

STUDENT EVALUATION

A Model for Improving Advising Services

The *rationale* for implementing a student evaluation of advising *services* was based on the premise that for advising services to be effective there must be evaluation. How can advising services and advisor performance be improved if students are not asked to rate their experiences in academic advising? After all, they are the consumers of the service! This article will explain the methodology used in a computerized student evaluation model that has been used for four years, identify the steps involved in designing a questionnaire and in implementing a student evaluation, and describe how advising services and advisor performance can be improved, based on student feedback.

WHAT IS A CEGEP?

John Abbott College is one of forty-four colleges that forms part of the Quebec educational system. These colleges are commonly called CEGEPs (College d' Enseignement Generale et Professionnel).

The advising services are centralized in the student services division with formal links to the academic divisions. The services are provided to 5,000 students by a team of five professional advisors whose primary function is academic advising. The services are coordinated by a senior academic advisor.

WHY EVALUATE ADVISING SERVICES?

The academic advising team has been committed to the notion of excellence in developmental advising since the department's inception in 1975. To achieve this goal, the department's general objectives focus on

- responding to student needs on an individual basis,
- fostering a quality advisee/advisor relationship, and
- providing quality services to students.

★ **ANITA NEALE**, senior academic advisor at John Abbott College at Ste.-Anne de Bellevue, established her advising department in 1975. She has her B.A. in psychology, with extensive personnel experience in education, government, and private industry. She has presented programs at the NACADA national conferences in Philadelphia and Seattle, and at "Le Congres" sponsored by the Quebec Association of Academic Advisors.

CATHERINE SIDORENKO is an academic advisor at John Abbott College. She received the B.A. and the M.Sc. en Sociologie from the Universite de Montreal (Loyola College). She was a presenter at the NACADA national conference in Seattle and at "Le Congres."

For many years, the advisors believed their advising program was effective and responsive to student needs. These perceptions had been confirmed by a high demand for advising services. About five years ago, however, the advisors commented that the role of the advisor seemed to be changing. It had become multifaceted; the advising process had become more complex; and the demand for the service had increased significantly. The advisors wanted to know why this was happening.

After considerable discussion, the advisors concluded that student needs had changed throughout the years due to major socioeconomic changes in this region. A weakened economy, a declining labor market, and an increasingly competitive university admission process had a tremendous impact on students. In the 80s, students were faced with making some very difficult decisions regarding their future educational and career goals. In addition, there seemed to be an increase in the personal problems students were facing.

These socioeconomic changes also had a tremendous impact on student enrollment—it increased significantly, particularly in the area of nontraditional students (second-language students, mature students, drop-outs and forced-outs returning to school). Naturally, this created an increased demand and need for advising services from a growing and changing student population, many of whom had special needs. Although it was reassuring to know that hundreds of students were clamoring for appointments, it was upsetting to turn away students because no appointments were available. Because the advisors wanted to be as accessible as possible, the team responded haphazardly to this increased demand by overextending itself. This solution was not effective; advisors became rushed, harassed, and exhausted!

The problems with accessibility and availability prompted the advisors to question all the perceptions they had about the quality of advising services. Were the department objectives being met under these conditions? Were advisors readily available to students? Were the advisors responding to current student needs? Were students really satisfied with the service? If not, was there room for improvement? And if so, in which areas?

Concurrently, the advisors were curious to know what the students thought of them as advisors and as people. If advisors were rushed, harassed, and exhausted, what was happening to the quality of the advisee/advisor relationship? Did the students perceive the advisor as sensitive, helpful, caring, and well-informed? Were the advisors easy to talk to and interested in students as individuals? Were advisors responding to student needs on an individual basis? Also, were advisors disseminating accurate information clearly to students?

Given the perceived changes in student needs plus the increased demand for services, the advising team decided to ask the students to rate the service. This would supply answers to our questions and determine if the department's general objectives were being met.

METHODOLOGY

Once the department became committed to student evaluation, the task of designing the method of evaluation and establishing its time frame began. A department contemplating evaluation must situate its evaluation process in terms of the current literature and existing models. The time, energy, and resources of the department will further influence the model chosen.

Literature on the evaluation of academic advising is limited, particularly with regard to centralized, professional advising services. The majority of articles and books written within the educational milieu deal with teaching effectiveness and, to a lesser extent, evaluation of student services. The advising network is relatively small, and contact with colleagues is

an excellent way to access the practices already in operation. Professional conferences, such as those sponsored by NACADA, provide a forum in which to share information on evaluation systems.

