

Chapter 4

ACADEMIC ADVISING, INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH,
AND OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT*Elizabeth G. Creamer and Susan H. Frost*

Some directors of academic advising programs and academic advisors may find it surprising that institutional research and outcomes assessment have much to offer those who design and manage advising programs. However, effective institutional research and outcomes assessment can reveal much about current realities and future development of colleges and universities. These activities can provide valuable support for advising managers and advisors who set out to answer three important questions about the advising program: What is happening now? What positive change should take place? and How can we effect such change? Articulating these questions is the first step to planning for a more effective future; within these activities advising, institutional research, and outcomes assessment can form an exciting and productive campus partnership. This chapter investigates such a partnership and suggests some collaborative approaches for campuses to consider.

Institutional Research

Advising managers and advisors who ask what is happening, what should change, and how-change should take place are initiating efforts to plan for, evaluate, and improve academic advising services. The answers to these questions might include insights about student populations, students' views of the academic experience, and their satisfaction with the advising they receive. Answers might also include the opinions of campus constituencies about the support students receive or should receive. Gathering and analyzing such environmental information is an early step in planning and evaluation, participatory processes that should involve all constituencies who provide, support, or use advising services.

In today's higher education environment, many colleges and universities use structured planning processes to guide collective decision making. Planning for change

and evaluating progress in systematic ways undergird effective programs, and in the past decade planning has supported positive change on numerous campuses. Although planned change has never been more necessary than it is today, it has not been a hallmark of most academic advising programs. In their 1987 review of advising programs nationwide, Habley and Crockett found that most advising programs are not planned systematically. Only about 54 percent have a policy statement, 21 percent evaluate their programs regularly; and 29 percent offer required advisor training (Habley & Crockett, 1988). As internal and external environments change more rapidly and profoundly than ever before and the effectiveness of advising continues to receive low ratings from students, advising programs need to adopt systematic procedures for planning, evaluation, and improvement. The campus office of institutional research can be a place to go for direction.

Most institutional research offices support the central planning process of the institution. Therefore institutional researchers are well versed in planning to plan, and many consider it their mission to consult with campus constituencies about appropriate procedures. If asked for advice about planning, a typical institutional research director might respond by quoting Uhl (1983).

Strategic planning is an analytical process which encompasses an assessment of the future, the determination of desired goals in the context of the future, the development of alternative courses of action to achieve those goals, and the selection of courses of action from those alternatives. (p. 2)

The first step in formulating a strategic plan is to create an atmosphere in which positive change can not only take place, but be welcomed by the constituencies it will affect. This sometimes difficult part of the process

requires leadership attuned to others' opinions and needs. Planning that is closed or too tightly designed from the top will soon drain the energy of most participants.

Where a positive atmosphere exists, most planning groups agree that formulating a mission is the next step. Mission determines the direction of future action, and defining mission can be a slow and arduous process. The advising mission needs to flow from the mission of the institution; conflicting views need to surface and be resolved. When determined collectively, mission guides the rest of the process of anticipating and taking advantage of change and conserves time by providing boundaries for future action.

After determining mission, planners need to look at the internal and external landscapes and assess the climate for change. At this point, institutional research can supply valuable information about college- or university-wide goals and progress toward accomplishing those goals; student demographics; the attitudes and expectations of freshmen; curricular assessment; and, for programs with evaluation components, the status of the current advising program.

Today the student body profile is perhaps one of the most important advising variables to investigate. Detailed and current information about students is knowledge that all sizes and types of colleges and universities need (Frost, 1991). For the past decade, traditional-age students have represented a shrinking segment of the student population, but within their numbers unprecedented diversity has developed. In fact, in the late 1970s, experts predicted that the traditional-age student cohort would decline more significantly during the 1980s than was the case. Because percentages of traditional-age minority students attending college increased during the decade, the cohort did not shrink to predicted lows.

