

Running head: MORE THAN ADVISING

More Than Academic Advising: The Role of Faculty as Mentors

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### More Than Academic Advising: The Role of Faculty as Mentors

Undergraduate students often find themselves in new and completely different academic and social environments than they have previously experienced when they first arrive on campus. For many students, these new environments may be more unsettling, demanding, and stressful than the environments left behind. Whether or not students find a concerned and supportive environment when they arrive on campus will influence each students' ability to transition and succeed in their new academic and social environments. This success can, in turn, affect students' decision to persist, an important factor not only for their academic and professional careers but also for the economic health and stability of the institutions they attend related to the ability to retain students (Gardiner, 1994).

Studies have shown (Heath, Skok, & McLaughlin, 1991; Mohr, Eiche, & Sedlacek, 1998; Neumann & Finaly-Neumann, 1989; Pascarella, 1980) significant positive associations, *particularly with juniors and seniors*, between the extent and quality of student-faculty informal contact and students' educational aspirations, attitudes toward college, academic achievement, intellectual and personal development, and institutional persistence. It is the quality, both real and perceived, of this advising and guidance the students receive that can impact the degree to which they will profit from their time in college. Students must learn how to understand their own development, clarify their personal values and goals, plan an appropriate developmental curriculum and other educational experiences, and feel emotionally secure, integrated, and

at home on campus; each of these elements can affect students' degrees of success as well as their choices to remain enrolled or continue attending college (Gardiner, 1994). Quantitative analyses conducted by Mohr, Eiche, and Sedlacek suggested that a college's inability to retain senior students could be predicted best if one or more of the following were present: dissatisfaction with academic guidance, dissatisfaction with access to school-related information, dissatisfaction with quality of education, and feelings of institutional alienation. Faculty advising provides a unique opportunity for individual faculty members, and the institution by proxy, to develop a close connection with students. The results of this connection can, as already stated, be an increase in satisfaction persistence.

Gardiner (1994) points out that the primary functions of academic advising today have become a way for students to gather information related to registration and graduation requirements. The goal of academic advising, however, should be to serve as a developmental tool to encourage academic success and student retention. Colleges need to move away from the perception of academic advising at the departmental level being viewed as nothing more than a mundane and clerical, but required, function each term. Frost (1991) advocates this developmental approach and states that academic advising can be approached from a broader perspective. According to Frost, advising is a shared responsibility between students and advisors, but faculty can facilitate the process by encouraging students to first consider the larger questions connected with educational and career goals before they worry about majors, plans of study,

and course registrations. Frost contends that as students learn to frame questions about their futures and search for the information they need to provide answers, they will become engaged in the learning process in a way that is different from their classroom experiences. Gardiner cites the following additional advantages of developmental advising: a positive relationship between academic advising and students' achievement, satisfaction with college, personal, social, and vocational development, persistence on campus, a positive association with self-esteem that may also result in improved academic success, and an undergirding mechanism to sustain each of these positive changes.

In a study of upper-class students by Smerglia and Bouchet (1999), faculty and student perceptions of the role, responsibilities, and expectations of the academic advisor and student were explored. There were no significant differences between faculty and students with regard to the role of advisors to suggest courses, recommend electives, explain general college and major requirements, and help develop class schedules. Differences were evident related to help with campus resources. Students were more inclined than faculty to identify the following tasks as responsibilities of the advisor: communicating student needs to university personnel, referring students to appropriate campus offices, and providing deadline awareness. These differences may result from students' perceptions that faculty better understand the culture and possible bureaucratic complexities of the campus; faculty may need to be more empathetic to this perception when working with first-year or transfer students. Assisting students as they plan for their futures was also seen as a role of the

academic advisor by students. In fact, significantly more students than faculty members viewed future planning exercises as an advising activity. Smerglia and Bouchet defined future planning as knowing the educational background for certain careers, providing information on job markets, and knowing prerequisites for graduate studies. Future planning can also include activities related to those proposed by Frost (1991) and Gardiner (1994), including personal assistance in such areas as life and educational goals.

A review of the literature demonstrates that when undergraduate students perceive and develop a relationship with a mentor, and not just an advisor, they are better able to understand, plan, and utilize their time in college (Gardiner, 1994). Heath, Skok, and McGlaughlin (1991) stress mentoring can provide students with support, challenges, and the vision necessary to view questions and problems from both internal and external perspectives. McCarthy and Mangione (2000), however, found, that only one half of college students in their study could identify a mentor and an additional 29% of responding students reported interest in developing a mentoring relationship. The authors were concerned that one half of the students in their study were unable to identify a mentor, stating that these students did not perceive any of the formal or informal academic advising they received as mentoring. In other words, these students did not feel a supportive connection to a member of the college community. Gardiner hypothesizes that, with the absence of the mentor-mentee relationship, students experience the loss of an important nonacademic developmental cog in their undergraduate education, the institution may suffer financially from student

attrition, and faculty and staff may acknowledge some level of frustration and disappointment from both. Gardiner stresses that the interaction of students and faculty must be elevated beyond structured and scheduled contacts in lectures, discussions, or laboratories. It may be necessary to examine and change individual, departmental, college, or university practices and culture for this to occur. Mohr, Eiche, and Sedlacek (1998), borrowing from Tinto's work on student attrition, summarize that undergraduate students need high-quality academic advising where advisors provide degree program and course information, refer them to campus or community resources that may aid in their development, and offer a caring, stable, and continuing relationship they can depend on during difficult times. When these relationships exist, particularly with seniors, students may possess the tools to continue coping with the ever present and changing challenges associated with being a successful student in today's colleges and universities.

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