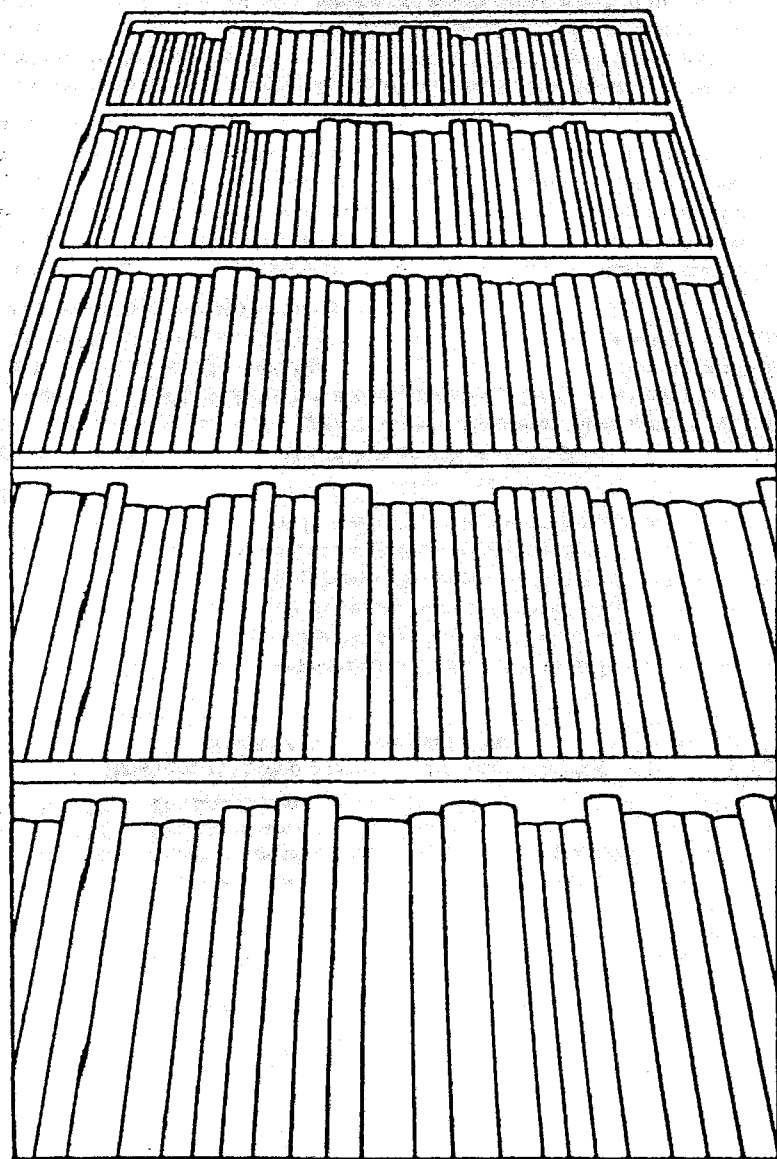


Higher Education



Student Perceptions of the Developmental Advisor-Advisee Relationship

LYNDA BEASLEY-FIELSTEIN, Ed.D., *University of Arkansas*

The literature in the field of education in the past ten to fifteen years has reflected interest and concern about academic advising, and improving student satisfaction with academic advising has been the focus of universities' efforts.^{1,2} Colleges and universities have been increasingly concerned about improving the quantity and quality of faculty-student contact, not only within the classroom but outside the classroom as well.³

BACKGROUND

In the nineteenth century colleges were small, intimate places and a personal relationship with a faculty member could occur informally. The president of the college and faculty members shared the belief that the most important role was to shape the character of youth.⁴ Intellectual concerns and educational needs were lower in priority on the scale of values.⁵ The focus of earlier colleges was on the religious, social, and moral training of the student. But in contrast, in the setting of the complex contemporary institutions, the process will require organization to insure that students' needs are not ignored.

