Measuring Advisor Relationship Perceptions Among First-Year Students at a Small Midwestern University

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In this article, I report on the development and validation of a new survey instrument measuring first-year students' perceptions of the advising relationship. I collected survey data from 113 residential freshmen enrolled in a first-year seminar course at a small, public, midwestern university during the fall of 2009. Factor analysis of students' responses to the survey revealed three key components of the advising relationships: advisor concern, advisor contact, and advising relationship quality. Internal consistency of students' responses to questions loading on each factor, as measured with Cronbach's α, ranged from .89 to. 93, and the internal consistency for all survey items was .95. The article concludes with a revised version of the questionnaire as a basis for future replication studies.

KEY WORDS: advisor role, freshmen, student perceptions of advising, survey

Introduction

A wealth of information shows the advantages of first-year seminar courses for incoming college students (Cuseo, 2002; Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Additionally, the benefits and importance of providing quality academic advising to college students have been well documented (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Light, 2001; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2005). Gore and Metz (2008) indicated that advisors are in a position to be able to help students "establish cohesive educational and occupational goals" (p. 103). Crockett (1985) stated, "Good advising is vital to students as they develop their career and educational goals" (p. 245). The 2009 *National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report* issued by Noel-Levitz, which included 84,638 students from 4-year public colleges and universities, showed that students rate academic advising as the most important priority among 12 campus-related characteristics. Limited studies have been conducted regarding delivery of the first-year seminar by the student's advisor and its correlation with the student's perception of the establishment of a quality academic-advising relationship. An article in the *National On-Campus Report* ("Move Beyond the Numbers . . . ," 2004) indicated that student connectedness with someone at the university matters to students and increases persistence at the university. Oftentimes, this person can be the student's academic advisor.

In this study, I developed and validated a new survey as a measure for assessing advising perceptions of first-year students that could then be used to assess the effectiveness of the first-year seminar course at a small midwestern university. I conducted a literature review to determine the constructs of quality academic advising for survey development purposes.

Advising has been tied to retention for decades. In 1981, Habley introduced the advisor-retention model, which was based on the direct and critical relationship between advising and retention. In 2002, Cuseo published a literature review from studies of academic advising and retention. He determined that academic advising is related to increased student retention. In 2004, Habley and McClanahan, authors of the ACT survey report titled, *What Works in Student Retention*, identified first-year programs (freshman seminar and academic advising) as among two of the top three campus practices with the greatest impact on student retention.

Often quoted in advising publications, Light (2001) conducted a 10-year study by interviewing seniors at Harvard University and came to the following conclusion: "Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. 81). Habley later espoused (2004), "Academic advising is the only structured activity on the college campus in which all students have the opportunity for one-on-one interaction with a concerned representative of the institution." The importance of advising for college students is supported in the literature and increasing advisor contact, through a course that meets once a week where the instructor is the students' advisor, would seem to help the advisor-advisee relationship develop.

Instructed on a weekly basis by their advisor, advisees can experience a more connected relationship with an advisor. Tinto (1993) indicated that "institutions should coordinate the work of the faculty who teach freshman courses with those in . . . advising . . . " (p. 152). In the case where

the advisor is the instructor for a course geared toward helping students navigate the university, manage their time and money, and develop an academic and career plan, advising and teaching are completely coordinated. Therefore, I hypothesized that students who elected to participate in a first-year seminar course taught by their advisor would perceive higher satisfaction with their advising relationships than students who chose not enroll in such a course.

Method

Participants

For this study, I surveyed 137 freshmen at a small midwestern university, the total number of residential first-time full-time freshmen enrolled at this university during the 3-week window of time that the survey data were collected (from the end of October through mid-November 2009). I asked first-year seminar instructors to allow me to administer the survey during their course meeting time. The students that were either not present in class when the survey was administered or not enrolled in the course ($n = 12$) were asked via e-mail and, in some cases, in person to respond to the survey. Of the 137 students asked to participate in the survey, 113 responded.

In this study, I looked at perceptions of the advising relationship, including advisor concern, advisor contact, and advising relationship quality. To look for differences between groups, I compared gender, ethnicity, and enrollment across constructs in the first-year seminar. Over 90% of first-year full-time students enrolled in this nonrequired first-year seminar course for fall 2008, the first time it was introduced, and for fall 2009. During 2008 and 2009, the course was only offered in the fall. It is worth one credit and is letter graded. The goals for the course, in general, include teaching student success skills and acclimating students to the university. The class is taught by the students' advisor. Students not enrolled in the course are still assigned to one of the course instructors for advising, so all freshman academic advising is managed by first-year seminar instructors. One hundred and four students taking the fall 2009 seminar course and 8 who were not enrolled in the course completed the survey. One student did not indicate enrollment status on the submitted survey.

