

# Faculty as Part of the Advising Equation: An Inquiry into Faculty Viewpoints on Advising

Randy K. Dillon, Southwest Missouri State University

Bradley J. Fisher, Southwest Missouri State University

*This study examines faculty advisor perspectives on faculty-student advising interactions. A survey questionnaire and two focus groups tapped faculty concerns about a variety of advising issues that faculty members feel contribute or detract from successful advising. Questions regarding the influence of the advising process, including the role of advisors and perceived student expectations, were also asked of advisors. Suggestions for improving the faculty-student advising relationship were also sought. Results suggest that advisors' knowledge of advising and preparation contribute to advising success. Advisors also reported a concern that the time and importance of good advising were not sufficiently recognized by upper-administrative personnel.*

“Our role must be to further engage faculty, not alienate them. A failure to engage faculty will result in NACADA becoming an association of professional advisors rather than a professional association for advisors” (Habley, 1994, p. 30). The need and the value of faculty advising are clearly documented in study after study. Frequent student/faculty interaction equals student academic success, satisfaction, and retention. Thus, faculty advising is seen as an integral component of the higher education system (Kramer & Kerr, 1994). Few researchers have looked at advising from a faculty perspective despite the predominant model of faculty advising at most institutions of higher education and its central role in student success. Although important to gain information from those that are most affected by advising, namely students, faculty members must not be left out of the advising equation. Habley (1994) reports that most first-time attendees of an orientation session at a NACADA conference consistently identified “the quality of faculty advising” as a major advising issue on their campuses (p. 25). The perception persists that many faculty members are uninterested, unskilled, and unconcerned (Habley, 1994). The atmosphere on college campuses may actually contribute to generalizations about poor faculty advising and lack of interest. Faculty members are often expected to advise students as part of their job responsibilities. Nevertheless, many new faculty

members do not receive sufficient training in advising (Fiddler & Alicea, 1996). In addition, faculty members who have advised for some time sometimes do not receive the appropriate information or instruction on course changes and sequencing of curriculum guidelines. The problem may be exacerbated because many faculty members believe that advising does not carry much weight for job promotion and tenure (Endler, 1994). As a result, advising is often looked upon as a necessary burden. Furthermore, systems for evaluating advisors and providing feedback on advising improvement and effectiveness are lacking.

Although negative perceptions persist regarding faculty members as advisors, when students are asked about the quality of advisement, they often report that faculty members are interested, skilled, and concerned advisors (Habley, 1994). Tinto (1989) confirmed that academic and social integration is a determinant to improved student retention and the way to such integration is regular and rewarding interpersonal contact among students, members of the faculty, and professional staff. Frequent advisor-student interactions of high interpersonal quality have a positive effect on students' intellectual, academic, and personal outcomes (Koerin, 1991; Pascarella, 1980; Shields, 1994). Research suggests that regular, quality interpersonal interactions between faculty advisors and students boost the probability of student retention and academic achievement that eventually leads to graduation. However, the question remains: How does advising affect or benefit faculty members?

Faculty members as advisors are important components of the advising equation, and the purpose of the present study was to engage faculty members in a discussion on advising. Faculty members are expected to take on different roles, and the role that was explored through the research presented in this paper is that of advisor from a faculty perspective. Therefore, the word “advisor” is used throughout to denote a faculty advisor. Advisors were asked what they believed students seek in an advising relationship. Suggestions for improving the advisor-student relationship were sought. Information was collected on advisors' perceptions concerning the roles and responsibilities of advisors as well as

other factors that could affect the advising relationship. Input was also sought on related issues, such as actions faculty members have taken to improve advising, advisee preparations before meeting with advisors, and the consideration of advising in promotion and tenure decisions. The overall intent of the study was to gather information from advisors to identify those factors that contribute to and detract from successful advisor-student interactions.

