

Beyond a Course Schedule: A White Paper on Academic Advising

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Institutions of higher education have long recognized the importance of providing appropriate support to students as they pursue their academic goals. While a number of strategies have been employed, there is good consensus that academic advising is important and a necessary component in ensuring student success in academia. However, there is considerable variation in (1) what constitutes academic advising, (2) the role of academic advisors, and (3) the most effective model or process. This paper will focus on these three aspects of academic advising and conclude with an overview of advising at Middle Georgia State University (MGA).

What is academic advising?

It is important to clearly define academic advising since one's definition of this term determines the role and function of academic advisors. In response to this question as posted on the MGA academic advising webpage, "Academic advising is an ongoing educational process that connects the student to the University." It is noteworthy that our institution defines advising as an "educational process." This perspective is consistent with the definition from the Noel-Levitz Participant Book/Resource Guide (1997) entitled *An Introduction and Foundation, Academic Advising for Student Success and Retention*, which states "academic advising is a process of teaching students how to become responsible consumers of their own education. It's also a process that involves teaching students how to make viable academic decisions." In his discussion on the *Theory of Advising as Integrative Learning*, Lowenstein listed six points essential to academic advising. Two of his points specifically address the educational aspects of advising:

- 1) Advising enhances learning and at the core is a locus of learning and not merely a signpost to learning.
- 2) The learning that happens is integrative and helps students make meaning out of their education as a whole.

The educational role of advising was important enough to compel the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) to develop an Academic Core Competencies model in 2017 which embraces this concept.

In a recent survey I conducted of all our professional advisors, they were asked the following questions:

- 1) What is the general MGA communities' perception of the role/function of a professional advisor?
- 2) What do you believe should be the role/function of a professional advisor in higher education?

About half of the advisors (10) responded to the survey. There was unanimous agreement on the first question regarding the perception of the MGA community on the function of academic advisors. All responses to the first question can be categorized as service, such as building schedules, registering

students, releasing holds, changing majors. etc. Remarkably, there was not a single response that was associated with the education of the student. In contrast, responses to the second question clearly indicated that advisors are aware of their role in educating the student and that they represent a member of the student's support team in their education process at our institution. Here are some examples of the responses to the second question regarding what advisors think their role or function should be.

"key member of a student's academic team"

"We should advise, mentor, advocate and coach students!"

"Professional academic advisors wear many hats – we are guiders, counselors, listeners, researchers, motivational speakers, realists, policy informant, monitors, and resource connectors."

E.R. White, a former NACADA president, affirms the mindset of our professional advisors when he asserts that academic advising is a part of an institution's learning and teaching mission, and not merely a service. Our advising mission, goals, and learning outcomes are aligned with these concepts. I invite you to review them on the MGA advising website: <https://www.mga.edu/advising/mission.php>

What is the role of academic advisors?

While the traditional role of academic advisors is indeed one of service, as noted above, this role is changing and expanding to include the education of our students. The importance of academic advisors in student success is recognized at the System level as evidenced by the formation of the Regents Advisory Committee on Academic Advising (RACAD) four years ago. Committee representatives from the various system institutions were asked to define the role/function of academic advisors. Responses touched on a large laundry list of responsibilities ranging from registering students, to tracking student progress, to performing graduation audits. Although many functions were service oriented, it was clear that some institutions were using advisors to engage students in the learning process and involving them in educational functions such as developing academic intervention and success plans, and conducting academic support workshops, particularly for students who are performing poorly. Clearly, the role of advisors has expanded beyond simply one of service and now encompasses the role of educator. Advisors must have the competencies, training and tools to perform their role. NACADA's recent guide on *Academic Advising Core Competencies* lists the following core values academic advisors should have: Caring, Commitment, Empowerment, Inclusivity, Integrity, Professionalism, and Respect.

What is the most effective Advising Model?

