

The Advising and Counseling Continuum: Triggers for Referral

Terry Kuhn, Kent State University

Virginia N. Gordon, The Ohio State University

Jane Webber, Monmouth University

In this article, we describe a continuum of responsibilities shared by faculty and nonfaculty academic advisors as well as personal counselors at 4-year colleges and universities. After addressing terminology, we describe a continuum of issues that advisors and counselors routinely address and identify some triggers that might suggest that a referral from an advisor to a trained counselor is warranted.

KEY WORDS: advisor role, counselor, developmental advising, mentoring, student problems

Relative emphasis:* practice, theory, research

The myriad of academic, social, and personal concerns and problems that students may bring to their advisors can be bewildering to new faculty or full-time academic advisors. Experienced advisors can attest to the “complicated and extensive personal, real-life agendas that many students bring with them to college that often militate against study and learning” (Butler, 1995, p. 107). Counselors are also familiar with students who are confronting difficult personal and transitional issues. Many students need information, goals, confidence, and support to pursue rigorous academic programs successfully (Hobfoll, 2002; McWhirter, 1997). Advisors are the institutionalized front line of such support and assistance.

In this article, we describe a continuum of responsibilities from the most basic information offered to students by an advisor to the more personal services provided by counselors. Advisors are not trained counselors, and counselors usually do not have extensive knowledge about curricula or academic policies. The line where these two areas cross is not always clearly defined. We suggest triggers that will initiate referrals of troubled students from advisors to counselors.

Ambiguity of Terms

The terms *advising* and *counseling* are sometimes used interchangeably. The NACADA search engine (www.nacada.ksu.edu/Journal/journal_help.htm), powered by Google to find references to the words

“advising and counseling,” produced articles on adult learners, academic advising and career counseling, advising and counseling of minority students, programs for counseling and advising, and counseling and career advising among other topics. This mixture of advising and counseling terms found on the NACADA Web site suggests a blurring of definitions. Various definitions of academic advising can be found through Google searches for “academic advising definition,” “academic counseling definition,” and “counseling definition.” A list of relevant Web sites for defining academic advising is provided at the end of this article.

At one end of the advising-counseling continuum, academic advising is conceived as a collaborative process in which advisors help students to develop and realize their educational, career, and personal goals. At its most fundamental level, advising is informational and explanatory and progresses through developmental and mentoring phases. At the other end of the continuum, counseling helps students overcome personal problems from the past and present that interfere with their academic success. Typically, students discuss with counselors the concerns or difficulties they are experiencing, and the counselor helps the student mobilize his or her own resources to resolve the problems. In addition to current views that counseling deals with wellness, personal growth, and career development, counseling also produces connotations of rehabilitation, therapy, disability, or pathology—conditions that may be related to emotional, mental, or physical problems (America Counseling Association, 2002).

At different institutions the terms *advising*, *counseling*, *advisor*, and *counselor* are used for different functions and persons. For instance, the responsibilities assigned to a person with the title of advisor at a research university might be the same as those assigned to a person with the title of counselor at a community college. Even within research universities, those giving academic advice to students may have the title of academic advisor in one college while their colleagues in a different college may have the title of counselor or academic counselor.

* See note on page 4.

Some of the confusion in terminology may stem from the widespread use of the term *counseling* in secondary schools; it covers the gamut of responsibilities from dispensing information to dealing with students' emotional and behavioral problems. By their very nature, advisors and counselors experience considerable overlap between their responsibilities, attesting to an institutional lack of agreement about the responsibilities associated with either position. For the sake of clarity, we use the terms *advising* and *advisor* to refer to academic advising and academic advisor. The terms *counseling* and *counselor* refer to those who are trained in a graduate-level program to provide personal counseling and the services they provide; counselors may be housed in a college or in a counseling center. The roles of advisor and counselor are more robust than the characterizations in this article; nevertheless, the distinctions between advising and counseling are made intentionally stark to emphasize their differences. This article is most pertinent to colleges and universities in which the roles of advisor and counselor are distinct, unlike the situations at many community colleges where both roles may be invested in the same person with a title of either advisor or counselor.

