

# Advisor Load

Authored by Rich Robbins

Based on *NACADA 2011 National Survey of Academic Advising* (Carlstrom, 2013), the median case load of advisees per full-time professional academic advisor is 296, or a ratio of 296 students to one full-time advisor. By institutional size, the median individual advisor case loads are 233, 333, and 600 advisees for small, medium, and large institutions, respectively. The data show that the median numbers of advisees per advisor by institutional type are as follow: 441, 2-year; 260, public bachelor; 100, private bachelor; 300, public master; 179, private master; 285, public doctorate; 200, private doctorate; and 225, proprietary institutions. These survey responses reflect important data, but they do not inform an ideal or recommended case load for advisors because the level of work for each case is relative. Although frequently asked of NACADA, meaningful case load comparisons remain elusive because too many factors affect advising delivery. In other words, there is no objective recommended case load for advisors because of the factors discussed below

## Factors to Consider about Case Loads

Direct comparisons of advisor case loads in institutions of the same type (e.g., 2-year colleges; 4-year, public, bachelor-degree granting universities; 4-year, private, bachelor-degree granting colleges) with similar student populations, programs, or geographical area are complicated by differences in campus climate, politics, institutional mission and goals, and other factors. Among the most unique aspect of any campus or program, the definition of *academic advising* must be clearly articulated and understood. Without agreement on the elements of it, no common characterizations guide the provision of academic advising to students within the same program or campus. In fact, similar institutions with different definitions of advising will manage advising quite differently. Based on results of the 2011 survey, Smith (forthcoming) discussed advisors' perceptions of upper-administrators' beliefs about academic advising, leading one to consider not only the definition of academic advising, but the entities who decided on it; specifically, does the description reflect identified programmatic and student needs?

## Advisor Responsibilities

In addition, many advisors bear additional responsibilities to advising students, including teaching first-year seminars, holding workshops, performing committee work, working at institutional events, and undertaking various other duties that take time away from direct advising with students. These obligations differ by institution (and often by college, division, department, program, or position within institution). Thus, two advisors at two different but similarly sized institutions with identical advising case loads may have completely different duties, in addition to advising, such that the case load for one allows plenty of time to advise, while the other has less time for advising.

## Advising Delivery

The delivery mode of advising additionally affects the impact of advising load. While one-on-one in-person advising remains the primary mode of delivery (King, 2008), other approaches may be used instead of or in addition to individual advising appointments. For example, group advising efficiently imparts important information to many students at once (King, 2008). First-year seminars typically involve group advising, which may be viable for specific student cohorts (e.g., pre-medical, pre-law, undecided).

Technology serves as another mode of delivery. According to Leonard (2008), it had a greater impact on academic advising than anything else in the 2000s. The use of informational web sites, e-mail, student information and transfer articulation systems, degree audit and career guidance programs, podcasts, webinars, texting, and even social networking sites to provide the informational aspect of academic advising will likely increase.

When students receive basic information via technology or group advising prior to individual advising sessions, or in place of appointments altogether where academic advising is defined only as the provision of information, a seemingly large case load of advisees does not require the resources that the same case load (or even a smaller one) does where students obtain advising only through one-on-one meetings. In fact, because of the various levels of technology implementation, case load numbers often do not truly reflect the resources required to advise students.

## **Advising Approaches**

Another factor influencing advisor load, advising approach dictates the amount of attention devoted to each advisee. Many in higher education continue to consider developmental advising (Crookston, 1972/1994/2009; O'Banion, 1972/1994/2009) the most effective form of advising, but in some circumstances prescriptive advising may be more appropriate. For example, research suggests that incoming first-year students prefer prescriptive advising, wanting primarily to know the classes they need to take their first semester (Daddonna & Cooper, 2002; Smith, 2002). The case load for an advisor working with students in a highly prescriptive program and one for an advisor using developmental advising techniques with undecided students will look the same on paper, but in practice the time and resources spent for the former cohort will not equal that needed to serve the latter.

## **Student Needs**

While different student cohorts have varying needs, even individual students within the same group present with personal circumstances and unique needs. For example, a junior declared major on track with courses and entering a summer internship will require different advising than a junior in the same major a few courses behind schedule and needing to take summer classes to graduate in 4 or 5 years. The other multiple and overlapping characteristics of cohorts (e.g., adult, minority, international, preprofessional, lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgendered students as well as those struggling and on academic probation, returning from academic dismissal, utilizing a GI Bill, or experiencing emotional or mental health challenges, etc.) mean that each individual academic-advising interaction involves specific elements and that the provision of advising, even for similar-sized case loads or cohorts, differs in reality.

