

Student Attitudes Toward Faculty Advising Services

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ABSTRACT

Faculty advisors play an important administrative and counseling role for students at most post-secondary institutions, while functioning in a changing academic and technological environment. This paper examines current student attitudes and expectations towards faculty advising services based on results from a survey of over 350 students. Areas examined include services used and provided, preferred methods of contact, the perceived quality of advising services, and relative importance and satisfaction levels for specific aspects of advising.

INTRODUCTION

For most students, a faculty advisor serves as the primary point of contact with their college or university outside of the classroom, as well as the one person who takes a longitudinal view of a student's academic efforts during their time in school. This paper examined student attitudes toward faculty advisors, using a survey designed to address issues such as the following:

- What factors do students see as being important for faculty advisors?
- Should the role of faculty advisors expand into a broader mentoring or counseling role?
- Is it important that the faculty advisor be in a student's major?
- What are student expectations in terms of accessibility and forms of contact for advisors?
- How do students rate the quality of their advising experiences?

Traditionally, academic advising has been the responsibility of faculty who served as mentors and assisted in student's ethical, intellectual and moral development (Damminger, 2001). The traditional advising system was simply an administrative function focused on short term rather than long term goals and involved little if any active involvement from either the student or the faculty advisor (Broadbridge, 1996). Since then, the focus of academic advising has been evolving from this traditional academic approach to more of a developmental approach, focusing on the student's personal growth (Frost, 1991; Lowenstein, 1999).

Today advising has moved from simply providing students with academic and scheduling information to a student-centered service that includes the needs of the institution as well. (Frost, 1990). This change in academic advising can be seen in the change in the roles, duties and responsibilities of today's academic advisors, which often include the development of individual academic plans, providing updated curriculum and academic policy information, and serving as a referral agent for other campus activities and organizations (Midgen, 1989). Furthermore, this change to a developmental form of academic advising is often seen part of the teaching paradigm in that planning, problem solving, decision making and cognitive skills are now an integral part of the skills needed in effective advising interactions (Frost 1991; Nutt 2004; Smith & Allen, 2006), to the point where Hemwall and Trachte (2005) feel faculty should approach advising as part of the learning and teaching process.

Damminger (2001) defines what academia now terms "developmental academic advising" as an advising relationship with students that supports and instills a quest for an enriched experience related to their education. It consists of ongoing student-advisor interactions and utilization of the entire range of resources available to the student to reach educational and personal goals, and includes course registration, academic competence, personal involvement, and the development of life purpose. Implementers of development academic advising feel that the advisor is the representative most responsible for assisting students in gaining maximum benefits from their higher education experience (Gordon, Habley, & Associates, 2000).

Benefits for individual students from effective advising include being motivated to remain in academic programs during difficult times, meaningful opportunities for out of class contact with faculty, and involvement in university experiences (Frost, 1991; Light, 2001; Mastrodicasa, 2001), while Creamer (2000) describes academic

advising as an educational activity that assists college students in making decisions in their personal and academic lives. Conversely, poor advising can potentially result in student anxiety and frustration (Astin & Astin, 2000; Astin, 1984). Other effects of ineffectual, meaningful or nonexistent academic advising include students feeling alienated, lonely, discouraged and overwhelmed (Flores, 1994). At the level of the institution, benefits of effective advising include improving student retention, creating positive learning environments, enhancing student's motivation to complete programs on time, and improved student successes (Moses, 2001; Templeton, Skaggs, & Johnson, 2002; Frost 1991; Mastrodicasa, 2001).

Given these trends, the need has been recognized for analyzing, improving and assessing the academic advising process. Brown and Sanstead (1982) noted that the overall purpose of evaluating academic advising is to provide information useful for making changes in the advising program, while Hester and others have recognized that student evaluations are suitable for studying certain aspects of advising (Hester, 2008; Campbell, 2005; Nutt, 2004), however success has been limited and problems have been identified (Brown & Sanstead, 1982). Against this context, this study was designed to measure student attitudes relative to current thinking about faculty advising.