Materials

The survey (see Appendix A) administered to students included solicitation of demographic information and offered questions related to constructs of quality advising. The demographic information included gender, age (20 years or younger; 21 years or older), ethnicity, academic standing, indication of enrollment status for the first-year experience course, percentage of courses attended for those enrolled, and ability of the student to identify his or her academic advisor. The survey was constructed based on a literature review and findings related to advisee satisfaction and quality academic advising.

Through the survey, I asked respondents to indicate on a Likert-type scale their level of agreement with the statements presented. *Strongly disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *slightly disagree* (3), *slightly agree* (4), *agree* (5), and *strongly agree* (6) were the answer options for Questions 4 through 22.

The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) (2005) *Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising* indicates that advisors are responsible to the students they advise. Regular contact and meaningful insight into students' diverse academic, social, and personal experiences and needs help comprise this core value. I measured the concern construct for students' academic, personal, and social development via survey Questions 4, 5, and 6 (Appendix A).

Hester (2008) found a positive relationship between frequency of advising sessions and high ratings for professional manner. High levels of interaction between advisor and advisee have been associated with good advising (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Hartnett, 1976; Weiss, 1981). I labeled satisfaction with the number of advisor-advisee meetings and advisor accessibility as Advisor Contact, measured via Questions 7, 8, and 9 (Appendix A).

I considered the possibility that advisor knowledge of the advisee from an academic and personal perspective may influence the advising relationship and trust may be important in the academic advising relationship. Nadler and Simerly (2006) hypothesized that "students' perception of advisor listening will be positively related to students' development of trust in the advisor" (p. 217). Survey Items 10, 11, and 12 measured advisor knowledge of the advisee, and survey Items 13, 14, and 15 measured advisee trust in the advisor relationship.

Hester's (2008) study of student evaluations of advising included good listening skills as a part of professional manner. Nadler and Simerly (2006) developed a model that "suggests that advisor listening is a key element in the advising process" (p. 215). Listening was measured via survey Questions

16, 17, and 18.

I also asked advisees to assess their comfort level (survey Questions 19, 20, and 21) with respect to their current academic advisor. An item of summative assessment (Question 22) asked students to indicate the degree to which they would recommend their advisor to other students.

Procedure

Eight of the nine first-year seminar instructors granted permission for me to survey students in their class. I asked students to complete the survey and informed them that participation or lack thereof was not tied to their course grade. I also gave them contact information for further questions or concerns regarding the study. All students who were present in class on the day the survey was administered opted to participate. Nonattending freshmen could participate in the study by setting up a time to come to my office to complete the survey.

Results

One hundred thirty-seven freshmen were enrolled at the university at the time the survey was administered. One hundred thirteen completed the survey for a response rate of 82.5%. See Table 1 for a breakdown of the demographic information.

To investigate the individual questions regarding constructs of concern with the advisees' academic, personal, and social development (Questions 4, 5, 6), satisfaction with contact with advisor (Questions 7, 8, 9), advisor knowledge of advisee (Questions 10, 11, 12), trust (Questions 13, 14, 15), listening (Questions 16, 17, 18), and comfort (Questions 19, 20, 21), I calculated the mean and standard deviation for each of the items within each

Table 1. Demographic information of sample, $N = 113$

Demographic Characteristic	Count	%
Gender		
Male	74	65.5
Female	38	33.6
Age (years)		
20 and under	104	92.0
21 and over	7	6.2
Ethnicity		
Hispanic or Latino	13	11.5
White/Caucasian	79	69.9
Black/African American	13	11.5
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0.0
Multi-ethnic or Other	7	6.2
Prefer not to respond	0	0.0
Academic Standing		
First-year Freshman	111	98.2
Transfer or sophomore level or above	0	0.0
I am enrolled in a section of Psyc 100 – Seminar on Success (SOS)		
Yes	104	92.0
No	8	7.1
If enrolled in SOS, I have attended approximately the following percentage of SOS classes that meet once per week		
0	0	0.0
20	1	0.9
40	3	2.7
60	6	5.3
80	30	26.5
100	62	54.9
I know who my academic advisor is		
Yes	107	94.7
No	3	2.7

Note. Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding errors.

construct (see Table 2). Each construct contained three questions. The highest mean was obtained for Question 19: "My advisor is approachable." The lowest mean was obtained for Question 12: "My advisor knows me academically." The mean of every question was greater than 4, which indicates some level of agreement, or satisfaction, with every item.

