

I DON'T THINK WE CAN DO IT ALONE

The following message is actually a request for help in confronting "the tough issues of standards and measurements" in academic advising. The author welcomes "comments or criticisms" regarding her inquiry.

When I first read Ed Danis's *Notes* in the fall 1987 issue of the *NACADA Journal*, I agreed with many of his ideas but took issue with his priorities. I think that the first priority must be to "correct the perceptions — or misperceptions" — of our institutional colleagues, with reference to the actual tasks and services we perform. In order to do this effectively, we must compile our data, statistically analyze that data, and advertise the outcomes of effective academic advising. I think that many academic advisors share this opinion. However, I also suspect that many have not yet completed this vital first step of statistical evaluation because of our workload. The following is a discussion of Ed's priorities and a request for a cooperative effort on the part of advisors who share my feelings of urgency and frustration.

Ed stated that we must **define** exactly what we do as advisors and that the definition of academic advising should make distinctions between "major and pre-major advising, faculty and professional advising, and centralized and decentralized advising," and I agree. Ed goes on to say that: "We must be clear about what we do. If we think we are serving an important function, we must reach agreement on what that function is. From a national consensus, we can then grapple with the tough issues of standards, measurement, recognition, and support."

It is true that what academic advisors do must be clearly defined, but as far as reaching agreement on what that function is, this has already been done, repeatedly. Descriptions of successful advising programs abound in the results of completed research projects that have been presented at NACADA conferences and are consistently printed in this *Journal*. It would seem to me that all that has to be done is to compile and refine the already well-known and often-agreed-upon definitions of advising.

I propose that before we attempt to correct our colleagues' conceptions or misconceptions about what academic advisors do, our first step should be to "confront the tough issues of standards and measurement," the results of which, if published in an appropriate manner, should earn for us some well-deserved recognition and much-needed support from our campuses and administrators. **Accomplishing** this task also could serve to apprise the administrators of the fact that effective academic advising is a continuous process and of vital importance, not just to the students, but to the total campus.

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Many advisors concur with findings presented from retention studies (Noel & Levitz, 1986-88) that one of the most significant variables in student satisfaction studies is the quality and frequency of freshman-year student-advisor contact. Many even go so far as to claim that effective academic advising not only increases student retention and academic success, but also contributes considerably to increased financial alumni support.

Corroborating these claims, Vincent **Tinto**, in his address at NACADA's 1988 Conference in Miami, and in his book, *Leaving School*, states again and again that "effective advising is at the very core of successful institutional efforts to educate and retain students," and that "the opportunity to learn is dependent upon effective advising." **Tinto** also offers proof that a school's "commitment to students generates a commitment on the part of the student to the institution," and this institutional commitment continues after graduation day in the form of alumni support.

Since student retention and alumni participation seem to be two of the major concerns of administrators in higher education, and since it appears that budget dollars flow into marketing and alumni solicitation efforts, is it not possible that the way to correct the "perceptions or misperceptions of our colleagues" would be to **publish** a comprehensive body of research findings that prove that our academic advising programs play a vital part in the **financial** well-being of our schools? But who among us is going to step forward to collect, refine, and document the definitions? I sense that there are few of us who are not already performing the tasks of at least two people and, therefore, have not generated the enthusiasm to do it alone.

Who has the energy to design measurement tools and compile the statistical results that will validate our efforts? Academic advisors are extremely busy people and I'm beginning to suspect that unless we have a firm commitment to this responsibility, as well as to identified, specific peers, we may not get around to documenting and organizing our statistics. In a rather convoluted paradox, it seems that the work generated by our successful programs has left academic advisors little time or energy to accomplish much in the way of evaluation. It would appear that if we have no deadline toward which to work, and no one with whom we can discuss ideas and collaborate, most of us will continue to procrastinate.

If there are other academic advisors among the *Journal's* readership who feel as I do, I would like to hear from you. Possibly, working together, with a mutual commitment, we could begin to implement Ed's plan of action. However, before deciding whether or not to respond to this request for suggestions about a cooperative research effort, I offer a brief summary of my advising experiences. From talking with directors of centralized advising programs, I assume my circumstances are typical.

Since June 1986, as director of the College of Business Advisement Center (COBAC), at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), I have been working with freshmen and sophomore business majors (1600 in number), as well as over 400 probation students within the College of Business. I also clear business majors for graduation (700-800 a year), and maintain the student record folders for the 3500 majors in the College of Business (constituting about **one-third** of IUP's student population). In addition, under my direction, COBAC sponsors at least six **intervention** workshops each semester for new freshmen, and for probation, transfer, part-time, and international students. This I do with the assistance of peer advisors and student workers only.

Given the fact that more than 2600 students have visited COBAC so far this semester, there is little time and energy left for gathering or analyzing statistics. Because of this, and in light of Wes **Habley's** comments on "reducing our *[NACADA's]* reliance on an all-volunteer

army" in the spring 1988 issue of the *NACADA Journal*, I think we should investigate the possibility of a combined solicitation effort for financial assistance.

From personal experience and from talking to advisors across the country, I am convinced that effective academic advisors are the most productive, overworked, and **under-**appreciated advocates in higher education. I feel we must seek outside funding if we are ever going to "confront the tough issues of standards and measurements" in which our administrators traditionally believe and respond to. Our colleges and universities insist on assessment, and usually lend financial support to programs that demonstrate and broadcast their success to constituents.

It is these "successful" programs that are touted in the media as enhancing the quality of education. It is these programs that receive adequate funding and support. Advisors know this and, therefore, should begin as soon as possible to develop the criteria for a coordinated evaluation of advising processes and programs. The next steps would be to assess, compile, and publish our success stories. Then it would be our turn to take center stage and take our bows — if, indeed, we could find the time to indulge.

Again, I ask that you contact me with comments or criticisms regarding this inquiry. I can be reached at COBAC, 5-B Uhler Hall, IUP, Indiana, PA 15705, 412-357-3215, or 368 S. Third Street, Indiana, PA 15701, 412-465-8228. Comments and suggestions are requested and will receive a prompt response.