

THE PROFESSIONAL ADVISOR

In this article, the author discusses the value of including professional advisors in an overall advising program. He makes comparisons among faculty, peer, and professional advisors, discussing the contribution of each type within a system.

Historically, higher education has emphasized teaching and testing and has viewed academic advising as a low-level, superfluous activity (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1976). Today, however, institutions of higher education are becoming more aware of advising's role in the educational process **as** they confront such issues **as** student retention and students' personal growth and development.

While improving student retention has become a major objective for many colleges and universities faced with declining enrollments, literature related to student retention indicates that quality advising programs can result in lower attrition rates (Thomas and Andes, 1987; Habley, 1981). Thus, the time may be right for academic advising to emerge as one of the vital ingredients in the total educational process.

Contemporary advising systems can be characterized by their diversity through their use — in varying degrees — of faculty, peer, and professional advisors in the advising process. The purpose of this article is to **support the contention that an advising system that uses professional advisors as part of its advising process is in the best position to meet student needs.**

Research demonstrates that in many academic institutions advising activities are primarily informational (Trombley, 1984), thus leaving counseling or student development needs largely **unfulfilled**. The counseling role is highly complex and involves more training and experience than does the advisor's informational role, but many professional advisors are likely **to have** the necessary education and training to address both the informational and the counseling needs of their students. Interaction with students, whether informational or developmental, is the primary responsibility of professional advisors. Thus, with no conflict of interests present, professional advisors are able to commit themselves totally to this activity. Faculty (Dehn, 1987), too, can become more cognizant of student development concerns through workshops and seminars, although many are reluctant to undertake these training initiatives (Crockett, 1982).

The academic advising format at the University of Akron, an urban, midwestern university with an enrollment of 27,000 students, will be used to illustrate the use of professional advisors within a total advising system. Similar to many urban institutions, this university has a diverse student body which includes many students who are first-generation enrollees in higher education. Consequently, many are undecided as to career choice and often lack an understanding of the higher education environment. The University is comprised of a

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University College and seven degree-granting colleges. New students are placed in the University College until they have met the specific requirements to transfer to one of the degree-granting colleges.

Approximately 10,000 students in the University College receive advising by a centralized professional staff consisting of 18 full-time and 6 part-time advisors. The minimum educational requirement for a professional advisor is a master's degree, preferably in a student development area such as student personnel or counseling. Some advisors, however, have been selected from various academic disciplines such as history and biology. The advising department is administered by the director of Academic Advising, who is responsible to the dean of the University College.

One of the primary reasons for centralizing the professional advisors at the University of Akron is the large number of University College students who are undecided as to career choice. Thus, it is more effective to centralize the advising process for new students than to pressure them into a premature career choice and route them off to a degree-granting college. Moreover, advising centers are likely to be more tolerant of students who require career guidance than academic departments (Hines, 1984).

The student's first contact with a professional academic advisor is during new-student orientation. Each student meets, one-on-one, with an assigned advisor for approximately an hour. During this first contact, advisors attempt to assist students in coordinating their educational experiences in the manner illustrated in O'Banion's model (1972). Thus, they help students clarify their values and goals, assist in exploring educational and career options, and help students plan an educational program consistent with their interests and abilities. Additionally, advisors serve as links between the students and the institution's other support services such as tutorial programs, testing and counseling, and financial aid.

Students who have not advanced to a degree-granting college have the opportunity to meet with a professional advisor on a continuous basis. Although professional advisors have many functions, they usually perform the following duties as they interact with students.

- *They assist students with academic plans consistent with their interests and abilities.*
- *They provide students with current and accurate curricular information.*
They interpret academic policies such as repeats for change of grade, academic reassessment, and degree requirements.
- *They serve as referrals to other institutional services such as placement and registration.*

Professional advisors at the University play a role in the institution's retention efforts. Students in academic difficulty meet with their assigned advisors on a continuing basis to develop educational strategies that will enhance their chances for academic success. For example, some students are placed in College Survival Skills courses which are taught by professional advisors. The objectives of such courses range from identifying values to learning basic skills such as note taking, listening, and test taking. With the help of these programs, over 80 percent of the students in academic difficulty have remained academically eligible to continue their education at the University of Akron.