Because of this complexity, administrators in higher education have had to take a closer look at the present system of advising.⁶ A number of studies support the belief that the

- 1 R.B. Winston, S.C. Ender and T.K. Miller, "Academic Advising as Student Development," *New Directions for Student Services: Developmental Approaches to Academic Advising*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982).
- 2 P.J. Kaufman and A.J. Netusil, "Selected Communication Variables and Their Effect Upon Advisee Satisfaction with Advisor-Advisee Conferences," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington D.C. (ERIC Document, ED 106 701).
- 3 K.M. Moore, "Faculty Advising: Panacea or Placebo?" *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 12, (1976), pp. 371-375.
- 4 M.D. Hardoe, *Faculty Advisors in Colleges and Universities*, (Washington D.C.: American College Personnel Association, 1970).
- 5 M. Raskin, "Critical Issue: Faculty Advising," *Peabody Journal of Education*, 52, (1979), pp. 99-108.
- 6 C.R. Dussance and R.L. Batdorf, "Educational Advising for Retention: Applying the Student Development Model," Forum presented at the American Association of Junior Colleges, San Francisco. (ERIC Document, ED 190 176).

advising relationship deserves considerable attention and should not be neglected.^{7,8,9,10}

Several critical issues facing institutions of higher education are: the higher costs for providing education; increased tuition; declining enrollments in four-year institutions; external pressure for colleges to account for the product they are delivering; and, there has been a reappraisal of advising with the arrival of the nontraditional student on campus.^{11,12} Another issue is the rise of student consumerism in institutions of higher education. Students in a buyer's market can demand personal attention, quality education, and guidance in goal achievement.

Higher education will have to respond to these critical issues in new ways since traditional answers may no longer suffice.¹³ In approximately 95% of the articles and books reviewed by Raskin, the high cost of faculty advising was mentioned; yet not one source specified in dollars and cents the cost of advising to a university or college. If higher education continues to rank low on state priority lists, academic administrators will have to find ways to maximize the effects of programs and personnel. It will be necessary to demonstrate that spending 1.9 hours per week with a student is a cost-effective way to perform the service of advising students. In Raskin's opinion, the days of "guessing on costs of faculty advising are numbered."¹⁴ Administrators will be compelled to re-appraise their present advising systems to develop more cost-effective models, which will include testing and evaluation.

Faculty advising, until the late 1970's, had received relatively little attention on university campuses or in literature.¹⁵ Now questions are being asked: Who does advising? What is the purpose of advising? How effective is current advising? If undergraduates in the United States are seeking consistent, personal contact with a professional adult, who can serve as an advisor, confidant, and parent surrogate, as found by Hardee¹⁶, are the present systems in most colleges and universities able to meet this need adequately?

As a result of these questions that need to be answered, there has been (in the past ten years) an explosion of interest in academic advising.¹⁷ National conferences on academic advising were held in the late 1970's, and the American College Testing Program began holding regional workshops and seminars. One result was the creation of the National Academic Advising Association, which holds an annual conference as well as regional conferences. In January 1981, the first issue of the journal of this association was published. From a review of the literature it is apparent that relatively little was known about the type of relationship and the nature of the interaction preferred by students when interacting with a

7 R.C. Wilson, L. Wood and J.C. Gaff, "Social-Psychological Accessibility and Faculty-Student Interaction: Beyond the Classroom," *Sociology of Education*, 47, (1974), pp. 74-92.

8 R.C. Wilson, J.C. Gaff, E.R. Dienst, L. Wood and J.L. Bavy, *College Professors and Their Impact on Students*. (New York: Wiley, 1975).

9 T.J. Gries, "Student and Self-Ratings of Teacher-Advisors," *NACADA Journal*, 1, (1981), pp. 29-33.

10 R.B. Winston and J.A. Sandor, "Developmental Academic Advising: What Do Students Want?" *NACADA Journal*, (1984), pp. 5-12.

11 Dassance.

12 Raskin, 1979, pp. 99-108.

13 Raskin, 1979, pp. 99-108.

14 Raskin, 1979, p. 108.

15 Raskin, 1979, pp. 99-108.

16 Hardee.

17 Winston, Ender and Miller.

faculty advisor.^{18,19} Don Creamer asserts that the "quality of the student-faculty interaction is a major contributing variable to institutional holding power."²⁰ But the question remains, what type of relationship is most productive, qualitative and satisfying for students?

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THEORY

In the past decade a new approach to advising emerged: the student development theory. It proposes that academic advising should be a developmental, student-centered process.^{21,22,23,24} According to Winston, Ender and Miller,²⁵ it should be goal-oriented, and the advisor should establish a caring relationship with the advisee.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to arrive at a clearer understanding of the type of relationship students prefer by examining specific aspects of the advising relationship that are perceived as desirable by the student. Although many authorities argue for developmental advising,^{26,27,28,29,30,31} is it the actual relationship preferred by students?