I completed factor analysis for Items 4 through 21. Table 3 depicts results of factor loadings from a principal component analysis and Varimax rotation, which was used to maximize the variance of factor loadings. The analysis revealed three components. Questions 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, and 21 created the first component and accounted for 33.18% of the variance. The questions together were relabeled Advising Relationship Quality. Survey Items 7, 8, 9, and 11 loaded together and were originally labeled Contact (Questions 7, 8, 9) and Knowledge (Question 11). Those four items together were labeled Advisor Contact and form Component 2. Items 7, 8, 9, and 11 accounted for 21.67% of the variance. Questions 4, 5, and 6, which were originally labeled Concern, loaded highly together and accounted for 18.30% of the variance, forming the third component.

The results of the Cronbach's α reliability coefficients and the correlations between the constructs extracted through the Varimax rotation are shown in Table 4. The Cronbach's α levels for all constructs demonstrate very good internal consistency: The low was .89 for Contact and the high was .95 for all variables.

I analyzed differences in construct scores related to academic advising for first-year students who elected to enroll in a first-year seminar course, in which the student's advisor served as the instructor for the course, and advising perceptions of stu-

Table 2. Average scores for survey questions (1 = *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree*)

Survey Question	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Concern			
Q4. My advisor is concerned with my academic development	113	5.04	1.15
Q5. My advisor is concerned with my personal development	113	4.78	1.20
Q6. My advisor is concerned about my social development	112	4.68	1.24
Contact			
Q7. I am satisfied with the number of meetings I have had with my advisor	113	4.61	1.28
Q8. I am satisfied with the amount of overall contact I have had with my advisor	113	4.84	1.18
Q9. My advisor is readily accessible to me	113	5.04	.98
Advisor Knowledge about Advisee			
Q10. My advisor knows me as a person	112	4.78	1.33
Q11. I am satisfied with the depth of information that my advisor knows about me at this time	113	4.80	1.14
Q12. My advisor knows me academically	110	4.60	1.06
Trust			
Q13. I trust my advisor has my best interests in mind	110	5.13	1.00
Q14. I trust my advisor will follow through with things he or she says they will do	109	5.30	.83
Q15. I trust my advisor to keep information I share confidential unless they deem it necessary to share it for my own well being	110	5.35	.84
Listening			
Q16. My advisor listens to me	110	5.29	.86
Q17. My advisor is attentive to what I want to share	110	5.23	.80
Q18. My advisor is focused on me during our interactions	109	5.21	.90
Comfort			
Q19. My advisor is approachable	110	5.36	.85
Q20. I feel comfortable speaking with my advisor about academic matters	110	5.31	.91
Q21. I feel comfortable speaking with my advisor about personal matters	110	4.65	1.33
Recommendation			
Q22. I would recommend my advisor to other students	110	5.29	1.02

Table 3. Factor loadings from principal components analysis and Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization: Extraction communalities and rotation sum of squared loadings

	Factor Loadings			
Item	**1**	**2**	**3**	**Communality**
Advisor Concern				
Q4. My advisor is concerned with my academic development	.31	.34	.81	.80
Q5. My advisor is concerned with my personal development	.30	.28	.84	.86
Q6. My advisor is concerned about my social development	.22	.23	.85	.82
Advisor Contact				
Q7. I am satisfied with the number of meetings I have had with my advisor	.24	.76	.23	.73
Q8. I am satisfied with the amount of overall contact I have had with my advisor	.31	.76	.36	.81
Q9. My advisor is readily accessible to me	.31	.66	.42	.70
Q11. I am satisfied with the depth of information that my advisor knows about me at this time	.33	.83	.13	.81
Advising Relationship Quality				
Q14. I trust my advisor will follow through with things he or she says they will do	.76	.38	.22	.77
Q15. I trust my advisor to keep information I share confidential unless they deem it necessary to share it for my own well being	.73	.29	.32	.72
Q16. My advisor listens to me	.77	.33	.31	.80
Q17. My advisor is attentive to what I want to share	.77	.31	.29	.77
Q18. My advisor is focused on me during our interactions	.76	.23	.34	.74
Q19. My advisor is approachable	.78	.20	.37	.79
Q20. I feel comfortable speaking with my advisor about academic matters	.81	.21	.23	.75
Q21. I feel comfortable speaking with my advisor about personal matters	.65	.22	.04	.47
% of variance from rotation sum of squared loadings	33.18	21.67	18.30	

