



A Framework for Training Program Content

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The standards to guide professional practice in academic advising published by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education (Miller, 1997) include thirteen aspects of “best practice” for advising programs. Although the scope of these components (for example, mission, leadership, and financial resources) supercedes the role, function, and behavior of the individual academic advisor, expectations about the quality of advising services provided to students are embedded within all of the components. With best practice as a goal for all who provide academic advising, it seems reasonable to expect that individual advisors should possess the information, resources, and behavioral skills needed to enable high-quality experiences for students.

How do the full array of individuals performing academic advising—faculty, student affairs professionals, graduate and undergraduate students, and full-time and part-time advising personnel—become knowledgeable about the necessary information and resources, sharpen their interpersonal skills for relating effectively with students, and learn to use the appropriate information and strategies in the advising setting? Many writers (for example, Grites, 1978; Keller, 1988; Glennen and Vowell, 1995) have advocated during the past two decades that institutions must provide quality training experiences to address such advisor needs.

In discussing advisor training programs, a number of individuals have provided training program models and suggested lists of topics to be addressed in advisor orientation activities. Sensitive to the various types of individuals providing advising, Virginia Gordon (1984) points out that a number of basic functions are performed by all advising personnel (for example, orientation to the rationale for beginning and upper-division requirements, use of decision-making

approaches, and provision of academic and cocurricular resources), regardless of their other institutional responsibilities. Donald and Elizabeth Creamer (1994) offer a conceptual model for developmental advising with specific student growth goals. This model requires that, to enable student learning and growth, the advisor's response to students must be grounded in understanding students' motivation for the questions they have posed in the advising interaction. Clearly this type of theoretical perspective has significant training implications in that advising personnel need to understand that students' questions go beyond mere information seeking. In her chapter on training faculty serving as academic advisors, Susan Frost (1995, p. 31) asserts that "the most effective training blends discussion about advising philosophy and campus practice." She also lists a half-dozen topics for inclusion in training programs, including findings about student outcomes, needs of special populations, registration procedures, and strategies for helping students examine their career and educational goals.

Current Status of Advisor Training Program Content

The results of American College Testing's (ACT's) fifth national survey of academic advising are provided in a monograph published by the National Academic Advising Association (Habley and Morales, 1998). Chapter Three in the present volume summarizes the findings from this latest comprehensive study of advising practice.

The monograph by Habley and Morales briefly summarizes the results of each of the first four ACT national academic advising surveys, conducted in 1979, 1983, 1987, and 1993. This careful summary enables analysis of progress made in various aspects of advising program delivery over the past two decades. In particular, several important insights are offered about the evolution and current offerings of advisor training programs. First, Habley and Morales note that advisor training efforts have remained focused primarily on students' and advisors' need for information, thus underscoring a narrow view of advising as "information giving that leads to the selection and scheduling of courses" (p. 27). Commenting on ACT's first national survey, conducted in 1979, and reporting on the recently completed fifth edition of the survey, they point out that a focus on information characterizes advisor training in both surveys and spans an eighteen-year period. According to the latest survey, "the most common topics included in faculty advisor training focus on information and facts while some attention is paid to concepts such as the definition of advising, and the importance of advising. Skills that focus on building strong relationships with advisees are receiving even less emphasis than in previous surveys" (Habley and Morales, 1998, p. 27).

Another finding in the latest national survey is concerned with support for and approaches to advisor training. Habley and Morales note that training for advisors, along with evaluation and recognition and reward, is not mentioned regularly in institutional policy statements. This current observation is discouraging,

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especially given that similar observations were made in the 1987 and 1993 surveys—that training experiences were offered at a minimum level, and that “training, accountability, evaluation, and reward still rate below the midpoint on the effectiveness scale” (Habley and Morales, 1998, p. 5).

Whatever the multiple, complex reasons for slow progress in regularizing the offerings and broadening the focus of advisor training programs, the increasing necessity of providing advising personnel with the information and skills to function successfully cannot be overstated. “Unlike teaching, which takes place in the company of departmental colleagues, advising is too often a service performed in virtual isolation” (Frost, 1995, p. 31). The relatively solitary advising experience described by Frost, the multiple professional expectations for those performing the advising role, and the increasing complexity of curricular information and of students’ educational and personal needs all combine to necessitate the provision of high-quality training experiences.