SUBJECTS

The subjects for the study, sophomores and seniors, were selected randomly from three colleges — the College of Agriculture and Home Economics, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the College of Business Administration — at the University of Arkansas campus. The sample total of 90 was stratified by majors as well as by colleges, thus allowing for comparisons.

INSTRUMENTATION

The instrument used for this survey was developed from statements, developmental in nature, and chosen from various instruments previously used for studies. The instrument was pre-tested with a sample of 11 students selected from a population similar to the one to be used in the study.

18 Wilson, 1974, pp. 74-92.

19 Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood and Bavy, 1975.

20 Dassance.

21 B.B. Crookston, "A Developmental View of Academic Advising," *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 13, (1972), pp. 12-17.

22 D.J. Mash, "Academic Advising: Too Often Taken For Granted," *College Board Review*, 107, (1978), pp. 32-36.

23 E.M. Walsh, "Revitalizing Academic Advisement," *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 57, (1979), pp. 446-449.

24 Winston.

25 Winston.

26 Crookston, 1972, pp. 12-17.

27 D.S. Crockett, "Academic Advising: A Cornerstone of Student Retention," *New Directions for Student Services: Reducing the Dropout Rate*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978).

28 Mash, 1978, pp. 32-36.

29 T.J. Gries, "Academic Advising: Getting Us Through the Eighties," *AAHE-ERIC Higher Education Research Report*, Washington, D.C. (No. 7).

30 Walsh, 1979, pp. 446-449.

31 S.S. McDaffrey and T.K. Miller, "Mentoring: An Approach to Academic," *Student Development Practices: Strategies for Making A Difference*. (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1980).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Students selected for the sample who had phones were contacted and interviewed, and students without phones received the questionnaire by mail. During the phone interviews, students who expressed satisfaction or dissatisfaction with present advisors or advising experiences were invited to participate in face-to-face interviews. A total of 20 students out of the 90 in the sample responded. The phone and face-to-face interviews, and mail-outs, were conducted during the months of November and December, 1984.

This study focuses on the information gleaned from the twenty face-to-face interviews. The questions posed demanded more explicit responses, expressed in the students' own words.

It had been planned to interview face-to-face an equal number of satisfied and dissatisfied students within the colleges, but difficulty in finding dissatisfied students from two of the colleges posed a problem; therefore equal representation from the colleges selected is missing from this study. Thus, caution should be exercised when generalizing to other colleges. The information gleaned from the interviews may be limited in its applicability, because students who expressed dissatisfaction with their advisors or with the advising system in general were reluctant to schedule appointments for face-to-face interviews. Of the students who were dissatisfied that did agree to interview, approximately half did not show up for the appointment, and failed to re-schedule.

Conversely, students who were satisfied with their present advisor or with advising in general were agreeable to scheduling appointments for face-to-face interviews. The number of no-shows or cancellations were negligible. In summary, a total of twenty students were interviewed face-to-face; thirteen satisfied and seven dissatisfied.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ASKED OF SATISFIED STUDENTS

1. What are the characteristics or qualities possessed by your advisor which facilitate a satisfying relationship?
What signs or cues (verbal or non-verbal) does your advisor give that indicate to you that he or she wants to become personally acquainted with you?
3. Think back over your experiences with your advisor; try to recall a situation or an incident whereby the advisor was especially effective; tell me about it.
4. What suggestions would you make to other advisors as ways to improve their interaction with students?
5. What would you suggest as the best method for finding a suitable advisor for a student?
6. Do you consider your present interaction with your advisor to be a personal relationship, as opposed to impersonal?
If yes, do you want that type of relationship?
If no, do you want that type of relationship?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ASKED OF DISSATISFIED STUDENTS

1. What does your advisor do or not do that contributes to your discontent with the relationship?
2. What would you like your advisor to do differently that would improve the interaction?

Student Perceptions of Advisor-Advisee Relationship

3. Think back over your experience with your advisor; try to recall a situation or an incident whereby the advisor was especially ineffective; tell about it.
4. What suggestions would you make to other advisors as ways to improve their interaction with students?
5. What would you suggest as the best method for finding a suitable advisor for a student?
6. Do you consider your present interaction with your advisor to be a personal relationship, as opposed to impersonal?
If yes, do you want that type of relationship?
If no, do you want that type of relationship?