A review of literature can be an overwhelming task in and of itself. Because evaluation is considered a tool to gather information from students, the review of literature is seen as an ongoing activity.

In 1983, two advisors were given the evaluation project to develop for implementation in the winter term, 1984. The first task was to write a grant proposal for the college's Research and Development Committee. From there, the review of literature and the design of an evaluation questionnaire were the first tasks to be undertaken.

At about the same time, the Faculty Professional Development Office had begun to use TABS (Teaching Analysis By Students) developed by Michael Melnick and Dwight Allen at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. This tool was being updated for user friendliness by our Faculty Professional Development Service. Therefore, a tool, plus the expertise of a pedagogical counselor familiar with the TABS system, was available.

The TABS system was adapted in advising for the following reasons:

1. It provided for a computerized analysis of data collected.
2. It provided a more sophisticated tool that could not only give student evaluations, but could also measure these evaluations against our own self-assessments and estimates of student predictions.
3. It provided individual and group evaluation while respecting confidentiality.
4. It allowed for comparison between self and the group.
5. It was available in the college without a user charge.

In the last three years, TABS has evolved from a computer mainframe version to a software package known as CATS. CATS (Computerized Assessment of Teaching Systems) was developed by ICSD (Intercollegial Consortium of Software Development) of which John Abbott College is a founding member. This development has made the evaluator more independent, since it is IBM PC compatible, has a user manual, has been designed to be user friendly, is extremely portable, and reinforces confidentiality. Thus, rather than starting from zero in terms of designing an evaluation tool and method of analysis, this package was selected and our process was adapted within its parameters.

DESIGN OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Few model questionnaires on student evaluation of advising were readily available. In addition, the CEGEP advising tasks differed significantly from faculty advising in the United States. As such, the advisors started by listing items which they believed students were competent to comment upon in terms of their interaction with advisors. From there, several resources on designing questionnaires were consulted and wording was fine-tuned to ensure clear and concise questions and instructions. The entire team participated in **finalizing** the 1983-84 questionnaire. In addition, particular care was given to the layout and presentation of the questionnaire, since a mailed questionnaire was chosen.

The **TABS/CATS** system imposed several constraints in the design of the questionnaire. Since it is multiple choice for computer analysis, the design is limited to presenting a statement and asking for an answer, which is rated on a five-point scale. For example:

My advisor helped me feel comfortable during the interview.

Rating Scale: A - very good to excellent

B - generally good

C - mediocre

D - generally poor

E - does not apply

Alternatively, the structure allows for questions to be asked such that five (or fewer) possible answers are named:

How many times did you see an advisor this year by appointment?

a) one

b) two

c) three

d) four

e) five or more

General comments were solicited to gain better insight into the student's perspective, as well as to allow the student to comment on areas not addressed by the questionnaire. By the third year, the questionnaire was finalized and copyrighted.

ADMINISTERING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The **TABS/CATS** model for faculty use is typically administered in a classroom setting where students immediately return the questionnaire. In the one-to-one, advisor-student relationship, this is somewhat awkward and threatens the confidentiality of student response.

Although a mailed questionnaire has major shortcomings in terms of return rate and costs of postage, it was chosen as the most viable method. It created an additional amount of work, since data from the mailed surveys needed to be transposed onto Opscan sheets or inputted directly onto the computer. Table 1 illustrates the critical path currently used at John Abbott.

STUDENT PREDICTION AND SELF-EVALUATION

CATS allows for a more complex analysis of data by introducing the dimensions of an advisor predicting student response and a self-evaluation (reflection on strengths and weaknesses). To make use of these two dimensions, CATS is designed so that the advisor's predictions and self-evaluation are loaded onto the computer prior to receiving the student responses. At John Abbott this is done on an individual and a group basis by setting deadlines and scheduling a department meeting to identify the group rating on these two items.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The completed surveys are given to each advisor as they are returned. Advisors receive immediate feedback, and the comments are particularly revealing. The impact on the advisors is such that there is a heightened sensitivity to the interpersonal dynamics of their interviews.

Advisors individually transpose their survey responses onto Opscan sheets (the capability of direct input to computer also exists). The Opscan sheets are **batched** by the advisor and the completed forms are sent to the MIS (Management Information Systems) department for processing.