In addition to their direct contact with students, the professional advisors are also responsible for gathering and disseminating curricular information from every academic department on campus. Therefore, each advisor serves as a liaison to one (or, in some instances, three or four) academic departments. The advisors' liaison responsibilities insure that students are receiving accurate and timely information.

Students are promoted to a degree-granting college once they have met the College's specific criteria. The minimum standards are the completion of 30 credit hours and a 2.0 **grade-point** average; however, some colleges require at least 45 credit hours (business and nursing) and/or a minimum grade-point average of 2.3-2.5 (business, engineering, and nursing). After promotion to a degree-granting college, students are assigned to faculty advisors and no longer have formal interaction with professional advisors.

Faculty advising at the University offers students the following benefits. First, faculty advisors develop a prospectus of the remaining degree requirements for students. This, in turn, becomes a "contract" between students and the University. Second, students have the opportunity to develop a continuous relationship with a faculty member, thus enabling them to receive specific information regarding career options, elective courses, and, in some instances, job referrals. Moreover, the faculty-student interaction has been found to enhance the student's educational experience.

While each of the major advising formats (professional, faculty, and peer) have their advantages and disadvantages, the following section will attempt to compare professional advisors with faculty and peer advisors. It is not the purpose of this comparison to develop a thesis purporting that advising must be the exclusive domain of professional advisors. Rather, it is to show that ***professional advisors should be an integral part of an institution's advising delivery system.***

FACULTY ADVISING

Advantages

Most institutions depend on faculty as a major part of the advising process. Perhaps the major advantage of faculty advising is the ***depth of knowledge*** faculty members possess regarding their subject area (American College Testing Program, 1980). Thus, informational needs of students concerning course selections and course content can be satisfied when those needs are related to the faculty advisor's area of expertise. In addition, positive outcomes for students, as well as the institution, are more likely to occur as a result of faculty-student interaction. For example, some research (Baer and Carr, 1985; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980) has found that faculty influence can result in ***higher levels of student retention and increased student satisfaction*** with the educational process.

Limitations

Problems can occur, however, if faculty are reluctant to assume advising responsibilities **and/or** are ***not adequately trained*** in advising procedures. According to Crockett (1982), problems in the advising process are more likely to occur if faculty (a) are overly subject oriented and lack information regarding other institutional programs and policies, (b) lack an interest in and temperament for advising, (c) lack advising skills and are not receptive to training, and (d) are not accessible to students.

Another limitation of faculty advising is that faculty may not have the training and knowledge necessary to deal effectively with student development concerns (Stickle, 1982). For example, there are more and more students undecided as to career choice, especially at large, public institutions (Evangelauf, 1984). Faculty advisors may lack the skills needed to deal effectively with this special group. It should be noted, however, that these skills can be acquired by receptive faculty members through workshops and seminars. Too often these undecided students are urged, prematurely, to choose a major or are recruited by aggressive academic departments to bolster enrollments (American College Testing Program, 1980). Professional advisors, however, have the training to recognize the special needs of undecided

students. Through exploration of student interests and life goals, professional advisors can guide students to career fields consistent with their interests, values, and capabilities.

Another student need which may not be satisfied as well by faculty advising is **accessibility**. Research has shown that students generally do not see faculty as "accessible" due to their teaching and research responsibilities (Raskin, 1980). Conversely, the professional advisor's primary function is to interact with students, and to be "accessible."

A final note on faculty advising involves attitudes toward advising. Kramer, Arrington, and Chynoweth (1985) stated that many faculty members had **negative attitudes about advising**, considering it an infringement on their primary roles of teaching and research. These negative attitudes were reinforced by a lack of institutional support in terms of rewards and release time for advising. Consequently, the advising process could suffer due to lack of faculty commitment. As previously mentioned, this potential problem could be prevented by the selection of faculty who show an interest in advising and who appear to have the temperament for advising.

Professional advisors are expected to have a positive attitude toward advising since it is their major organizational role. They are rewarded, primarily, for advising students, not for teaching and research. Moreover, professional advisors have spent many years developing advising skills and knowledge and are, therefore, more likely to possess favorable advising attitudes.