Organizing Framework for Advisor Training

Over the years, a number of publications have provided excellent how-to suggestions for advisor-training programs (Grites, 1978; Ender and Winston, 1982; Kramer and Gardner, 1984; Vowell, 1995). In his paper “Advisor Training in the Context of a Teaching Enhancement Center,” Habley (1995) asserts that three essential components are necessary to increase the likelihood that advisor training will be successful: presenting a balance of content topics; attending to training participants’ skills, expertise, and willingness to participate (as well as to advise); and using suitable training approaches. However, few experts have offered a coordinated approach for connecting training methods, training program content, and assessment of training outcomes to one another. I believe that approaches to training programs (discussed in Chapter Twenty), assessment of training effectiveness (see Chapters Twenty and Twenty-Five), and training program content should be based on a unifying framework. The framework presented in this chapter has been developed jointly with Margaret King and Faye Vowell and is addressed in both Chapters Twenty and Twenty-Five.

We propose an organizing framework for training programs composed of three key elements—supporting principles, delivery considerations, and assessment issues. Earlier works by Gordon (1984) and Vowell (1995) have helped shape this framework as a unifying backdrop for coordinating the development of training program content, delivery strategies, and assessment. Gordon’s reminder that training must include all types of individuals who provide advising (for example, recruitment and orientation personnel as well as faculty) is further supported by Vowell’s perspective. She suggests that training program effectiveness is dependent in part on carefully framing program goals, relying on adult development theory, and using a needs assessment to determine the content focus.

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The first element of the organizing framework presented here—supporting principles—includes four fundamental components that provide the foundation for developing appropriate and coordinated training program approaches, assessment strategies, and content topics for a specific group of advisors in training. These four foundation principles are (1) conducting a preparatory campus or program needs analysis, (2) reviewing the advising mission within the institution, (3) becoming informed about the broad field of advising, and (4) understanding student development. Delivery considerations constitute the second element of the organizing framework. This aspect focuses on the advisor as student and challenges program planners to be especially sensitive to effective learning strategies for advisors as adult learners. The third element, assessment issues, reminds training program developers that evaluation of program effectiveness must focus on both advisor and student outcomes.

Content Components for Advisor Training

With the organizing framework just presented as a foundation, the balance of this chapter focuses on desirable content components for advisor training programs. Strategies for training and program delivery methods are discussed in Chapter Twenty, and Chapter Twenty-Five addresses assessment of training program effectiveness.

Habley (1995) has envisioned a useful three-category approach to considering the components of training program content:

Concept components: These topics encompass what the advisor needs to understand about the student and about the institution’s advising environment. They include such subjects as the definition of advising, students’ expectations of advising, and the rights and responsibilities of advisors and advisees.

Information components: These are topics about which the advisor needs to be knowledgeable, including familiar items such as institutional rules and regulations, program and course offerings, and referral sources and services.

Relationship components: These are behaviors that the advisor needs to demonstrate in order to be effective in advising students, including demonstrating an attitude of warmth and welcome, asking questions that invite students’ involvement in discussion, and helping students use effective decision-making strategies.

Commenting on this three-part classification of training program content topics, Habley (1995, p. 76) notes that “without understanding (conceptual elements), there is no context for the delivery of services. Without information, there is no substance to advising. And, without interpersonal skills (relational),

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the quality of the advisee/advisor interaction is left to chance.” Many scholars recognize that the academic advising function, an activity that is common to virtually all colleges and universities, can be a key positive factor in student retention, especially as it occurs in the context of a personal relationship involving a student and a significant member of the institution’s professional academic community.

The content categories identified by Habley—concept, information, and relationship—are discussed in the following sections. They are offered here to help institutions fulfill their educational responsibilities to students by nurturing in the advising setting high-quality interactions about substantive issues related to students’ academic and personal growth. Results from the fifth national survey on academic advising (Habley and Morales, 1998) are used to frame the discussion of each category. That is, the lists of advising responsibilities, training topics, and reference materials cited by survey respondents serve as the beginning point for consideration of training program content topics. In addition, content that Glennen and Vowell (1995) found to be common in advisor training, as well as Kramer’s (1995) view of attributes associated with successful advising, help expand the array of topics gleaned from the national survey results.

A broad list of suggested content topics is offered for each of the categories. However, as indicated in the organizing framework discussed earlier, selection of topics for inclusion in training experiences for particular groups of advisors should be informed collectively by the specific institutional mission, a current assessment of advisor and student needs, and attention to the learning preferences of the adult (advisor) learner.