Table 4. Correlation of subscale constructs and measures of internal consistency

Subscale	**Items**	**F2**	**F3**	**F4**	**Cronbach's α**
F1 Concern	Q 4, 5, 6	.59	.60	.80	.93
F2 Contact	Q 7, 8, 9, 11		.64	.86	.89
F3 Quality	Q 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21			.91	.93
F4 Total	Q 4–21				.95

dents who elected not to enroll in the course. The rationale for such a study is supported by evidence uncovered in a 2005 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which revealed that, among the NSSE items surveyed, the quality of academic advising students received at their institution was the item most highly correlated with student satisfaction. Retention is tied to student satisfaction and is critical for the sustainability of an institution of higher learning; therefore, it is important for furthering the education of the nation's population. In addition, academic advisors assist students with their transition from high school to college (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). If this transition does not take place in a way that is palatable to the new college student, retention of that student is at risk.

Tables 5, 6, and 7 show the *t* test results of between-group differences. I conducted these tests for exploratory purposes to determine if differences were present between groups based on gender, age, or seminar enrollment. In Table

5, mean scores for gender are reported for each of the three constructs and between-group comparison results are given. Table 6 reports comparisons between age and the three constructs. Table 7 lists comparisons between seminar enrollment and the constructs. I found no differences between these groups and their perceptions of the advising constructs. An analysis of variance revealed no significant differences between ethnic groups on perceptions of advising.

Discussion

This study provides a new tool for studying advising perceptions of students in higher education. Because many studies of student perceptions of academic advising effectiveness are a product of local program evaluation or assessment efforts, the content of most surveys reflects local needs, goals, and expectations rather than the findings reported in published literature on academic advising. By developing a survey that reflects the content of published literature, I intended to produce an instrument that would be relevant to the needs of many institutions and increase the likelihood that results obtained at any one institution should be generalizable to others. Factor analysis of the designed instrument yielded three constructs of advising: Advisor Concern, Contact, and Advising Relationship Quality. Levels of student satisfaction among these items can be measured for purposes of studying advising relationships, assessing advising at institutions of higher learning, and identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses in advising relationships. These relationships are important for student satisfaction, development, and retention.

While the scope of this project as a validation study was limited, the results are consistent with

Table 5. Comparison between gender and constructs

Construct Category	Male *M*	Female *M*	*p*	Effect Size *d*
Advisor Concern (Q 4, 5, 6)	14.22	15.11	.19	.27
Advisor Contact (Q 7, 8, 9, 11)	19.20	19.45	.76	.07
Advising Relationship Quality (Q 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21)	42.17	41.50	.57	.12

Note. * $p < .05$

Table 6. Comparison between age and constructs

Construct Category	20 years and younger *M*	21 years and older *M*	*p*	Effect size *d*
Advisor Concern (Q 4, 5, 6)	14.55	14.00	.70	.17
Advisor Contact (Q 7, 8, 9, 11)	19.33	18.29	.51	.26
Advising Relationship Quality (Q 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21)	41.92	41.67	.92	.05

Note. * $p < .05$

Table 7. Comparison between first-year seminar enrollment and constructs

Construct Category	Yes *M*	No *M*	*p*	Effect Size *d*
Advisor Concern (Q 4, 5, 6)	14.61	13.38	.32	.37
Advisor Contact (Q 7, 8, 9, 11)	19.17	20.75	.29	.40
Advising Relationship Quality (Q 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21)	42.02	40.88	.60	.20

Note. * $p < .05$.

the preliminary conclusion that this survey will prove to be a reliable and valid research tool. The constructs for this instrument demonstrated excellent reliability (based on the high values of Cronbach's α for items associated with each of the three factors). Furthermore, the survey was constructed based on a literature review of factors important in academic advising, and therefore, the emergence of these three familiar factors can be interpreted as evidence that the survey has substantial content validity. This reliability could be checked and validity further determined by replication of this study across other institutions. Because three questions in the original survey (see Appendix A) loaded roughly equally on all three factors, those questions were omitted from a refined version of the survey. The new survey, reproduced in Appendix B, should be adopted for future replication studies.

The empirical findings indicated that at the small midwestern university under study, freshmen, regardless of enrollment status or demographic characteristics, hold favorable perceptions of their relationship with their advisor. Instructors of the course also advise the students who are not enrolled in the seminar, and they may be exceptional to all students, whether they meet them on a weekly basis in class or not, thus explaining the lack of differences between those enrolled and those who are not attending the seminar. The lack of significant difference between enrolled and nonattending students may be explained by nonenrolled students, knowing they are foregoing the opportunity to have weekly contact with their advisor via the course, possibly having lower expectations of or fewer needs for an advising relationship.

