ARE WE MEETING STUDENT EXPECTATIONS: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ADVISING IN THE NEW MILLENIUM

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ABSTRACT

Individual student advising is an important part of faculty life, but is it effective as a means to communicate with and meet the needs of millennial students. In this study, we examine the perception of accounting and information systems students to evaluate advising from a student perspective. Undergraduate students from two universities in the northeastern United States were surveyed. The results indicate that although social media has become a regular part of student life it has not yet become an advising tool. Eighty-seven students who were either information systems or accounting majors participated in this survey; we present the results.

Keywords: Advising

INTRODUCTION

Advising is an important part of faculty life in many universities. It provides a means for students to receive direction on academic planning, graduate school preparation and career planning. In most universities advising is performed by faculty, though more recently some schools have adopted advising models that include professional advisors or other university administrators.

Millennial students use a variety of ways to communicate and stay informed, including texting and other forms of instant messaging, email, Facebook, and Twitter. Recent research confirms that most students communicate through a variety of these sources. Academic advising has been slow to adapt to the changing communication methods.

This article discusses student perception of academic advising. It discusses the perception of the effectiveness of the advising processes in helping students in their academic life and career preparation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic advising has been defined to include course planning, career preparation and planning. These functions may be linked together and performed by a single individual (faculty member or professional advisor) or they may be performed as separate processes.

Allen and Smith [1] analyzed the literature of the past thirty years to investigate student dissatisfaction with the advising experience. They identified five factors that impact the student's perception of quality in advising as well as their impact on the development of the student. These factors include:

1.Consideration of the student's individual characteristics

2.Accessibility of information about curriculum requirements and administrative policies that impact curriculum.

3.Referral to campus resources for academic and non-academic problems.

4.Development of understanding of the shared responsibility for advising between the student and advisor.

5.Integration of the curriculum and other co-curricular activities with the goals of the student.

Campbell and Nutt [4] define academic advising as a process to encourage students to capitalize on learning opportunities that challenge their intellectual

and social development and add value to the college experience. It is a key component in keeping stiudents engaged in the college experience.

Hale, Graham and Johnson [6] surveyed 429 undergraduate students to investigate the student's preferred advising style and their satisfaction with the advising process. Nearly all of the students surveyed preferred a developmental advising style (95%).

Allen and Smith [2] point out that faculty attitudes toward advising generally define a gap that exists between faculty perception and the students' perception. A simplified response from students is typically that faculty need to provide more and better advising. However, their survey of faculty found that faculty do not feel they should be solely responsible for all academic advising that students receive. Faculty should perhaps be partnered with others to improve the quality of the advising experience.

Freeman [5] defined comprehensive academic advising as a hierarchy consisting of:

1. Exploration of life goals, values, abilities, interests and limitations.
2. Exploration of vocational/career goals.
3. Selection and design of academic major or program of study.
4. Selection of courses.
5. Scheduling classes.

The goals of the advising program should be to create an atmosphere of support and promote independent decision making on the part of the student by assisting them in the exploration of their goals. Advising programs should be a comprehensive program that establishes effective relationships with faculty, administration and students.

Steingass and Sykes [8] found a correlation between high levels of academic advising and student retention, particularly amongst freshman.

Basshart, Wentz and Heller [3] surveyed 2,763 alumni who had graduated from one to five years. They found satisfaction levels to be high in most areas, except for academic advising. We are not effectively reaching students with our current academic advising programs.   This research seeks to identify student preferences for communicating with advisors to help improve student satisfaction.

Advising involves establishing a mentoring relationship with a student. These relationships have been shown to be a key component of the students overall academic experience. Haworth and Conrad [7] point out that mentoring relationships improve the quality of the students learning experience. They cite an example of a student from a major state university who stated, "I really got a sense they were interested in my learning and getting a good education… I had a sense that there was commitment from them to facilitate my learning. I didn't get the sense that they had a very strict, clearly defined, and concise little goal that they wanted me to get to. They had some kind of goal but they also wanted me to reach my own goals. I had the sense that I was driving my own goals."   An effective advising experience does not have to be a faculty member telling a student what to do, it results in a relationship in which the advisor empowers the student to set and then subsequently reach their goals.

