

THE ACADEMIC ADVISOR AS ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE AGENT

*The author of this article believes that academic advisors, especially directors of advising units, **have** an excellent opportunity to help students by becoming environmental change agents on their campuses. Here, he reports some of the responses he has received from advisors who have performed this role on their respective campuses— what they did and how they did it.*

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

To test the premise that academic advisors can become environmental change agents on their campuses, a short survey questionnaire was sent to 77 academic advising colleagues, 41 members of the California Conference of Academic Advisors, and 36 others from 25 states. Almost all of the latter have held, or currently are holding, leadership positions in NACADA. The group was composed of 38 women and 39 men. Of the 77 questionnaires mailed, 33 (43%) were returned— 20 from public institutions and 13 from private ones. Eighteen men and 15 women responded. The respondents were asked to provide selected demographic data and, then, to indicate whether or not they had been change agents on their campuses in one or more suggested categories. If so, they were asked to provide succinct examples.

DISCUSSION

Most respondents, 27 of 33 (82%), indicated they had been change agents and provided numerous anecdotes accordingly.

Table 1 indicates the categories checked most frequently.

Table 1

Change-Agent Categories

	Public	Private	Total
1. Campus-wide policy/procedures	15	8	23/33 = 70%
2. Schedule of courses	7	7	14/33 = 42%
3. Department policy/procedure	7	4	11/33 = 33%
4. Catalog	7	3	10/33 = 30%

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All 33 respondents provided numerous examples of major and minor ways in which they have affected their respective campus environments for the benefit of students and faculty. Area of change most often included campus-wide **policy/procedure**, but also involved school or department **policy/procedure**, and improving the catalog and course schedule. No essential differences were detected between respondents from public and private institutions.

Changes resulted from such involvements as creating an advising or reentry office, revising catalog~schedule-of-courses copy, developing a training program for faculty or peer advisors, instituting a peer advisor program in spite of faculty uncertainty as to the need or viability of peer advising. The respondents also cited writing grant proposals, preparing advising checklists, and developing faculty advisor handbooks.

In many cases, respondents indicated that changes took one or several years to accomplish, and that often they had to work cooperatively with such academic administrators as deans and registrars—indeed they had to persuade committees and departments in the process. In other words, some policies and procedures, biases and apprehensions, are so entrenched in a given campus bureaucracy—or ingrained in people—that one must possess patience and self confidence in order to bring new programs and ideas into being.

Although no pattern appears to exist as to who can cause change, it seems that **directors/coordinators** of advising have the best opportunity, or individuals who have been on campus long enough to learn the system and how to function within it. This is especially true for those who have demonstrated competence and developed relationships with **campus** leaders and policymakers. Even new and young faculty or student affairs staff members can effect change, if they see a need and are willing to do something about it.

The following are four anecdotes to illustrate ways in which advisors have been campus change agents.

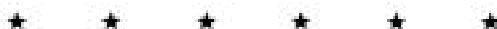
I paved the way for extensive use of peer advisors on our campus. Campus advising coordinators were invited to discuss the use of peers, eventually resulting in a credit course being offered for their use. For several programs on campus, advising is now done almost exclusively by peer advisors, many of whom are trained in our office. During a recent revision of our campus standards for satisfactory performance, I worked closely with our campus senate committee on scholastic standing to formulate a new set of more demanding standards. The original proposal for these standards was my own creation and was different from other proposals submitted by campus committees. With only minor modifications, my proposal was supported by our senate committee and will likely be approved by our board of regents at its next meeting. I was personally responsible for obtaining funds from our campus parents association with which to present annual awards for excellence in advising. These have been given over the past four years at our campus's annual honors convocation. At this year's awards, six campus advisors received certificates of recognition and each received a **\$400** cash award.



Spearheaded successful attempt to remove "Progress Points"; revived defunct orientation programs for entering students and improved their format and impact; assisted in developing improved registration procedures; revised cumbersome petitions forms; developed system for more personalized tracking of students on academic probation; stopped "revolving door" of disqualification/reinstatement; produced first Faculty Advising Handbook and revised second edition; instituted advising training workshops for new faculty.



I wrote the initial draft of a program for Academically Underprepared Students. It was approved by the School of Arts and Sciences, the Academic Affairs Council, and the Board. I direct the program. As a result we have put in place a placement testing program for all new students. Course placement in English and math now works well. Due to the success of the Entry Program, our retention is up and, most importantly, students' basic skills have improved tremendously. I wrote the initial draft and syllabus for a Freshman Seminar course. It came out of an ad hoc committee examining our peer group counseling program. Data from the past three years indicate that students who take the course are significantly retained and have significantly higher GPAs. I reorganized the advising system in the School of Arts and Sciences.



I established and chaired an academic advising committee, consisting of faculty, assistant deans, and students. This committee has served as a forum for reviewing policies and procedures affecting advising and for recommending and developing new policies and procedures. I instituted a number of changes in registration procedures that affected advising, e.g., separating course selection from schedule building in order to free advisors from routine tasks, moving from an arena registration system to one that is decentralized and permits advising to be carried on in faculty members' offices. I have instituted a pilot project for advising selected groups of freshmen students, especially undeclared majors. This project involved structured group advising sessions conducted by selected faculty advisors, in a freshman mini-seminar format.

SUMMARY

Survey results obtained from 33 academic advising colleagues from public and private institutions of higher education across the nation supported the premise that an academic advisor, especially a **director/coordinator** of advising, can have a positive impact on his or her campus as an environmental change agent for the benefit of students and faculty alike.

Suggested Reading

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