

ASSESSMENT OF ACADEMIC ADVISORS AND ACADEMIC ADVISING PROGRAMS

Joe Cuseo
Marymount College

THE CASE FOR ATTENTION TO ASSESSMENT OF ACADEMIC ADVISMENT

The contemporary relevance and cross-institutional significance of advisor and advising program evaluation is highlighted by the most recent of five national surveys of academic advising, which reveals that only 29% of postsecondary institutions evaluate advisor effectiveness (Habley & Morales, 1998). Evaluating advisor effectiveness sends a strong and explicit message to all academic advisors that advising is an important professional responsibility; conversely, failure to do so tacitly communicates the message that this student service is not highly valued by the institution. As Linda Darling-Hammond, higher education research specialist for the Rand Corporation, once said: "If there's one thing social science research has found consistently and unambiguously. . .it's that people will do more of whatever they are evaluated on doing. What is measured will increase, and what is not measured will decrease. That's why assessment is such a powerful activity. It cannot only measure, but change reality" (quoted in Hutchings & Marchese, 1990). In addition, the particular items that comprise an evaluation instrument illustrate the specific practices and concrete behaviors that we hope those being evaluated will strive for, or aspire to; thus, the instrument can function not only as a measure of reality (what is), but also as a prompt or stimulus that promotes professional behavior that more closely approximates the ideal (what should be).

Advisor evaluation is also inextricably related to other important advising issues, such as advisor (a) recruitment and selection, (b) orientation, training, and development, and (c) recognition and reward. Furthermore, advisor evaluation has major implications for student *satisfaction* with, and *retention* at, the college they have chosen to attend.

RATIONALE FOR THE CONTENT OF AN ADVISOR EVALUATION INSTRUMENT

The specific items that comprise the content of an advisor evaluation instrument should be grounded in research on common characteristics or qualities of advisors that students seek and value. Research repeatedly points to the conclusion that students value most highly academic advisors who are seen as: (1) available/accessible, (2) knowledgeable/helpful, (3) personable/approachable, and (4) counselors/mentors (Winston, Ender, & Miller, 1982; Winston, Miller, Ender, Grites, & Associates, 1984; Frost, 1991; Gordon, Habley, & Associates, 2000).

Each one of these general "core" qualities of effective advisors may be defined in terms of more specific advisor roles and responsibilities, as follows:

1) **Available/Accessible:** An advisor is someone who effectively communicates and interacts with students outside the classroom, and does so more informally, more frequently, and on a more long-term basis than course instructors. A student's instructors will vary from term to term, but an academic advisor is the one institutional representative with whom the student can have continuous contact and an ongoing relationship that may endure throughout the college experience.

- 2) **Knowledgeable/Helpful:** An advisor is an effective consultant—a role that may be said to embrace the following functions: (a) *Resource Agent*—one who provides accurate and timely information about the curriculum, co-curriculum, college policies, and administrative procedures. (b) *Interpreter*—one who helps students make sense of, and develop appreciation for the college mission, curricular requirements (e.g., the meaning, value, and purpose of general education), and co-curricular experiences (e.g., the importance of out-of-class experiences for student learning and development). (c) *Liaison/Referral Agent*—one who connects students with key academic support and student development services. (d) *Teacher/Educator*—one who helps students gain self-insight into their interests, aptitudes, and values; who enables students to see the “connection” between their academic experience and their future life plans; and who promotes students’ cognitive skills in problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking with respect to present and future educational choices.
- 3) **Personable/Approachable:** An advisor is a humanizing or personalizing agent with whom students feel comfortable seeking out, who knows students by name, and who takes a personal interest in individual students’ experiences, progress, and development.
- 4) **Counselor/Mentor:** An advisor is an advocate who students can turn to for advice, counsel, guidance, or direction; who listens actively and empathically; and who responds to students in a non-judgmental manner—treating them as clients to be mentored—rather than as subordinates to be evaluated (or graded).