The Concept Component

The advisor’s conceptual understanding of the student and of the institution’s advising environment serves as a crucial foundation for effective advising relationships. Topics that merit attention at this level are framed from two perspectives within the institution—the student and the role of advising.

The Student Within the Institution. Topics in this area enable advisors to understand college students in general as well as their own institution’s student body. Subjects appropriate for emphasis include descriptive data about the characteristics of the students enrolled in the advisor’s institution (for example, gender and racial composition, performance on standardized tests, and proportion of students receiving various types of financial aid) as well as data illustrating student attrition and retention patterns. Also, advisors need to understand students’ educational and personal needs. Comprehending and appreciating both generic and specific student needs requires a focus on student development theory, on personal development issues for students (for example, alcohol use, conflict and stress, decision making, financing educational expenses, gender identification, learning styles, roommate relationships, and values clarification), and on the unique characteristics of special populations such as adult learners, student athletes, honors students, international students, racial and ethnic

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minorities, part-time students, preprofessional students, undecided students, underprepared and at-risk students, students with disabilities, and women.

Role of Advising Within the Institution. Awareness of the institution's mission and goals in the context of its local community and of higher education in general provides an important foundation for the advising function. Understanding the relationship of the advising function to those overarching institutional directions will position advisors to provide sensitive, relevant guidance to support student success. Topical areas suggested for emphasis include consideration of the importance of academic advising for students and the institution, and a definition of academic advising, including clarification of advisor and advisee responsibilities and privileges.

The Information Component

The fifth national survey on academic advising (Habley and Morales, 1998) shows that more than 55 percent of institutions now have formal policy statements relating to academic advising. Of these institutions, however, only a small proportion (28 to 38 percent, depending on the type of institution) address training for academic advising personnel in their policy statements. Findings from the fifth national survey also show that the typical approach to advisor training is a once-a-year workshop of one day or less. Further, as discussed previously, institutions report that their advisor training programs usually place considerable emphasis on providing relevant information to advisors. The almost exclusive emphasis on information and ACT's long experience in providing training in this area conveys that there seems to be no doubt that information does provide much of the substance of advising. The substantive information that academic advisors need to know falls into four groups—the internal environment, the external environment, student needs, and advisor self-knowledge.

Internal Institutional Structures and Functions. The context for academic advising is largely a reflection of the institution's internal environment. This environment is composed of the philosophical and historical underpinnings of the institution along with the current structures and functions that are in place to carry through the educational mission. To help students negotiate the institutional bureaucracy successfully, it is important for academic advisors to be knowledgeable about contemporary structures and functions. Training topics in this area include academic integrity; relevant advising technology (for example, on-line academic information programs and computerized degree audits); accommodations for students with disabilities; cocurricular opportunities to support academic success, such as honors programming and research involvement; course availability; degree program curricular requirements; honors program options; appropriate policies and procedures; publications such as the advising handbook and the institution's catalogue; campus referral sources and services; registration procedures; standards for course transfer from other institutions; and use of information sources such as transcripts and the results of standardized tests.

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External Environment. The higher education community, the local community surrounding the campus, and the broad world of work supply additional context for the advising function. Advising personnel link to each of these arenas through their established professional and disciplinary networks and other referral sources and services. Through knowledge of the various aspects of the external environment, advisors are able to help students link their academic pursuits with real-world applications and settings (for example, cooperative education programs and internship experiences). Topics for advisor training on the external environment include cocurricular opportunities to support academic success, such as service learning experiences; employment outlook projections; professional associations and disciplinary societies; opportunities for graduate and professional continuing education; referral and information sources and services; and how to establish a personal network in the external environment.

Student Needs. Because the successful advising experience depends on the active involvement of advisees, advisors must be knowledgeable about how to address students' individual needs. Although the composition of the student body will differ from institution to institution, there are a number of universal student characteristics that may anchor this portion of the advisor training program. Related training topics include career and personal decision making, evaluation of multiple options, learning styles, effective learning strategies such as learning teams, analysis of the relationship between academic and occupational choice, special population issues (for example, curricular and occupational considerations for international students, veterans, and adult students), test preparation strategies, and time management.