## **Advising Time Line**

The timing of academic advising also plays a role regarding the significance of case loads. When advising is undertaken once each semester, quarter, or session at a designated time, the advisor will not handle extrinsic duties during that period. However, when offered multiple times throughout the semester, quarter, or session, advising the same case load will require more time and resource commitments to cover multiple meetings with the same students. Also, a large case load where students voluntarily seek advising may not require the resources of a smaller case load in a mandatory advising situation.

## **Mission Statement**

A delineated mission statement and identified goals and objectives for the academic advising program inform the significance of case loads. A mission statement for academic advising reflects the specific purpose of advising on the campus and serves as the road map to achieve the vision and affirm the stated values for academic advising' (Campbell, 2008; Campbell, Nutt, Robbins, Kirk-Kuwaye, & Higa, 2005). Goals follow from the mission statement, describing the ways to operationalize the vision and identifying the exact achievements necessary for a successful advising program (Robbins, 2009, 2011). Together, the mission and goals form the blueprint for advising provision. Because of differing institutional missions and goals, similar case loads at two different institutions are truly unique.

## **The Council for the Advancement of Standards for Academic Advising**

Multiple, almost infinite combinations and permutations of factors affect the realistic impact of advising case loads, such that two advising situations that look similar on the surface are likely quite different. The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS), in publishing the *Standards For Academic Advising*, recognized the uniqueness of each individual advising program and interaction by offering general, qualitative guidelines for advisor loads. According to CAS (2009, p. 5), "Academic advising caseloads must be consistent with the time required for the effective performance of this activity," that "academic advisors should allow an appropriate amount of time for students to discuss plans, programs, courses, academic progress, and other subjects related to their educational programs," that "the academic status of the student being advised should be taken into consideration when determining caseloads," and that "when determining workloads it should be recognized that advisors may work with students not officially assigned to them and that contacts regarding advising may extend beyond direct contact with the student." The impact of advisor case loads between institutions of similar size and type varies such that comparisons are likely of little value. Therefore, rather than focusing on comparing case loads, leadership should consider all of the factors that determine the optimal case load for meeting student needs and programmatic goals.

## **The Need for Assessment**

To ensure the best possible advising for students, an assessment process needs to be in place. Assessment is continuously conducted at the programmatic level to measure the achievement of process and delivery as well as student learning outcomes for advising (Robbins, 2009, 2011; Robbins & Zarges, 2011). Process and delivery outcome statements articulate the expectations regarding academic advising delivery and the informational content given during the academic advising

experience (Campbell et al., 2005; Robbins, 2009, 2011; Robbins & Zarges, 2011), and student learning outcomes reflect what students are expected to know (cognitive learning), do (behavioral learning), and value (affective learning) as a result of involvement in the academic advising experience (Campbell et al., 2005, Robbins, 2009, 2011; Robbins & Zarges, 2011). Knowing the identified desired process, delivery, and student learning outcomes for academic advising can further convey the elements of the advising process needed for successful results. Without assessment, no one knows if the programmatic goals are being met, if student learning outcomes are realized, if the advising process allows for appropriate time during meetings and the appropriate number of meeting with students each semester or academic year, if the type and delivery of advising accommodates advisee needs, or if advising case loads are beneficial or detrimental to overall advising efforts.

## Summary

When programmatic goals for academic advising are met and student learning outcomes for academic advising are achieved, then advisors can be confident in the appropriateness and efficiency of their advising case loads. Questions to consider when evaluating the best case load for each situation are as follow:

- How does the institution define academic advising?
- How does the advising program define academic advising?
- Is academic advising in the program primarily prescriptive, primarily developmental, or some combination
- Is academic advising in the program performed once per term at a designated time, devoted primarily to planning and scheduling for the following semester
- Are students provided information prior to the advising interaction via web sites, e-mails, curricular guides, or other means?
- Do students receive group advising, in any manner, in addition to one-on-one advising?
- For what other duties are academic advisors responsible for that take time away from advising students?
- Is the program guided by a stated mission and identified goals?
- Are assessment efforts underway to determine if the mission and goals of the program as well as student needs are being met?
- Are student expectations evaluated to determine their opinions about the information they should be receiving through advising?
- Is the advising program assessed to determine if programmatic goals are being achieved?
- Are assessment efforts made to link advising case load to student success

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**References are listed on the Clearinghouse website**

<http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Advisor-Load.aspx>