TABLE 1

JOHN ABBOTT COLLEGE STUDENT EVALUATION OF ACADEMIC ADVISING SERVICES

CRITICAL PATH

June	1. Set the critical path and budget
Ongoing	2. Review literature
Summer	3. Design or revise questionnaire
Summer-Fall	4. Establish parameters of sample to be surveyed
Summer-Fall	5. Send questionnaire to print (color code)
Jan. - Mar.	6. Prepare mailing - stuff envelopes by color
March	7. Load questionnaire onto diskette
April	8. Load self-assessments and student predictions onto diskette
April	9. Compile lists of students for each advisor and general computer mailing labels
End of April	10. Mail questionnaire
May	11. Enter student data
May	12. Run reports of data
June	13. Analyze data
	14. Write report and recommendations

The CATs program can be operated on any IBM compatible personal computer. The software is designed to be user friendly and can be used without the assistance of other departments (e.g., MIS). Where a large number of questionnaires are processed individually and then combined using the Opscan method, the services of MIS are particularly helpful.

There is quick return of the data in tabular form through MITS. For smaller samples this feedback can be more immediate if the user is working directly on the personal computer. The next section will describe the presentation of the findings as generated by the CATS program.

Section I — Accessibility and Availability of Advisors

The first area of study is the accessibility and availability of the advisors to the student body. This is a sensitive issue at John Abbott because it is virtually impossible for five professional advisors to fully service approximately 5,000 full-time students.

Students are asked to rate the advisors on a five-point scale. The instruction for the five questions in this section is as follows:

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU FEEL YOUR ADVISOR OR THE DEPARTMENT NEEDS IMPROVEMENT IN EACH OF THE AREAS BELOW?

1. I was able to make an appointment with an advisor at a time that fit my schedule.
2. The receptionist at the Student Services desk was helpful.
3. Advisors are available to answer my quick questions.
4. A half-hour appointment is usually sufficient time to discuss my questions with an advisor.
5. The advisor was on time for my appointment.

Suggestions from students that relate to these items have been very easy to implement. Thus, we have been able to improve our services.

For example, students pointed out that it was difficult to see an advisor at lunch time. Drop-in times are now scheduled over the lunch period. The soliciting of comments after each question does generate significant feedback over and above the General Comment section at the end of the survey.

Section II — Interpersonal Skills

In this section, the advisors wanted to know how students would rate the advisor's interpersonal skills.

It was concluded that listening and communication skills were essential, as was the ability to care about and take an interest in the individual student. Skills that could contribute to the quality of the advisee/advisor relationship were identified and the students were asked to rate their experience in each of the following areas:

1. My advisor made me feel comfortable during the interview.
2. I felt that the advisor was interested in me as an individual.
3. I felt that my advisor was a good listener.
4. I found that my advisor explained things clearly and was easy to understand.
5. My advisor did not seem rushed and had time to spend with me.
6. I felt that my advisor was helpful and encouraging.

This section was important because it measured the extent to which the two following departmental objectives were met:

1. to establish quality advisee/advisor relationships, and
2. to respond to student needs on an individual basis.

The data also provided the advisors with good feedback on the students' perceptions of the advisors' interpersonal skills. Since the students' ratings helped to identify advisors' strengths and weaknesses, the advisors finally knew what students thought about them as advisors, and as people.

It was interesting to note, however, that the advisors as a group consistently underestimated their performance on all questions in this section. Why do advisors continually do this? Is it because they feel pressured and are always rushing to meet the next student? Or is it because the advisors are indeed rushed and sense that their interpersonal skills are not always at their best when advising students late in the day or during peak advising periods?

Section III — General Information

Since the college system is complex and students are at varying stages in all phases of their personal development, students need considerable information and advice to make informed decisions about their present and future educational and career goals. Although students cannot evaluate an advisor's technical expertise and knowledge, they can provide helpful feedback about the quality of the information they receive. Students were asked to rate the information they received and the extent to which the advisor helped them to become informed about the following areas:

1. John Abbott calendar and other publications.
2. College policies and procedures.
3. Course selections and diploma requirements.
4. Planning a program to help achieve educational and career goals.
5. Criteria for choosing programs and universities to best suit any individual's needs.
6. University information.
7. Suggesting education/training routes which would prepare a student for various jobs.

