

AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON ACADEMIC ADVISING A Report from Students at a University in Saudi Arabia

Academic advising constitutes one of the key problems facing higher education throughout the world today. The need for and benefits of advising are not limited to one geographical area, but represent a pervasive problem, penetrating international and cultural boundaries. This study examines the advising program at King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Students' responses to a twenty-item questionnaire have been drawn upon to construct a picture of how students perceive academic advising at their university. The study also sought to determine if a significant difference in student responses to the survey existed between the colleges within the university and between the academic levels of the students. Recommendations and practical suggestions to help improve academic advising at the university are offered.

INTRODUCTION

The need for and benefits of advising are universal in nature. The problem of providing effective academic advising is not limited to one geographical or cultural area. The challenge is for institutions of higher education *all over the world* to meet the academic advising needs of their students.

Academic advising has arisen as institutions of higher education have sought to meet the needs of their students by providing them with information and support to enable them to attain academic and personal success. The significance of academic advising is emphasized by research reporting its consistent relation to student performance and retention (Crockett, 1979; Habley, 1982; Morehead & Johnson, 1964; Trombley, 1984) and has been found to be related to student morale (Wilder, 1981) and grade-point average (Morehead & Johnson, 1964).

Today, more than ever before, students are faced with decisions concerning course selection, course scheduling, course requirements, university regulations, entry-level job requirements, and decisions concerning vocations. Students are sometimes faced with what seems to be a bombardment of data to filter, decipher, and use. Advising must be a source of ac-

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curate information for students. Information-giving is not enough, however. Academic advising must help students to use information to their best advantage.

Academic advising must also seek to provide support for students and assist them in solving problems which hinder their academic success. This implies that advising must be not only information-giving, but must also involve personal advising-counseling. It is important to help students identify and make use of information relevant to their life situations.

Unfortunately, this is often not the case with academic advising. Advising, all too frequently, becomes a last-minute effort before registration for classes, when someone signs a schedule so that the student can register. Thus, the benefits of the academic advising process are not realized by the students.

It is imperative that academic advising not be a "stepchild" of higher education, but an integral part—a partner in higher education along with counseling, research, and placement. This implies a conscious awareness of and dedication to advising on behalf of the institution's administration, and a faculty that is trained and dedicated to advising and to the goals of an advising program.

The importance of gathering students' opinions and attitudes through surveys and questionnaires has been well established in higher education research. Opinion surveys can have a number of uses in the area of academic advising. They can establish the usefulness of an advising program to the students it serves, and they can evaluate the ongoing advising program to determine how improvements can be made.

THE EXISTING PROGRAM

The academic advising program established in 1957 at King Saud University is a relatively new one considering that the University is the oldest and largest university in Saudi Arabia. King Saud, like many other Arab universities, has experienced phenomenal growth. Beginning in 1957 with 21 students, it has grown to over 17,000 students in 1986 (Saleh, 1986). Like other universities in the Arab world, King Saud has been primarily concerned with establishing an institution of higher education with a trained faculty capable of teaching in Arabic and with a sufficient number of buildings in which the teaching can occur. Great strides have been made up to this point. Now, hopefully, the time is ripe to look at other ways to ensure the students' academic success.

The present academic advising program at King Saud University is carried out by faculty, is information-giving in nature, and lacks definite goals and cohesion. Academic advising is done within each college of the University. Certain faculty members in each department are asked by the department head in consultation with the dean of a college to advise students within the department. The number of faculty members asked to advise in each department varies according to the number of students expressing interest in the specializations of each department. The advisor assists the same students until their graduation and receives new students each semester.

These faculty advisors receive no prior training and no guidelines. They meet with the students immediately before, and during, registration at the beginning of each semester to assist students with their degree plans, the scheduling of classes, and course selection. If students need to make a schedule change by dropping or adding a course during the semester, they go to their advisor for a signature.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was threefold: (1) to ascertain the students' perceptions of academic advising at King Saud University, (2) to determine if a significant difference exists among students' responses throughout the various colleges at King Saud, and (3) to determine if a significant difference exists among the various levels of academic attainment by the students included in the survey.

