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Academic Advising with Peer Advisors and College Freshmen

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Freshmen college students are faced with problems of academic survival such as: getting off to a "good start" in the college; learning the "academic game," its rules and procedure; becoming acquainted with the resources of the university; and most importantly, identifying a "niche" in the college. Some colleges and universities have attempted to solve the problem of academic survival by adding a new component in their advising programs — Peer Advising. Past experience with freshmen in the college indicated that a coordinated peer advising program with competent supervision from professional counselors and faculty advisors could help provide students with the necessary tools and support for "academic survival." These necessary tools included access to information about college programs, assistance with registration procedures, networking with other university programs, and exploration of the college and university environments. The underlying assumption was that new students needed the support and advice of experienced counselors to help them develop academic competence, and upper-division students in various majors could provide that support if they were adequately trained and supervised.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to describe an active and successful peer advising program in a college setting. The program was part of a coordinated effort at the department, college, and university levels to promote comprehensive academic advising models for use with college students.

DEFINITION OF PEER ADVISING

Peer advisors were upper division college students who completed a required training program. They worked with an academic advisor who supervised their contacts with entering freshmen. Their title was student advisor.

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REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Academic advising is one of the most important, yet least understood activities of higher education. Peabody, Mets and Sedlacek reported great variety of philosophies and programs of academic advising in the colleges of the commonwealth of Maryland. They conducted a survey of colleges to develop a coordinated, statewide effort to improve the quality of academic advising. Over 60 percent of those surveyed had written documents which described the role of academic advising in their institution. Over 40 percent used central academic advising, while 35 percent relied upon faculty advisors. Relatively few institutions used a combination, or mixed model of academic advising which took advantage of the unique characteristics of their student body, institution, or setting.

Their results indicated that two-year institutions were more likely to use professional advisors, while four-year institutions were more likely to use faculty advisors. The role of the faculty advisor was more limited in the four-year institutions than the two-year institutions, while two-year institutions were less likely to assume that advising was a regular part of the faculty activities.¹

In an interdisciplinary department of a large land grant university, Polson and Jurich described an extensive academic advising program. Their program evolved over several years, and included an evaluation of their advising process by students who were enrolled in majors in the department. The centralized departmental advising center appeared to have met the goals of academic advising. In the long run, the centralized approach appeared more feasible and effective than their previous efforts through assigned faculty advisors.

They used a locally designed instrument to measure the impact the centralized center had upon their students. The advisors received high marks for their advising characteristics, but the surprise was the positive scores in the area of interpersonal aspects of advising. Their advising program communicated values about their majors, and concern for their advisees. The authors suggested that the unique characteristics of their department may have influenced the emphasis on interpersonal skills and concerns. Developmental advising tended to set goals for the psychosocial development of the student, which cannot be forced on the student, but can be developed through the enthusiasm of interested advisors.²

Barman and Benson described the components and evaluation of a peer advising program in a small, public, mid-western four-year university. They utilized peer advisors based on past experience, and the growing complexity of academic procedures. They reported positive results with trained peer advisors who assisted in academic, personal and career advising of new freshmen students. In this study, peer advisors were paid hourly wages. The authors concluded that peer advising should be only one part of a larger program of advising students.

In the process of advising, supervision by faculty with proper inservice training was essential. The advising program comments by freshmen indicated that the peer advisors were helpful, friendly, and showed a better understanding of their level of academic competence than faculty advisors.³ Goldberg, a career counselor, also agrees that peer advising should be

a supplement to, but not a substitute for, faculty advising.⁴

If successful academic advising consisted only of providing accurate academic information to undergraduates, monitoring their progress, and making sure they graduate on time, peer advising could do as well as faculty advising. Probably, the most effective and efficient advising program would provide a combination of faculty, peer, and professional advising. Such a program could maximize the use of appropriate resources by permitting three levels of intervention, with successive referral and backup resources.

Partizky reviewed the literature in training peer counselors and found that the referral task was overlooked. Two situations arose in which referrals took place; in the first, the individual seeking assistance went to the wrong agency, and in the second, the level of professional expertise was beyond those of the provider. He devised a set of guidelines to assist the student counselor in making referrals to other agencies and service providers. The concepts included information, communication, goals of referral, and training. Referral was most effective when the student counselor and the help-seeker agreed on the referral.⁵

The intent of using student advisors was to provide assistance to other students. In many cases, student advisors were effective caregivers. However, situations arose in which referral was essential. Barman and Benson,⁶ Goldberg,⁷ and Partizky⁸ concluded that peer advisors needed to identify the limits of their own role and services they could provide, and have access to other community resources. Then, they could demonstrate their concern for their fellow students through effective listening and appropriate referral in a positive manner.