METHODOLOGY

A paper survey was administered to students at a liberal arts college on the East Coast during registration for the fall term of 2007, containing 17 questions assessing student attitudes towards advising services across several dimensions including usage levels, expectations, future recommendations, and overall satisfaction, together with demographic information. The **364** survey responses received were distributed fairly evenly across the classes of 2008 through 2011, with approximately a 3 to 1 ratio of females to males (77% versus 23%). Broad spectrums of majors were represented, with the largest groups including biology (12.6%), business administration (10.2%), and psychology (6.6%). The survey questions were as follows:

I. Demographic information

The following questions were asked to classify the demographics of the respondents:

1. What year do you expect to graduate from college?
2. Are you a full-time or part-time student?
3. Have you identified a major? If you answered, "Yes"; what is your major(s)?
4. What is your gender?

II. Advising information

5. What do you consider to be your primary source for academic advising? (Faculty Advisor, Professor in your major (not your advisor), Academic Deans, Friends/Students, Office of the Registrar, Family Member(s), Office of Career Services, Coaches, Other)
6. Select the main reasons why you contact your faculty advisor. Check all that apply: (Career planning, Internship opportunities, Community service requirement, Graduate school, Scholarship opportunities, Course registration requirements, Review academic plan, Review graduation audit, Add or drop a class, Required by academic advising, Elect pass/fail option, Other)
7. How have you used advising services? Check all that apply: (In person, On-line, E-mail, Text-messaging, Telephone, Other)
8. How would you prefer to use advising services? Check all that apply: (In person, On-line, E-mail, Text-messaging, Telephone, Other)
9. How many times do you visit your faculty advisor during one academic year? (Zero through six or more visits)
- 9a. How many times do you *expect* to visit your faculty advisor during one academic year? (Zero through six or more visits)
10. What are your reasons for using a faculty advisor? (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree):
 - a. Identify education goals
 - b. Identify career goals
 - c. Information on programs/course offerings
 - d. Information on college services
 - e. Develop a plan to meet education goals
 - f. Selection of courses for the term

- g. Assistance with resume, job search and graduate school plans
 - h. Assistance with class management
 - i. Sign forms such as add/drop, pass/fail, community service etc.
 - j. Go over your graduation audit
11. Please rate the importance of each of the following roles for faculty academic advisors (low, medium, high), and your satisfaction of how well these roles are currently performed (poor, good, excellent):
 - a. Assist with course selection/planning
 - b. Be able to advise me on the selection of an academic major
 - c. Be knowledgeable about careers that apply to my major
 - d. Help me with personal issues and concerns
 - e. Serve as mentors
 12. I expect my faculty advisor to: (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree):
 - a. Be knowledgeable about college and departmental policies, procedures, and deadlines.
 - b. Write letters of recommendation.
 - c. Assist me, if needed, with study skills such as note taking, test taking, and time management.
 13. I prefer to have a faculty advisor in my major: (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree):
 14. Have you switched advisors since the beginning of your freshman year? (Yes/No)
If "Yes," I switched advisors because (check all that are appropriate): (I wanted an advisor in my major, My advisor left the college, I did not feel my advisor was helpful, Other)
 15. I would rate the quality of faculty advising that I've received as: (Very Good, Good, Average, Poor)
 16. Please use this space to express any comments, concerns or suggestions you may have regarding faculty advising?
 17. The one thing that would most improve faculty advising at this school would be:

Results from the survey questions listed above were then coded as quantitative values as specified by respondents. This data was also examined relative to demographic criteria surveyed, with variations by class year detailed for several survey items in the following results section.

The vast majority (75.8%) of students surveyed viewed their faculty advisor as their primary source for academic advising, versus friends (9.3%) and professors (8.5%), making this survey a useful tool for assessing the role of faculty advisors. The data also showed that the average student both expects and receives approximately 4 advising visits per year (3.82/3.96), with the number of actual average visits increasing among older classes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this survey show clear trends in student preferences for advising, ranging from the alignment of advisors with student majors to clarifying the roles of an advisor, with this data pointing to several specific areas for improvement. Key conclusions are as follows:

Conclusion 1: Advisors provide a broad range of services

This survey found that nearly all students use advisors for functional roles such as selecting courses (94%), processing add/drop forms (92%), and obtaining information on courses and programs (87%). A substantial majority of these students also use faculty advisors to discuss educational goals (83%) and career goals (72%). Finally, a smaller majority of students use their advisors for services such as graduation audits (66%), information on college services (59%), assistance with job searches and graduate school (58%), and class management (54%).