The Advising-Counseling Continuum

Having noted the widespread ambiguity, overlap, and lack of agreement in the current use of the terms *advising* and *counseling*, we conceived a continuum of responsibilities addressed by both advisors and counselors in varying degrees. This continuum of responsibilities is represented in Table 1 and includes five different levels of involvement: informational, explanatory, developmental, mentoring, and counseling. While the table columns that illustrate the five levels of involvement may be mistakenly perceived as silos, we realize that in many circumstances involvement may not be characterized

neatly in categories. In practice, the levels of involvement may overlap, and each column represents a developmental component that empowers advisees to discuss themselves, their feelings, and their goals.

Shane (1981) compared advising, counseling, and psychotherapy and outlined the service providers and program categories for each. Butler (1995) identified the missions and purposes of organizational structures and services for advising and counseling. The first version of the content in Table 1 was developed by Virginia Gordon for workshops in the 1970s and has been revised to reflect the content of this article. Table 1 may be considered a further development of those earlier efforts.

The purpose, content, and focus of academic advising contacts range from students' simple questions to more complex academic, social, or personal problems. All advisors tend to be involved in the informational, explanatory, and developmental-advising responsibilities (Table 1), but faculty advisors are more likely to assume the role of mentor with graduate students or undergraduates in liberal arts institutions. The questions or concerns that students present in the advising contact determine the involvement of the advisor, and some contacts may engage the advisor at multiple levels: The student may need basic information, a clarification of some aspect of that information, and help in applying and integrating it into her or his personal situation.

Informational Advising

The least complex level of advising involves the simple act of providing information. It includes, for example, the advisor answering basic questions pertaining to directions and assignments, or when no complicating factors exist, it may include advisor-initiated referrals of students to campus locations or individuals. An advisor may respond to a student who is requesting basic information by E-

Table 1 The advising-counseling responsibility continuum

Session	The Continuum				
	Informational	Explanatory	Developmental	Mentoring	Counseling
Purpose	Informational	Clarification	Insights	Growth	Pinpoint problem
Content	Information	Procedures	Options and values	Values	Devise resolution
Focus	The information	The institution	The student	The person	Modification of student's behavior
Length of each contact (minutes)	5-15	15-30	30-60	Varies; many contacts are made	Determined by severity of problem

mail or as they meet walking across campus. For example, a student may approach an advisor and say: "A couple of weeks ago you told me about a study skills course, and I have forgotten the number. Would you please give it to me again?" Basic information is often provided in handouts or on advising Web sites.

Explanatory Advising

Through explanatory advising, one attempts to clarify information that a student must use to take action. Explanatory advising might involve a discussion of certain campus policies or procedures. It may also involve explaining curricular or major requirements, such as the number and level of math courses that are required in a certain curriculum. For example, a student may present the following situation to the advisor: "This summer I want to take a course at the community college near my home. Can you tell me how I can transfer the credit back here?"

Developmental Advising

Developmental advising entails an advisor-advisee relationship that is more personal in nature than are the informational or explanatory types. Advisors support students in forming and clarifying meaningful educational plans that are compatible with their personal goals (Chickering, 1994; Creamer & Creamer, 1994; Crookston, 1972). Rather than just informing or explaining curricular or campus procedures to students, advisors offer the information in the context of students' needs, values, goals, and personal situations. Students may approach the advisor with the following dilemma: "I'm no longer sure I want to major in pre-med, but I don't know what to do about it."

Mentoring

The most personal advising relationship is mentoring, which is an ongoing, caring relationship in which an advisor gives time, support, and encouragement to the mentee. The advisor is a role model and friend who takes a caring interest in students' academic progress and helps them achieve their potential.

Personal Counseling

When advisors determine that students' problems are beyond their expertise, referrals to a counselor are indicated. The issues that involve personal or adjustment concerns are often more complicated than those related solely to academics. A roommate problem, for example, may have reached a point where it is not only disturbing a student's

study time but is creating a disruptive personal relationship as well. Counselors may also fulfill the role of therapist when a student's problems are severe or debilitating.