### The Survey

This study was conducted at a medium-sized university in the midwestern United States. Advising services at this university utilizes professional and faculty advisors. In addition, a few departments have in-house advising centers for students majoring in the departmental curricula. For a majority of students who have declared their major, faculty members are the advisors. Unless there is a problem, such as a student has probation status or is otherwise at risk for academic failure, students are encouraged, but not required, to see their advisors. Faculty and staff advisors are invited to increase their advising knowledge and skills through a nonmandatory 12-hour intensive Master Advisor Workshop conducted by the university's advisement center staff. Four separate workshops are traditionally held during a calendar year.

The survey questionnaire contained six questions pertaining to demographic information. In addition to identifying sex, age, and race, each respondent was asked how many years he or she had been with the current institution, the years of prior employment at another academic institution, and to specify a terminal degree. The first part of the questionnaire included eight Likert-type questions about advising and advising related issues, which are listed in Table 1. Respondents were asked to answer these questions on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 anchored as "strongly disagree" and 10 anchored as "strongly agree." The second part of the questionnaire primarily consisted of eight open-ended questions on advising. These questions included, "What do you think an advisor's responsibilities are to his/her advisees?" "What factors contribute to successful faculty-student advising?" and "What are problems in faculty-student advising interactions?" Respondents were invited to write down their responses to these eight questions.

The survey questionnaire was sent out to 90 faculty members in each of the six departments in an academic college. All six departments use faculty advisors. To insure that the sample was representative of various department sizes, participants were randomly selected proportionate to the size of

their associated department within the college. Questionnaires were coded to help identify participants for a follow-up focus group. A letter from the investigators was attached to the survey. It contained an explanation about the code and the focus group. Respondents were asked to answer the questions within the context of advising undergraduate students. Each of the questionnaires was hand delivered to faculty campus mailboxes.

### Respondents

Out of the 90 survey questionnaires distributed, 50 respondents completed and returned the instrument (56%). Twenty-three of the respondents were males. The average age of respondents was 45 years (range 37–66). The years of employment at the university ranged from 1 to 30 years with the average term of employment being 9.3 years. Thirty-four respondents reported having a terminal degree (e.g., Ph.D. or M.F.A.) while 16 reported having other (e.g., M.A. or M.S.) degrees. The racial makeup of the respondents included 45 White and 1 Hispanic advisor. Four respondents did not include personal information about race.

### Focus Groups

Basch (1987, p. 41) described focus groups as "a qualitative research technique used to obtain data about feelings and opinions of small groups of participants about a given problem, experience, service, or other phenomenon." Two focus groups met approximately 3 to 4 weeks after the administration of the survey questionnaires and provided us with a means to obtain feedback on survey questionnaire responses. Participants for the two focus groups were identified through code numbers on the returned survey questionnaires. The first focus group consisted of 11 participants; 9 participants were in the second group. All six departments in the college were represented in the focus groups by at least two participants. We served as moderators for the focus groups. An interview guide was developed that closely followed the questions on the survey questionnaire, but we also probed for additional information about the topic of advising. The conversations of both focus groups were audio taped and subsequently transcribed.

### Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to examine participants' responses and to identify key categories for both the open-ended questions on the survey and those presented at the focus group meetings. Basch's system (1987) of sorting responses into categories to note important themes and then illustrating these

themes through quotations of typical responses within each category was used in this study. Two independent reviewers coded the qualitative data, and their work resulted in a reliability interrater agreement rate of 94%.

**Results**

Results of the first part of the survey questionnaire are presented in Table 1. The second part of the questionnaire invited respondents to write in their comments to a series of open-ended questions. To make reporting of responses clearer, the percentage and number of participants who responded in a particular way are indicated.

Thirty-nine of 50 (78%) participants who returned a survey responded to a query that addressed the factors that contribute to successful advisor-student interactions. The advisors noted that the top factor (46%, *n* = 18) was preparation by both the advisor and student for the advising session. One respondent wrote, “Student making an appointment and letting the advisor know in advance what the topic or purpose of appointment is helps with preparation.” Another respondent reported, “Each party is responsible and willing to work; the advisee thinks of us as a *team* [emphasis in the original], not a hand-holder.” Another factor contributing to successful advising was the advisor’s knowledge (31%, *n* = 12). Two additional factors noted by advisors were taking time for advising (26%, *n* = 10) and courtesy, kindness, and friendliness between advisors and their students (21%, *n* = 8).

When asked about problems that detract from the success of advisor-student interactions, advisors frequently reported that the student being unprepared or misinformed (41%, *n* = 16) created inter-

action difficulties. One respondent reported:

I think the hardest part is that they come to you and expect you to tell them what to do. There are a lot of advisors who do that and a lot of students come to me two years behind because they were advised inappropriately, and now they’re not going to be able to graduate because they didn’t follow the proper sequence. Many of them [*students*] don’t read the course catalog.

Unprepared and misinformed advisors were the subjects of another reported problem (31%, *n* = 12). Several respondents admitted their lack of knowledge concerning an individual student’s academic career and needs. The reasons ranged from “Advisors who are rushed by other responsibilities sometimes don’t listen very well” to “inconsistency in departmental policies, especially the ones that are not openly stated.” One respondent admitted, “I never know who my advisees are. There’s no communication between office staff who assign advisors to students and faculty members who advise.”

Respondents were asked to list up to four characteristics that they thought students sought in an advising relationship. Out of the 44 participants who responded to this question, 77% (*n* = 34) believed that students look for advisors who possess a clear understanding and knowledge of requirements. Respondents commented that a good advisor was “someone who knows the answers or can look them up” and “someone who gets students out of here as quickly as possible.” In addition, advisors believe students look for advisors who provide course/degree counseling guidance (45%, *n* = 20), who are caring and interested (43%, *n* = 19), and who are available and accessible (30%, *n* = 13).

**Table 1** Advisors’ responses to Likert-type questions

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
My advisement sessions with my students are productive.	7.90	1.37	48
Advising is a large priority to me in my overall job duties.	7.06	2.84	48
My students come prepared for the advisement sessions.	5.33	2.21	45
I am prepared for advisement sessions with my advisees.	7.49	1.92	47
I spend enough time with my students to get the job done.	8.75	1.58	47
An important part of advisement is career planning.	7.66	1.92	50
Advising is valued by upper administration.	4.96	2.63	50
Administrators consider a faculty member’s advisement load and responsibilities in promotion and tenure decisions.	2.32	1.67	50

Note. 1 = strongly disagree; 10 = strongly agree.

Respondents were asked to outline their responsibilities regarding advisees. Out of the 45 who responded to this question, 76% ( $n = 34$ ) identified being knowledgeable as the primary responsibility of advisors. One respondent commented that advisors should “take seriously the student’s goals and to give them the most accurate information about options available to the student and potential consequences of each option.” The second most highly ranked responsibility of a faculty advisor was to act as a guide for the advisee (47%,  $n = 21$ ). One respondent wrote that an advisor serves “to facilitate discovery of solutions to problems and to guide students.” Being sincere and caring (31%,  $n = 14$ ) and being available (27%,  $n = 12$ ) were also identified as advisor responsibilities.

Respondents were asked to describe actions that they had taken to improve their advising. Out of the 40 respondents, 45% ( $n = 18$ ) mentioned that being knowledgeable is the primary means for improvement. In specifying this characteristic for improvement, one respondent wrote that knowledge entails “keeping up with information in general education [requirements] and my field.” Another respondent noted that to improve his skills he “learned more about the catalog, other programs, and the bureaucracy of registration.” Attending the university’s Master Advisor Training workshop was also mentioned by 45% ( $n = 18$ ), and 18% ( $n = 7$ ) cited that keeping good records was a means of improving their own advising.

When asked if their advisees do anything to prepare themselves before advising sessions, of the 42 who responded, 83% ( $n = 35$ ) said “yes,” while 17% ( $n = 7$ ) said “no.” [*Calculations subject to rounding error.*] Students bringing a proposed course list or trial registration to the advisement meeting was the most frequently cited form of advising preparation by students (38%,  $n = 16$ ). One respondent wrote, “I ask them to bring a list of courses being taken and courses completed. I ask them (when appropriate) to bring in ideas about directions they wish to explore when they finish their Bachelor’s degree.” Respondents related that students brought to appointments other evidence of advising preparation, such as academic audits (36%,  $n = 15$ ), 4-year degree plans of study (14%,  $n = 6$ ), and lists of specific questions (14%,  $n = 6$ ). One of the respondents who reported that advisees do not come in prepared wrote, “Students frequently expect advisors to tell them what to take. Most haven’t really looked over the catalog.”

Advisors were asked whether advisement load and responsibilities should be considered in promotion and tenure decisions. Out of 44 respon-

dents who answered this question, 91%, ( $n = 40$ ) said that, because good advising takes time, it should be considered in promotion decisions. One respondent working toward promotion and tenure reported: “The time spent with students is also time not doing something else. Two hours a week in advising amounts to over 30 hours a semester. I could write part of an article in that time.”

The “important responsibility” of advisors was the second highest-rated reason given why advising should be considered in promotion and tenure decisions (13/40 = 33%). One respondent spoke to both reasons of time and responsibility:

In many cases faculty carry disproportionate advising loads to compensate for those advisors who refuse or are incapable of providing accurate genuinely useful assistance to students. After all, without students, we would all be flippin’ burgers somewhere. Generally—service to our “customers” should be the highest priority for tenure/promotion.

When asked about improvements in advisor-student interactions, 35 of the 50 (70%) respondents offered suggestions. Twelve respondents (34%) suggested that advising duties be assigned to those faculty members who want to advise. Summarizing the importance of advising and how it should be recognized, one participant wrote: “Advising ought to count in promotion and tenure decisions. It takes time and effort to do it well and is extremely important. Some faculty are particularly gifted at advising. Reward them for these gifts and services.”

Additional suggestions, each cited by nine respondents (26%), included providing more training for faculty members and allocating advising to a professional staff of advisors. Those who suggested that more training was an appropriate means of improving advising referred primarily to the master advisor workshops and new faculty training workshops. On the subject of professional advisors, one respondent said, “Hire a full-time staff to do student advising.” Other respondents defined professional advising as that done by a few select, trained faculty members who are compensated. One respondent wrote, “Some people are good advisors and enjoy it—many do not and are not good advisors. A designated advisor(s) per department is a good idea with subsequent release time from other duties.”

## Discussion

The information gained from the questionnaires functions as the main platform for the discussion of advisor concepts about advising students. The two

focus groups served to reinforce as well as expand the data collected from the survey questionnaires, and excerpts from these focus groups will be included throughout the discussion.

### *What Contributes to and Detracts from Successful Advising*

Although advisors cited a number of factors that promote successful advising interactions with their students, advisors understand that knowledge performs an essential role. They believe that students first look for knowledge in advisors, and advisors have made attempts to increase and perfect knowledge to improve their advising by attending the university's advisor training workshops and by keeping good records. Advisors said that benefits derived from this knowledge include a better understanding of degree programs and requirements in one's own department as well as departments around the university. Understanding the university general education requirements is also important as is understanding the current and projected job market. Knowledge of requirements and advising can also provide a clearer understanding of students' points of view.

Other interesting aspects regarding advisor knowledge arise from this study. For example, advisors equate the problems from an advisor's lack of knowledge or preparation with problems associated with a student's lack of knowledge. Advisors suggested that advising can be improved if steps were focused on advisor knowledge. They said that advising duties should be assigned to those who want to advise (and probably have the knowledge base) or to a professional staff. They also suggested that advisor knowledge can be improved through more training. However, alerting students to their responsibilities and increasing their knowledge about the advisement process was a surprisingly low priority in relation to other proposals regarding improved advising.

According to the advisors' responses, guiding students through requirements and eventually through the completion of their degrees is another factor of successful advising. Advisors must be knowledgeable to affect appropriate and effective guidance. One advisor said that advisor responsibilities included, "guiding student through to their degree, and helping students choose the career path they will benefit most from." Another advisor said that responsibilities included, "steering them toward elective courses, encouraging activities like internships, and helping students discover and articulate their own goals." Advisors take these responsibilities seriously and advising is a large priority of their

overall job duties (see Table 1, item 2).

In open-ended responses on the survey questionnaire and in the focus groups, advisors often commented that they were usually more prepared for advising than were their students (see Table 1), and the difference in these ratings was significant ( $t(44) = 2.82, p < 0.05$ ). The questionnaire results show that advisors feel that knowledge is the most important attribute of successful advising. They stressed that it is more influential in establishing the student-advisor relationship than interpersonal characteristics such as courtesy, sincerity, being interested, and being accessible. This result does not suggest that faculty advisors are not concerned or do not consider their personal demeanor when interacting with their students. Several references to interpersonal qualities were made on the questionnaire and in the two follow-up focus groups. However, the results suggest that faculty members, in their roles as advisors, are more focused on delivering correct information than in developing or improving interpersonal relationships with students. All the sincerity and friendliness toward students is not worth much if the advice given is incorrect or not in the advisee's best interest. As one advisor said in a focus group:

I often get students who are very adamant, and who are very mad that their advisor screwed up their schedules, and who can they talk to [?]. I don't know legally about what the responsibilities are for advising or signing for someone else. It can get scary sometimes to know what that is. That's why I don't like my advisees going someplace else, and when I sign for somebody else I go "Okay, who's your advisor?"

The ranking of interpersonal qualities below knowledge could be interpreted to mean that advisors have confidence in their interpersonal skills. Although advisors were not asked directly about the importance of communication skills to successful advising, they reported that they spend enough time in advising to get the job done (see Table 1, item 5). The majority of respondents (74%,  $n = 37$ ) made reference to communication skills in the open-ended portion of the survey questionnaire. Most of these responses used the terms "honest and trustworthy," "knowing how to listen," and "being empathetic" to describe qualities important to establishing the advisor-student relationship. However, some of the respondents commented more pointedly to the issue of communication skills. The following quote from one of the focus group respondents epitomizes the responses:

Listen and understand the students' needs, fears, dreams, goals, stumbling blocks, etc. Good communication can help students sort out all of the above so they can make their own decisions. Good rapport and mutual respect. The advisor needs to take the time needed to answer questions courteously and correctly. Faculty should self-monitor their actions and body language so the student doesn't feel he/she is "bothering" the advisor.

#### *Advisement and Promotion/Tenure*

A majority of the respondents believed that the load and responsibilities of advising should be considered in promotion and tenure, primarily because effective advising takes time away from teaching, research, and other services that are generally considered in promotion decisions. Advising is also an important responsibility, and good advising should be rewarded. One advisor wrote, "Successful advising takes time and preparation . . . like a class, and because it requires a great deal of contact time, yes, advising should be considered." Despite claims made by administration and research department personnel about the importance of good advising to a student's retention, grade-point average, and entrance into graduate school, respondents seemed to be realistic about the weight that is given to advising in tenure and promotion decisions. In one of the focus group interviews an advisor stated:

After a while you know that it is not part of your evaluation, not part of your tenure promotion. It's hard to break down the hours you spend advising. You're doing it because you want to do it, and that leads to your satisfaction. But nobody is going to reward you for it.

The advisors' perceptions of how advising should be considered in tenure and promotion decisions clearly differ from their perceptions of how advising is viewed by administrators who are making promotion decisions. Responses from advisors on both the open-ended questions of the survey and in the focus group discussions support the results from the Likert-type portion of the survey questionnaire. Advisors moderately agreed that advising is valued by upper administration (see Table 1, item 7). Furthermore, advisors strongly disagreed with the notion that administrators consider a faculty member's advisement load and responsibilities in tenure and promotion (see Table 1, item 8).

Because "good" advising is difficult to assess, it is hard to factor into promotion and tenure decisions, and it may also be an expected responsibility associated with the job of being a faculty member. One

advisor in the focus groups said:

They [*administration*] can easily evaluate your teaching or how many articles you are producing, the number of artworks you're producing. But there is very little about how your advising is going to help you get promotion or tenure. It's an extra. You're expected to do it.

However, the reputation of being a good advisor can act as a double-edged sword resulting in an uneven distribution of students among faculty advisors (Vowell, 1995). Another advisor in the focus groups commented that although one may officially have 35 advisees, he or she may be really advising 70 because students recognize the faculty member as a good advisor. Therefore, particular advisors are not getting credit for these additional advisees and the time that the extra work is taking away from scholarly and other academic activities that weigh more heavily in decisions for tenure and promotion.

#### *Suggested Improvements in Faculty-Student Advising*

Suggestions for improvement were split between assigning advising to those faculty members who want the responsibility and do a good job advising, providing more training, and designating advising to a professional staff of advisors. Advising is a responsibility that faculty respondents believed should be taken seriously. However, one can find individual faculty members who do not want to be bothered with advising students and other faculty members who are taking up the slack. Often the faculty members who take on the extra responsibility that had been shed by someone else are the ones that gain the reputation of being good and willing advisors. Faculty members should be given the appropriate support, including training and updates on changes in the advising field. In large academic departments or programs, a staff of professional advisors can provide an advantage to the student as well as to the faculty. The common ties among these diverse suggestions are the responses that suggest that to be a good advisor one needs to be knowledgeable. More important, knowledge about advising is assured when advising is done by individuals who not only know, but want to learn, want to advise, and are rewarded for doing a good job.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

Responses were from faculty advisors at one college in a large university, and advising in this particular college may differ from that in other colleges. In addition, this particular college has departments

identified only with the arts or social sciences. Previous research suggests that faculty engagement toward advising may differ between physical and social sciences, and between those departments who specialize in basic and applied studies (Neuman & Finaly-Neuman, 1990).

Researchers should consider looking at comparisons between new advisors (5 years and less of service) and those advisors who have advised for longer periods. Perhaps a faculty advisor's position and experience results in different responses to queries about successful advising. Because previous research has shown that the gender of the student can affect the type of advising relationship wanted (Crockett & Crawford, 1989), another appropriate study could concentrate on how faculty advisors differ on perspectives by gender.

Another interesting project would compare and contrast advisor and student perspectives. To gain these perspectives, a study where both advisors and students are administered the same survey and then are subsequently gathered together in a joint discussion on advising topics could be conducted. The following questions could be posed: "Do students and advisors identify the same items as detracting or enhancing the advisement process?" and "Do students rank knowledge and interpersonal characteristics in the same order as do the faculty members?"

Several studies have examined advising from the viewpoint of the student, and many others suggest strategies for training faculty and professional advisors. Fewer studies have looked at advising from the faculty perspective. The results from this study suggest that faculty members are an important part of the advising equation. They have input regarding strategies that work, practices that do not work, and are very interested in improving advising. They also hold strong opinions on being recognized for good advising, the consequences of advising on promotion and tenure, and the effect of advising on overall workload. These issues that are important to faculty members need to be further examined to understand how to provide faculty members with incentives and motivation for engaging in effective advising.

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## Authors' Note

Randy K. Dillon is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication and Mass Media at Southwest Missouri State University. His publications include "The influence of Ethnicity, Communication Competence, Approach, and Avoidance," in the *International Journal of Listening*, and "Diversity Board," in *Speech Communication Teacher*. Dillon has traveled extensively throughout the world and has taught in many countries, including Japan, South Korea, and England. His research has primarily focused on communication and on helping relationships such as those found in instruction, counseling, and advising. His current research interest includes computer-mediated communication and its impact on interaction in instructional contexts.

*Bradley J. Fisher is Director and Professor of Gerontology at Southwest Missouri State University. His publications include "She Won't Be Dancing Much Anyway: Surgeons, Surgical Nurses, and Elderly Patients," in the Journal of Qualitative Health Research, "Successful Aging, Volunteerism and Generativity in Later Life," in the International Journal of Aging and Human Development, and "Successful Aging and Creativity in Later Life," in the Journal of Aging Studies. His current research interests include the self-concept in later life, the*

*impact of Alzheimer's disease on family caregivers, living environments for the elderly, and innovative teaching techniques.*

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Randy K. Dillon, Department of Communication and Mass Media, Southwest Missouri State University, 901 S. National Avenue, Springfield, Missouri 65804; Fax: (417) 836-4774; E-mail: rad986f@smsu.edu.*