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Steps for Prioritizing Academic Advising: A Small-School Case Study

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study of the steps taken to prioritize academic advising at a small, four-year, liberal arts university. Assessment data from several sources and an advising task force shaped the plan for changing the importance and culture of academic advising within the institution.

As a primarily tuition-driven institution, George Fox University is always concerned with its retention rate. However, retaining as many students as possible becomes especially important in times of economic and financial uncertainty. Consequently, we began to examine retention indicators from several sources. The first step was to compare our retention rate to those of other institutions. We studied member institutions within the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities and a separate national sample of private institutions obtained in a Noel-Levitz *Survey of National Retention Indicators*. Although our retention rate was comparable to other institutions, there was still considerable room for improvement. Therefore, we began identifying factors that could improve retention.

One of the marketing points of our institution is the low student-to-faculty ratio. Class sizes are purposefully kept within certain ranges to foster the student-faculty relationship. We can examine this relationship by reviewing course evaluations. Another indicator of a strong relationship between students and faculty is student satisfaction with advising. Consequently, data from the university's *Student Satisfaction Inventory* were used to provide an initial assessment of academic advising. Although students felt faculty were available and understood

how to advise for their majors, overall satisfaction was lower than individual ratings on academic advising items. This suggested something was missing from the student-faculty advising relationship.

To gain a better understanding of students' advising needs, we conducted two advising assessments. In the first assessment, graduating seniors were asked to identify adjectives that best described effective academic advisers (Kays, Thurston, Hall, & Allison, 2009). Approximately 25 percent of graduating seniors completed an online survey in which they provided a list of ten adjectives describing an effective academic adviser and then ranked the top three adjectives provided. The most frequently listed adjective was “knowledgeable.” Students also felt that an effective adviser was “available” and “approachable.” The third most frequent characteristic described an effective adviser as a “good listener.” These characteristics reveal an interesting set of student needs.

It is not surprising that students want an adviser who understands the discipline and major and who is available for consultation. However, the rankings also reveal that students want an adviser who not only advises for graduation but also listens to them talk about their current and future plans and desires. This larger model engages both a traditional view of the adviser as an informer and guide as well as aspects of mentoring and serving as a source of life wisdom (Crookston, 1972; Propp & Rhodes, 2006; Smith & Allen, 2006).

The second advising assessment consisted of twenty-one advising-related items that students rated for importance and satisfaction on a seven-point Likert scale. Approximately 25 percent of all first-year students, sophomores, juniors, and seniors completed the survey. In general, students rated all the items as important to the advising process and were satisfied to varying degrees with their experiences related to each item. However, the items with the biggest differences between importance and satisfaction concerned either academic or career goals (Table 1). Furthermore, based on responses to other items, it appears that students prefer to gain information about careers from their advisers instead of being encouraged to use a career services office as a resource. Therefore, based on our two assessments, students may not have indicated full satisfaction with advising when completing the *Student Satisfaction Inventory*, because faculty members are advising for graduation but not taking the time to listen to students or advise them about their professional lives after graduation, i.e., discussing whether or not they should pursue an immediate career or attend graduate school.

Table 1 Rating assessment items (with common terms underlined in items with the highest gap scores)

Item
My adviser is a mentor who is available to help guide my life and <u>career goals</u> .
My adviser is knowledgeable about my major requirements.
My adviser helps me set goals to work toward.
My adviser is available when I need help.
I receive ongoing feedback about progress toward my <u>academic goals</u> .
I receive the help I need to apply my academic major to my <u>career goals</u> .
I am able to trust that what I discuss with my adviser is kept private and confidential.
My adviser helps me connect with academic resources on campus (e.g., tutor, academic resource center [ARC], etc.).
My adviser helps me connect with personal services on campus (e.g., counseling, Career Services, etc.).
My adviser is aware of my personal situation and sensitive to how it affects my academic achievement.
My adviser encourages excellence and leadership in my selected field of study.
My adviser has a general awareness of how to navigate through the various departments, academic disciplines, and services within the university (e.g., admissions, financial services, library, ARC, etc.).
My adviser embodies the characteristics that are essential to the University's goal of providing a Christ-centered environment.
My adviser is attentive to my specific spiritual needs (e.g., open to discussing spiritual concerns).
My adviser encourages me to seek a diverse educational experience that will increase my involvement in, and understanding of, cultures different than my own.
My adviser is knowledgeable and up-to-date about information relevant to me and my <u>career path</u> and communicates it well.
The environment where my advising takes place is conducive to the advising process.
I typically make more decisions on my own, utilizing available tools (e.g., university website), than with my adviser.
My adviser understands what it is like to be a student at George Fox University.
Overall, my adviser meets my needs.
Overall, my adviser understands and cares about me.

