Academic advising of undergraduates in communication: Structural models and service challenges identified by faculty

Douglas J. Swanson, Ed.D APR
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Undergraduate students need effective academic advising to succeed in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Mastrodicasa, 2001; Kramer, 2003). Advising within communication disciplines has received little research attention, and is not even mentioned in one key journal’s research agenda for the new millennium (Friedrich, 2002). This national survey of faculty, a starting point for further investigation, found faculty carry the major burden of advising, are seldom trained for it, and carry out a variety of time-consuming tasks beyond face-to-face student contact. Several areas of apparent deficiency were identified in regard to faculty preparation for, involvement in, and communication about advising.

The typical institution of higher education offers undergraduates dozens of curriculum options. Without a competent, experienced, and caring academic adviser as their guide, students can struggle to understand their options and make academic progress (Mastrodicasa, 2001). This is especially true in communication disciplines that are fragmented into a number of academic approaches and specialties (Swanson, 1993; Jeffrey, 1994). Among

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faculty, there is little consensus on what communication encompasses and how the essence of the discipline should be captured in curriculum or structured in an academic program. So one wonders: If faculty have difficulty defining and explaining the field – are they similarly challenged in providing academic advice to students?

Few scholars have examined academic advising within the communication disciplines, so there is insufficient discipline-specific research to affirm what models of advising are in use, the extent to which faculty are involved, the advising resources available, and faculty members’ use of those resources. This study was undertaken to answer some basic questions about these issues and provide a starting point for future research.

**Literature Review**

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 widen the scope of advising services. At least five different institutional models for advising have been developed (Tuttle, 2000; Kuhtmann, 2004). In each model, faculty still play a critical role (Kramer, 1995). Regardless of the structure chosen for advising, faculty are central to the process because they provide “specific insight and expertise” that undergraduates need (Yarbrough, 2002, p. 67).

Some long-standing problems face faculty advisers. The problems begin at the outset of the faculty member’s professional experience. Doctoral programs typically offer no training in academic advising (Clifton & Long, 1992; Stolar, 1994; Ryan, 1995). Few higher education institutions include academic advising as part of the job description for entry-level faculty (Vowell & Farren, 2003) even though scholarship, teaching, and service expectations are explicit. Most colleges and universities reward faculty for scholarship, teaching, and service but do not reward good advising – or link it to promotion, tenure, or salary increase (Vowell, 1995; McGillin, 2003). One university even admitted in a 2004 analysis of its advising structure that its only bonus for faculty who advise well is that “good advisors end up getting even more students to advise” (University of Wisconsin
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Once they go to work, faculty will find academic advising presents them with students’ personal issues with which they may be uncomfortable (Goldenberg & Permuth, 2003; Habley, 2003). Faculty can even be held legally liable if they fail to “actively and effectively provide advice” (Tribbensee, 2004, p. 11) consistent with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and other federal policies. Because employers continually demand more knowledge and skills from new college graduates, communication faculty struggle to initiate and maintain “curricular breadth that is relevant to developing professionals” (Stark et al, 1987, p. 3). At the same time, faculty struggle with misunderstandings about their role in the university (Endres & Wearden, 1996), the technological expectations they face (Beam, Kim, & Voakes, 2003), and an “onslaught” of work responsibilities aside from teaching (Dillon & Tanner, 1995).

It has been argued that the professional associations have done little to support communication faculty members’ involvement in academic advising, either through professional development or promotion of scholarly research (Marra & Schweitzer, 1992). Indeed, Communication Education, one of the most respected journals in the discipline, published a “Communication Education Research Agenda” in 2002 with no mention of academic advising (Friedrich, 2002). Given that as much as 20% of a typical faculty member’s time may be devoted to academic advising (Marra & Schweitzer, 1992), the lack of knowledge about academic advising within communication is troubling.

Methods

Three research questions were developed to guide this project: (1) What organizational structures are most common for academic advising of undergraduates in the communication disciplines? (2) To what extent do communication faculty members take advantage of available training and resources to improve their academic advising skills? and, (3) What are the key challenges faced by
faculty members who provide academic advising to undergraduates in the communication disciplines?

Using several guides that address electronic survey issues (*Educational web design*, 2005; Narins, 1998; Turner & Turner, 1998) and with input of researchers outside the population for study, a web-based survey form was created. The questionnaire was organized in accordance with National Academic Advising Association research guidelines (2005) and with questions adapted from Berman and Nelson (2001) and Perry (2001). Pilot testing showed respondents could complete the survey in fifteen minutes or less.

More than 500 faculty members were identified through membership directories of the Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication and the National Communication Association. Faculty were contacted via e-mail and asked to participate in the online survey. A total of 110 surveys were returned; 106 were substantially complete and usable (a return rate of 20% at minimum).