Advisor Self-Knowledge. We have all heard advising colleagues express exasperation about the somewhat overwhelming quantity of information to be digested as part of the advisor role. Perhaps we have experienced those feelings personally. Yet attention to advisors has not been a typical training topic. To be successful in the classroom, instructors must attend to their own energy levels, interest in students, and personal issues outside the classroom. Effective counselors are aware of their levels of concentration, their personal values related to their clients' concerns, and the reactions of the client to the advisor's interventions. Academic advisors must have similar information about what they as individuals bring to the advising setting. For example, they should ask themselves, What attitudes do I have about student behavior—about alcohol use, sexual involvement, and academic dishonesty? What knowledge and beliefs do I possess about indecision about choice of major? What do I know and believe and what are my attitudes about students? Honest self-knowledge will enable the advisor to enter the advising relationship with integrity of purpose to focus on facilitating the student's personal and educational growth.

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The Relationship Component

Results from the fifth national advising survey show that institutions have little experience training advisors in the relationship area. In particular, Habley and Morales (1998, p. 27) point out that few four-year public institutions include “relational skill areas in advisor training programs in all departments.”

In his classic article describing academic advising as a form of teaching, Burns Crookston (1972, p. 12) defines a developmental approach to advising as “facilitating the student’s rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills.” Although a number of training topics are unique to the relationship component, in many ways the primary goal for this component is for the advisor to be able to use effectively the understanding and knowledge identified through the concept and information components. In Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen of this volume, the skills related to effective one-to-one and group advising approaches are discussed in detail.

The focus of this training component is for the advisor to convey effectively the understandings and knowledge obtained from the other components by establishing a personal relationship with student advisees through demonstrating appropriate advising behaviors. Use of such expert behaviors will enable the advisor to fulfill Crookston’s vision and address students’ needs fully. For example, advisor behaviors that derive from a conceptual understanding of and sensitivity to the special challenges of adult learners who face multiple competing responsibilities on a daily basis will likely result in the student feeling personally supported by the advisor. Similarly, advisor facility in explaining to students and helping them practice the use of various decision-making strategies is likely to lead to enhanced student confidence.

Training topics for this component include the following: accessing institutional and external information, behaving to communicate welcome and warmth, verbal and nonverbal interpersonal communication skills, interview and inquiry strategies, methods for teaching decision making, multicultural communication skills, establishment and maintenance of advising records, and use of advising tools such as computerized degree audits, academic planning worksheets, and articulation worksheets and agreements.

One final behavior that is paramount for advisors to demonstrate is accessibility. The importance of this behavior is emphasized by the results of a survey of students enrolled in the College of Business Administration at the University of North Texas (Kern and Engels, 1996). More than 90 percent of survey respondents included on their lists of needs three aspects of advisor accessibility—availability during evenings, access to a faculty advisor, and more time with an advisor. A training program can likely inform advisors in training about students’ accessibility needs and expectations. However, no training experience can shape this behavior; it depends on the advisor’s commitment.

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Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the appropriate content topics to be addressed in training experiences for academic advisors. A three-factor organizing framework has been offered as a means to couple the choice of content topics with the approach to delivering and assessing the training program. This framework is composed of supporting principles, program delivery considerations, and assessment issues.

An extensive inventory of topics has been presented for each of three content areas—concept, information, and relationship. Topics in the concept component embody the necessary advisor understandings of both the student and the advising role within the institution. The information component includes topics in four areas: environment (both within the institution and external to it), student needs, and advisor knowledge of self. The last component centers on the personal relationship between the advisor and the student. Training topics for this component relate to the skills that the advisor must display during advising interactions. These behavioral attributes include various interpersonal communication skills, along with abilities to access informational resources and use available advising tools, and other facilitating behaviors.

The five national studies of academic advising conducted by ACT since 1979 (see Habley and Morales, 1998) show clearly that information has continued to make up the major portion of advisor training program content. In spite of this reliance on information for training, there have been no careful analyses of the effectiveness of these topics in achieving desirable advisor and advisee outcomes. Yet about half of institutions participating in the fifth national survey report that they regularly evaluate the overall effectiveness of their advising programs. To achieve necessary improvement in academic advising, stronger institutional commitments to quality training experiences for advisors are needed. These commitments must also require assessment of the effectiveness of training programs' content topics.

Using careful assessment of training program outcomes to inform future selection of content topics is an important step. In addition, the vision for advisor training programs must be determined by standards for best practice. This vision obligates advising experts to assess and share training program experiences, and to ensure that the CAS Academic Advising Standards and Guidelines (Miller, 1997) are enhanced to address training program requirements completely.

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