These four advisor roles can be used to generate related clusters of advisor characteristics or behaviors that represent the content (rating items) of an advisor evaluation instrument. An example of such an instrument is provided in Appendix A (pp. 11-13). While the foregoing synthesis of advisor roles may be useful for guiding construction of specific items on the advisor evaluation instrument, the scholarly literature on academic advising strongly suggests that advisor evaluation should originate with, and be driven by, a clear *mission statement* that reflects consensual or communal understanding of the overarching meaning and purpose of the academic advisement program (White, 2000). This statement of program purpose should be consistent with, and connected to the college mission statement, thus underscoring the centrality of the advisement program and its pivotal role in the realization of broader institutional goals. Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991) report from campus visits that connection between program purpose and institutional mission characterizes educational program delivery at “involving” colleges, i.e., colleges with a strong track record of actively engaging students in the college experience. As they put it, “Policies and practices at Involving Colleges are effective because they are mission-driven and are constantly evaluated to assess their contributions to educational purposes” (p. 156).

The purpose statement for an academic advisement program should also serve as a springboard or launching pad that drives and directs the development of an effective evaluation plan. If the college does not take time to develop a carefully constructed statement that explicitly captures the essential purpose and priorities of its advising program, then individual advisors may develop different conceptions and philosophies about what advising should be, and their individual advising practices may vary in nature (and quality), depending on what particular advising philosophy or viewpoint they hold. In fact, research indicates that there is fairly high consistency between advisors’ stated philosophy of advising and their actual advising behaviors or practices (Daller, Creamer,

& Creamer, cited in Creamer & Scott, 2000).

The following statements, culled from the scholarly literature on academic advising, have the potential to serve as models or heuristics that can help guide and shape the construction of an effective mission statement for advising programs.

(a) “Developmental academic advising is . . . a systematic process based on a close student-advisor relationship intended to aid students in achieving educational, career, and personal goals through the utilization of the full range of institutional and community resources. It both stimulates and supports students in their quest for an enriched quality of life” (Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites, & Associates, 1984, p. 538)

(b) “The formation of relationships that assure that at least one educator has close enough contact with each student to assess and influence the quality of that student’s educational experience is realistic only through a systematic process, such as an academic advising program. It is unrealistic to expect each instructor, even with small classes, to form personal relationships of sufficient duration and depth with each student in his or her class to accomplish this” (Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites, & Associates, 1984, p. 538).

(c) “Developmental academic advising is *not* primarily an administrative function, *not* obtaining a signature to schedule classes, *not* a conference held once a term, not a paper relationship, *not* supplementary to the educational process, [and] *not* synonymous with faculty member” (Ender, 1983, p. 10).

(d) “Academic advising can be understood best and more easily reconceptualized if the process of academic advising and the scheduling of classes and registration are separated. Class scheduling should no be confused with educational planning. Developmental academic advising becomes a more realistic goal when separated from class scheduling because advising can then go on all during the academic year, not just during the few weeks prior to registration each new term. Advising programs, however, that emphasize registration and record keeping, while neglecting attention to students’ educational and personal experiences in the institution, are missing an excellent opportunity to influence directly and immediately the quality of students’ education and are also highly inefficient, since they are most likely employing highly educated (expensive) personnel who are performing essentially clerical tasks” (Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites, & Associates, 1984, p. 542).

RATIONALE FOR THE STRUCTURE & ADMINISTRATION OF AN EVALUATION INSTRUMENT FOR ACADEMIC ADVISORS

1. Decide on whether you want to develop an *internal* (“home grown”) instrument, or import an external (“store bought”) standardized instrument from an assessment service or evaluation center. There are commercially developed instruments available that specifically target evaluation of academic advising—for example: (a) The ACT Survey of Academic Advising (American College Testing), (b) The Academic Advising Inventory (Winston & Sander), and (c) The Developmental Advising Inventory (Dickson & Thayer). For a review of standardized instruments designed to evaluate academic advising, see: Srebnik (1988). *NACADA Journal*, 8(1), 52-62. Also, for an annotated

bibliography on advising evaluation and assessment, see the following website sponsored by the National Clearinghouse for Academic Advising, Ohio State University, and the National Academic Advising Association: www.uvc-ohio-state.edu/chouse.html

Standardized instruments do come with the advantage of having already-established reliability and validity, as well as the availability of norms that allow for cross-institutional comparisons. However, if you feel that your college has unique, campus-specific concerns and objectives that would be best assessed via locally developed questions, or if you want an instrument that will elicit more qualitative data (written responses) than the typical quantitative data generated by standardized inventories, then it might be best to develop your own campus-specific instrument.