**Results**

Most respondents identified themselves as teaching faculty (89, or 83%), with lesser numbers identifying as administrators (14, or 13%). Most respondents teach in public colleges and universities (66, or 62%) and have an average of 16.57 years experience in academia. Table 1 details respondents’ reported faculty role/ rank, academic unit subject area and structure, and respondents’ geographic regions.

**Table 1** Respondents’ reported faculty role/ rank, academic unit subject area + structure, and geographic region where located

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent’s faculty role/ rank</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% of total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching faculty, Assistant Professor</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching faculty, Associate Professor</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching faculty, Professor</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic administrator (dean, director of grad studies, department chair)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
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</table>
The faculty-only model of advising was identified by 68 respondents (64%) as in use in their academic program. These respondents included those who indicated that the responsibility lies with tenure-track faculty only (27, or 25%), as well as those who indicated that both tenure-track and non-tenured faculty participate (38, or 36%). About one-third of the respondents
indicated that their academic unit (21, or 20%) or their campus (7, or 7%) uses a centralized academic advising office. None of the respondents identified use of undergraduate peer advisors, graduate student advisors, or program-wide mass advising.

Training and resources

More than half of the respondents (62, or 58%) indicated that their unit “rarely” or “never” provides training for academic advising of undergraduates. Twenty-four respondents (23%) agreed that training is “sometimes” or “usually” provided. Only nine respondents (8%) indicated that training is “always” offered by the academic unit. Despite the indication that training is at best an infrequent occurrence, respondents indicated that levels of overall support – and coordination of that support within the academic unit – is high. Table 2 details respondents’ perceptions of level of support within the unit and coordination of that support, as well as respondents’ perception of the comparison of their unit’s support versus other units on campus.

Table 2 Resource support for academic advising and coordination of that support as identified by faculty in the communication disciplines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of support within my academic unit</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Always” or “usually” enough support</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sometimes” have enough support</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Rarely” of “never” have enough</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of support in my unit vs. other units on campus</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We “always” or “usually” have more</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We “sometimes” have more</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We “rarely” or “never” have more</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Advising information, resources, & services in my unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| “Always” or “usually” coordinated | 57 | 54%
| “Sometimes” coordinated | 29 | 27%
| “Rarely” or “never” coordinated | 11 | 10%

Advising information, resources, & services - my unit’s coordination compared to others on campus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</table>
| We’re “always” or “usually” better coordinated | 37 | 35%
| We’re “sometimes” better coordinated | 29 | 27%
| We’re “rarely” or “never” better coordinated | 19 | 18%

N = 106

Service Challenges

The greatest academic advising problem areas reported by faculty include too many students to advise and not enough time to do it (52, or 49%), students unprepared for advising sessions (39, or 36%), faculty discomfort in dealing with students’ personal issues (30, or 29%), and faculty members having little or no input into university policies dealing with academic advising (27, or 25%). Table 3 shows a summary of results in this category of questions.

Table 3 Greatest academic advising challenges identified as “always” or “usually” a problem by faculty in the communication disciplines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Total</th>
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| Too many students, not enough time | 52 | 49%
| Students unprepared for advising sessions | 39 | 36%
| Little or no input into university-wide policies | 27 | 25%
| Ambiguous, shifting policies | 20 | 18%
| Lack of respect from administrators | 19 | 18%
| Poor coordination with other academic units | 17 | 16%
Advising is not a professional priority for the faculty/staff in our unit 16 15
Little or no input into college policies 14 14
Little or no input into academic unit policies 13 13
Discomfort in dealing with students’ ‘personal’ issues 9 9
Lack of respect from students 7 7
Students coming to me, hoping I’ll override someone else’s advice 7 7
Lack of respect from other faculty 6 6
Faculty or administrators question my advice or authority 5 5
Students questioning my advice or authority 3 3

N = 106

Faculty reported that the advising of students in scheduled appointments takes up the bulk of their time (39.4%), while conducting drop-in advising visits by students is close behind (24.2%). Respondents reported spending 9.7% of their total advising time on correspondence with students related to advising, 8.7% of their time on record-keeping related to advising, 4.7% of their time on the planning and scheduling of advising appointments, and 4.4% on committee work related to academic advising.

Summary / Further Research Opportunities

The results of this survey show that a majority of faculty respondents – more than three out of five – are working in colleges and universities that employ the “faculty only” model of academic advising. Since the faculty-only model has been adopted by just 15% of the academic units across all of higher education (Tuttle, 2000), further study is needed to confirm the prevalence of this model in communication and understand why it remains so strongly favored in this discipline.

