

STUDENT PRIORITIES FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING

Do They Want a Personal Relationship?

Student priority ratings for personal developmental advising activities are compared with instructive prescriptive advising activities. Results indicate that students prefer prescriptive advising activities to developmental advising activities. However, review of the ratings for each advising activity reveals that students prefer a combination of these two advising roles, and it further suggests that there are limits to the degree of personal involvement desired. While student ratings do support the dual role of advising, i.e., offering academic guidance within an individualized/ personal relationship, advisors who are attracted to the developmental model of advising are cautioned to consider carefully how much personal counseling a student may desire. Suggestions for further research are also offered to determine which students prefer which type of advising relationship at what point in their academic development.

INTRODUCTION

The value of academic advising has been highlighted by numerous investigators (Crockett, 1979; Grites, 1981; Habley, 1982; Winston and Sandor, 1984; Andrews, Long, and Henton, 1987) because of its importance in facilitating student development and fostering retention. As a result, greater attention has been given to the advising process in recent years with greater appreciation of the multi-faceted roles required of an advisor. Providing information in a quasi-teaching role (Kramer and Gardner, 1977) is no longer the exclusive activity of an advisor, but providing a more personalized relationship within a quasi-counseling role is also viewed as essential (Grites, 1979; Fielstein, 1987). This perspective requires a comprehensive model of advising to account for the complexity in academic advising roles.

Within the literature on models of academic advising, an important distinction has been drawn between two differing types of activities advisors should be offering to students. This distinction was previously described by Crookston (1972) who postulated a theory defining the advisor's relationship with the student as either prescriptive or developmental in approach. The prescriptive approach was seen as the more traditional relationship between advisor and advisee, where the advisor was seen as a kind of teacher who instructs students in academic advising matters such as registration, deciding upon a major, etc. Another approach with a different emphasis is the developmental model which espouses a closer and more personal

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relationship between student and advisor. This approach assists students in achieving educational as well as personal goals (Winston, Ender, and Miller, 1982) and involves developing a more personal relationship where a student's background, personal attitudes, and concerns are discussed.

This summary of advising models seems to imply that students would prefer their academic advisor to embrace a developmental approach over a prescriptive approach. After all, the developmental approach espouses a caring and concerned attitude toward students along with greater involvement in their academic and personal experiences at college. Who would find that kind of personal interest unattractive? In contrast, the prescriptive approach would seem less appealing because it espouses a more didactic and narrowly focused interaction with an emphasis on academic matters over interpersonal concerns. The relationship seems less caring and more emotionally distant in contrast to the warmth and concern of a more personal relationship.

While student preference for an advisor emphasizing a developmental perspective is intuitively appealing and has received recent empirical support (Winston and Sandor, 1984), it is not clear how much and what type of personal involvement students truly desire. It has been demonstrated that the quality of the relationship with an advisor is related to student persistence to graduation, i.e., retention (Pascarella, 1980), but certainly some students might desire the more technical competencies of an advisor over the advisor's personal qualities as a counselor.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate what activities of an academic advisor are most preferred by students. What activities were rated as priorities when students were given the opportunity to select from both prescriptively and developmentally oriented advising activities? In this context, overall preferences for more personal, developmentally oriented activities were compared with the more instructive, prescriptive activities. In addition, student ratings of advising activities with both low and high priority ratings were explored to assist in clarifying the *types* of personal and instructive activities students want and do not want in an academic advising relationship.

METHOD

I Subjects I The present sample consisted of 90 undergraduates from a land-grant institution with an undergraduate enrollment of 14,000. Subjects were randomly selected from the three major undergraduate colleges with the following number of subjects for each college: Agriculture/Home Economics ($n = 14$), Arts and Sciences ($n = 34$), and Business ($n = 39$). The number of subjects for each college was selected in proportion to the total number of majors in that college. To insure that students had adequate experience in advising upon which to make ratings, only sophomores and seniors were selected. The sample was 53.3 percent ($n = 48$) male and 46.7 percent ($n = 42$) female and almost exclusively Caucasian (96.7 percent). There were 44 (48.9 percent) students, ages 19-21; 27 (30 percent) students 22-24 years of age; and 19 (21.1 percent) over 25.

