Responsibility for Assessment of Academic Advising

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PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITY CONTROL OF ACADEMIC ADVISING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This brief addresses the issue of responsibility for assessment of academic advising in higher education. Recent scholarly research on academic advising assessment is summarized to present the issue’s background and increasing importance in the face of mounting cuts to higher education funding. Information is provided about recent Texas legislation requiring the state’s Higher Education Coordinating Board to develop a system for assessing academic advising at all state higher education institutions. In the absence of legislative mandates, scholars and practitioners in other states may develop and implement effective assessments (in close alignment with unique institutional missions) to meet regional accreditation and national educational standards. Perspectives are presented, followed by recommendations from the Missouri State University Advising Council for consideration by the institution’s administration.

A PROBLEM OF DOLLARS AND SENSE

Does today’s truth in higher education rest on the adage that “if it doesn’t make dollars, it doesn’t make sense?”

Shao and Shao (2011) discuss the plight of higher education in terms of financial pressures, budget cuts, and strategic financial planning that may require institutions to alter the very missions guiding the education of college students. Institutions that wish to avoid such core changes will adopt assessment practices that demonstrate to stakeholders that they meet expected educational standards. In the Imperatives for Change 2011 Annual Report, the Missouri Department of Higher Education highlighted a near 38 percent decline (in constant dollars) for state public higher education funding over the last decade. In the resulting economic climate, accountability is a key to survival of higher education institutions. According to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, 2009), accreditation is a “successful and well-tested system of quality assurance and quality improvement” that facilitates higher education accountability. Through institutional self-studies and external program reviews, colleges and universities may demonstrate to accrediting agencies (and thereby to stakeholders) that they meet expected educational standards. The necessity and value of assessment are not up for debate; however, who is most responsible for collecting accountability data for programs like academic advising that bridge academic and student support programs in higher education institutions?

Does it make more sense for legislators or academic professionals to coordinate the assessment of academic advising?
SNAPSHOT: SIGNIFICANCE AND BACKGROUND OF ACADEMIC ADVISING ASSESSMENT

With regard to assessment of academic advising, four primary areas of inquiry have emerged as outcomes extending beyond student satisfaction: Expectations, Retention, Engagement, and Learning.

Expectations: In its *Statement of Core Values in Academic Advising*, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA, 2004) suggested that the advising process should be shaped by understanding the needs of an institution and its students. Accreditation processes (CHEA, 2009) provide one measure of the extent to which institutions meet the needs and expectations of stakeholders, but additional research is needed to show how advising impacts specific elements contributing to student expectations related to success. Effective assessment may enhance understanding of the impact of advising on student progress toward educational and career goals.

Retention: Higher education institutions increasingly seek to retain enrolled students in the current economic climate (Shao & Shao, 2011). According to Nutt (2003), retention efforts must recognize academic advising as a valuable contributor to student success. Although the literature suggests that academic advising supports student success, Campbell and Nutt (2008) posited that the case may not be made explicitly enough.

Engagement: Overlapping initiatives contribute to student development more than isolated experiences (Braxton & McClendon, 2002; Kuh, 2001-2002; Kuh, Cponce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008; Landry, 2002; Patton, Morelon, Whitehead & Hossler, 2006; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson & Le, 2006; Shelton, 2003). Assessment across diverse institutional initiatives is complicated; however, regardless of the initiative, quality interaction between a student and a concerned individual on campus is a key contributor to college retention (Habley, 2004). An institution can facilitate this type of connection or engagement with campus educational and co-curricular programs through effective academic advising.

Learning: Hemwall and Trachte (2003) suggested that viewing advising as a learning process allows assessment of specific outcomes. Thus, the link between advising and student achievement can be demonstrated by revealing how the process helps students to develop specific skills and understanding necessary for success.

COMMUNICATING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

- Government, taxpayers, accrediting agencies, higher education institutions, advisors, students, and their families are all stakeholders in advising outcomes, though some outcomes may (on the surface) mean more to certain stakeholders.
- As research expands to more clearly iterate links between advising and each outcome, who is responsible for communicating links to each group of stakeholders?

The following section of this brief presents two perspectives on who is responsible for assessing academic advising: the legislature or individual higher education institutions.
**Assessment by Legislative Mandate (Texas)**

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB, 2009), in alignment with the state’s educational plan, aims to strengthen academic advising to address varying issues that impact student success. The THECB touted advising as a “cornerstone for successful retention programs” that often “receives insufficient support and focus” (p. 9). The THECB also reported that faculty advisors typically receive inadequate training or reward for providing quality academic advising. To strengthen advising in Texas undergraduate education, THECB suggested vertically integrating advising across all levels of education (P-16), creating purposeful advising interactions based on academic plans that align with individual student needs, and redesigning processes to include academic advising in faculty tenure and promotion considerations. These aims are admirable; however, the THECB apparently has not advanced them at the legislature’s preferred pace.

The Texas Governor signed 2011 legislation requiring the THECB to develop and implement (by September 2012) a method to assess advising quality and effectiveness at all state institutions of higher education. The THECB is required to consult with academic advisors and other appropriate representatives of Texas colleges and universities to develop the assessment process. The bill’s author, Senator Zaffirini, referred to advising as a currently underused key predictor of undergraduate success and suggested that a formal assessment system will contribute to student success and degree completion. Advising proponents may applaud the rationale behind this legislation, though concerns arise regarding institutional autonomy and applicability of standardized assessment for a process that is practiced differently across institutions and is unique to every college student.

**Assessment as Opportunity for Authentic Inquiry (Missouri State University)**

The Missouri government has not mandated formal, standardized, statewide assessment of advising, though Missouri State University (MSU) did receive related recommendations from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) in the 2005 comprehensive evaluative report. The HLC stated that, “recognition that assessment and evaluation is vital for continuous improvement, and which has informed the academic divisions’ planning processes” has been “unevenly applied in non-instructional and academic support areas across campuses” and suggested “successful implementation of improvement strategies in the assessment of student learning outcomes” (p. 12). Perhaps HLC’s suggestion motivated the Provost’s 2008 charter of a campus-wide Advising Council charged to evaluate MSU advising, recommend improvements, identify and encourage successful existing practices, and enhance MSU advising consistency and quality. The Advising Council identified student learning outcomes linked to advising and piloted an instrument for formal launch in fall 2012 to assess identified outcomes. MSU advising professionals were able to autonomously develop an instrument that is broad enough to cover a decentralized advising system, yet is aligned with MSU’s public affairs mission and advising mission statement.

Significant work remains for MSU to develop a full advising assessment process; however, MSU is privileged to self-direct development of this plan, unbound by legislative mandate. MSU’s initiative is allowing for authentic inquiry into how advising impacts student retention, engagement, and learning. Additionally, the assessment process can illustrate how MSU meets stakeholder expectations. For example, in 2005, the HLC indicated that in self-study discussions of advising, there was “no comment about ‘pre-advising’ or 2+2 advising guides” (p. 17) to assist potential transfer students. Pre-advising was already being provided, but without a process to evaluate and assess advising practice, it was not visible to the HLC. An effective assessment feedback loop can allow MSU to use advising as a tool to meet transfer student expectations while promoting engagement, learning, and retention among this growing group of stakeholders (and others).
1. In political arenas, support institutional autonomy over legislatively mandated assessment of academic advising.
2. Request MSU Advising Council consultation to inform related areas of the next self-study.
3. Allocate a budget to assist the Advising Council with meeting its multifaceted charge.
4. Assist the Advising Council with campus-wide implementation of the emerging advising assessment plan.
5. Facilitate widespread and effective communication of advising assessment results with all stakeholders.

REFERENCES


Shelton, E. N. (2003). Faculty support and student retention. *Journal of Nursing Education, 42*, 68-76.