Examining this data broken down by class, there is a clear increase in using advisors to discuss opportunities among older classes, as well as increasing levels of add/drop activity. Understandably, uses of graduation-related services are clustered toward seniors, while the broader use of using faculty advisors to gain academic advised is clustered around beginning students and seniors.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Conclusion 2: Students use - and prefer - in-person or e-mail contact

A wide variety of potential touch points now exist between students and faculty advisors, including e-mail, telephone counseling, on-line contact via the school's learning management system, and text messaging as well as the traditional office visit. The survey showed that students have a strong preference for in-person visits, with over 90% of students in each class expressing a preference for this. E-mail was selected as a preference by a majority of all students except freshmen, while minimal preference (under 20%) was expressed for other forms of contact. There was minimal variance in the survey between methods used and preferred, as well as minimal variation across class years for modalities other than e-mail.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Conclusion 3: Students expect more academic and career expertise, less personal guidance and mentoring

A substantial majority of students gave high importance to functional aspects of advising such as assisting with course selection (77%), advising on the selection of a major (59%), and being knowledgeable about careers in a major (70%). By comparison, less than half of students rating helping with personal issues and concerns (26%) or serving as a mentor (43%) as being important. This correlates with a related finding that students expect advisors to be knowledgeable about the school (97%) and to write letters of recommendation (87%), but feel less strongly about assisting with study skills (41%).

When it comes to student satisfaction levels for these services, the survey reveals substantial areas for improvement. While 62% of respondents gave high ratings in the core competency of course selection, for other issues the percentage of high ratings were in the 50s or below. Note also in the corresponding chart that one-third or more of respondents rate their satisfaction levels as "medium" or lower in each of these areas.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Conclusion 4: Students strongly prefer advisors within their major

One of the key outcomes of this survey is that students are very clear in their preference for having an advisor in their declared major, with over 85% of respondents rating this as "agree" (18%) or "strongly agree" (67%). This compares with a related finding that over one-third of survey respondents (35%) have switched advisors during the course of their studies.

Conclusion 5: Overall ratings of advisors are good, but with much room for improvement

The vast majority of respondents currently rate their faculty advisors as "good" (36%) or "very good" (42%), while less than 3% rate their advisors as "poor." At the same time, less than half of students rated their advisors as "very good", particularly seniors, as shown in figure 4. Among the qualitative comments from students, there were numerous responses praising specific advisors as well as a few criticizing specific ones, while far and away the most common comments pertained to wanting the school to assign advisors by major according to the subjects they teach.

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Taken together, these findings indicate a clear consensus defining the primary role of a faculty advisor as being a personal guide for curriculum and career information through graduation, as well as an expectation that such advisors should be very knowledgeable in the student's major of choice. Such expectations serve as important feedback for the methodology of assigning faculty advisors, and in a world of increasingly transdisciplinary education, it also underscores the importance of advisors having a base of expertise within a home discipline.

These results also indicate that students themselves appear to be resistant to broader counseling roles for faculty advisors, with a strong preference for basic competencies in academic advising, a result that in turn should inform the debate over a more developmental advising environment. While this sample is only representative of one school, if its results are indicative of broader trends, they may indicate that other channels for personal growth and development may be more favored by students themselves. Finally, this survey indicates that while advising quality is good overall within this survey sample, considerable room for growth remains.

SUMMARY

These survey results open up several issues for future research and discussion, including the following:

- Clarifying the role of faculty advisors in the future
- Addressing strong student preferences for advisors in their major
- Understand what factors keeps students from giving advisors the very top rating
- Examining how to educate faculty members to be better advisors

At a broader level, they also open the issue of future student input and participation into the process of how faculty advising evolves from here. The results from this survey indicate student attitudes that, in some ways, contradict academic trends toward a broader and more developmental level of advising services. Expanding this survey approach to a broader sample of students, including more diverse geographic locations, campus sizes, and student demographics, could yield a more accurate composite picture of student thought that could, in turn, inform the further growth and development of faculty advising roles.

