Communication Apprehension and Academic Advising: Advising the Communicatively Apprehensive Student

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Communication apprehension, broadly defined, is the anxiety associated with communicating with others. As many as 20% of students may suffer from high levels of communication apprehension, interfering with their ability to communicate effectively with their academic advisors. The author offers suggestions for responding to the needs of communicatively apprehensive advisees.

For the past two decades a great deal of research in human communication has addressed the concept of communication apprehension (Richmond & McCroskey, 1989). McCroskey (1984) defines communication apprehension (CA) as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person" (p. 13). CA is part of one's personality or predisposition for behavior and has a variety of effects on behavior. For example, those with high levels of CA often avoid contact with others, withdraw from social or task interactions, make academic and occupational choices that make relatively few communication demands, and may even make housing choices that limit incidental contact with others (Richmond & McCroskey).

Those with high levels of CA suffer negative interpersonal perceptions from others. Highly apprehensive individuals are viewed as less competent, more anxious, less assertive, less responsive, less sociable, less friendly, less attractive, and less likely to emerge as a candidate for leadership. Those with high CA are often not as successful in the workplace and in social interactions (e.g., those with high CA do not perform as well in employment interviews as those with low CA). In addition, highly apprehensive individuals report far fewer social contacts than less apprehensive individuals (Richmond & McCroskey, 1989).

Students with high CA are generally not as successful in the educational environment as those with low CA. For example, those who are less talkative (a characteristic of high CA) are perceived as less intelligent and receive less attention and less favorable evaluations from instructors. Scores on scholastic aptitude tests and grade point averages also tend to be lower (Richmond & McCroskey, 1989).

Some evidence exists that retention rates are lower for highly apprehensive students (Ericson & Gardner, 1992; McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989). It makes sense that students with high CA are higher retention risks, for studies have shown that frequent, quality interactions with faculty and professional staff increase student retention and academic success (Centra & Rock, 1971; Earl, 1988; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Frost, 1991; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Tinto, 1989). Students with high CA are likely to be at risk of failing to achieve frequent, quality contacts.

A few studies have addressed the role of CA in retention. Chandler, Cosner, and Spies (1979) found a relationship between generalized (not communication) anxiety and nonpersistence among college students who were taking a specific course. McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, and Payne (1989) reported that students with high CA were more likely to drop out of college. This effect was strongest in the first two years of college. Finally, Ericson and Gardner (1992) concluded that students with high CA are most at risk for dropping out of college within one or two years.

Some evidence, then, seems to indicate that CA associated with interacting with faculty and professional staff may play a role in retention. Because academic advising is one of the more common scenarios in which faculty or professional staff interact on a one-on-one basis with students outside the classroom, advising provides an important setting in which to combat the negative effects of CA.

Identifying Apprehensive Students

Several well-researched measures are readily available to advisors who wish to assess advisees' levels of CA. The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) is the most widely used measure of its kind (Richmond & McCroskey, 1989), although shorter scales are available. The Situational Communication Apprehension Measure (Richmond & McCroskey) and the Faculty/Advisor Communication Apprehension Measure (Hawkins, 1991) both...
Comprehensive Communication
Apprehension

In the absence of a specific measure of CA, advisors might be alerted to its presence by any or a combination of the following behaviors: failure to attend scheduled advising sessions; failure to seek assistance, even when in obvious academic difficulty; failure to follow through on referrals made by the academic advisor; and a general lack of responsiveness when interacting with academic advisors (including diverted gaze, body oriented away from the advisor, and minimal responses to questions). Whether or not such behaviors signal the presence of CA, students who engage in them are probably in need of additional guidance.

**How To Reduce CA in the Academic Advising Setting**

Having identified an at-risk student, what can be done to address CA in the academic advising setting? One important note at this point is that many of the techniques described below not only improve academic advising with communicatively apprehensive students but with other students as well. Specifically, many of these techniques should prove effective in advising academically underprepared students, who exhibit many of the same characteristics (e.g., low self-concept, deficiency in basic skills, and hesitancy to seek out support services; Frost, 1991).

**Seek Students Out**

Apprehensive students avoid interactions that provoke anxiety (e.g., with their academic advisors). Therefore, even when they are in serious academic difficulty, they may not seek out an advisor. Although students are ultimately responsible for the consequences of their actions, advisors who recognize the special needs of apprehensive students can take steps to prevent or mitigate advisee trouble. Many academic advisors advocate intrusive advising (e.g., checking with instructors regarding student progress and seeking out students experiencing academic difficulty) for at-risk students. In short, rather than waiting for the student to show up, the advisor goes to the student. This approach may have value for advisors working with communicatively apprehensive students.