These assessments complemented each other and provided a basis for evaluating our advising practices. As somewhat of a grassroots response to the assessment findings and without prompting from administration, faculty members created an academic advising task force. Committee members discussed the role of advising at the institution and adopted a slightly modified version of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) definition of academic advising (NACADA, 2003). Consistent with the definition, members identified three levels of advising. *Basic advising* consists of understanding the various requirements for

graduation (e.g., general education requirements, major requirements, upper-division hours, etc.), making oneself available to students, and advocating for students as needs arise. Personal experience and student satisfaction data suggested that we generally accomplish this level of advising. *Good advising* goes beyond basic advising to help students engage in critical thinking about their courses and careers, seek resources related to their interests, and develop an action plan to achieve their academic and career goals, as well as become a life-long learner. Good advising is aligned with Crookston's (1972) original developmental view of advising. This good advising model suggests that teaching and advising share a central mission (Winston & Sandor, 1984). We recognized that all academic advising was not taking place on this level but identified this level of advising as the goal, particularly for students with a declared major. Finally, *mentorship advising* combines good advising with professional and even personal mentoring. This level of advising requires an additional investment on the part of the adviser and is, therefore, deemed an example of exceptional advising to which faculty can aspire. We also recognized that faculty members may operate within all three levels of advising to various degrees.

Agreeing on a definition and specifying levels of academic advising provides standards to which all advising can be compared. If advising is taking place on the basic level, meeting an effective advising standard would require a shift in the culture of academic advising at the university. Therefore, we developed a multifaceted plan to facilitate this shift in culture. The plan included an academic advising syllabus that could be tailored to accommodate individual differences among faculty, regular assessments of academic advising, a mission statement, a financial plan to compensate faculty carrying heavier advising loads, and a standard for advising in the promotion and tenure process (Goldenberg & Permuth, 2003; Hunter & White, 2004; Vowell & Farren, 2003).

To help faculty meet the increased expectations for advising, we conducted an advising needs assessment. The needs assessment included a short evaluation of advising experiences and ratings of different needs. Based on these findings, several resources and training opportunities are now available. For instance, a recent change in administrative software changed how advising-related information is accessed. As a result, many faculty members would like to learn how to use the new system to maximize their advising interactions. Additionally, the software allows for greater database flexibility regarding assessment. For example, it is possible to include fields for student goals in information normally accessed by faculty. The needs assessment indicated that academic advisers would value these additional fields, as well as information concerning resources available through career services. Discipline-specific job information is available through the career services office so that advisers can directly answer career-related questions from advisees.

To further facilitate the shift in academic advising standards and to maintain high quality advising, an advising syllabus (Trabant, 2006) was created and advising assessment tools are in development. The syllabus specifies the expectations of the adviser and advisee. Although all faculty advisers receive a standard syllabus, it can be further tailored to meet the needs of individual faculty. However, any modifications to the syllabus represent expectations beyond those outlined in the standard advising syllabus. The advising assessment combines a checklist of behaviors along with advisee ratings of their advising experiences and is intended to provide

useful feedback to advisers as well as evaluative information for the promotion and tenure process.

Improvements in faculty compliance, as evidenced by the checklists, and in student experiences, as reflected by student ratings, will show the impact of the new advising standards. Student satisfaction data should also provide evidence of improved academic advising. However, retention will be a key indicator of success (McArthur, 2005). In fact, the financial implication of increasing the retention rate through improved academic advising was an important factor leveraged by the advising task force to encourage the campus-wide changes outlined above.

In summary, assessment findings and the current economic climate fostered a movement to examine how academic advising was conducted and how it could be improved. We systematically assessed the advising process and worked on developing standards to explicitly state expectations for advising and tied those expectations to the faculty review process. We stressed the importance of academic advising and incorporated an evaluation process for maintaining high quality advising (Figure 1). As with any cultural shift on campus, improving academic advising is an ongoing process. However, the steps we engaged in were critical for initiating that paradigm shift.

Figure 1 Flowchart of process for changing academic advising standards

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