I Questionnaire I The questionnaire used for this study was constructed as part of a larger project on academic advising (Fielstein, 1987). Academic advising activities thought to be commonly involved in undergraduate student advising were identified. A set of thirty activities was generated based upon review of previously developed instruments of student perceptions of advising (Grites, 1981; Trombley, 1984; Winston and Sandor, 1984), questionnaires from several other colleges and universities (e.g., South Dakota State Univer-

sity, College of St. Benedict), and informal interviews with academic advisors in the University's three major colleges. These items were then used in a pilot study of students to insure that major areas of advising were being assessed and to insure clarity of wording and presentation of items. Subsequently, a final list of twenty advising activities was included in the final questionnaire. The twenty items were then independently rated by the author and three faculty members on whether the advising activity could be categorized as emphasizing either a "developmental" or "prescriptive" approach. This resulted in identifying eleven "developmental" activities and nine "prescriptive" activities. The questionnaire was designed to determine students' priorities for each advising activity. Students' priority rating for each activity was a choice among "high priority," "priority" and "not a priority."

Procedures ■ Subjects were selected randomly from the listing of sophomore and senior majors from each of the three colleges. Each potential subject was contacted for a telephone interview during which the questionnaire on preferences for advising was administered. Those individuals who did not have a telephone were sent a questionnaire by mail and were given two weeks to respond. A total of 53 percent of the initial randomly drawn names completed the questionnaire and comprise the present sample of 90 students.

RESULTS

The initial analysis was designed to determine whether students feel that advising activities which emphasize a developmental approach are considered a higher priority than those of a more prescriptive nature. To accomplish this, the mean rating of all the developmental advising activities was compared with that of the prescriptive advising activities. The ratings were converted to numerical scores as follows: Not a Priority = 1, Priority = 2, and High Priority = 3. Mean scores were then separately calculated for the developmental and prescriptive activities. The mean priority rating of prescriptive advising activities ($x = 2.47$, $SD = .31$) was higher than that of the developmental advising activities ($x = 1.82$, $SD = .36$). A one-tailed paired t-test revealed a significant difference between these mean ratings ($t(1, 88) = 18.33$, $p < .001$). Thus, students perceived prescriptive tasks as more of a priority for their advising than the developmentally oriented tasks.

Review of the priority ratings of activities within each category reveals substantial variability which helps explain the above finding. As may be seen in Table 1, those prescriptive advising activities with the highest priority ratings are in areas which emphasize the technical expertise of an advisor. For example, at least 50 percent of students rated six of the nine advising activities as a "high priority." These activities involved explaining graduation requirements (86.7 percent), discussing course selection (78.9 percent), planning a course of study (66.7 percent), discussing educational goals (55.6 percent), exploring career options (53.3 percent), and explaining **registration** procedures (51.1 percent). These activities are informational, and some are even didactic, but they are considered highly important to be provided by advisors.

Similarly, the priority ratings of developmental advising activities seen in Table 2 reveal that certain of these activities are not considered important in an advising relationship. For example, the four activities which at least 50 percent of the students rated as "not a priority" were talking with the student about problems with family or friends (76.6 percent), making out-of-office contacts with students (72.2 percent), helping the student improve interpersonal skills (71.1 percent), and building the student's self-esteem and improving self-image (50 percent). As may be seen, these activities are of a more personal nature but are felt to be low priority in students' advising needs.

Table 1
Student Priority Ratings for Prescriptive Advising Activities*

Advising Activity	Not a Priority	Priority	High Priority
Explaining requirements for graduation	0	13.3	86.7
Making referrals to other campus agencies	11.1	56.7	32.2
Explaining registration procedures	16.7	32.2	51.1
Discussing course selections	0	21.1	78.9
Explaining university policies and procedures	11.1	41.1	47.8
Helping the student plan a course of study	1.1	32.2	66.7
Exploring career options	7.8	38.9	53.3
Discussing educational goals	3.3	41.1	55.6
Suggesting ways to improve study skills	20.0	57.8	22.2