In almost half of the institutions represented by our respondents, tenure-track faculty alone are carrying the burden of providing academic advising to undergraduate majors. None of the respondents reported use of undergraduate peer advisers, graduate
student advisers, or the mass advising format that is commonly used to help ease the burden placed on faculty advisers. This is another issue that warrants further study and explanation.

More than half of faculty respondents said academic advising training was “rarely” or “never” provided to them, even though a similar number said they had taken advantage of training at least once. We know that the quality of academic advising can be improved when training is made available to faculty. We also know that academic advising is a huge part of the job for faculty, even if it is an unstated expectation (Kramer, 2003). Given that only about half of respondents reported satisfaction with the current level of resource support for academic advising in their unit, it would seem beneficial to look at ways to increase training opportunities for faculty who advice.

The overall response rate of 20% is a cause for concern. Babbie’s primer on research methods makes the claim that nothing less than 50% would be considered adequate – although Babbie’s judgment is made in the context of postal surveys (1990). Couper identifies several online surveys that achieved response rates in excess of 40%, but also notes the plethora of survey design and methodological variables that impact survey response (2000). Therefore, without having done any kind of pilot study for this research, it is difficult to say whether 20% should be considered “adequate” response by those targeted for participation. Perhaps more worrisome than the overall response rate, however, is the lack of response to individual items by those who did participate.

For example, while 102 respondents (97%) were able to categorize the level of support for academic advising within their academic unit, only 97 (91%) were able to respond to the query about coordination of advising information, resources, and services in that unit. When respondents were asked to compare their academic unit to others on campus, even fewer were able to do so in regard to level of support (90 respondents, or 86%) or in regard to coordination of that support within the unit versus other units on campus (85 respondents, or 80%). This leads to the conclusion that while participants can readily identify support available to them, they cannot identify the extent to which that support is made available to other faculty in the unit, or the support in the unit as compared to other units on campus.
It is difficult to assume faculty respondents have no knowledge
of coordination across campus. The data show respondents
averaged more than ten years of work experience at their present
institution and more than 16 years of experience in academe.
Having that much time “in the trenches” gives plenty of
opportunity for faculty to learn about how they and their peers
relate to others both professionally and organizationally. Further
study is warranted to determine what might be responsible for
apparent faculty ignorance in this area.

The responses to questions about academic advising challenges
show that the burdens reported by faculty in communication
disciplines are common to those of college faculty in all disciplines
(Kramer, 2003). Faculty members dedicate the bulk of their time to
one-on-one meetings with students, and spend lesser amounts of
time with correspondence, paperwork, scheduling, and committee
action. The oft-heard complaint of too many students and too little
time heads the list of biggest challenges to faculty, with nearly half
of respondents citing this as an issue for them. More than two out
of three faculty reported complaints of unprepared students. One in
four indicated they lacked input into policies that affect their
advising relationships. Studies consistently show that teachers who
are engaged with students, empowered to make decisions, and
offered opportunities for professional development are the most
satisfied with their jobs (Bowers, 1986; Dvorak & Phillips, 2001).
It would seem beneficial to do further study on ways to provide
more training and empowerment to faculty, to increase their job
satisfaction and help them become more effective advisers.

More than three-quarters of the respondents (78, or 73%)
agreed that they experienced discomfort in dealing with students’
“personal” issues at least some of the time, and nine respondents
(9%) indicated this is “always” or “usually” a problem. This was
surprising, given that communication faculty are among the higher
education professionals that one might reasonably expect to be the
least reticent about discussing personal issues with students.
Further research is warranted to verify these concerns by faculty
and the impact of these concerns on effective academic advising.

The design of this study was such that respondents could not
make open-ended comments. Since faculty in large measure
indicated they have problems that are known to be stressful and
demoralizing – too many students to advise and not enough time to
do it, for example – it would be beneficial to allow faculty to explain in their own words how these frustrations affect academic advising.

The decision-makers who lead and manage higher education organizations have been characterized as rational individuals who “match marginal resources with preferred priorities” (Chafee, 1991, p. 264). They have also been portrayed as somewhat hapless bystanders in an organizational process that allows “problems and solutions [to] become attached to choice opportunities” to facilitate change (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 162). To paraphrase both Chafee and Birnbaum, the author would like to think that this research has identified some “preferred priorities” that are not being addressed within the communication disciplines. Perhaps the research has also identified a few “choice opportunities” that leaders in the communication disciplines can address to improve the quality of their academic program services. After all, what is more important to us than assuring the academic success of our students, and the increased relevancy of our discipline within academe and within society at large? This is an issue that can no longer be avoided by teachers and scholars within the communication disciplines.

References


Mastrodicasa, J. M. (2001, March). *But you teach chemistry, how can you advise me at orientation?* Paper presented at the annual conference of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, Seattle, WA.


