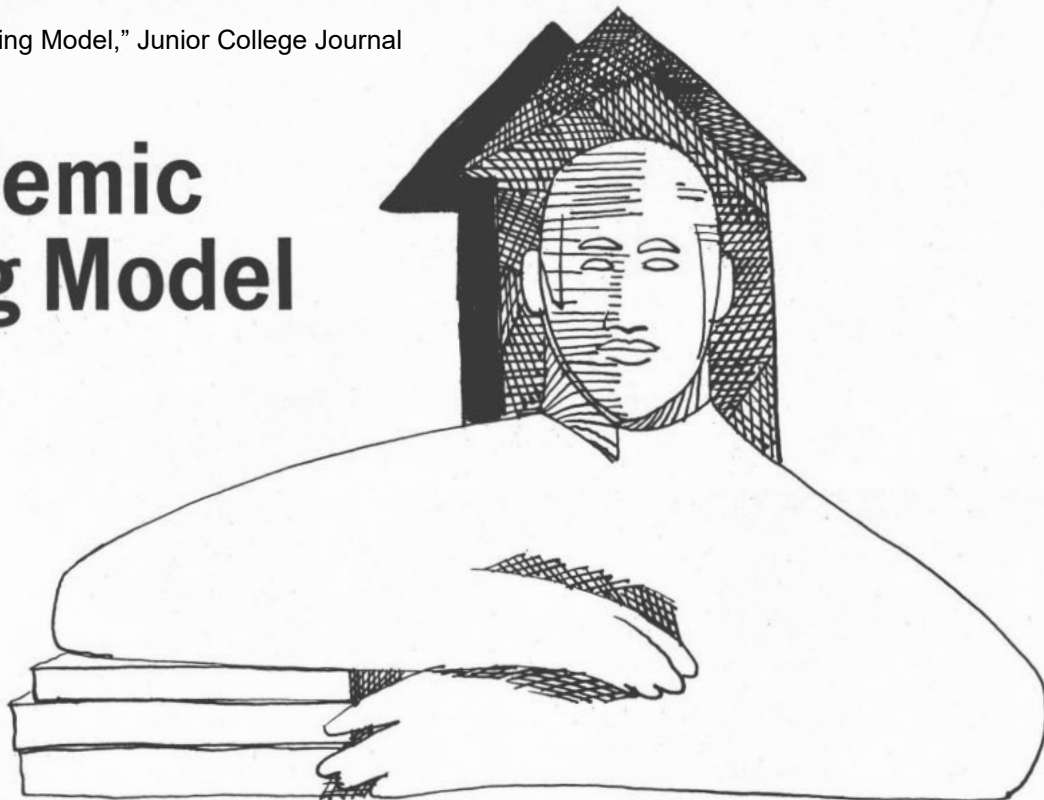


# An Academic Advising Model



By Terry O'Banion

*"Who does advising is probably not as important as the philosophy of the institution . . . and the commitment and understanding with which the counselor or instructor approaches the process."*

The purpose of academic advising is to help the student choose a program of study which will serve him in the development of his total potential. As such, academic advising is a central and important activity in the process of education. Academic advising occurs at least once each term for every student in the college; few student personnel functions occur as often or affect so many students. But while there is general agreement concerning the importance of academic advising for the efficient functioning of the institution and the effective functioning of the student, there is little agreement regarding the nature of academic advising and who should perform the function.

The community college, as with many of its educational practices, has too eagerly adopted an academic advising model practiced in four-year colleges and universities. In that model, academic advising has been "faculty advising" with "every faculty member an adviser." When the question was raised regarding the appropriateness of this model for the community college in a discussion at the 1964 Chicago conference that launched the Carnegie study, a leading student personnel educator from a major university replied: "Of course this model is appropriate for the junior college. Faculty members should do the advising regardless of the institution."

Many community college educators feel, however, that a different model may be more appropriate for the community college and for community college students. This article proposes a model based on a logical sequence of steps to be followed in the process of academic advising. The model, while geared to the community college, would probably be adaptable to four-year colleges and universities as well.

## The Process of Academic Advising

What is the process of academic advising? Too often, programs have been planned on the basis of available personnel (such as faculty) or on the basis of some philosophical rationale that has been shoddily stated, if stated at all. Seldom have programs been constructed and coordinated on the basis of the process or nature of academic advising.

The process of academic advising includes the following dimensions: (1) exploration of life goals, (2) exploration of vocational goals, (3) program choice, (4) course choice, and (5) scheduling courses.