Judging from the generally good ratings received in this section, students were satisfied with the information they received, but in order to achieve excellent ratings across the board, there was room for improvement. Students seemed to want more information and explanations. This, however, could be in conflict with a developmental advising model. Do students expect the advisor to recite the contents of all the reference materials? If so, then perhaps the advisor's role is not clearly understood by the student since advisors expect students to become good consumers of information and to make informed decisions.

Section IV — Student Data

This is the one section that uses the alternate format for questions—a question followed by five possible answers. This section has been used to gather data on the student population and to establish overall ratings of satisfaction. The first two questions deal with the program the students are in, as well as the number of semesters the students have attended John Abbott. These are two indicators which help measure the stratification of our sample.

The students' familiarity, as judged by the number of appointments with advising, can effect the evaluation. Over the past three years the largest proportion (approximately 80 percent) of the students have had one or two appointments. With the introduction of "drop-in" times (1985-86) in response to feedback from students, patterns of how often the students have used the drop-in times (in addition to appointments) have emerged.

Referral sources to advising are categorized:

- (a) friends (fellow students)
- (b) faculty
- (c) other staff
- (d) read about it
- (e) other, please specify.

Friends and literature equally account for approximately 30 percent of referrals!

In terms of the level of satisfaction, over 90 percent of the students, when asked directly, agree that they are satisfied with the advising services.

Overall, I am satisfied with the academic advising services.

- a) yes b) no

This item alone has provided the department with great pride and satisfaction. If this is taken one step further, the students have been indicating that greater than 96 percent would recommend academic advising to their friends.

To ensure that the questionnaire fit the perceived reasons for coming to advising, students were asked "Why did you come see an advisor?" as an open-ended question, and 85.7 percent (1985-86) did take the time to describe their reasons. This served to clarify and validate/verify the multiple-choice data.

Section V — General Comments

This solicits remarks from the students in an open and inviting manner—"Please feel free to add your own general comments."

There was a 44.3 percent response rate in this section in 1985-86. Although undocumented in terms of percentage of response, numerous comments had been gathered in previous years. No formal analysis of these two sections is undertaken, because they are beyond the capacity of CATS. Selected comments are included in an appendix to each year's report.

The impact of the comments has been significant. The sense of understanding and knowledge of advising is sometimes evident and allows the comment to be put into context. Fortunately, there are few negative comments, but each advisor is taken aback by such negative criticism and a fair bit of introspection occurs thereafter. This section has often been used as a forum for the students to criticize the institution, its teachers, **and/or** other services. Certainly, the students need the option for open-ended responses, and they make good use of it.

HOW EVALUATION IMPROVED THE SERVICE

While some people will argue that student evaluations are a waste of time, this evaluation told us a great deal about the students' perceptions about advising services and advisor performance. It told us how students perceived the advisors; how they felt about the advisors' accessibility and availability; how they felt about the information they received; and how pleased they were that an advising service like ours existed.

This evaluation proved to be an excellent tool to improve advising services for the following reasons.

Goal Setting

This evaluation provided a solid base upon which to improve the services because it helped to assess student needs and to identify areas for improvement. Therefore, it provided direction for setting future goals to respond specifically to those areas where improvements were required. Brainstorming sessions resulted in setting realistic, specific goals for the department to which all the advisors were committed. The team solved problems such as accessibility and availability as a group by introducing improved appointment schedules and increased drop-in times and introduced a preregistration ADVIZ-A-LINE. This gave each advisor an opportunity to contribute to improving the service.

This annual review based on student feedback contributed to reducing the risk of the service deteriorating over an extended period of time by catching problems before they could get started. Because it allowed the advisors to compare the ratings from the previous year, they were able to see, within a year, if, and to what extent, their solutions had improved the services.

Professional Development

The data identified areas for professional development for the advisors as a group. This resulted in organizing professional development activities such as workshops on student development theory and advising undecided students. It also helped to identify appropriate conferences for the advisors to attend.

Heightened Awareness Levels

The evaluation caused the advisors to think in concrete, objective terms about the notion of what excellence in advising means and what it takes to provide it. It provided an opportunity for advisors to talk about how each handles the variety of roles each is required to play, the differences therein, and how to improve. The evaluation results pinpointed some of the pitfalls or "red flags" of the advising interview process, particularly advising during peak periods and late in the day. Because there is a risk that the quality of the advisee/advisor relationship may suffer if the advisor is rushed, harassed, and exhausted, advisors became more aware of these pitfalls and more sensitive to the needs of those particular students. Thus, they tried to listen carefully, be helpful, and care about the student. Watching for "red flags" has become an ongoing aspect of the advisors' interviews with students.