A total of 400 undergraduates (academic levels 1-5) were included in the survey. All respondents were male—King Saud, like all other Saudi institutions of higher education, is strictly segregated along gender lines. A sample of 50 students from each of the following eight colleges responded to the survey: College of Arts, College of Science, College of Administrative Science, College of Pharmacy, College of Agriculture, College of Education, College of Engineering, and College of Medicine.

A twenty-item questionnaire, formulated by the researcher, based on a three-point scale was given to 400 students. Each item concerned a specific role or function of academic advising. An item-by-item analysis was made of the students' responses. The frequency of their responses was tabulated and indicated as percentages. A chi-square test of independence based upon frequencies of responses was conducted to compare the responses of the various colleges and the level of academic attainment of the students. Statistical significance was established at the .05 level.

RESULTS

The results of the study showed that less than 50 percent of the students gave a positive response to 15 out of the 20 survey questions (see next page). Only 34 percent believed that their advisor had the necessary knowledge and ability to help them select courses and arrange a class schedule; 37 percent of the students reported that they believed their advisor had the needed knowledge of faculty teaching the courses and subject contents to help them; and 40 percent responded that their advisor was knowledgeable of university rules, regulations, and course offerings.

Sixty-three percent of the students reported that they did not believe consultation with their advisor had improved their grade-point average; the remainder reported it had. Forty percent of the students believed that their advisor had a deep knowledge of and concern for them. The same percentage responded that they perceived their advisor to be interested in them as a person and made them feel comfortable about discussing their concerns. Sixty-two percent of the students do not identify their advisor as someone with whom they would discuss their personal problems.

Fifty-two percent reported that their advisor was easily assessable; 50 percent reported that their advisor was in a hurry and did not take the necessary time to speak about the students' concerns. The location of the advisor's office was reported by 58 percent of the students as easy to find. A total of 68 percent believed their advisor listened to them and gave them adequate attention.

Forty-five percent indicated they had a positive experience with the academic advising program within their college and 43 percent reported that the goals and objectives of their advising program were clear and understandable. Fifty-four percent responded that the time they needed their advisor was when they needed someone to sign a registration card. Even so, 61 percent indicated they felt that their advisors had been a positive influence and helped them to succeed in academic life.

Student responses to academic advising

Question	Yes		No		Not sure		Difference among colleges	Difference among levels
	#	%	#	%	#	%		
1. I have had a positive experience with the academic advising program at my college.	182	45	146	37	72	18	0.002	0.025
2. The goals and objectives of the advising program are clear and understandable to me.	174	43	144	36	82	27	0.036	0.002
3. My advisor is easily accessible to me and is easy to get an appointment with.	210	52	152	38	39	10	0.001	0.016
4. My advisor is always in a hurry and this impedes my speaking with him about my concerns.	157	39	202	51	42	10	0.784	0.261
5. My academic advisor is knowledgeable about rules and regulations, subjects, and course offerings, and, thus, I have confidence in his advice.	160	40	172	42	69	18	0.066	0.206
6. My advisor does not really listen to me and does not give me adequate advice and is not really fulfilling my needs.	93	23	271	67	37	9	0.001	0.008
7. I would not discuss my personal problems with my advisor.	250	62	118	30	33	8	0.636	0.334
8. My specialization is similar to my advisor's, and this gives common ground for establishing a relationship.	200	50	125	31	76	19	0.010	0.163
9. I usually meet once or twice after registration with my advisor.	190	47	168	42	43	11	0.007	0.095
10. My advisor is interested in me as a person and makes me feel comfortable and free to discuss my concerns.	161	40	182	45	58	15	0.001	0.131
11. My advisor communicates with me on a level I can understand.	150	37	179	44	72	18	0.001	0.024
12. My advisor has the knowledge and ability to help me select classes and arrange a class schedule.	138	34	210	53	53	13	0.017	0.054
13. The only time I need my advisor is to sign my registration card.	215	55	165	41	21	5	0.114	0.429
14. My advisor has knowledge of both faculty and subjects.	149	37	178	45	74	10	0.012	0.918
15. My advisor is patient and helps any one who asks for it.	209	52	121	30	71	18	0.001	0.470
16. My advisor has a deep concern about me and is happy to see me successful in life.	159	39	136	34	106	37	0.001	0.248
17. My advisor takes the necessary time and is patient with me even when I am slow or change my mind.	177	44	150	38	74	18	0.001	0.001
18. My consultation with my advisor has improved my grade point.	150	37	189	47	62	16	0.024	0.604
19. It is easy to find the location of my advisor's office.	231	57	135	34	35	8	0.176	0.142
20. My advisor has been a positive influence and has helped me succeed in my academic life.	246	61	53	23	62	16	0.001	0.839

