

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS AS RESOURCES FOR ADVISORS

Increased enrollment in professional programs, combined with increased demands for limited resources, has diminished the ability of advisors in these programs to provide the services students demand. This article examines the potential of student professional organizations for assisting students and advisors in an overenrolled program such as a business administration program.

PROBLEM

Increases in undergraduate enrollment in the College of Business Administration at the University of Georgia have created some interesting challenges for those responsible for providing academic advisement to students. Over the past four years, the number of business undergraduates has increased almost 60 percent, from 3,100 in fall of 1984 to nearly 5,000 in fall of 1988. Because advising is mandatory at the University of Georgia, this increase could not be ignored, even by those whose personal and professional priorities relegated advising to the bottom of their lists of "things to do." Although College and University administrators agreed that academic advising was important, their priorities focused on increasing the number of faculty to provide classes for students. The College had used professional advisors rather than faculty for several years; as one administrator rather succinctly put it, "I can buy faculty or advisors, not both."

The primary charge to the Undergraduate Studies Office in fall of 1984, therefore, was to revise the system of academic advising to serve the needs of increasing numbers of students at minimal cost to the College. In 1985, after studying the results of needs assessments and conversations with students and faculty, the College created the Lower Division Advising Center (LDAC). The LDAC provided advising for freshmen and sophomore business students and the departmental professional advisors handled the upper-division student as they had done in the past. More than 1,900 lower-division students per quarter visited the four half-time LDAC advisors to get information about course scheduling and services offered to them at the University. Common sense suggested that our delivery system was inadequate, and we administered another evaluation survey in winter of 1988 to sophomores and seniors. The results were interesting and somewhat surprising.

Although our evaluation revealed weaknesses in various areas of the process, students expressed overall satisfaction both with their advisors and with the scheduling information at each level of the delivery system. That was the surprising part. Further analysis and discussion, however, produced the hypothesis that the current system merely provided scheduling information and helped the students through a particular curriculum without providing adequate information about which curriculum individual students should follow. The advising

staff had created a *Handbook For Undergraduate Majors* to address this need, but students indicated that while this was useful in making a decision to major in business, they needed to engage in conversations with knowledgeable people who could discuss their particular interests. Given the existing advisor/student ratio, how to provide those conversations was the interesting part.

Clearly the faculty could play only a limited role in providing the individual counseling that our students needed. Their primary tasks focused on their research and on teaching increasing numbers of undergraduates. Attempts to involve them in the advising process proved to be quite fruitless. Referrals to the University's Career Planning and Placement Center met with more success, but the information provided there tended to be more general than the students wanted. While working with a student on a seemingly unrelated problem, a possible solution emerged.

SOLUTION

The president of a newly formed business student organization, the Future Business Alumni Association, developed a list of alumni who had expressed interest in serving as mentors for business students interested in their field. The president asked for help in publicizing this list. Our discussion revealed that forums already existed for the kind of conversations that our students wanted, forums that brought students and faculty together with practitioners and alumni who could answer the questions that our advisors had neither the time nor the expertise to discuss. What was even more interesting was that the students had developed those forums themselves.

Each of the nine departments in the College of Business Administration supports at least one student organization with activities that focus on issues and opportunities of a functional area of business. In addition, two national business fraternities provide opportunities for students of all interests and academic levels to engage in the very conversations our students were so eagerly seeking. The scope of the opportunities provided by these sixteen organizations surpasses any program that the College could have created, even with unlimited resources.

The officers and faculty sponsors of the organizations were asked to report the number of their undergraduate members; the number of speakers they brought onto campus, as well as other career-related events; and to report the number of students attending these events. The results were staggering. More than one-fourth of the undergraduate business students belonged to a professional organization and had the opportunity to acquire information about business areas and practices, to develop personal relationships with faculty members, and to make contact with prospective employers.

BENEFITS

Most of the organizations sponsored at least one speaker each quarter. Four groups reported they had brought ten or more speakers onto campus during the past academic year. Our students had the opportunity to meet with a total of ninety-six business men and women representing virtually every area of the business community. In addition, most organizations offered field trips to factories, corporate offices, executive seminars, and government agencies, and participated in campus-wide career days. A total of twelve hundred business majors heard the speakers, and several students each quarter participated in the field trip activities.

What may be even more significant are the opportunities for students to interact with faculty members who work with these organizations. With a student/faculty ratio of forty to one, most undergraduate students seldom have the opportunity to meet, let alone converse with, faculty in their major area of study. Membership in the student organizations enables such conversations to occur. In addition to the faculty sponsor, most departments require, or strongly encourage, their faculty to attend annual banquets and general meetings of their student organizations. Several department heads proudly reported that they had 100 percent attendance at the banquets. Most faculty sponsors expressed a great deal of satisfaction with their work with the student organizations and described student friendships which have lasted years beyond graduation. Although these faculty sponsors support the College's decision to relegate academic advising to staff advisors, they have been instrumental in establishing the type of student-faculty bond that Pascarella and Terenzini (1977) have highlighted as being critical for student persistence in college. The extent of this involvement by the faculty contrasts markedly with their reluctance to participate in other "advising" activities which they perceive as intrusive and annoying.

Although business students rely on the University's Office of Career Planning and Placement for most job placement services, many of the student organizations within the College provide members with excellent placement assistance. The Insurance Society and Gamma Iota Sigma, both within the Department of Insurance, Legal Studies, and Real Estate, budget more than \$2,000 annually for a Careers Day, which has resulted in a reported 100 percent placement of Insurance graduates in the last two years. In addition, these two organizations as well as the Finance Club, the American Society for Personnel Administration (ASPA), the American Production and Inventory Control Society (APICS), and the Society for Management Information Systems also publish and distribute to selected companies a resume book of their members. As increasing numbers of business graduates enter the workplace, the assistance provided by these organizations will become critical for students seeking that first job.

CONNECTIONS

Student organizations within the College of Business Administration provide services and opportunities for their members which the advisors have been unable to offer. This situation, however, cannot be used to justify inaction from advisors or the institution. The LDAC and departmental advisors have incorporated student organization events and services into their battery of resources by providing bulletin boards for organizational announcements in the advising center, referring students to both faculty and student leaders on a regular basis, using the list of organizations as a handout at orientation, and forging more direct links with the organizations. Although the results of these connections are yet to be measured, the hope is that students will not only reap the benefits of participation in professional organizations, but will learn that they can indeed work together to enhance their collegiate experiences to better prepare themselves for professional life.

This hope is not without precedent. Throughout the history of American higher education, student organizations have emerged to satisfy student needs unmet by the institution. Frederick Rudolph (1962) described in the nineteenth century the power of students to reshape their collegiate experience:

For the American College, if it could not be reformed from the top, could be redefined from the bottom. If it was not seriously reshaped by the Jeffersons, Lindsleys, Ticknors, and Marshes, it was nonetheless significantly changed by now unknown and forgotten hosts of undergraduates (p. 136).

From student debate and literary societies to intercollegiate athletics and sororities and fraternities, American college students have formed organizations that have provided opportunities for students to engage in desired activities not offered by the institutions. Eventually, colleges incorporated many of the contributions of the organizations, such as libraries, debate, and athletics, into the curriculum or institutionalized the services (Rudolph, 1962; Rose, 1984).

Student organizations in the College of Business Administration have continued to fulfill an historic mission by providing needed services that the institution cannot or will not provide. Advisors have an obligation to use every means at their disposal to help students gather information necessary for making informed choices about majors and careers. Our experiences have revealed that professional student organizations can play an important role in providing information, establishing bonds with faculty, and enhancing job placement.

References

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