Due to the large variety of institutions it is not surprising that there are multiple models for academic advising. All the models can be grouped based on the type of advisors and the way advising functions are administered. Advisors may be full-time staff members (often referred to as professional advisors) or members of the faculty. In a study conducted by the Education Advisory Board (EAB), almost 80% of institutions surveyed use professional advisors. Some rely completely on professional advisors while others use a combination of professional and faculty advisors. There are essentially two models in regards to the distribution of the professional advisors and how advising services are provided: the centralized and decentralized models. In the centralized model, advisors are placed in advising centers

where they advise students with a variety of majors from different Schools. This model is most often used for freshmen and sophomore students and is advantageous in advising students who are undecided or unsure about their major and career path. In contrast, the decentralized model is one where advisors are distributed to individual Academic units or Schools and they primarily serve students whose program of study is housed in the Academic unit. The greatest advantage of this model is associating students with the school in their selected area of interest which helps to foster relationships and identity. A significant disadvantage is the tendency of isolation and a “siloeing” effect. Some institutions use a shared model which consists of elements from the centralized and decentralized models. After reviewing data from the ACT Fifth National Academic Advising Survey, Habley and Morales concluded that the centralized, decentralized, and shared advising models can be effective. I believe the appropriate and most effective model for an institution depends on its mission, its student population, and the ability of the institution to integrate advising with its other student support services.

Academic Advising at MGA

The advising structure: In keeping with our School-based strategy, MGA has moved from a shared advising model to a decentralized one where all 23 of our professional academic advisors are distributed among six academic units. With an optimum caseload of 300 students per academic advisor, the number of professional advisors assigned to each School is based on the volume of students with declared majors within each School. Faculty members in each School are also expected to participate in student advising and mentoring. The distribution of professional advisors is shown in the table below.

SCHOOL	ASSIGNED PROFESSIONAL ADVISORS
Arts and Letters	3
Aviation	2.5
Business	3*
Computing	2.5
Education and Behavioral Sciences	3.5
Health and Natural Sciences	7**

*One advisor is also a transfer specialist.

**One advisor is also a transfer specialist and two advisors are generalists on the Dublin and Warner Robins campuses.

The advising process: The advising process begins with the acceptance of a student to the institution. All newly admitted students are assigned a primary advisor according to their major. Each school determines who the default primary advisor is for new admits and the process for changing student/advisor designations when appropriate. Some schools transition students from professional advisors to faculty advisors after they have completed a set number of hours (usually after 30 hours), while others assign faculty advisors to students who have been accepted into a professional program of study such as Nursing.

Managing our decentralized model of advising: As mentioned previously, any advising model can be effective if it is integrated with the other support systems available to the student. This requires careful management and coordination. There are two dimensions in the management of our decentralized model. The *vertical dimension* resides within the academic unit (School) where the line of reporting originates from the Dean down to the supervisor of the academic advisor who may be the department chair or a curriculum coordinator. The vertical dimension allows for effective decision making regarding

the assignment of advisors to students (advising caseload), the School's advising process, availability of advising at our various campuses, assessment, and accountability.

As mentioned previously, a disadvantage of the decentralized model is that it places emphasis on the Schools which has a siloing effect that can result in isolating advising into the individual academic units. This hinders communication among the advisors from various units which can have a negative impact on student support particularly since many of them switch majors and move from one School to another. Attention to the *horizontal dimension* of the model can greatly diminish the siloing effect of the decentralized model. The horizontal dimension is fostered by considering all advisors as an institutional "unit" which allows communication among advisors assigned to various Schools to promote best practices, sharing of institutional and System information, and coordinated participation in institutional functions such as orientation and Open House events. Management of the horizontal dimension of the decentralized model should reside in the Office of Academic Affairs to ensure an institutional perspective of advising among the Deans, and effective coordination of advising programs with other support services, and non-academic units such as admissions and financial aid .

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to emphasize several points in the form of recommendations.

- 1) We must broaden our definition of academic advising beyond service and consider it as part of our students' education process – a part as important as their classroom experience for it is through their interaction with advisors that our students will learn to take ownership of their education and forge their educational pathway.
- 2) We must consider our academic advisors as partners in our students' education process, not just staff members who help students build schedules and promote registration campaigns. From their responses, our academic advisors have this mindset and understand their expanding role as a team member in the support of our students.
- 3) Our decentralized advising model can be effective and provide exceptional support in the educational process of our students. This will require careful management of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the decentralized model.

It is my hope that this white paper will generate an increased awareness and foster discussion on the expanding definition of academic advising, the essential role academic advisors play in the education of our students, and how critical an effective advising program is in promoting student retention, persistence and progression at MGA.

Sources

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