2. Instead of using the usual Likert-scale with four options (strongly agree – agree – disagree – strongly disagree), consider including more rating options. The wider range of numerical options may result in mean (average) ratings for individual items that display a wider spread in absolute size or value. For instance, a 6-point scale may be superior to 4-point rating scales because the latter may yield mean ratings for separate items which vary so little in absolute size that advisors may tend to discount the small mean differences between items as being insignificant and inconsequential. For example, with a 4-option rating scale, an advisor might receive mean ratings for different items on the instrument that range from a low of 2.8 to a high of 3.3. Such a narrow range of differences in mean ratings can lead advisors to attribute these minuscule differences simply as random “error variance” or students' failure to respond in a discerning or discriminating manner.

An expanded 6-point scale has the potential to produce larger mean differences across individual items, thus providing more discriminating data. In fact, research on student evaluations of course instructors does suggest that a rating scale with fewer than five choices tends to reduce the instrument's ability to discriminate between satisfied and dissatisfied respondents, while a rating scale with more than seven choices does not add to the instrument's discriminability (Cashin, 1990).

In addition to providing advisors with mean scores per item, they may also be provided with the percentage of respondents who selected each response option. This statistic will reveal how student responses were distributed across all response options, thus providing advisors with potentially useful feedback about the degree of consistency (consensus) or variation (disagreement) among their advisees' ratings for each item on the instrument.

3. Instructions for the advisor-evaluation instrument should strongly emphasize the need for, and importance of, students' *written* comments. Research on student evaluations of course instructors indicates that this type of feedback provides the most useful information for performance improvement (Seldin, 1992). (Indeed, the findings of many years of research on students' course evaluations may be directly applicable to the construction and administration of advisor-evaluation instruments. For a review of research and practice with respect to instructor evaluations, much of which can be applied to advisor evaluations, go to the following site: <http://www.Brevard.edu/fyc/listserv/index/htm>, scroll down to “Listserv Remarks” and click “Joe Cuseo, 10-20-00,” *Student Evaluations of College Courses*.)

4. Beneath each item (statement) to be rated, it is recommended that some empty space be provided, preceded by the prompt, “*Reason/explanation for rating: . . .*” Inclusion of such item-specific prompts has been found to increase the quantity of written comments student provide—and their quality, i.e., comments are more focused and concrete because they are anchored to a specific item (characteristic or behavior)—as opposed to the traditional practice of soliciting written comments solely at the end of the instrument—in response to a generic or global prompt, such as: “Final Comments?” (Cuseo, 2000).

Furthermore, the opportunity to provide a written response to each item allows students to *justify* their ratings, and enables us to gain some insight into *why* the rating was given.

5. It is recommend that the instrument be kept *short*, containing no more than 12 advisor-evaluation items. For example, four 3-item clusters could be included that relate to each of the four aforementioned qualities of highly valued advisors. It has been the author’s experience that the longer an instrument is (i.e., the more reading time it requires), the less time students devote to writing and, consequently, fewer useful comments are provided.

6. Toward the end of the instrument, *students* should be asked to *self-assess* their own effort and effectiveness as advisees.

This portion of the instrument should serve to (a) raise students’ consciousness that they also need to take some personal responsibility in the advisement process for it to be effective, and (b) assure advisors that any evaluation of their effectiveness depends, at least in part, on the conscientiousness and cooperation of their advisees. (This, in turn, may serve to defuse the amount of threat or defensiveness experienced by advisors about being evaluated—a feeling that almost invariably accompanies any type of professional performance evaluation.)