• Percentage of students selecting each priority rating for each advising activity

Table 2
Student Priority Ratings for Developmental Advising Activities*

Advising Activity	Not a Priority	Priority	High Priority
Being open to the idea of helping with personal problems	20.0	57.8	22.2
Building students' self-esteem and improving self-image	50.0	35.6	14.4
Keeping regular office hours and being accessible	1.1	35.6	63.3
Talking with students about problems with family and friends	76.6	23.3	1.1
Knowing the student's background	46.7	46.7	6.7
Making out-of-office contacts with students	72.2	17.8	10.0
Helping the student improve interpersonal skills	71.1	25.6	3.3
Discussing long-range goals	12.2	55.6	32.3
Knowing the student's values and attitudes	41.1	46.7	12.2
Advisor be personally acquainted with the student	16.7	54.4	28.9

• Percentage of students selecting each priority rating for each advising activity

Students do perceive some advising activities as important. For example, 83.3 percent of the students felt it a priority or high priority for an advisor to be personally acquainted with a student, and 53.4 percent made a similar priority rating for the activity of knowing the student's background. Thus, there certainly is support for student interest in a personal quality to the relationship with an academic advisor, but as noted above, there are certain activities of a personal nature felt to be outside the priorities of academic advising.

Finally, it may be noted that, within the developmental advising activities, the item "keeping regular office hours and being accessible" was endorsed as a priority or high priority by fully 98.9 percent of the sample. This finding is inconsistent with the trend of ratings of the other developmental advising activities. This item represents a very basic function of advising, and, in retrospect, could have been placed in the prescriptive category.

DISCUSSION

The present study was designed to assess the advising activities which students perceived as high priorities in their advising needs. Prior theoretical and empirical research has indicated that advising from a developmental perspective, where the role of counselor is emphasized, would be more preferred by students to the more prescriptive approach, where the role of teacher is emphasized. Contrary to this prediction, the present investigation found that a list of advising activities representing the more traditional (prescriptive) advising approach was more preferred overall than those activities representing a more developmental approach. Though at first glance this finding appears to contradict prior work, closer inspection of the results reveals that present results complement earlier work.

Prior work has conceptualized a dual role in advising, where providing both information and counseling is viewed as essential to successful advising (Trombley, 1984). An emphasis upon "developmental advising," where a trusting and caring relationship is established, has also been shown to be preferred by students over the traditional prescriptive advising approach (Winston and Sandor, 1984). The present study suggests that students do desire a personal relationship with an academic advisor but one that does not include exploration of such personal matters as family problems or relationships with peers. In addition, students in the present study emphasize that an academic advisor should provide important academic information related to their requirements for graduation, course selection, planning a course of study, and exploring career options. Thus, this study supports the dual role of advising, from students' point of view, and also may suggest that students generally draw a distinction between the function of academic advising and what might be considered the function of personal counseling (Fielstein, 1987).

Of course, when looking at the variability in students' priority ratings across different advising activities, consideration must be given to an individual student's needs. While the tendency in this study is for students to prefer that advisors provide the necessary information on academic policies and requirements over personal counseling in troubling areas, there is a sizeable minority of students who feel that "advisor as counselor" is a high priority for an academic advisor. For example, 14.4 percent of students felt that building a student's self-esteem was a high priority for an advisor, and 12.2 percent felt it a high priority for an advisor to know a student's background and attitudes. Thus, it is important for an academic advisor to be aware of the diversity of student needs and be attentive to the unique combination of both the "developmental" and "prescriptive" advising needs of an individual student.

Further research in this area might also determine to what extent students are receiving the kinds of advising they prefer — a topic which would be of interest both to advisors and to departmental and college/university administration. Another area for further exploration

might be to clarify which students prefer which type of advising relationship at what point in their academic development. For example, nontraditional (i.e., older) students with more clearly defined graduation goals may wish a more structured prescriptive advising approach, while traditional students who are still exploring career goals may wish a more personal developmental approach. Specifying student characteristics which may be related to advising preferences has begun (Trombley, 1984), though additional longitudinal studies would also be valuable.

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