Advising and Counseling Compared

Butler (1995, p. 108) gave an apt description of advising and counseling in the following quotation:

Although counselors and academic advisors may employ the same processes with students, academic advisors are more concerned with helping students learn information-seeking, analytical, and developmental skills so they can meet the institutional expectations for successful academic achievement, graduation, and employment. Emphasis is placed on the students' adaptation to the institution's standards. Counselors assist students to learn self-exploration, analytical, decision-making, and behavioral skills to enhance their abilities to make effective personal choices. Emphasis is placed on students becoming unique individuals with awareness of their values and goals.

The responsibilities for advising and counseling are compatible and overlapping. Students are seeking to be successful in their academic pursuits as well as to be fulfilled individuals whose values and beliefs are reflected in their academic, social, and personal goals. Students' issues can be complex and intertwined with personal and academic elements, which make defining precise responsibilities for advisors and counselors difficult (Shane, 1981). Both advisors and counselors help students set goals so they can improve their personal functioning, identify barriers that may impact successful accomplishment of their goals, develop strategies to accomplish these goals, and assess whether or not the strategies are successful.

Student Issues and Concerns

The issues and problems that students bring to advisors are varied and at times complex. Table 2 displays a wide variety of problems that undergraduates may bring to an advising appointment. Conceding possible exceptions, we shaded the columns to suggest with whom the responsibility for each issue rests. Table 2 lists many issues, some of which may require that the student receive in-depth, long-term counseling assistance. The severity of the issue (problem) and the student's coping abilities should be factors in deciding whether the problem is best handled by the advisor or if the student should be referred to a counselor.

Table 2 Typical issues students bring to academic advisors

Issue	Suggested Primary Responsibility as		
	Advisor	Either/Or	Counselor
Course selection			
Register for classes			
Advanced placement			
Drop a class			
Exit institution			
Degree requirements			
Academic probation			
Unfair grade from professor			
Death in family			
Time management			
Underachievement			
Mid-life career change			
Decision making			
Academic goals			
Personal goals			
Career goals			
Interpersonal relationship			
Family relationships			
AD/HD			
Substance abuse			
Eating disorder			
Physical/emotional abuse			
Sexual orientation			
Sexual harassment			
Racial discrimination			
Suicide			

The Line between Advising and Counseling

When examining the list of student concerns in Table 2, some advisors may feel comfortable discussing any of the problems, while others may feel they cannot adequately deal with some of these concerns. For instance a simple question for information about any topic can be handled by the advisor (e.g., “Is there a chess club at this campus?”); however, a statement like “I’m very depressed and thinking of committing suicide” would call for an immediate referral to a counselor.

Any of the issues in Table 2 could create a need for information, explanation, clarification, mentoring, or counseling. For instance, course selection for a new freshman could be straightforward and merely require that the advisor provide some infor-

mation from the catalog or some explanation of the implications of this information with regard to student expectations. On one hand, if the student is in a major such as nursing, where the requirements are fairly inflexible over a 4-year projection, then the student’s only choices may be limited to the general education requirement for that semester. On the other hand, course selection for a junior exploratory major who has already completed 60 semester hours of general education requirements may involve hard choices about establishing academic and career goals, deciding upon a major, and dealing with conflicting parental expectations. If that exploratory major has a grade-point average of 2.00, then an exploration of the implications of poor time management, underachievement, and

academic probation may be needed. If a student evidences signs of substance abuse or reeks of alcohol, then the advisor should be alert and broach the topic. As these examples illustrate, no rule-bound approach can be utilized rigidly or automatically. Advisors must be alert to all input, formal and informal, verbal and nonverbal, to provide the best possible advice.

Communication Barriers

Two potential communication barriers for both advisors and counselors are first, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974, which restricts the information that can be released from a student's educational record, and second, the confidentiality policy of advising and counseling centers. FERPA requires schools to have written permission from eligible adult students or parents of minor students to release any nondirectory information from a student's education record, but it allows student information to be shared with "school officials with legitimate educational interest" (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.). While FERPA makes provision for advisors and counselors to share information about a student, the policies of counseling and advising offices are often more restrictive than the federal mandate; some adhere to strict confidentiality. While remaining the designated advisor, academic advisors routinely refer students with personal problems to a counselor. These policies can create communication barriers between advisors and counselors who are both working with the same student. Advisors, counselors, and professors employed at institutions with strict confidentiality rules must obtain the student's explicit permission for consultation to take place. If such permission is not requested, or is not granted by the student, then information about the student cannot be exchanged.