Individualized feedback that students receive through personalized advising has been found to strengthen student's professional competence and confidence. It also helps student's advance their careers [7]. Advisors who take the time to develop a mentoring relationship with students create a positive learning environment that enables students to achieve their potential.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research in the area of student advising continues to show that the student experience is strengthened when a significant positive mentoring relationship can be built. However, student communication styles have also been changing. The introduction of social media and mobile technology have brought about changes in the way students interact with each other. Social media sites such as Facebook are now used to help students interact with each other to solve problems. Has this changed the way in which students prefer to interact with their advisor?

The research problem that was addressed in this study is to determine what is the preferred method of communication between student and advisor for information systems and accounting students.

Further we seek to examine if the differences between student and advisor communication methods are significant between accounting and information systems students.

METHODOLOGY

A survey questionnaire was developed to gather data to investigate student perception of their advising experiences. Accounting and computer information systems students at two universities in the northeast United States were surveyed. A total of 1,132 surveys were distributed via an email link with a request to voluntarily participate. The students were not offered any additional incentive or compensation. The questionnaire was formatted using the electronic survey tool, Survey Monkey. Eighty-seven responses were received for an overall response rate of 7.7%. One of the universities is a private predominately residential campus university; 51 of 336 students responded yielding a response rate 15.2%. The other university is a public university with a mix of residential and commuter students 36 of 796 students responded for a response rate of 4.5%.

Survey questions focused on providing students an opportunity to comment on their current advising experiences and to also collect their ideas for improving the advising experience. Included in the survey were questions on their preferred method of communication with their advisor, why they meet with their advisor, as well as current and preferred frequency of meetings.

A convenience sample using personal contacts was used to select subjects. Students were given one week to complete the survey, there was one follow-up request, but this only yielded five additional responses. The response datasets were separated by university to provide the capability to analyze if significant differences existed between the responses from students at public versus private universities.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

There were a total of 87 survey responses for which 43 were females and 44 were male students. The demographic response by class is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents by Class

Class	Respondents
Freshman	7
Sophomore	16
Junior	32
Senior	32

There were 17 computer information systems majors who responded and 70 accounting majors. This is proportional to the size of the programs; in both universities there are substantially more accounting majors. Enrollment in computer information systems is much lower than accounting programs nationwide and this is also the case in the two universities that were part of this study.

Students were asked if they normally meet with the advisor that was assigned to them, or if they meet with another advisor. Sixty-eight students indicated that they meet with their assigned advisor, while nineteen indicated they meet with another faculty member. None of the respondents indicated that they meet with a university administrator for advising. It is interesting to note that a much higher percentage of the respondents from the public university (33% versus 10%) indicated they meet with another faculty advisor.

All of the respondents indicated the frequency that they meet with their academic advisor. The results are presented in Table 2 (please note in both cases, the universities surveyed were on a traditional fall/spring semester schedule).

Table 2. Frequency of Advisor Meetings

Frequency/Semester	Responses
Never	0
One	55
Two	24
Three	6
Four or More	2

Students were asked to comment on the purpose of their meetings with the academic advisor. The question was set-up to allow for multiple purposes to be a part of the response. Table 3 provides a summary of the responses.

Table 3. Reasons for Meeting with Advisors

Reasons for Meeting with Advisor	Responses
Academic planning for the next semester	81
Academic planning for more than one semester	35
Advice on graduate education	18
Advice on career planning	33
Advice on how to obtain a full-time position	7
Advice on obtaining an internship	23
Advice on improving your resume	6
Interviewing or other career preparation advice	5
Advice on co-curricular activities that support your career objectives	7

It is worth noting that with the exception of meeting to create an academic plan for the next semester, in all other cases the students at the private university responded at least 50% higher on all other questions. Students were also asked if they discussed a change of major with their advisor. Only 11 responded that they had, with four students indicating that the advisor did not express an opinion, four suggesting that the student remain in their current major and three recommending a change of major.