Based on frequencies of responses

Significant at the .05 level

It appears from the survey that some of the colleges within the university did a more adequate job of academic advising than others, with the various colleges differing at the .05 level of significance to fifteen of the twenty questions included in the survey. The students in Fine Arts and Business were consistent in giving more negative perceptions of academic advising than students in the other colleges. In sixteen of the twenty questions, students in these two colleges had the most negative perceptions of academic advising. Generally, the Colleges of Pharmacy, Science, and Agriculture (in that order) had the highest positive perceptions.

It appears from the findings of the survey that the lower the classification of the student, the more unfavorable their perception of academic advising. Students who had been at the University one and two years reported a consistently more unfavorable perception of academic advising than those students who had been there three, four, and five years. This was particularly true with respect to questions 1, 2, 4, 11, and 17. More frequently than their upperclassmen counterparts, the one- and two-year students indicated that the goals and objectives of academic advising in their colleges were not clear and understandable to them, and that their advisor did not communicate on a level they could understand.

CONCLUSIONS

The study indicates general student dissatisfaction with academic advising at the University, particularly from the point of view of the first- and second-year students. Perhaps this can be attributed to the lack of experience in University life and advising as compared to the "veteran" students. The study also revealed some colleges in the University were reported by the students to provide better academic advising than others.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the survey was that an overwhelming number of students perceived their advisors to be lacking the necessary knowledge concerning rules and regulations, content of subjects, course offerings, faculty, and scheduling. That, combined with the students' perception of lack of interest and concern on the part of their advisors, seems to have undermined the academic advising process at the University, rendering it only minimally beneficial when compared to its potential. This is not surprising, considering the advisors' lack of preparation and the lack of administrative leadership in the advising process.

It appears, from the findings, that the quality and amount of academic advising is inadequate to meet the students' needs. Considering the importance of academic advising, it has not received the attention and support it merits within the institution. It is particularly alarming that large numbers of first- and second-year students reported their dissatisfaction with the advising program. This could correlate with and have a **significant** impact upon the University's retention efforts. Also, it is hard for any institution to maintain morale and a caring relationship when students perceive a lack of interest on the part of their advisors.

King Saud University needs to undertake an overall dedication to an active advising system that will meet the needs of its students. This can begin at the top levels of administration by establishing the following:

- formalized goals of academic advising,
- a handbook for academic advising for faculty members,
- a training program for advisors,
- incentives for those providing academic advising,
- and involvement of more faculty in the advising process in order to lower student-advisor ratios and enable the advisors to spend more time with each **student. Emphasis should be placed on** providing the student with accurate, useful information and a more personal approach to advising.

Faculty advising with a personal approach is best suited to the Arab culture, where most business and social interactions are conducted on a personal basis. Combined with the high respect for university professors who have attained high academic success, this indicates that computer-assisted advising and peer advising probably will not meet with the kind of success, at present, that it has had in the West.

One should keep in mind that higher education in a university setting is relatively new to some countries of the Arab World, and many of the students do not know what to expect from the university. They do not have a network of elders in the community who have been through the system to help them understand it. This means that academic advising, particularly on behalf of the faculty, can play a significant and decisive role in the lives of students within King Saud University and other Arab universities. It should be kept in mind that it is not enough to have a formal advising process. What is called for is an effective advising process that meets the students' needs. This means that monitoring of students' perceptions of academic advising should be an ongoing process in order to improve the academic advising process.

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