THE PROGRAM FOR ADVISING STUDENTS SUCCESSFULLY (PASS)

ACADEMIC ADVISING WITH COLLEGE FRESHMEN

The goal of the *Program for Advising Students Successfully* (PASS) was to promote behaviors, or activities, on the part of beginning students which insured success in their academic environment at the university. The short range objective concerned the student's success in earning adequate grades, learning to "survive" in the academic community, and declaring an appropriate major at the conclusion of the freshman year. The long range objective of the program was graduation from the university and successful transition into the world of work.

During the course of the first year, students were encouraged to begin to organize their educational and occupational plan of study, i.e., plan ahead, and make career related decisions which would lead them into the world of work. The most important developmental activity was assisting the beginning student in gaining a sense of control over the planning and decision making tasks involved in becoming a successful college student.

¹ L.G. Goldberg (1981). Peer advising: a supplement to, but not a substitute for, faculty advising. NACADA JOURNAL, 1:2, 41-43.

² R.S. Partizky (1981). Training peer counselors: the art of referral. JOURNAL OF COLLEGE STUDENT PERSONNEL, 22:7, 528-532.

³ C.R. Barman and P.A. Benson (1981). Peer advising: a working model. NACADA JOURNAL, 1:2, 3-40.

⁴ L.G. Goldberg (1981). Peer advising: a supplement to, but not a substitute for, faculty advising. NACADA JOURNAL, 1:2, 41-43.

⁵ R.S. Partizky (1981). Training peer counselors: the art of referral. JOURNAL OF COLLEGE STUDENT PERSONNEL, 22:7, 528-532.

STAFF OF THE PASS PROGRAM

The program was administered through the Office of the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies in the College of Human Development. It was directly supervised by an Academic Advising Assistant who was familiar with the specific tasks freshmen must resolve in the College of Human Development.

ACADEMIC ADVISING ASSISTANT

The Academic Advising Assistant (AAA) was responsible for the supervision of the student advisors who worked with a group of freshmen in the College. The routine activities of the staff member included:

- assessing scores of students on the placement tests;
- assessing orientation information;
- facilitating the initial decision of freshmen regarding choice of a college;
- supervising the registration, preregistration, and early registration activities of freshmen;
- notifying freshmen of academic policies, rules and regulations which affect their academic planning;
- helping freshmen evaluate their academic performance and decisions about their potential program of study; and
- assisting freshmen gain access to information about programs of study appropriate to their objectives.

STUDENT ADVISORS

Approximately 15 upper-division students were selected from an interested group and they were in a semester-long training program to learn the skills to serve as peer-advisors to freshmen. They were under the direction of the Office of the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies, and the direct supervision of the Academic Advising Assistant. Approximately one hundred and thirty college freshmen were assigned to the Office of the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies for Academic Advising.

ORGANIZATION OF THE PASS PROGRAM

The student advisors were enrolled in an upper-division course for an extended training program (1 credit) before beginning actual advising. They also received one additional credit for each enrollment period. The actual number of hours required to complete the assignments of student advisors depended on the circumstances, and required a sense of commitment and dedication to the tasks on the part of each.

DUTIES OF THE STUDENT ADVISOR

The student advisor participated in arena registration, pre-registration, mid-semester checks and individual advising sessions with freshmen, averaging two hours per week. The hours varied according to academic deadlines for each of the activities.

ARENA REGISTRATION (SIX HOURS PER SEMESTER)

1. Registration advising began the day before registration and continued through the registration period. The registration preparation for students was held in a room devoted to academic advising.
2. Student advisors "signed up" for their responsible time period.
 - a. Student advisors assisted freshmen in the selection of courses which met baccalaureate degree requirements.
 - b. Freshmen who were unfamiliar with the College of Human Development, its programs, and course requirements received guidance from student advisors.
 - c. Student advisors helped freshmen complete registration cards, data and other information cards (for contacting student later), a preference sheet which indicated a program of interest in the College, and information sheets for the student folder which was maintained in the Recorder's Office.
 - d. Student advisors distributed the pre-registration course assignment results completed during pre-registration, checking to be certain the courses selected were appropriate. When changes were made, a revised registration card was completed prior to the time the student appeared at registration. A faculty advisor at registration was available to help the student complete a revised schedule. Each student had previously completed a "shopping list" of alternative courses.
 - e. Student advisors recorded names and student numbers of students whose names did not appear on the College registration list. By doing this, they were able to "walk-in" students — and the college of enrollment, change of major information, and previous college were necessary to obtain information for appropriate referral of these students.

