The Difference Academic Advising Makes for Students

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Academic Advising

Academic advising is a vital component of student affairs and student development (Goetz, 2004). It is one of the few, if not the only, “structured activity” at an institution of higher education that provides students with an opportunity to work individually with “a concerned representative of the institution” (Abelman, Dalessandro, Janstova, & Snyder-Suhy, 2007, p. 10). The role of the advisor is to assist the student in making academic choices, discover learning styles, practice goal setting and problem-solving techniques, and gain access to the necessary support services offered by the institution (Love, 2003; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005).

Advising is provided by faculty members or professional advisors. The purveyor of advising is often determined by the type of institution (Abelman et al., 2007). Community colleges, for-profit institutions, and professional schools most often employ academic advisors who are nonteaching professionals (Paulson, 2002). Faculty or professional advisors can choose from a variety of advising styles including developmental advising, prescriptive advising, or strengths-based advising.

Developmental advising entails cultivating a bond between the advisor and the student. The relationship is a medium for the advisor to assist the student in becoming more aware of his or her personal goals, values, learning styles, and requirements (Saving & Keim, 1998; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). Prescriptive advising involves a more authoritarian relationship between advisor and student where the advisor provides information and directs the student in meeting institutional requirements (Saving & Keim, 1998; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). Strengths-based advising is a type of developmental advising where the focus is on the student and what he or she does well. Advisor and student work to develop and apply the strengths to academic and nonacademic goals (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005).
Advising Effects During College

Academic advising is one of the first encounters a student will have with college support staff, and advising often takes place at orientation before the academic year begins. Advisors will meet with students to determine the first semester’s course schedule and answer any questions students may have about the institution. This is the first opportunity an advisor has to help the student understand the institution’s mission, including its purpose, values, and goals. During the student’s time at the institution an advisor will need to help the student connect the institution’s mission and goals with the student’s personal goals (Hemwall & Trachte, 1994).

An advisor working from a developmental framework will assist students finding out where they are in the process of learning, in setting and achieving goals, developing critical thinking skills, and developing decision making skills (Hemwall & Trachte, 2005). Goal setting and asking probing questions about future situations can assist advisors in setting-up a pattern of critical thinking (Hester, 2008).

During college students will benefit from developmental advising by building a relationship with the institution via their relationships with advisors. It is through the advising relationship that students can access nonacademic knowledge and skills that will meet many desired learning outcomes. These outcomes can include a marked ability in critical thinking, strong communication skills, and ability to develop professional and personal goals.

Between and Within College Effects

Academic advising frameworks will have an effect on student learning outcomes, but it is often institutional type that affects the framework used by institutions and advisors. Prescriptive advising is most often found at for-profit institutions. Large research based universities will also include some prescriptive advising, especially during the first year of a students collegiate career.
The change at large institutions often occurs when a student declares a major and is assigned a faculty advisor. However, with the increased curricular complexity and the expanding diversity of students many institutions are retaining the professional prescriptive advising centers and including faculty advisors once a major is declared (Abelman, et al, 2007; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). In situations where advisors carry a heavy student-to-advisor load the within college affects may be more noticeable with advisors relying more heavily on prescriptive advising. Students who must access two different advisors may receive conflicting or confusing information, and may be less inclined to develop a strong relationship with either advisor.

Institutional factors that affect the type of advising offered include size of enrollment, type of degrees conferred, religious affiliation, institutional mission, and private or public status. Abelman et al. (2007) also found that these institutional factors can influence students satisfaction with the advising provided. Hester (2008) found that students who had increased interactions with their advisors were more satisfied with the advising provided. The study also found that a higher number of advising sessions led to higher GPAs for students and greater student knowledge and understanding of the student support services provided. These findings indicate the within college affects of academic advising. Students who utilize advisors and advisors who make themselves readily available will benefit the most from the advising relationship.

Conditional Affects of Academic Advising

A plethora of research has been done on academic advising for different student populations. Stewart, Russell, and Wright (1997) stated that having advisors who are interested in advising students of color is fundamental. Studies have shown a positive association between providing good advising services and being sincerely interested in, and invested in, student
success. The article also stated that the effect of having African-Americans as advisors and as role-models should not be undervalued.

A key component of working with any underrepresented population is the ability of the advisor to create individual advising plans. This will require both time and effort on part of the advisor and it will also require a developmental or strengths-based framework. By using a variety of methods to connect with their students advisors can engage in a proactive approach to advising and contact students who may be exhibiting at-risk behaviors such as low mid-term grades or excessive absences (Steingass & Sykes, 2008).

Conditional affects are a fundamental part of every advisor-advisee relationship. It is important that advisors treat all students as individuals and focus on developing a relationship that meets the student’s needs. Advisors may need to deal with student issues involving not only socioeconomic status and race or ethnicity, but also mental health, preparedness for college work and the collegiate environment, and family issues as well.

Net and Long-term Effects of Academic Advising

Little research is available on the net and long-term effects of academic advising. It is, however, clear from the current research in all areas of advising that it is the relationship with the advisor that is important. Kelley (2008) stated that significant advising, which is defined as advising that causes change within the student, can enhance student development. An advisor is responsible for assisting students in developing fundamental knowledge about university policy and procedures so that students can apply them to both in-class and out-of-class experiences. Helping students connect the general education curriculum to their majors, academic goals, and career aspirations is also a function of the advisor. An advisor may also have occasion to function as a motivator for students in order to keep them enthusiastic about the learning process.
These overarching goals of academic advising are what contribute to the net and long-term effects of advising. Students who are able to achieve these learning outcomes during their college career and in the relationship with their advisors will be able to transfer and apply the acquired skills beyond the campus environment.

Variations in Academic Advising

Academic advising is a vital function of student affairs and an important factor in student success and development. With so much at stake it is disconcerting that academic advising can vary so greatly within a single institution, or between institutions. It is true that no one advising framework will work for every student, but it is also apparent that developmental and strengths-based advising provide students with enhanced experiences, and thereby improve the quality of students’ overall collegiate career.

The variations in advising do not arise so much from institutional type, although that is a factor, but from the framework to which the individual advisor subscribes. Even if an institution’s advising orientation is prescriptive an advisor can make an effort to assist students in making connections between curriculum and career goals, or between the students’ needs and the support services available on campus.

Advisors and students need to be aware of the possible outcomes of the advising relationship and work to develop an understanding of the intended goals. With both parties working from a developmental framework even busy and pressured advisors and students can achieve significant advising.
References