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FIGURES AND TABLES

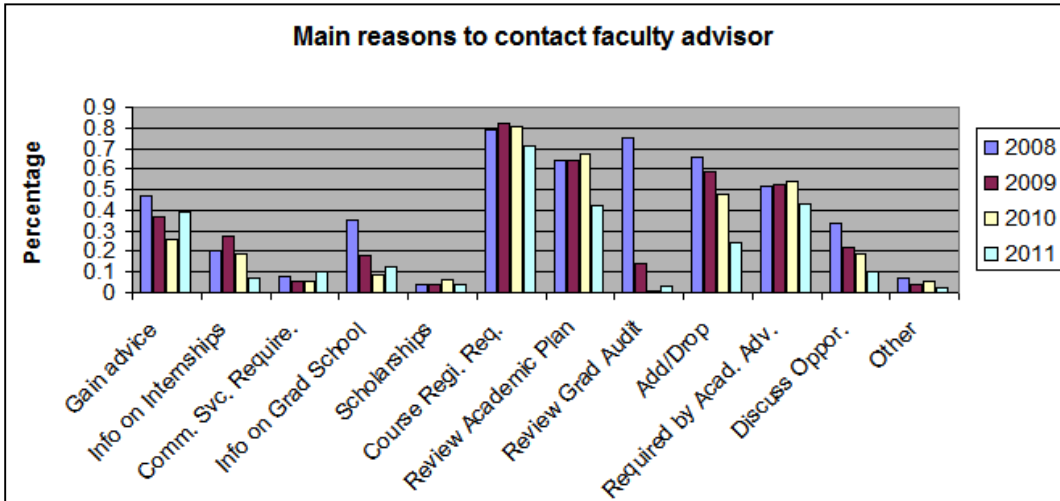


Figure 1. Main reasons for contacting a faculty advisor, by class year.

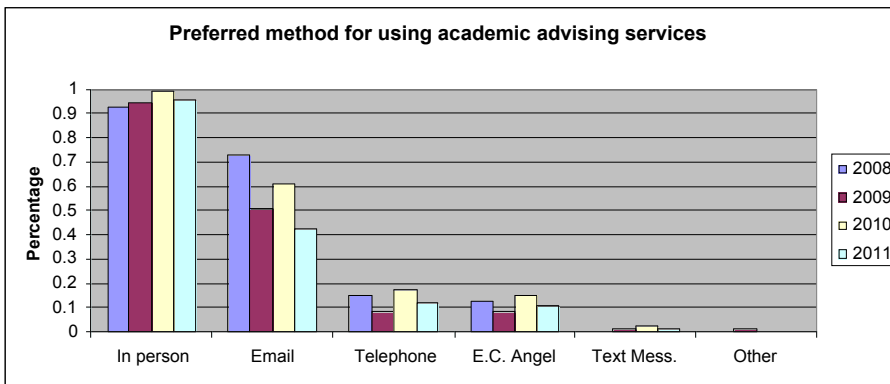


Figure 2. Preferred method for using academic advising services, by class year.