For these reasons, advisors must indicate to new advisees that unlimited confidentiality cannot be promised because all future circumstances cannot be predicted.

Should the student share information that suggests the student may injure self or others, then the principles of beneficence (to do good), nonmaleficence (do no harm) and the legal directives of a duty to protect and a duty to warn would take precedence over maintaining confidentiality and require that the advisor or counselor consult with another appropriate, responsible person. (Butler, 1995, p. 114)

Therefore, advisors and counselors must establish the boundaries for confidentiality with each advisee

in the beginning so that uncomfortable situations do not evolve later.

Triggers for Referral

When considering whether to refer a student to a counselor, advisors should be alert to changes in their advisees' behaviors, emotions, or thinking. At the extreme, threats to get even, commit suicide, harm others, or to cease taking prescribed medications would call for referral. Likewise, students' speculation that they have attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) because their mathematics class is difficult for them would call for a referral to the Students with Disabilities Office for subsequent evaluation and diagnosis by a licensed professional. Stressful times, around the beginning and end of the semester, can be full of triggering situations for freshmen.

Ability to cope can be significantly influenced by the interaction of personal problems such as a) depression or other emotional or physical disorders; b) interpersonal and family issues such as divorce, relationship breakups, pregnancy, or death; and c) community, national, and global tragedies such as 9-11 and devastating, large-scale natural disasters. Advisors need to be alert to all three sources of stress, especially around traditionally stressful times. The inability to cope with the day-to-day routine and functions of attending class, reading, studying, sleeping, eating, and working can also be serious behavioral triggers.

When an advisee's affect is anxious, flat, grieving, angry, withdrawn, paranoid, or frightened, the advisor should be alert to the need for referral. Other interview behaviors such as wringing of hands, rapid tapping of hands or feet, uncontrollable crying, disheveled appearance, sweating, or rapid or slurred speech should invite careful scrutiny.

The effects of physically destructive behaviors (self-medicating, overmedicating or undermedicating, and alcohol or drug use) are frequently triggers for referral to counselors or other professionals, especially for students with disabilities who may rely on medication to help their level of functioning. During stressful periods, affective or behavioral symptoms that are usually controlled may suddenly manifest themselves in tics, agitated behavior, stuttering, hyperactivity, or hypoactivity. Advisors need to know their advisees and develop a sense of their typical behavior, because students in distress may not readily have the words to describe adequately their problems.

Harper and Peterson (2005) listed some other signals of distress that advisors should recognize.

These include excessive procrastination; listlessness; sleeping in class; marked changes in personal hygiene; too frequent advisor visits (dependency); or impaired speech or disjointed thoughts. Obviously, students who report self-abuse or abuse by others (self-mutilation, cutting, physical abuse, sexual abuse, date rape, anorexia, or bulimia) require immediate referral for assessment and treatment. Recognizing active and passive symptoms of suicide ideation requires special professional or graduate training, and therefore, an advisor concerned about a student's safety should make a referral to a counselor.

Table 3 presents some samples of behaviors that an advisor might observe that may prompt referral to another office or student service area. In some cases, advisors should be on the alert for multiple

triggers that in combination may culminate in a need for referral. For instance, a nontraditional student who is working full-time, recently divorced, raising two children alone, and taking classes may look tired because he or she is exhausted and not because the individual is having psychological issues. While this student may evidence the same symptoms as a traditional 18-to-22-year-old, his or her challenges will likely be best addressed by different resources than those to which traditional undergraduates are referred. Similar symptoms can have multiple causes and depend on the intellectual, emotional, financial, or other factors that a student is experiencing.