7. Before formally adopting an evaluation instrument, have *students* review it, either individually or in focus groups, to gather feedback about its clarity and comprehensiveness (e.g., if critical questions about advisors or the advising process have been overlooked). Also, consider adding an open-ended question at the end of the instrument that would ask students to assess the assessment instrument. (This could be referred to it as “meta-assessment”—the process of assessing the assessment by the assessor).

Ideally, an evaluation instrument should allow students not only rate items in terms of perceived satisfaction or effectiveness, but also in terms of perceived *need* or *importance*. In other words, students would give two ratings for each item on the instrument: (a) a rating of how satisfied they are with that item, and (b) a rating of how important that item is to them. The instrument could be structured to efficiently obtain both sets of ratings by centering the item statements (questions) in the middle of the page, with a “satisfaction” rating scale to the left of the item and an “importance” scale to the right of the same item.

Lee Noel and Randi Levitz, student retention researchers and consultants, have used this double-rating practice to identify institutional areas with large “performance gaps”—items for which students give low satisfaction ratings but high importance ratings, i.e., a large negative score is obtained when the satisfaction rating for an item is subtracted from

its importance rating (Noel & Levitz, 1996). If this strategy were applied to advisor evaluation, those items that reveal high student ratings on importance but low ratings on satisfaction would provide particularly useful information. These items reflect high-priority student needs that they feel are not presently being met. As such, these items represent key target zones for improving academic advising—which, of course, is the ultimate purpose of assessment.

Applying this satisfaction-vs.-importance rating scheme to the advisor evaluation instrument would, in effect, enable it to co-function as a student *satisfaction* survey and a student *needs assessment* survey. This would be especially advantageous because it would allow for the systematic collection of data on student needs. Historically, institutional research in higher education has made extensive use of satisfaction surveys, which are designed to assess how students feel about what *we* are doing; in contrast, comparatively short shrift has been given to assessing what *they* (our students) need and want from us. It could be argued that satisfaction surveys represent an *institution-centered* (or egocentric) form of assessment, while student needs assessment is a *learner-centered* form of assessment that resonates well with the new “learning paradigm” (Barr & Tagg, 1995) and the “student learning imperative” (American College Personnel Association, 1994).

8. Before formally adopting a proposed instrument, feedback should be solicited from *academic advisors* with respect to its content and structure. Broad-based feedback should help to fine-tune the instrument and redress its shortcomings and oversights. More importantly, perhaps, this solicitation of feedback from advisors gives them an opportunity to provide input and provides them with a sense of personal ownership or control of the evaluation process. Advisors should feel that evaluation is something that is being done *with* or *for* them, rather than *to* them. In fact, “evaluation” may not be the best term to use for this process because it tends to immediately raise a red flag in the minds of advisors. Although the terms “evaluation” and “assessment” tend to be used interchangeably by some scholars and differentially by others, it has been the author’s experience that assessment is a less threatening term which more accurately captures the primary purpose of the process: to gather feedback that can be used for professional and programmatic improvement. It is noteworthy that, etymologically, the term “assessment” derives from a root word meaning to “sit beside” and “assist,” whereas “evaluation” derives from the same root as “value”—which connotes appraisal and judgment of worth. (An added bonus for using the term assessment, in lieu of evaluation, is that the former can be combined with “academic advisement” to form the phrase, “assessment of academic advisement”—a triple alliteration with a rhythm-and-rhyming ring to it that should appeal to faculty with literary leanings and poetic sensibilities.)

Consistent with this focus on assessment for professional improvement rather than evaluation for judgment, it is recommended that *advisors* be given the opportunity to assess the *administrative support* they receive for advising—e.g., the effectiveness of orientation, training, and development they have received; usefulness of support materials or technological tools provided for them; viability of the advisee-advisor ratio; and effectiveness of administrative policies and procedures. (Note: See Appendix B, pp. 14-16, for an instrument that has been designed to assess advisors’ perceptions of the quality of an advisement program and the effectiveness of administrative support for advising.)

