

APPROACHING A DEFINITIVE POSITION ON ACADEMIC ADVISING

At the March 1987 mid-year meeting, the NACADA board of directors engaged in a **three**-hour, wide-ranging discussion of the problems facing academic advising, nationally and at all types of institutions. Of the 27 issues that were discussed, three important questions emerged: What exactly do we—in our role as advisors—do? How do we measure that activity within the context of an academic institution? How do we gain substantive recognition on our respective campuses?

Although given priority ten on the list of 27, the first question provides the primary key to our concerns. As one board member astutely noted, sound Aristotelian principle calls for procedure from definition. We, of course, know what we do. When we gather at national and regional meetings, we have little difficulty talking about our jobs and understanding each other, and we quickly go about seeking solutions to mutual problems. In short, we very easily empathize. When we make presentations or ask for support on campus, however, we are sometimes hard-pressed, because deans, administrators, and other colleagues often have a different idea of who we are and what we do. To continue the Aristotelian motif, our understanding of our essence does not coincide with the perceptions of those who perform different functions at the same institution.

Our institutional colleagues' perceptions—or misperceptions—revolve around two fundamental fallacies that we must correct. The first is that advising occurs in "peaks and valleys," i.e., in short, work-intensive periods followed by long periods of low activity. In fewer and fewer situations does this hold true. Word has traveled fast and students have overwhelmingly voted with their feet by seeking out faculty and professional advisors who offer good assistance during the entire course of the term or semester and even during term breaks. The traditional "down-time" in advising, including that nice, relaxing summer, has faded into history. The former peaks and valleys have leveled off to a fairly continuous plateau. A second critical misperception stems from a "checksheet" view of advising, which we might see as *passé*, but which is implanted in the minds of many of our colleagues. This assumes that academic advising chiefly involves monitoring a student's progress toward fulfilling general and major course requirements printed in the college/university bulletin or on an internally designed course list. It presumes that, once students are given a schematic handout on general education and major requirements, their progress in their college/university career flows smoothly and logically from that point.

We can, and often do, protest against what we think is an outmoded and oversimplified understanding of advising, and we can argue over what advising *is* not, but this only brings the debate full circle. What *is* advising? If we are to break this circle, it is we who must do it, it is we who must be clear about what we do. If we think we are serving an important function, we must reach agreement on what that function is. From a national consensus, we can then grapple with the tough issues of standards, measurement, recognition, and support. Our definition will not be short, and it probably will look more like a position paper. Inevitably

we will make distinctions (again, Aristotelian methodology) between major and **pre-major** advising, faculty and professional advising, centralized and decentralized advising. We most likely will address differences in advising at different types of institutions, and of necessity we will touch upon our relationship to colleagues in career and personal counseling and other areas of student life. Despite all of these distinctions, despite our richly varied academic backgrounds, we do have a common bond and we can articulate it for our own good, for the good of our students, and for the good of higher education.

We have prompting already, not only from the NACADA board and its appointed committees, but also from our healthy exchanges at national and regional meetings. If you have thoughts about what advising is, your advising counterparts would like to know of them. (Probably, policymakers at your institution would be interested too; we do have evidence that they are quite willing to listen.) Write to your NACADA regional or institutional representative, or better yet, direct a letter to the editor of the NACADA Journal, and use the ***Journal*** as a mechanism for sharing your ideas. The time is ripe to approach a definition of academic advising, to state a position on what we are and what we do, and to develop those standards that will guide us in the future.