SUMMARY OF FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS

Characteristics or qualities possessed by advisors who were perceived as helpful by satisfied students were:

- generous with time
- accessible
- source of accurate information
- provider of practical help and counsel
- willing to take a personal interest in the student

Signs or cues (verbal or non-verbal) indicating to the student that the advisor wanted to become personally acquainted were:

- asking probing questions that elicit more than a "yes" or "no" answer
- frequent inquiries as to ways to help the student
- office doors left open
- recognizing the students in the halls and calling them by name
- friendly greetings
- smiling and jovial
- steady flow of students frequenting the office

In contrast, dissatisfied students cited these behaviors which contribute to discontent with the relationship:

- unpredictability
- indifference
- intimidating demeanor
- brevity
- inaccessible
- impersonal

When asked what advisors could do differently to improve the interaction, dissatisfied students gave the following suggestions:

- from the first day on campus, all students be assigned an advisor
- more time be reserved for students
- advisors should be less hurried
- demonstrate a caring attitude

In addition, most students concurred that changes in advising would require changes in the attitudes of administrators. The administration will have to assume responsibility for setting standards of appropriate attitudes and behavior for advisors when interacting with students. An attitude such as "Advisees are nuisances" would demand correction in order to

observe a significant change in the system. Administrators would need to take deliberate steps to seek out teachers who have the ability to create comfortable learning atmospheres in the classroom and teachers who are rated highly effective by students since there is greater likelihood that they will also make the best advisors.

Specific instances in which the advisors was seen as especially effective by satisfied students can be grouped under four general headings:

1. Expediency and efficiency
 - the advisor immediately took action on a problem
 - the efficiency by which the conflicts are resolved
 - promptly informed when changes occur
 - follows through on what is started
 - gives full explanations about new procedures
 - does not delay on requests or inquiries
2. Prevalent attitudes in the college
 - known fact that the administration cares about students
 - doors opened, suggests the student is welcomed
 - exit interviews with seniors conveying that the students' opinions were noteworthy
3. Taking a personal interest
 - the students receive individualized attention
 - not afraid to show affection — i.e., a hug to demonstrate appreciation for hard work
 - listened without giving advice, only support during a personal crisis
4. Explaining educational and career goals
 - long range goals are seen as priority
 - suggestions given that will be of benefit later
 - spoke candidly about the demands of the field selected

Specific instances in which the advisor was seen as especially ineffective by dissatisfied students can be summarized as follows:

- made the student appear foolish in front of peers
- hurried the student
- obsessed with details, overlooking the student as a person
- masked the truth about the practicality and applicability of the degree in the real world
- signing registration forms without inspecting the schedule, alerting the student to remain detached from the system in order not to be "hurt" by it
- the system for advising appeared loose without guideline, signifying the student would be the one who pays

Suggestions made by satisfied students to other advisors as ways of improving their interactions with students were:

- be available; allow ample time for the student;
- be communicative; be expressive

Also, the method used in selecting faculty members to serve as advisors was seen again by the students to be a source of concern. It was suggested that administrators screen faculty members by selecting those known for their ability to relate to students, and who have shown an interest and willingness to serve as an advisor. It was recommended that class loads be reduced as reward for those faculty advisors who accepted this added responsibility.

Suggestions made by dissatisfied students to other advisors as ways of improving their interactions with students were similar to the comments made by satisfied students; they were:

- focus on the freshman; freshmen needs are more critical
- develop the advisor-advisee relationship; continuity with an advisor would sustain the relationship
- force the interaction initially; make it mandatory to meet with an advisor
- structure the interaction; keep an updated and official file on each student

Suggestions made by satisfied and dissatisfied students that overlapped were:

- be a source of information; dispense accurate information readily
- act as a referral agent when appropriate
- become personally involved; show a caring attitude toward the student; take a personal and active interest in the student

When asked to describe the best method for finding a suitable match between advisor and advisee, most students, satisfied and dissatisfied, prefaced ideas with comments reflecting the difficulty of such an undertaking. After expressing reservations, with the notion of finding a "best system," however, the satisfied students suggested the following:

- the advisor will need to be of the same major, or within the same field of interest as the student
- after adequate orientation and familiarity with the instructors in their department, the students could decide which advisor could serve them best
- first, administrators will need to carefully select faculty members sensitive to the advising needs of students

Dissatisfied students made virtually the same suggestions as the satisfied students, with a few additional comments:

- be willing to explore academic and career goals with the students, especially the undecided
- all students be assigned an advisor
- given time, if a student is displeased with the assigned advisor, a new advisor can be selected by the student

When asked if the present interaction with their advisor would be considered a personal relationship, as opposed to impersonal, eight of the twelve satisfied students answered "yes." The four answering "no" were describing basically the same type of relationship as the others. The expression "personal relationship" gave rise to differing interpretations making it more a matter of semantics than a difference in perception. After qualifying what constitutes a personal from an impersonal relationship, commonalities emerged as follows:

WHAT THE RELATIONSHIP IS...

- I can talk to my advisor, if I want to, about personal matters
- my advisor is my friend
- we can talk together
- cares about me as a person
- our conversations are not restricted to academics
- we are on a first name basis
- mutual concern is expressed
- a friendly interaction

- shows interest in me
- knows me and I know him/her

When asked if the present interaction with their advisor would be considered a personal relationship, as opposed to impersonal, all of the dissatisfied students answered "no." After qualifying what makes it appear impersonal, the following comments were recorded:

- does not call me by name
- it is only a business type relationship
- makes me feel like I am in the way
- gives incomplete answers to my questions
- makes no attempt to be helpful
- void of explanation
- gives the impression of being too busy

In the second part of the question, "Do you want a personal relationship with your advisor?", five of the six dissatisfied students answered "yes." Of those indicating a preference for a personal relationship, the following comments were made as to how the relationship could be different:

- just personal enough so I could feel comfortable
- helpful and friendly is all I ask, the advisor does not have to get involved in my private life
- my advisor does not even have to like me, as long as s/he would answer my questions
- show that they care about students as people

In summary, knowing the student as a person, taking an active interest, being on a first name basis, and recognizing the student in the halls and recalling the student's name seemed to characterize the preferred personal relationship. Arbitrary lines were generally drawn by the students confining the advisor-advisee relationship to classroom or office contacts. Students seemed to encourage advisors to get involved up to a point. But, intruding into social or personal life was somehow seen as off limits, unless the student requested such help. Personal meant being personally acquainted, not intimately involved. Students did not perceive the advisor to be a therapist with whom the discussion of personal problems was expected. If the student indicated a need for this type of interaction, however, the advisor would be receptive and able to make a referral to the proper agency.

DISCUSSION

From the interviews it seemed that the advisor-advisee relationship was confined to activities normally performed by advisors. Students appeared to define the role and restrict the activities to a narrow range of academic issues and concerns. The emphasis focused on being an executor of routine, clerical tasks and on being a dispenser of accurate information. The consensus was that traditional advising activities were seen as prerequisites for delivery systems; activities beyond that were seen as additional benefits, and seldom rejected if offered. Students did not discern the role of advisor to be all-encompassing, but saw the role to be somewhat limited in scope due to time constraints and departmental demands. It was noted that students' remarks were usually prefaced with an informed and realistic appraisal of the current situation for advising, i.e., faculty-student ratios, heavy teaching loads, professional expectations, lack of funding, etc. In other words, the concept of developmental advising was not rejected *per se*; it was not seen as expected or as practical.

During the face-to-face interviews, an air of optimism prevailed. Students did not see the study as futile; on the contrary, they were enthusiastic and willing to cooperate, believing that the advising system could be improved. Students interviewed felt the topic of advising was worthy of discussion, and a critical service for students in higher education; they expressed appreciation for being solicited for opinions. The belief that students' input might be used to better an existing service appeared to be a motive for participating rather than using the situation as a way of voicing discontent.

For instance, in the case of the dissatisfied student, the criticism was constructive, not vindictive. As stated previously, these dissatisfied students, when asked to participate further in face-to-face interviews, were less willing than the satisfied students to schedule and to meet appointments. The ones that did agree to participate, though not happy with their own situations, believed that by cooperating their comments might help undergraduates in the future.