**Provide a Comfortable Setting**

Reduce the effects of CA by doing whatever possible to reduce anxiety. If possible, provide a comfortable waiting area. It might be helpful to set appointments to avoid periods of prolonged and uncertain waiting. In summary, do whatever is feasible to provide a relaxing environment for the communicatively apprehensive advisee.

**Reduce Uncertainty**

Increased feelings of CA in the advising setting may be traced to uncertainty about advising procedures. Students, especially communicatively apprehensive students, may wonder how they are supposed to behave in the advising session, what documents they should bring, what they should have prepared, what will happen during the advising session, or what they will have to do after the advising session. Uncertainty can be high, especially for inexperienced students, and high levels of uncertainty can lead to high levels of anxiety.

Uncertainty can be reduced in a variety of ways. For example, during preregistration or registration advisors can hold general information sessions for all interested students, targeting students who are not experienced with the advising system. During such sessions students can be informed not only about the institution’s registration process but also about advising. Students can be told such mundane things as what documents to bring, what sorts of questions will be asked, how long to expect to spend in an advising session, and so on. The introductory general information session can be an important tool for setting expectations for the session, particularly in setting a positive tone for the interaction. Be sure to publicize such sessions well.

**Set Clear Expectations**

Another way to reduce uncertainty is to set clear expectations (such as those described above) and then satisfy them. Few things confuse and upset students more, especially communicatively apprehensive students, than being told one version and then having that version change. As much as possible, stick to a routine with which students can become familiar and comfortable. When change is necessary, integrate it slowly, with numerous announcements and explanations during the transition. Written
explanations of changes, including references to the way it used to be, may make the transition less painful for all students but particularly for communicatively apprehensive students who are loathe to approach an advisor or a fellow student for assistance.

Provide Structure

Booth-Butterfield (1986) found that communicatively apprehensive students performed better in situations where a high degree of structure was present. It follows from her findings that communicatively apprehensive advisees would benefit from high levels of structure in the academic advising session. Several ways of adding structure and predictability to the advising process have already been described, but more can be done with individual students. For example, a communicatively apprehensive student could be given a worksheet to fill out before the session that could then be used to structure the session itself. Worksheets could contain questions about coursework completed, requirements that have been (or remain to be) satisfied, schedule requests for the upcoming semester, extracurricular activities, career plans, and so on.

Help Students Take Control

Many students come to the advising session with a variety of negative and irrational thoughts that increase apprehension. One of the most common, in my experience, is the student’s feeling of being out of control. This fear is evidenced through such comments as, “I’ll never graduate,” “I don’t even know what classes I’m supposed to take,” and “I’m totally confused about what I’m supposed to do.” Experienced advisors are not surprised to hear these sorts of comments from advanced students as well as those who are less experienced.

The advisor can help students realize that they are in control of their destiny (in this case, college education). Interestingly, Frost (1991) argues that doing so has the added benefit of building an effective advisor/advisee relationship, characterized by independence rather than dependence. An effective method is to take students through requirements for graduation, one at a time, slowly, so that they truly understand them. This process is time consuming initially, but my experience is that once students are released from “graduation requirement phobia” they are empowered to take an active role in their own advising and are far less of an advising burden in the long run. In addition, having had the irrational fear of loss of control debunked, apprehensive students will enjoy a better relationship with the advisor.

Help Change Negative Attitudes

A related strategy is to help communicatively apprehensive students relabel their arousal before an advising session as excitement (or some other positive emotion) rather than dread (or some other negative one). Simple ways to do this include smiling at advisees, welcoming them into the office (or wherever advisees are seen), inviting them to take a seat, engaging in a small amount of pretask chitchat, selling the next semester’s course offerings (“We have some great new courses that I think you’d really enjoy”), remarking on progress toward the degree, and so on. These tactics encourage the advisee to associate positive feelings with advisement.

No doubt many other techniques could be used to improve advising of communicatively apprehensive students. I have listed some that make sense given our understanding of CA, as well as those with which I have had good experience. Although the stated goal of this paper was to suggest several practical approaches to reducing CA in the academic advising setting, another agenda is to raise awareness of the advising needs of all students, not only communicatively apprehensive ones. Academic advisors provide a vital link between the student and the academy and should be at the center of student retention efforts.

References


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