Now numbers of students who are members of ethnic minority groups continue to increase; more women than men attend college; and many students have physical or learning disabilities, international backgrounds, or other circumstances that create special needs. (For a discussion of the advising needs of different populations, see Frost, 1991, pp. 23-58.) During the 1980s and early 1990s, adult students became a powerful student constituency. Now the traditional-age cohort is growing again and some schools, having retooled to meet the needs of adults,

will have to readjust to address the needs of younger students (Simpson & Frost, in press).

Each year more than two hundred thousand new freshman at four hundred institutions complete the freshman survey of UCLA's Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). For participating institutions, survey results can provide valuable information to advising planners. Students' responses reveal how new freshmen spend their time, their probable majors and careers, academic and social expectations, and the objectives they consider important. When viewed longitudinally, survey results can reveal changes in the student population that could influence the advising services students need.

When student demographics, survey data, and other information sources are combined, a comprehensive view of current conditions emerges, and advising planners can move to the next step: formulating objectives for change. Here the views of all who support advising are essential because change will influence not only those in advising offices but also career counselors, residence life professionals, and reference librarians, for example. Institutional research would logically step out of the process at this point, but might re-enter to plan for and implement evaluation.

After designing strategies, measuring the effectiveness of the new or redesigned advising structure is the logical next step. Evaluation can take the form of outcomes assessment, measuring change on the individual student level; or program review, measuring effectiveness on the program level. Outcomes assessment, which can interface with advising, is discussed below. Program review, when used to guide change (formative) and not as a gate-keeping function (summative), can suggest mid-course correction for an already solid program or provide direction for a comprehensive overhaul. Such an

approach can stimulate the evaluators to become change agents as they point the way to improved services.

Currently some institutions have in place systems to evaluate the work of individual advisors (Habley & Crockett, 1988). Methods, however, are varied, ranging from student evaluation, self-evaluation, and supervisory evaluation to peer review. The evaluation of individuals can be a valuable component of program review, but it should not be the only evaluation tool. The most effective evaluation processes are systematically designed as

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part of the planning process. Advisors contribute to the design and periodically review the evaluation process.

For planning and evaluation to be effective, they should inform processes of systematic improvement, and such improvement should be based on information gathered in systematic ways. The full value of planning can be realized, and meaningful improvement can occur. Institutional researchers who act as campus partners to those who plan for more effective advising programs will find great value in participating in the exciting changes that effective advising can bring to students and other members of the college community. Both researchers and advisors share the same general premise in regard to students as stated by the NACADA Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising (1994): "Like other educators, academic advisors work to strengthen the importance, dignity, potential, and unique nature of each individual served within the academic setting."

Outcomes Assessment

Unlike most institutional research, outcomes assessment focuses directly on students. It is action research which involves a process that, first, identifies ways in which an institution expects to effect change in students; second, determines how to assess or measure the results of this change; and third, plans and implements educational environments that are most likely to provide the experiences that will facilitate change in the direction desired.

The Guidelines for Academic Advising (1988) which were developed by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) refer to outcomes assessment by including the following item in the list of institutional goals for academic advising:

Collecting and distributing student data regarding needs, preferences, and performance for use in institutional policy making. (p. 21)

Academic advisors can be involved in outcomes assessment in several ways. Academic advising can be the topic of outcomes assessment and/or academic advisors can collect information used in assessment. The most central role of academic advisors, however, is in providing the avenue by which the information collected through outcomes assessment strategies is shared with students. Some accrediting agencies now require assess-

ment activities and evidence that the information is fed back to students.

Relationships

In some institutions, the responsibility for outcomes assessment, including in the area of academic advising, rests in a single, centralized office. Such offices often combine responsibility for outcomes assessment and institutional research. In such cases, the inclusion of outcomes or results associated with academic advising in assessment activities is likely to be set by institutional priorities.

In other institutions, outcomes assessment is decentralized in individual academic units or departments. In these cases, departmental priorities determine whether academic advising is included in an area of concern in assessment activities.

In either structure, coherence among initiatives in outcomes assessment can be facilitated by the creation of an advisory or steering committee, staffed by academic deans, faculty representatives from departments, advisors, directors or coordinators of academic services, and administrators from offices involved with institutional research and outcomes assessment. Such a group can communicate institutional priorities, provide in-service training, assist in the design and implementation of new efforts, and facilitate information sharing.

Outcomes

The process of outcomes assessment can serve a number of constituencies in an institution, including the following:

1. students

One of the functions of outcomes assessment is to document student outcomes from higher education in both the cognitive and affective domains. Some goals for academic advising have cognitive outcomes, such as the development of suitable educational plans that are compatible with life goals (CAS, 1988). Other goals for academic advising have noncognitive outcomes that can be measured by overt student behaviors, such as evaluation of student progress toward completion of a degree or selection of courses that are appropriate to the level of preparation. One of the challenges in such research is to ensure the important variations in subpopulations, such as minorities or women, are not overlooked.

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2. *faculty*

The inclusion of issues related to academic advising in outcomes assessment can provide faculty members with valuable data about students, such as information about academic preparation, interests, and academic deficiencies. These data can be used in curriculum development and to assist instruction.

3. *staff and administrators*

One of the goals of outcomes assessment is to integrate information about educational goals and student outcomes in the planning and budgeting process so that resources can be established to help create environments that facilitate desired changes. The involvement of academic advising units in outcomes assessment can help pave the way for the inclusion of academic advising in institutional funding priorities. Evidence of the impact of academic advising on the achievement, development, and retention of students is essential. In the climate of the 1990s, data about on-time graduation rates is particularly relevant. Such data can also have an impact on deliberations about the reward structure, including consideration of academic advising in promotion and tenure decisions for faculty.

Data collected through outcomes assessment can be even more useful in the efforts to intentionally shape the college environment to foster success and retention of students whose values and goals are compatible with those of the institution if the contribution of co-curricular activities is considered. These might include type of residential experience (i.e., leadership experiences, work experiences, or participation in student activities). Data about the characteristics of students who are most likely to succeed, as well as to fail, is valuable to enrollment services in shaping recruiting material.

Issues and Opportunities

Even though most acknowledge the benefits of the process, faculty and administrators involved in outcomes assessment often lack enthusiasm for responsibility for the process and the reporting duties it may entail. This is likely to be the case in public institutions in states that mandate outcomes assessment. An approach that is based in an academic department, whether it is mandated or not, has the benefit of allowing the unit autonomy in developing a plan suitable to its values and cultures.

A significant challenge in the outcomes assessment process is to ensure a complete feedback loop. That is to say that students are not only informed about the edu-

cational goals of the institution and unit, but that the information and data gathered about students is used to guide decisions students make in areas such as course selection and choice of major. Providing individualized feedback to students is an important role for academic advisors in the outcomes assessment process.

Outcomes assessment offers the greatest opportunities to academic advisors when individual academic units expand the focus of their assessment activities to include issues related to academic advising and its relationship to student learning and development. This can be done through surveys, by asking students about the impact of an academic advisor on their choice of major or career, and/or satisfaction with the college experience.

The sharing of information resulting from a successful outcomes assessment program has the potential to lead to a greater sense of shared purpose, based on a more precise definition of the characteristics of the student body and the campus environment associated with student learning and development.

Examples

A number of initiatives illustrate the role of academic advising in outcomes assessment. For example, a number of colleges and universities, including some very large statewide systems as well as smaller colleges, collect detailed data about entering students from a variety of sources, including standardized placement tests, personal interviews, high school transcripts, and questionnaires to develop an individualized profile about the skills and interest of each student. Information about how this profile compares to the profile of other students in the college or major is then shared with the individual student in a personal interview. The same strategy is also used in many institutions to help a student determine his or her readiness for a particular course.

As data are collected about entering students, it is also important to collect data, through alumni surveys, from students who have graduated. Information about what types of jobs graduates enter from different programs is particularly valuable to students currently enrolled in those programs. Similarly, responses from alumni about courses that they found valuable and elective courses they recommend can provide information to guide curriculum development.

Many institutions use information gathered through the outcomes assessment in recruiting materials to help prospective students assess the match between their skills and interests are those of other students at that institution and/or major.