In the case of the satisfied students with nothing to gain personally from a study of this kind, they seemed willing to participate as a way of expressing gratitude for having advisors that took a personal interest. The majority pointed out how fortunate they were to have a relationship with an advisor in which the advisor was seen as personally involved. The benefits incurred from such a relationship made an investigative study of this kind worthwhile, so that others might benefit from interactions.

Both satisfied and dissatisfied students overall endorsed the study as a worthwhile endeavor that could potentially lead to changes for the better. Generally, they appeared eager to be a part of an effort to improve the existing advising system.

In the face-to-face interviews, a personal dimension emerged from the open-ended type questions. Students with few exceptions expressed a preference for faculty advisors to know them personally. The desire to be known and cared about as a person surfaced as an essential need. A number of the dissatisfied students candidly expressed a sincere regret for having missed an opportunity of having an advisor know them personally.

A personal relationship as espoused by the development theory in which advisors become closely involved in all areas of the students' lives may not be seen as practical or necessary from the students' standpoint. The premise, however, that the advisor is responsible for initiating a caring, human relationship with an advisee, which is also part of the developmental theory, was seen as practical and necessary from the point of view of students. The majority of the students interviewed indicated that knowing the student personally and becoming personally involved in all aspects of a student's life may not be a realistic expectation for advisors, but demonstrating that advisors care about students as people was a realistic expectation. One student captured the essence when she explained, "Considering the number the advisors have to deal with, it may be impractical to think the relationship could be more personal. If, however, advisors just understood, you do not have to know the student, just show them that you care about them as people, that in itself would do."

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings of the present investigation, recommendations for consideration in improving present advisor-advisee relationships and for further research are as follows:

A pertinent question raised from examining the results of the study and yet unanswered, merits consideration. It was found that students generally limit advisors to traditional advising activities; does it mean that students want this or does it mean that students have only learned to expect what they know they can get?

As stated by Witters and Miller¹³ students appear to be conditioned to expect nothing more than routine registration advising. The question raised is, "Are students so oriented in the college environment that they do not expect anything more than the formality of 'registering for classes?'".¹⁴

In order to answer the question, to what extent students' perceptions of the role of advising are influenced by extenuating circumstances, it may be desirable to conduct a longitudinal study. By comparing perceptions of the "ideal" relationship from a population of incoming freshmen it might reveal to what extent expectations change with time and to what extent expectations are tempered by the reality of the situation. At the end of the senior year the same population could be re-tested to measure discernible differences in perception of the "ideal" with the "actual" relationship established contrasted to initial perceptions of the "ideal" that they held at the beginning of their collegiate experience.

Seeking answers to this and other questions may require further studies of similar design. Replicating this study or perhaps developing a study further adapted to the type of institution, or the type of student in question, may be necessary in order to fully explore and come to an understanding of the nature of the advisor-advisee relationship. Future studies with a larger N may need to be conducted upon populations within each college on campus or within each major. This, being a descriptive study, suggests a need for more closely controlled, experimental studies allowing for manipulation and control of variables. Perhaps the development of a new instrument for the purpose of measuring students' perceptions quantitatively would be useful. Also, more valid and reliable measures are required for rating and evaluating students' satisfaction with various advising delivery systems.

It also seems reasonable that a method be devised for evaluating advisor effectiveness. This instrument could be used to screen and select faculty members as advisors. An effort on the part of administrators to screen such faculty members would be an attempt to improve delivery systems and meet the needs of the students. Seeking better ways to evaluate advisors' performance may pave the way for commensurable recognition or reward for advisors.

To implement such plans would necessitate changes in attitudes and philosophies for some departments, colleges, and institutions of higher education. Advising would need to be seen as a high priority and an integral part of the total mission. Recognizing the value of out-of-class contacts with students and realizing the benefits, both short and long range, for improving advising delivery systems would stimulate administrators and faculty to increase the frequency of contact and to improve the quality of the interaction.

As the "new" student of the 1980's becomes the typical student of the 1990's, the advisor's role will become increasingly more demanding. New skills will be expected in order

13 L. Witters and H.G. Miller, "College Advising: An Analysis of Advisor-Advisee Roles," *Journal of Space*, 9, (1971), pp. 36-40.

14 Witters, 1971, pp. 36-40.

to meet the current needs as well as the changing needs of the students. If the role is carried out well, it will require continuous commitment to advising and a willingness to accept the complexity of the demands and meet the challenges that ensue.