Summary

Advisors are often the first persons on campus to whom a student may express a problem or

Table 3 Sample referral observations (triggers)

Advisor Observations

- 1 Depressed junior has no commitment to any major.
 - 2 Pre-med major is failing math and chemistry.
 - 3 Freshman's grades drop after death of father.
 - 4 Student does not accept responsibility for poor grades.
 - 5 Sophomore is in denial about precarious academic situation.
 - 6 Student's transfer hours will not apply to desired major.
 - 7 Freshman has no approach to making decisions.
 - 8 Freshman male cannot study because roommate keeps late hours.
 - 9 Freshman female is having relationship problem with boyfriend.
 - 10 Female refuses professional counseling because of mother's advice.
 - 11 Nontraditional student's spouse resents her pursuing higher education.
 - 12 Recently divorced parents refuse to pay for sophomore's college expenses.
 - 13 Freshman cannot communicate with domineering parent.
 - 14 Normally nicely dressed student shows up looking disheveled.
 - 15 Student reports not attending one or more classes.
 - 16 Bright honors student quits participating in cocurricular activities.
 - 17 Student reports being tired all the time.
 - 18 Senior says she is depressed.
 - 19 Student cries uncontrollably over inability to cope.
 - 20 Student smells of alcohol.
 - 21 Struggling freshman is unwilling to request accommodations for diagnosed AD/HD disorder.
 - 22 Student has prolonged incapacitation due to auto accident.
 - 23 Student reports not taking prescribed medications because they are too expensive.
 - 24 Student is unable to generate solutions for stressors in his or her life.
 - 25 Female student claims to have been sexually harassed by another student.
 - 26 Student asks to be withdrawn from school because of financial concerns.
 - 27 Nontraditional student is under pressure from multiple demands of school, job, and family.
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Note. Numbers are nominal and imply no particular ordering.

dilemma that is beyond an academic concern. Advisors' primary responsibility is to help students obtain information and develop skills to achieve their academic aspirations, and sometimes their expertise cannot be used to address problems; instead the student requires personal counseling. Unlike advisors, counselors assist students with personal and social problems and help them cope with difficult personal and social transitions and events so that they are better equipped to manage their lives. The intent of both advisors and counselors is to facilitate students' self-exploration and development of effective analytical decision-making skills so that their college experience is positive and productive. As their advisees move through a complex maze of academic, social, and personal situations, advisors need to recognize the triggers that indicate a referral to a counselor. When advisors and counselors work cooperatively and in tandem, students are the beneficiaries.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research might include a study in which counselors and advisors are interviewed about their perceptions of each other's roles. Another study could be conducted to determine whether or not counselors or advisors agree with the issues listed in Table 2. Whether a clear distinction can be made about the appropriate triggers for any given referral could drive a third research project in which students could be interviewed about their receptivity to getting help from official offices and personnel (both advisors and counselors). Also, researchers could describe an advising-counseling continuum for community colleges.

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Additional Resources

Relevant Web Sites for Advising Definitions (All were retrieved on June 25, 2005)

www.nacada.ksu.edu/Journal/journal_help.htm

www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/Research_Related/definitions.htm

www.ferrum.edu/arc/adv/pref.htm

www.valenciac.edu/lifemap/pbs/damodeldescription.htm

www.students.uidaho.edu/default.aspx?pid=34434

www.casa.colostate.edu/advising/facman/chapter1/definition.cfm

www.tcnj.edu/~advising/define.html

www.uta.edu/advisorhandbook/intro.htm

www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/020816va.htm

Authors' Note

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Terry Kuhn is professor of Music and Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies Emeritus at Kent State University. He has published articles and books in the field of music education. Readers may contact Dr. Kuhn at tkuhn@kent.edu.

Virginia N. Gordon is Assistant Dean Emeritus at The Ohio State University and has published many books and journal articles in the areas of academic and career advising. Readers may contact Dr. Gordon at Gordon.9@osu.edu.

Jane Webber is assistant professor of counseling in the Educational Leadership and Special Education

Department at Monmouth University. She has published books and articles in the area of school counseling, trauma counseling, and disaster response. She is also a part-time counselor at the McClintock Center for Counseling and Psychological Services at Drew University. Readers may contact Dr. Webber at jwebber@monmouth.edu.