Ideally, the college would provide the student with a variety of experiences in each of these dimensions. The experiences would hopefully occur in a sequential order, as indicated. The college that is dedicated to helping students achieve their maximum potential—and all community colleges subscribe to such a philosophy—will provide students with professional personnel who can help them focus on the question: "How do I want to live my life?" Few students have had opportunities to explore this question in an intensive and meaningful way; college should be an experience especially designed for

such exploration. Without such an exploration, a student would not be able to decide how to use his skills and interests in a vocation.

Vocational goals are life goals extended into the world of work. What a person is and wants to be (life goals) determines what he does (vocational goals). The relationship between life goals and vocational goals is intricate and involved; educators are understandably frustrated in their attempts to help students make decisions in these areas. But because it is a difficult process in education is no reason to avoid it. Many programs of academic advising flounder because they begin at step three with "program choice." It is assumed that students have already made choices regarding life goals and vocational goals when they enter the college—a questionable assumption for college students in general and a harmful assumption for community college students in particular.

#### To Select a Program

Once the college has provided an opportunity for goal explorations through summer advising groups, encounter groups, occupational classes, self-development classes, programmed guides, media, experiential sessions, etc., the student is ready to make a program choice. Even in a college or university offering traditional "college" programs to a selected clientele, the process of choosing a program is difficult; in a community college offering a comprehensive range of programs to a great diversity of students, the process of choosing a program staggers the imagination.

Once the program is selected students choose courses for the immediate term and perhaps for subsequent terms. Most colleges provide program guides which list the required courses, often noting the courses required by different transfer institutions. Course selection is a difficult and time-consuming process requiring extensive knowledge on the part of the adviser regarding courses as well as the individual being advised.

Selecting the times courses are to be taken is often thought to be a simple task. But many community college students are confused by such concepts as semester-hour credit, transfer, grade-point average, etc. They are often left on their own to figure out a schedule of classes to attend three days a week rather than the five to which they were accustomed in high school. While the scheduling of courses may appear easy to professional educators who themselves have experienced scheduling time and again in their collegiate experiences, it can be a frightening experience to the non-traditional college student who attends the community college.

These five steps, then, are the dimensions of the

process of academic advising: (1) exploration of life goals, (2) exploration of vocational goals, (3) program choice, (4) course choice, and (5) scheduling courses. Any well-conceived program of academic advising will include activities related to each of these dimensions. It may be possible for each of these dimensions to be explored in a single day; most colleges, however, are likely to consider the process of academic advising as continuous, beginning before the student attends class and continuing throughout his stay at the college.

To better understand the nature of the process of academic advising it will be helpful to consider the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required by the personnel who would assist students in each of the steps. The following is a tentative listing of such requirements:

1. *Exploration of life goals:* (a) knowledge of student characteristics and development, (b) understanding of decision-making process, (c) knowledge of psychology and sociology, (d) skills in counseling techniques, (e) appreciation of individual differences, (f) belief in worth and dignity of all men, (g) belief that all have potential.

2. *Exploration of vocational goals (all under number 1 above plus the following):* (a) knowledge of vocational fields, (b) skill in interpretation of tests, (c) understanding of changing nature of work in society, (d) acceptance of all fields of work as worthy and dignified.

3. *Program choice:* (a) knowledge of programs available in the college, (b) knowledge of requirements of programs (special entrance requirements, fees, time commitments), (c) knowledge of university requirements for transfer programs, (d) knowledge of how others have performed in the program (e) knowledge of follow-up success of those who have completed the program.

4. *Course choice:* (a) knowledge of courses available, (b) knowledge of any special information regarding courses (prerequisites, offered only in certain times, transferability; Does the course meet graduation requirements? (What is the appropriate sequence for the university?)) (c) rules and regulations of the college regarding probation and suspension, limit on course load (academic and work limitations), (d) knowledge of honors courses or remedial courses, (e) knowledge of instructors and their teaching styles, (f) knowledge of student's ability through test scores, high school record, (g) knowledge of course content.

5. *Scheduling courses:* (a) knowledge of schedule, (b) knowledge of the systems of scheduling and changing the schedule, (c) knowledge of work and commuting requirements.

Considering the proposed five steps in the process of academic advising and the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required by advisers for each step, who should have responsibility for what? Contrary to those systems in which advisers make decisions for students, this writer believes that students are responsible for making decisions throughout the



process. It is the responsibility of the adviser to provide information and a climate of freedom in which students can best make such decisions. Professionally prepared counselors can best provide assistance for students in the advising process for the first two steps: exploration of life goals and exploration of vocational goals. Some sensitive instructors could participate in these two steps, but counselors should have major responsibility.