Allowing advisors to assess administrative support for advising serves the dual purpose of (a) providing feedback to the advising program director/coordinator that may be used for program improvement, and (b) actively involving advisors in the assessment process—allowing them an equal opportunity to take on the active role of assessor, rather than restricting them exclusively to the role of passive recipient (or object) of assessment.

Advisors can also become more actively involved in the assessment process if they engage in *self-assessment*. This could be done in narrative form, perhaps as part of an advising portfolio that would include a personal statement of advising philosophy, advising strategies employed, advisor-development activities, etc. One potentially useful form of self-assessment would be for advisors to respond to their student evaluations. For instance, advisors might give their interpretations or explanations for ratings and comments received from their advisees, their thoughts about why they received high evaluations with respect to certain advising functions, and how they might address or redress areas in which they were perceived least favorably.

One interesting idea suggested in the scholarly literature on instructor evaluations that may be adopted as a form of advisor self-assessment is to have advisors complete the same evaluation instrument as their advisees, responding to it as they think their advisees respond. Consistencies and discrepancies that emerge between how the advisor and students respond to the evaluation instrument could provide advisors with valuable feedback for self-assessment. In particular, mismatches between advisor-advisee perceptions may create cognitive “dissonance” or “disequilibrium” in the minds of advisors that could stimulate productive changes in advising attitudes and behavior.

In addition to using the advisor-evaluation instrument for student assessment and self-assessment, it may also be used in conjunction with *peer* assessment. For instance, teams of advisors could agree to review each other’s evaluations in a collegial fashion—for the mutually supportive purpose of improving their professional performance. Peer assessment could also be conducted in an anonymous or confidential manner, whereby each advisor receives the student evaluations of an anonymous colleague and provides that colleague with constructive feedback; at the same time, the advisor who reviews student evaluations from an anonymous colleague also receives feedback from a colleague. Thus, each advisor receives peer feedback from, and provides feedback to, an advising colleague.

Research on faculty development strongly supports the effectiveness of peer feedback and collegial dialogue for promoting change in instructional behavior (Eble & McKeachie, 1985). Thus, it may be reasonable to expect that peer assessment and collegial feedback would work equally well with faculty advisors. The effectiveness of peer assessment is probably due to the fact that feedback from colleagues is perceived to be less threatening and more credible than feedback delivered by a superior or outside consultant—because it’s feedback coming from someone “in the trenches”—performing the same duties, facing the same challenges, and working under the same constraints as the person being evaluated. However, despite the documented effectiveness of peer assessment and collegial dialogue for instructional development of faculty, national survey research indicates that peer assessment is the *least* frequently used method of advisor evaluation (Habley, 1988).

In addition to student, peer, and self-assessment, the *program director* also has a role to play in the assessment process. Frost (1991) notes that comprehensive evaluation of an

advisement program includes feedback from advising administrators, as well as students and individual advisors. It is the program director who is uniquely positioned to review all individual advisor evaluations and see the “big picture,” i.e., advisement as a total program. By detecting recurrent themes or cross-advisor trends that emerge when individual advisor evaluations are aggregated and viewed as a composite, the director can obtain a panoramic perspective of the program’s overall effectiveness, moving advisor evaluations beyond the narrow scope of *personnel* evaluation and viewing them through the wider lens of *program* evaluation. For instance, the director could identify those items that tend to receive the lowest overall student ratings (aggregated across all advisors) and use these items to prioritize and focus discussion of program-improvement strategies with advisors. This discussion could be conducted in a collegial, non-threatening fashion by framing advising-improvement questions in terms of what “we” can do collectively, as a team, to improve the effectiveness of “our” program in areas where students perceive it least favorably.

The program director is also well positioned to identify “critical incidents” that could serve as qualitative data for diagnosing weaknesses or problems in the advising program (e.g., common sources or causes of student complaints and grievances, and recurrent reasons given by students for seeking a change of advisors.) Patterns emerging from such incidents may provide critical diagnostic data that can be used to target and focus advising-improvement efforts.

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