PEER ADVISING

Advantages

The utilization of peer advisors has increased in recent years, primarily because it is **cost effective**. There are several advantages associated with a peer advising system (Habley, 1979). First, research has indicated that, in some instances, students have found peer advisors as **effective as faculty or professional advisors**. In addition, students have rated peer advisors **significantly higher than faculty in personal relationships**. Second, peer advisors are **accessible** and available since they are often on campus most of the time. Third, the development of a peer advising system is **economical**. Fourth, peer advisors can identify more with other students and, consequently, may be **more aware of student problems**. Another advantage of peer advising is that it **offers the advising structure more flexibility during registration times**, freeing faculty and professional advisors for more complex tasks such as student development concerns, and providing the means for **organizational renewal**, since new peer advisors are likely to look upon their new roles with enthusiasm.

Limitations

While peer advising offers advantages, it also has limitations in the advising process. A major limitation is **the lack of training and educational background in student development theory**. Thus, there are limitations in what peer advisors can *do*. For example, it is unreasonable to expect peer advisors to deal effectively with undecided students or with students who are pursuing course work outside of their area of expertise. In addition, the peer advising format **lacks the systematic sophistication of gathering information related to course additions, changes, and institutional processes**. As a result, the informational needs of students may not be adequately satisfied.

Another limitation, or disadvantage, is *the lack of continuity*; peer advisors generally are available for only two years or so. Consequently, the professional staff must invest a substantial amount of time in continuous peer advisor selection and training. In contrast, professional advisors generally look upon advising as a career. For example, at the University of Akron the average professional advisor has about nine years of experience. Thus, institutions are more assured of continuity and consistency in **advising** through the use of professional advisors.

One more disadvantage is that, through the use of peer advisors, *the institution could become more susceptible to legal consumerism*. Beginning in 1966 with *Blank v. Board of Education of the City of New York*, the courts have held that an implicit contract exists between a student and a college when an advisor directs the student to take a course for graduation; the college, then, cannot deny the student a degree once the course has been taken (Elliott, 1983). Therefore, the problem of accountability arises. Due to frequent turnover of peer advisors, advising errors may not be caught immediately (Habley, 1979).

DISCUSSION

What this article hopes to accomplish is to create among higher education administrators an awareness of the importance of developing and implementing an advising system that can satisfy most of the needs of its students. Research (Gordon, 1980) has shown that institutional goals, such as student satisfaction with the educational process and student retention, can be achieved more readily when advisors have the proper education and training. Therefore, institutions that incorporate professional advisors into their advising delivery systems are in an excellent position to satisfy student needs and, thus, help achieve institutional goals. Crockett (1978) stated that a properly instituted advising system can provide the foundation for an effective retention program. He contended that advising is vital to the development of positive student attitudes toward the institution and a belief in their academic programs, which, in turn, can enhance student retention. Research has shown that a significant relationship exists between advising and student retention if the advising is perceived as being of a high quality by students and if contacts are frequent (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980).

Based on the comparisons of the various advising formats, professional advisors are best suited to meet the criteria which could be related to increased student retention. Although no attempt is being made to infer a causal relationship between a professional advising format and student retention, nonetheless, professional advisors' specialized education and training in student development, as well as their accessibility, can only enhance institutional retention efforts.

Another implication for higher education administrators is that professional advisors are in the best position to link students to other necessary institutional services. Professional advisors at the University of Akron are responsible for gathering and disseminating current information regarding student affairs areas **such** as financial aid, placement, and counseling and testing. Staff meetings involving the professional advising staff and the student affairs departments are held on a regular basis to share current information. Thus, professional advisors are able to "link" students with other institutional services, as required, in a more efficient manner than faculty or peer advisors. Furthermore, Olson (1981) reported that professional advisors are in an ideal position to develop a personal relationship with students, especially in large universities, and this relationship could result in the advisor linking the student with the appropriate service as personal problems develop.

This linking function is especially important for new students who are often bewildered and frustrated by the complex bureaucracy of larger institutions. According to Mash (1978), new students who lack a personal relationship with someone in authority, such as an advisor, often leave school within their first or second years.

SUMMARY

As academic institutions attempt to satisfy student needs, it is increasingly important that they adopt the most effective advising delivery system. Evidence and some observations have been presented to support the contention that this objective is more likely to be achieved when professional advisors are recognized as an integral part, along with faculty and peer advisors, of the advising process.

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