The sample size of this study was small and limited to undergraduates during the fall semester of 2009 at one particular small university. Therefore, the generalizability of results to the U.S. population of college freshmen remains in question. A small percentage of students elected not to enroll in the first-year seminar and accounted for a small subsample. As a result, comparisons of nonattending students with course enrollees are difficult to validate.

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Appendix A. Advising survey in first-year experience course

Advising Survey

Please take a moment to fill out the survey below. The purpose of this survey is to assess perceptions of advising for freshmen.

Gender
___ Male
___ Female

Age
___ 20 and under
___ 21 and over

Ethnicity
___ Hispanic or Latino
___ White/Caucasian
___ Black/African-American
___ American Indian or Alaskan Native
___ Multi Ethnic or Other _____
___ Prefer not to respond

Academic Standing
___ First Year Freshman
___ Transfer or sophomore level or above

1. I am enrolled in a section of Psyc 100 – Seminar on Success (SOS)	Y	N
2. If enrolled in SOS, I have attended approximately the following percent of SOS classes that meet once per week (circle one): 0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%		
3. I know who my academic advisor is	Y	N

Please think of the following questions with respect to your current academic advisor. Rate each of the questions to the best of your ability.	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Slightly Disagree**	**Slightly Agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
4. My advisor is concerned with my academic development	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. My advisor is concerned with my personal development	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. My advisor is concerned about my social development	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. I am satisfied with the number of meetings I have had with my advisor	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. I am satisfied with the amount of overall contact I have had with my advisor	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. My advisor is readily accessible to me	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. My advisor knows me as a person	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. I am satisfied with the depth of information that my advisor knows about me at this time	1	2	3	4	5	6

Appendix A. Advising survey in first-year experience course (continued)

Please think of the following questions with respect to your current academic advisor. Rate each of the questions to the best of your ability.	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Slightly Disagree**	**Slightly Agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
12. My advisor knows me academically	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. I trust my advisor has my best interests in mind	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. I trust my advisor will follow through with things he or she says they will do	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. I trust my advisor to keep information I share confidential unless they deem it necessary to share it for my own well being	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. My advisor listens to me	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. My advisor is attentive to what I want to share	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. My advisor is focused on me during our interactions	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. My advisor is approachable	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. I feel comfortable speaking with my advisor about academic matters	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. I feel comfortable speaking with my advisor about personal matters	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. I would recommend my advisor to other students	1	2	3	4	5	6

Comments:

Appendix B. Revised survey based on factor analysis

Advising Survey

Gender
___ Male
___ Female

Age
___ 20 and under
___ 21 and over

Ethnicity
___ Hispanic or Latino
___ White/Caucasian
___ Black/African-American
___ American Indian or Alaskan Native
___ Multi Ethnic or Other _____
___ Prefer not to respond

Academic Standing
___ First Year Freshman
___ Transfer or sophomore level or above

1. I am enrolled in a section of a first year seminar course	Y	N
2. If enrolled in a first year seminar, I have attended approximately the following percent of SOS classes that meet once per week (circle one): 0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%		
3. I know who my academic advisor is	Y	N

Please think of the following questions with respect to your current academic advisor. Rate each of the questions to the best of your ability.	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Slightly Disagree**	**Slightly Agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
4. My advisor is concerned with my academic development	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. My advisor is concerned with my personal development	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. My advisor is concerned about my social development	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. I am satisfied with the number of meetings I have had with my advisor	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. I am satisfied with the amount of overall contact I have had with my advisor	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. My advisor is readily accessible to me	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. I am satisfied with the depth of information that my advisor knows about me at this time	1	2	3	4	5	6

Appendix B. Revised survey based on factor analysis (continued)

Please think of the following questions with respect to your current academic advisor. Rate each of the questions to the best of your ability.	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Slightly Disagree**	**Slightly Agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
11. I trust my advisor will follow through with things he or she says they will do	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. I trust my advisor to keep information I share confidential unless they deem it necessary to share it for my own well being	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. My advisor listens to me	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. My advisor is attentive to what I want to share	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. My advisor is focused on me during our interactions	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. My advisor is approachable	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. I feel comfortable speaking with my advisor about academic matters	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. I feel comfortable speaking with my advisor about personal matters	1	2	3	4	5	6

Comments: