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Creating a Culture of 'Engagement' With Academic Advising:
Challenges and Opportunities for Today's Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Effective academic advising is recognized as key to college student success and academic retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Mastrodicasa, 2001). There are at least seven different structural models for academic advising; each depends to a greater or lesser degree on a level of *engagement* by faculty in the process (Kramer, 2003). Despite devoting large amounts of resources toward improving academic advising, many institutions find a less than adequate level of engagement is achieved. Based on a review of recent studies, including data from a national study of faculty recently completed, the author identifies six key threats to engagement. These include: institutional role competitiveness, increasing faculty workloads, inadequate advisor training and preparation, legal concerns, technological barriers, and escalating levels of challenge presented by students and their parents. As a whole, these threats add up to a system of institutional disincentives that prevent full participation by faculty in academic advising in many higher education settings. The author shows how to turn these challenges into opportunities, by illustrating the recent success story of one higher education institution whose students took the lead to demand – and receive – significant institutional improvements in academic advising.

Introduction

More than 30 years ago, Richard Giardina addressed questions raised by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education regarding the quality of American higher education. Giardina concluded that an effective Bachelor of Arts degree program should be achievement based. He said it should build off competencies gained in high school, relate to social needs, and encourage specialization while recognizing a need for continual professional re-tooling. Furthermore, Giardina said it should allow for a continual re-examination of distinctions between general and specialized learning (Giardina, 1974).

Just about everyone would agree with Giardina's ideas for broad-based learning outcomes. The problem is, today's higher education environment offers so many curriculum options that students – particularly undergraduates – have difficulty matching their short-term needs to long-term outcomes. College students consistently report that they have difficulty expedient progress through the maze of options without the guidance of a competent, experienced, and caring academic advisor (Mastrodicasa, 2001). Students' ability to make progress is a particular issue of concern in the social sciences because of the subject segmentation of many social science fields and the multitude of guiding philosophies and pragmatic approaches utilized across a wide variety of curriculum paths.

Though different institutional models are used for academic advising, faculty members are almost always an integral part of the structure. While the involvement of faculty is welcomed and encouraged by colleges and universities, there are a number of built-in disincentives to faculty who provide academic advising. This paper is an effort to

identify some of those obstacles and illustrate the challenges they present to higher education institutions and faculty. The paper concludes by showing how one university's students, faculty, and administrators overcame some of the challenges and worked together to develop a plan that allows for a greater campus-wide engagement with academic advising.

Models of academic advising in higher education

Although academic advising of undergraduate students has traditionally been seen “as a faculty function” (Tuttle, 2000, p. 15), in recent years higher education institutions have made a more concerted effort to broaden the scope of advising services. At least seven different institutional models have been developed under which academic advising is commonly structured (Tuttle, 2000; Kuhtmann, 2004). These models are:

- The faculty-only model – Each student is assigned to a faculty member, usually in the student's major program of study, for all academic advising.
- The satellite model – Sometimes referred to as the multiversity model, this structure has separate advising offices that are maintained and controlled by the different academic subject units.
- The self-contained model – All student advising takes place in a centralized office that frequently does not have any direct interaction with faculty. Usually the office is staffed by professional academic advisors and overseen by a dean or administrative director.
- Shared-supplementary model – Faculty members provide academic advising, but are assisted by professionals in a supplementary office. Often, this office

provides coordination and training for faculty, as well as additional services such as transcript evaluation and graduation clearance for students.

- Shared-split model – This model is similar to the shared-supplementary, except that in the shared-split model students are grouped for advising according to some measure of their academic progress. For example, students might be asked to an advising center until students complete general education requirements – then they would be shifted to a faculty member in the student’s discipline for further advising.
- Shared-dual model – In this model, students are assigned to two advisors. Commonly, one of those advisors is a faculty member and the other is a professional staff member. The faculty member can help students with curriculum and major sequence issues, while the professional staff member helps with registration issues and general academic progress.
- Total intake model – Colleges and universities that use the total intake model use an advising center to provide initial advising help to all students. At the point where students have completed their first year, earned a certain number of credits, or met some other pre-set criterion, students are released to faculty for advising.

Regardless of which institutional model is in use in a given institution, faculty members still play a critical role in the process (Kramer, 1995). The effort to make faculty recognize this fact and get connected with the process is referred to as faculty *engagement with academic advising*. Faculty engagement is operationalized through “a mentoring relationship” between faculty members and students (Yarbrough, 2002, p. 65).

In this relationship, faculty are expected to provide “specific insight and expertise” that will help guide students through the academic experience (Yarbrough, 2002, p. 67).

Faculty engagement benefits the university in a number of ways. When faculty make the commitment to be actively involved in students’ academic planning, they contribute to quality education in all areas – and not just within their academic unit. They become involved in the decision-making that impacts students socially and educationally (Tinto, 1993). The result is “the promotion of a stronger educational community among students, faculty, and staff” (Mastrodicasa, 2001, p. 6).

There is no question that increasing the amount of contact between students and faculty can help students be more motivated and involved with their academic work (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). A higher level of contact between faculty and students results in “greater student persistence” toward their degree completion (Mastrodicasa, 2001, p. 6).

Threats to faculty engagement

The literature clearly identifies problems that arise from asking faculty to be more active in academic advising. These problems manifest themselves as threats – threats to the institution, to the individual faculty member, and occasionally to the overall system and process of academic advising.

Institutional role competitiveness

At the institutional level, colleges and universities are constantly becoming more competitive. Budget pressures are mounting while, at the same time, institutions are trying to reach out in new ways to capture new markets. There’s increasing pressure to think of students as consumers – in no small measure because of the pressures brought by

the University of Phoenix and other similar institutions to change the entire structure of the higher education marketplace (Berg, 2005; Farrell, 2003). Partnerships with the business community are increasingly the norm rather than the exception (Griffin, 1995). Smaller, lower-ranked institutions are trying to move up in the Carnegie institutional classification structure in an effort to develop more prestige and attract new research dollars. Faculty are under pressure to increase their research output and participate in grant-writing activities. Diversity efforts are accelerating, as institutions try to recruit more minority students and faculty. All of this is occurring in a marketplace where Ehrenberg claims that a fixation on institutional rankings exacerbates competitiveness rather than encouraging helpful institutional collaborations (Ehrenberg, 2003).

Increasing faculty workloads

More than ten years ago, Marra and Schweitzer claimed advising “exact[s] a heavy toll” on the faculty, with large student loads, diminishing opportunities for lengthy contact with students, and no perception of reward by faculty for the advising work they do (1992, p. 64). Clearly, the situation will only get worse for educators in the U.S., as the domestic higher education system absorbs 1.5 million new students between now and 2015 (Roach, 2001). This 16% enrollment gain, coupled with budget reductions that are common in both the public and private-sector schools, will unquestionably result in more advising workload for faculty.

Related to workload is the issue of compensation. Most colleges and universities do not tie advising performance by faculty to promotion, tenure, salary increase, or any other tangible reward (Vowell, 1995; McGillin, 2003). One university even admitted in an analysis of its academic advising structure that its only bonus for faculty who advise

well is “good advisors end up getting even more students to advise” (*University of Wisconsin System*. . . , p. 49). As faculty see their advising workload increase, they will not see a corresponding increase in compensation. When forced to choose between activities that support tenure and promotional advancement and those that do not, one must expect faculty will choose to pursue research productivity, teaching excellence and community service over strengthening their engagement with academic advising.

Inadequate advisor training and preparation

Because doctoral programs focus on scholarship and research instead of teaching and service, new doctoral-degreed graduates begin their teaching careers with little knowledge of how to facilitate students’ successful academic progress toward completion of a degree. There is no lack of research demonstrating that faculty are not getting the professional development and training they need to advise students effectively (Clifton & Long, 1992; Stolar, 1994; Ryan, 1995).

Once prospective faculty reach the point where they are interviewing for teaching positions, the issue of academic advising may not even be mentioned. Researchers have found that it is uncommon for job descriptions of university teaching positions to include stipulations about academic advising (Vowell & Farren, 2003); scholarship, teaching, and service are the three common professional expectations for a tenure-track faculty member. Academic advising may not be mentioned at all, or may be referred to only in passing as a professional duty.

It is questionable whether faculty get much training after they are established in a teaching position. A recent national survey of faculty in communication disciplines found that tenure-track faculty alone were carrying the burden of providing academic advising

to undergraduate majors, and that more than half of respondents said academic advising training was “rarely” or “never” provided to them (Swanson, in press).

Faculty who are trained to provide academic advising and do dedicate the time to the effort may find that they become uncomfortable with it. This is because academic advising demands that the faculty member engage the student in a discussion to “probe into their own personal development” (Goldenberg & Permuth, 2003, p. 152) in a way that may uncover personal issues that faculty are unprepared to address or are unwilling to deal with.

Legal concerns

In today’s complex higher education environment where students, often viewed as consumers, try to negotiate their way through a maze of complicated and costly course offerings – faculty members who engage in academic advising must be ready to also engage with the complex legal issues it presents. In the eyes of the court, Habley wrote, “the role of a faculty advisor is not a casual and informal relationship” (2003, p. 245). Faculty advisors need to have detailed understanding of contract law, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, as well as numerous federal and state regulations that relate to accommodations for the disabled. Advisors must know both the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, since faculty advisors or their colleges may be legally liable if “the advisor failed to actively and effectively provide advice” (Tribbensee, 2004, p. 11) to students. This is another area that faculty are not trained to deal with; thus, it is not hard to imagine that their lack of preparation would cause them to want to avoid it altogether.

Technological barriers

As is the case in the other segments of the higher education institution, the structural boundaries within which academic advising has traditionally taken place are in flux. The changes are being accelerated by the growth in technological applications. It is not uncommon for academic advisors to have more contact with students electronically than they do in face-to-face contact (Kramer, Childs, and others, 2000). Faculty who engage in academic advising can expect that students – increasingly in collaboration with parents – will gather information from web sites, from online bulletin boards, from blogs, and from other electronic media both on-campus and off. Advisors must be able to work effectively with students’ prescriptive academic advising needs (e.g., selecting classes) as well as with their developmental advising needs (e.g., ‘what is the right major for me?’) using e-mail and related online technology.

Some faculty are clearly not prepared for this interaction. Researchers have found that faculty feel less autonomous as a result of technologically-induced pressures (Ferrara, 1998), are struggling individually to stay current with their disciplines (McInnis, 2002), may not be ready to work in groups with new technology (Wills, 2000). If faculty cannot manage the technology change within their discipline, it is unlikely then can manage the technological change needed to address students’ advising needs. In a 2003 survey focusing on technological change in journalism education, Voakes, Beam, and Ogan found widespread faculty agreement with the statement “I like doing things the way I’ve always done them” (2003, p. 330). Indeed, there may be many faculty in a variety of different disciplines who would agree with that sentiment.

Escalating levels of challenge presented by students and their parents

The profile of today's student body is dramatically different from that of the generations of students that preceded it. Students born after 1982 are referred to as the Millennial generation. Generally speaking, these students identify closely with their parents' values, are fascinated by new technology, have high standards but a limited attention span, and tend to favor highly structured environments (Howe & Strauss, 2000). When asked about challenges facing this generation, "Millennials respond that the biggest one is the poor example that adults set for kids" (Oblinger, 2003, p. 38). Working with this generation presents challenges heretofore unseen by higher education faculty, staff and administrators.

The parents of the Millennial students are equally challenging. At higher education conferences, a frequent topic of discussion is the parent who called a faculty member to inquire about a son or daughter's academic progress, receive information about homework assignments, or argue for a particular course grade. Parents accompany their children on college tours – and return at registration time to see that their children are able to take "the right" classes. Parents accompany their child to advising appointments, to make sure their child will choose "the right" major. Parents have even been known to ask to accompany their children on post-graduation job interviews.

The author of this paper participated in a summer freshman registration session at which the parent of an incoming freshman became belligerent over the fact that her son was going to have to take a 100-level history class. "He doesn't need history," the mother protested. "I'm not paying for him to take history." The mother was not interested in a calm explanation of the university's general education program and history requirement –

she stormed off to the records office in an effort to have the charge for the history course removed from her son's tuition bill.

Parents of college students today put tremendous energy into acquiring “the best deal” for their children (Lange & Stone, 2001) – and that “best deal” encompasses everything: admissions, scholarships, major/ minor choice, course selection, housing, meal plans, and extracurricular activities. The demands of parents often pit schools against each other and dramatically increase the pressure on academic advisors, as well as college personnel in other offices (Lange & Stone, 2001). Faculty who wish to advise students successfully need to understand the Millennial generation and, perhaps first, learn how to deal with this generation's parents.

Systemic institutional disincentives

The six threats just identified are all interrelated. New faculty apply for a teaching position following a position announcement that makes no mention of academic advising responsibilities. New hires arrive untrained for academic advising and enter into a contractual agreement that also, frequently, makes no mention of advising. When pressed to add advising to their workload, faculty can successfully refuse (either explicitly or implicitly) because there's no written agreement to do it – and typically no reward for it, even if it is done and done well. In speaking with their new peers, it takes the new faculty member little time to identify complex legal issues, technological issues, and the stresses caused by Millennial students and their parents as good reasons for avoiding engagement with academic advising. That avoidance can continue through the faculty member's promotion and tenure process with little professional risk, because there is both explicit and implicit understanding that teaching, research, and service are the three critical

expectations of higher education faculty today. Research shows that faculty commonly report little is done by their institution to facilitate training for academic advising; institutions can argue that the reason they do so little is because funding better advising is just one of a myriad of priorities that need to be addressed when there is precious little resource support available.

Turning challenges into opportunities

The final segment of this paper will illustrate how one university's students, faculty, and administrators overcame some of the challenges and worked together to develop opportunities for greater campus-wide engagement with academic advising. While the plan doesn't address all the obstacles so far discussed in this paper, it has been a good start.

The University of Wisconsin-La Crosse is a mid-sized regional comprehensive institution with 200 faculty offering 80 degree programs to an enrollment of approximately 6,500 undergraduates and 700 graduate students. In the University of Wisconsin System, UW-L is second only to UW-Madison in its ability to attract "the best and the brightest" freshman classes. The overall academic climate is excellent; student retention levels are among the highest in the nation. But over the years, students consistently reported displeasure with the university's faculty-only model of academic advising. In particular, there was unhappiness that students who had not declared a major did not receive an academic advising assignment that reflected their undecided status. While all declared students were assigned to a faculty member in their major area, undeclared students were assigned randomly to faculty. Often, these faculty members were among those least interested in providing academic advising (they had low numbers

of advisees, and therefore were assigned more advisees when undeclared students were processed for assignment).

While a 1995 Blue Ribbon Panel recommended the establishment of an ‘Academic Discovery Lab’ to help students make more informed choices about majors and careers, the panel stopped short of altering the university’s faculty-only advising structure. The unhappiness about academic advising – particularly among undecided students – remained a nagging problem.

Recognizing that the problem with undecided students needed attention, the Student Senate began working in 2002 to prioritize needed services for students and develop a funding structure to support the needs. The group’s work resulted in a series of approved programs, funded by differential tuition, which would meet students’ goal to “enhance the educational value of UW–L” (*Academic Initiatives*, 2003). In March, 2004, the Student Senate approved the plan. It was focused primarily on improving academic advising, but also included a structure and support for improving student research, campus diversity, and international education. The bulk of the effort – and 55% of the funding – would go toward establishing an Academic Advising Center that would serve the needs of all students who had not yet chosen a major.

The Student Senate recognized the importance of campus-wide faculty engagement in academic advising. The senate’s proposal was held up for a year to allow Faculty Senate review – and to write in to the plan the requirement that the Academic Advising Center be directed by a tenured faculty member. In 2004, final approval was given by the administration for the plan to proceed, and in July of that year the first faculty director of the Academic Advising Center began work

All UW-L students pay for *Academic Initiatives*. The cost to both undergraduate and graduate students is about \$2 per credit hour (up to a maximum of 9 hours). Students each pay about \$20 per semester to fund their portion of *Academic Initiatives*. The university funds the other half. The total funding called for is about \$750,000 per year, of which the Academic Advising Center is budgeted to receive approximately \$350,000. Approximately \$70,000 in funding was set aside by summer, 2004, to fund advising center startup costs.