An important dimension of the advising experience is the ability for the student-advisor to connect. Two questions were related to this dimension. Table 4 presents the results of the student perception of how frequently they would like to meet with their advisor each semester.

Table 4. How Often Would the Student Like to Meet with Their Advisor

Frequency/Semester	Responses
Never	3
One	26
Two	38
Three	10
Four or More	9

In addition, students were asked how many advisors they would prefer to have. Fifty-six students responded with a preference of one, twenty-eight preferred two.

There were 87 responses to the question asking the students preferred method of communicating with an advisor. The question was structured to determine if electronic and social media has made an impact on the advising experience. Students' responses are reported in Table 5.

Table 5. What is Your Preferred Method of Communicating with Your Advisor

Method of Communicating	Responses
Meet in Advisor's Office	54
Telephone	2
Office Communicator	2
E-mail	29
Facebook	0
Myspace	0
Twitter	0
Other	0

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Social media has had an impact on student life. However, it has not yet made an impact on student's perception of how to communicate with their advisors when addressing issues such as academic or career planning. Our survey showed that the majority of students still prefer face-to-face interaction with their advisor and that the only other significant method of communication was via e-mail.

Although academic planning is an important part of the student advising experience, students also indicated that more frequent contact with their advisor to discuss issues such as career preparation and planning is an important part of their student life.

Several of the respondents commented on the student-advisor relationship. One comment stated

"Advisors please be on time! I've gone to so many advising meetings where I have to fit it in between classes where I should have enough time for an advising meeting, but my advisor was always late! Then I would have to rush my meeting or be late to class. Please, if we're arriving on time, give us the same courtesy."

While two others commented,

"If someone has too much work or will not be available on campus ever, they should not be an adviser. Advisers need to be more responsive to the needs of their students, particularly when the student e-mails them multiple times."

"I want my advisor to be more flexible in scheduling for when I need to meet with him or her."

Perception of availability of the advisor stood out as an important aspect of the student perception of the advising experience; a positive experience is important as a large percentage of the students surveyed indicated.

It is equally important that the advisor be knowledgeable in how to resolve student questions or concerns. This does not mean they need to be expert in every nuance of academic life at the university. Student comments in this area varied, with one pointing out,

"My advisors never really had a firm grasp on what courses covered requirements in my program. I felt like I was running the risk of not graduating on time due to poor advice on classes to take. "

However, some students felt their experience was very positive, as one commented,

"It has always been great, and if she does not know the answer, she tells me who else I can talk to."

Results of the survey indicate a desire on the part of students for more frequent and direct interaction with knowledgeable advisors who consider them to be mentors to the student. Advisors need to recognize this is an important part of student life and should be well prepared before taking on this role. One interesting comment brought forward by one of the respondents was,

"There should be a way for the university to have sit in's on classes and advising sessions as to see how professors could improve there abilities because students aren't the only ones who need to learn or the only ones who can learn. If there was this method of "checking-in" professors, advisors, and other faculty would be better off. Just hearing feedback doesn't help it helps if YOU are there to better understand what people are saying about the staff."

This study looked at information system and accounting students. These groups were chosen because of the availability of research participants to the researchers. No significant differences were found across these two student groups.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

The scope of our research was limited to a study of accounting and information systems students in the northeast United States; this study could be extended to include students within other disciplines as well as to broaden the geographic distribution of the sample population.

FUTURE WORK

We are interested in extending this research to investigate how faculty view their role as mentor/advisor for accounting and information systems students. This will influence how to establish effective advising programs that promote individual student growth and achievement. We intend to expand the scope of our student to include a greater cross section of accounting and information systems students, particularly freshman and sophomores.

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