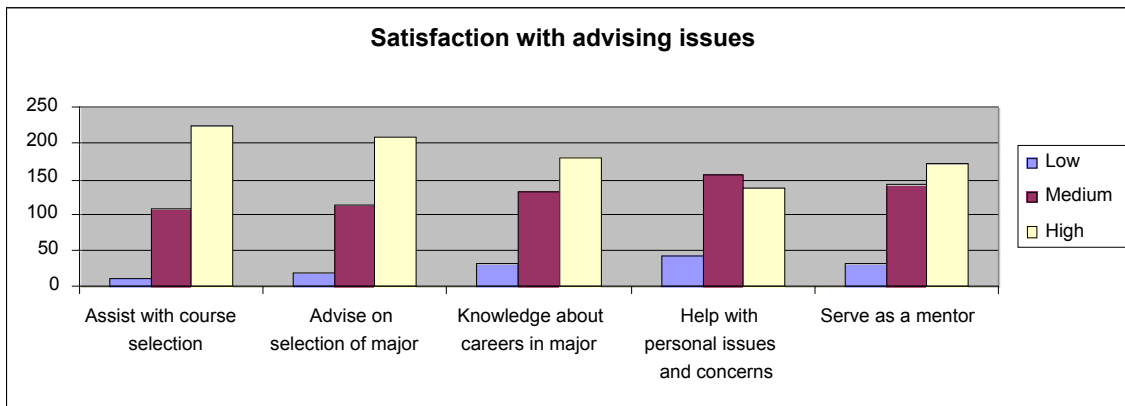
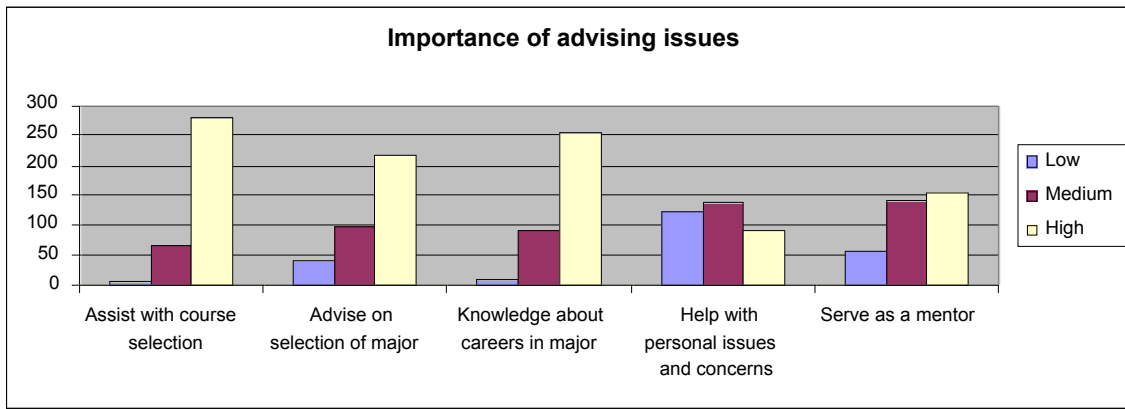


Figure 3. Importance and satisfaction levels for specific advising issues.

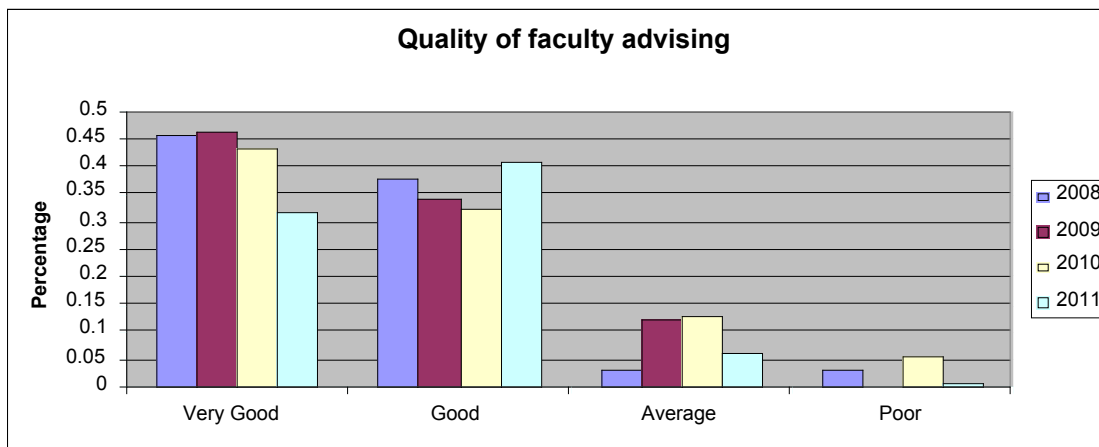


Figure 4. Quality of faculty advising, by class year.