The Academic Advising Center provides a “one stop” location to have academic questions answered. The AAC does not take the place of faculty advisors; rather, the center is designed to augment and support services faculty advisors continue to offer. The center is staffed by a director and four full-time academic advisors, one program assistant, two graduate assistants, and five student peer advisors. In its first three semesters, the Academic Advising Center accomplished a number of objectives to build greater engagement in academic advising by faculty. Here are a few:

- Two of the UW-L’s three colleges turned over their incoming undecided freshmen to the AAC – allowing those students to be advised by AAC professional advisors until the point the student makes a declaration of major. Upon declaration, the student is assigned to a faculty advisor in the discipline. No undecided student will be assigned to a faculty member, with the exception of students who are undecided in business (but have declared an affiliation with the business college).
- All UW-L department chairs were contacted, requesting a meeting between their faculty and the AAC director to explain the desired goals and outcomes for the

- AAC. Eight of 36 departments accepted this offer and held meetings during the fall semester 2004. These meetings were the beginning of a dialogue between the AAC and faculty (individually and collectively) about academic advising – the first time this dialogue had ever been attempted in a systematic form on campus.
- The AAC director took a team of six UW-L faculty and staff to the UW System Advising Task Force meeting on assessment in 2005. The meeting resulted in a proposal for defining academic advising on the UW-L campus and establishing goals and objectives for the practice of advising.
 - The Academic Advising Center assumed administration of the UW-L 100 (Freshman Experience) course. This will allow the center to build stronger ties between General Education and the freshman experience. It will also allow AAC advisors to get into the classroom and make stronger connections with students in regard to academic advising.
 - The Academic Advising Center launched an “Outstanding Advisor Awards” program that took nominations from students in three categories. Awards were presented to the university’s outstanding advisors at the end of the spring semester beginning in 2004, and helped generate new campus discussion about what it takes to be a “good” advisor.
 - The AAC director and a faculty member authored a grant proposal for faculty development funds to produce a UW-L advising manual and video training package.

- The AAC was awarded with the Public Relations Society of America (Wisconsin chapter) *Alchemy Award*, recognizing the center for developing “the best consumer information campaign” in Wisconsin in 2004 for the AAC’s start-up.

Many challenges remain. The Academic Advising Center and its director are not empowered to make changes in faculty position descriptions, job expectations, or rewards. Clearly, this structure needs to be radically altered if the university is going to create a system that allows for the needed tangible rewards for academic advising.

The AAC was pulled out from under the authority of the Provost and grouped with admissions, career services, financial aid, and records and registration into an Enrollment Services unit. While the AAC’s removal from the ‘academic’ structure of the university is a concern, it is hoped that greater collaboration with related student services units will be advantageous.

The AAC’s efforts to provide formal and informal academic advising training for faculty were met with limited success. Often, the faculty who showed up for training were those who seemed least to need it. The student committee that oversees *Initiatives* funding was not nearly as interested in having the AAC provide training for faculty as it was in having the AAC provide one-on-one advising to students in lieu of the advising provided by “poor” faculty advisors.

Despite a massive publicity campaign to communicate information about the AAC to faculty, even three semesters into the effort some faculty did not understand what the AAC was attempting to do and why. One faculty member in the sciences did not want to see his undecided students released to the AAC for advising because he was convinced the AAC was established to “convert” students into Liberal Studies majors.

On a positive note, UW-L students who suffer under a poor academic advisor now have somewhere to go – whether it be to get help in establishing a better relationship with the faculty member, to have general academic advising questions answered, or to seek guidance about switching majors. There is a ‘one stop’ campus office that is increasingly recognized as an authority on academic issues pertinent to all students.

At the same time, students have been educated to expect more from their academic advisor. Faculty, in turn, have been released from the difficult and unpleasant task of advising undecided students – with the hope that they will work to provide a higher level of service to the declared majors who remain under their care.

Schmitz and Whitworth (2002) argue that most universities are more interested in maintaining the status quo than they are in enhancing academic competencies. When one looks across the landscape of higher education and sees all the systematic disincentives to faculty engagement with academic advising, it’s easy to resign oneself to accepting the status quo. It takes a lot of effort in a lot of different directions to make small improvements in academic advising for undergraduates. However, the UW-La Crosse example shows that improvements for more effective faculty engagement can be made, in small steps – if students, faculty, staff, and administration all buy in to the concepts involved and agree to work together.

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