PRE-REGISTRATION (FOUR HOURS PER SEMESTER)

1. During the first week of classes, each student advisor received a list of names of freshmen-advisees assigned to him or her for the semester.
2. Student advisors contacted, by telephone, each of their advisees within the week, to inform that student that he/she was their advisor. The contact provided a check on the enrollment of the student in classes and reminded the student of pre-registration, drop add and other procedures.
3. Each student advisor maintained contact with the Advising Center on a daily basis early in the enrollment period.
4. Student advisors encouraged advisees to call them if they had questions, problems or difficulties. However, they were instructed to use referral as a major resource. Referral was important with beginning students who may have been overwhelmed by circumstance and did not realize what was happening.
5. Advisees were reminded of special dates for pre-registration. An activity calendar was provided with dates listed. Generally, advisors arranged to meet their advisees in the Academic Center, and usually it depended upon the advisor to be assertive and make initial contact. The Academic Center provided a social exchange area with tables, chairs and other furniture, plus a large table for consultation. As a group, the advisors acted as

"backup" for each other, aiding students other than those assigned to them. In the process, advisors helped the freshmen become acquainted with other students in various programs.

6. Advisors used a program check list when advising a student. The checklist proved to be useful with undecided freshmen and freshmen who said they knew what major they were headed toward and then changed their directions, so keeping advisees' options open with a checklist was important. On the other hand, checksheets were provided for each program to help freshmen initiate a "planning" orientation toward their eventual programs of study.

MID-SEMESTER CHECKS

1. Student advisors usually arranged personal conferences with each advisee to determine their academic progress (CLASS ATTENDANCE, INSTRUCTOR'S NAME, TEST TAKEN AND GRADES, PAPERS COMPLETED, AND COMING ASSIGNMENTS). Particular attention was directed toward areas of potential difficulty.
2. Following each contact, a conference record was completed for each advisee. Notes were summarized regarding their academic progress and potential hazards, and action (such as referral) was taken when necessary.
3. Listening carefully to each advisee was an important skill. In addition, advisors offered to help students gain access to resources in meeting their needs. They encouraged freshmen to be assertive in their contacts with the University. For example, if a student needed a tutor, or to contact a professor, advisors were supportive.
4. It was important for peer advisors to confirm that the major a freshman listed on the preference sheet and the major he or she was "talking about" were the same. However, changes were noted on a revised preference sheet and continued exploration by the student was encouraged.

INDIVIDUAL ADVISING SESSIONS (ONE PERIOD PER WEEK)

1. Student advisors maintained office hours in the Academic Advising Center in order to be available to interested students. Students were able to "walk in" or be referred to the Academic Advising Center by one of the Dean's staff.
2. Student advisors helped their advisees gain information and develop contacts with people in the College. In the process, the advisees gained an understanding of University rules and procedures. Academic survival was an important skill that freshmen needed to gain, develop and maintain to be successful students.

CONCLUSIONS

The short term objective of "success in earning grades" was achieved for freshmen during their first year in college. At the end of the year, 85 percent of those entering the College at the University Park campus, compared to 75 percent the previous year, were able to earn at least a "C" grade point average and declare a major in the college. Differences between the two groups ($n = 120$) were significant at the five percent level of confidence.

The long term goal of promoting behaviors which insured student success in the academic environment was still being determined. Students still reported being confused about programs of study, University, College, and program requirements, and an assumption that majors, careers, and jobs were closely tied to each other. Dates for deadline activities were a particular problem for some freshmen. The follow up contacts, and written summaries of these contacts were helpful to academic advisors when meeting with students who required additional assistance to help salvage their situation, or explore an option that was beyond the knowledge of the student advisor.

The lack of adequate tutorial referrals was a critical area identified by student advisors during the year. One unsuccessful activity involved the use of student advisors to maintain regular office hours. The student advisors often had class conflicts at specific times during the semester, when they were needed and they were unavailable to students on a walk-in basis.

Overall, the peer advising program (PASS) provided effective support for entering freshmen, plus a positive advising experience for the peer advisors. The program met the needs of a large number of freshmen and helped maintain a supportive, individualized approach to the advising process for freshmen.