Image of Advising

The evaluation strengthened advising's position within the institution because the level of student satisfaction with the service was visible and because problems were quickly addressed. Students appreciated good academic advising and became satisfied students, thus contributing to the college's retention rate. It generated interest among teachers and administrators who were eager to know more about the CATS program as an evaluation instrument and about the students' level of satisfaction with advising services.

It also increased advising's profile outside the college because the use of a computerized evaluation tool was an innovative project in the college system. Presentations to various groups including NACADA national and regional conference delegates brought recognition not only to the department, but to each member of the advising team.

Team Building

Participation in this evaluation was a positive experience for all the advisors. As a group, they were eager to know what students had said about the service (and about them, too!), to share concerns, and to find solutions to problems together. In fact, advisors willingly shared their individual results in an effort to help identify the department's strengths and weaknesses. The evaluation was also successful in confirming that the advisors provide a quality service and that, despite changes within our student population in the last five years, the service is meeting today's student needs.

The team was proud to report that 96 percent of the students surveyed would refer advising to their friends. This was a great morale booster and it became the prime motivator for the team in its quest for "excellence" in academic advising.

HOW EVALUATION IMPROVED ADVISOR PERFORMANCE

This evaluation proved to be an excellent tool for improving advisor performance in a non-threatening and confidential way. In the privacy of his or her home or office, each advisor could study his or her student ratings.

Goal Setting

This evaluation provided a solid base upon which each advisor could set personal goals for the coming year to improve weaknesses as perceived by the students. The evaluation results presented personal challenges for each advisor, particularly in the areas of interpersonal skills and quality of the information received. Again, since the advisors could compare previous year's ratings to the latest ratings, they could see if any improvements had been made during the year. Also, each advisor could compare his or her ratings against the group's ratings to see where his or her performance ranked with the group's performance. The advisors experienced a strong sense of personal achievement when there was an increase in the level of student satisfaction.

Professional Development

As in the group evaluation, it identified areas for professional development on an individual level. This allowed advisors to attend seminars, workshops, and conferences appropriate to their personal needs.

Advisor's Role

Participation in this evaluation gave the advisors pride in their work and an opportunity to talk about what they were doing in their offices and to compare techniques and strategies they were using to advise students. Although the advisors had always consulted with each other on a regular basis, since the inception of evaluation, they have shared more information and have willingly exchanged ideas and concerns about handling various interviews.

These discussions have led to the organization of workshops led by each advisor where specific case studies were presented for discussion. Because the advisors do not specialize in advising specific groups of students, these workshops gave insight into individual approaches to similar situations.

CONCLUSION

The results of this four-year evaluation project have confirmed the advisors' belief that for advising to be effective, there must be evaluation. Evaluating advising services has become an integral component of our advising program. Since offering top quality advising services responsive to students' needs is our primary goal, this evaluation helps us achieve it in an organized, systematic way. It also monitors the team's progress in its quest for excellence in academic advising, and answers the individual advisor's question, "Am I doing a good job today?"

Using the CATS software to evaluate advising services has many advantages. It is easy to use, economical, provides immediate feedback, and ensures confidentiality. The flexibility of the software allows for use by any size institution with either decentralized or centralized services delivered by faculty, professional, and/or peer advisors.

References

- Crockett, D. & Levitz, R. (1983). *A national survey of academic advising*. Iowa City, IA: American College Testing Program.
- Beasley-Fielstein, Lynda (1986). *Student perceptions of developmental advisor-advisee relationship*. *NACADA Journal*, 6, (2), pp. 107-115.
- Centra, John A. (1981). *Determining faculty effectiveness: Assessing teaching, research and service for personnel decisions and improvement*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Kramer, Gary L., Arrington, Norma R., and Chynoweth, Beverly (1985). *The academic advising center and faculty advising: A comparison*. *NASPA Journal*, 23, (1), (1979). pp. 24-55.
- Kuh, George D. (1979). *Evaluation in student affairs*. American College Personnel Association, ACPA Media.
- Sudman, Seymour, and Bradburn, Norman M. (1982). *Asking Questions: A practical guide to questionnaire design*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Trombley, Toni B. (1984). *An analysis of the complexity of academic advising tasks*. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, pp. 234-239.

ADVISING FORUM