Counselors can prepare materials for students to explore before the students ever come to campus. Special group meetings can be formed in the summers to help students explore life and vocational goals. The majority of community college students should enroll in special courses in personal development, occupational exploration, value seminars, encounter groups with counselors to allow for a more thorough and meaningful exploration before choosing specific programs. Regardless of the methods used students should have assistance from professional counselors to make decisions before they move on to step three, program choice.

Once vocational goals have become fairly specific, or at least identified as unclear, decisions regarding choice of programs offered by the college become easier. As the student explores vocational goals with a counselor, he reviews the various programs offered by the college and selects a program or an area of programs that interests him. At this point professional counselors could continue with the advising process through steps three and four, or these steps could become the responsibility of instructional personnel or special personnel employed for academic advising.

When a student has selected the courses he is to take for the term, he then registers and arranges a schedule of classes. Some colleges have moved to computer registration, but many still use professional personnel to help students make decisions regarding scheduling. Neither counselors nor instructors are necessary, except in very special cases, to make scheduling a successful ending to the process of academic advising. A selected group of sophomores, specially trained, can assist other students in scheduling as well as professionals. More and more, colleges will employ counselor-aides to assist in scheduling. Many students, of course, need no assistance in this step; some need no assistance in any of the steps.

While the brief overview above indicates areas of general responsibility for academic advising in terms of the model of the process proposed, the question still remains: "Yes, but who should do academic advising?" This question cannot be answered for individual institutions because an

answer depends on resources and personal biases of administrators.

In reality, who does advising is probably not as important as the philosophy of the institution that supports the academic advising program and the commitment and understanding with which the counselor or instructor approaches the process.

There are some factors pro and con, however, that may be helpful in deciding on which group of professionals should have *major* responsibility for academic advising. In the following section the discussion centers on who should assist students in steps three and four (program choice and course choice). The writer feels, as he has indicated, that steps one and two should be performed by professional counselors and step five by student assistants.

The reasons that colleges give for using counselor systems of advising are varied. One of the most usual reasons given is that the student is a whole person. The implication here is that the college should not fragment the student into personal, academic, and vocational parts by having counselors relate to his personal characteristics and instructors relate to his academic and vocational characteristics. In the counselor academic advising system the counselor assists the student with personal questions of life goals, helps him with decisions regarding vocational goals, and provides assistance with academic decisions regarding program and course choice.

#### A Logical Sequence

Related to the rationale that the student is a whole person is the recognition that the steps in academic advising form a whole process. Steps one through five form a logical sequence for individual decision making and for institutional programming. The effects of the program are best realized if the program is organized as an integrated sequence of events. If counselors should perform steps one and two by virtue of their competencies then it follows that the program will probably be better coordinated and implemented if counselors perform steps three and four. Step five, of course, would be coordinated and supervised by counselors.

Effective counselors have had good programs of graduate preparation in which they have become skilled in listening to students and helping them in decision making. They also know how to interpret tests, an important part of program planning. Community college instructors who come from traditional liberal arts or teacher education programs have not usually had such preparation. The decision-making process regarding programs and courses is a most important process, and those professionals who are best prepared to assist in such processes

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should be made available to students.

Counselors who see only individual students in their private cubicles come into contact with a very small proportion of the student body. It is often argued that in counselor advising systems counselors are forced to relate with more students. Some administrators use this rationale to launch a counselor advising system because they know the value of counselor-student interrelationships, and they wish to make such relationships available to a greater number of students. In colleges where counselors are already working at full capacity, such a proposal, of course, would need to be accompanied by a request for additional counseling staff.

### Communicating Other Services

Counselor advising systems are often advanced on the basis that such a program will give the staff an opportunity to communicate other student personnel services to all students. Except through the orientation program the student personnel staff seldom has an opportunity to communicate its services to all students. Since advising occurs each term for each student, staff members can inform students regarding financial aid, placement, personal counseling, student activities, individual testing, and other services. The academic advising system can become the vehicle through which many of the services of the student personnel program become available to students. In that way, academic advising is not simply an additional service to be performed requiring new staff; it can become the service through which most other services are realized.

Counselors, in colleges where their expertise is recognized and supported, do not usually teach subject matter courses and, therefore, are more available to students for academic advising conferences. When commuting and working students are on campus, instructors are in class; counselors can be available during morning sessions, however, and many colleges have counselors available in the evening.

In addition to being available in the day and evening, counselors are also available in the summer when the bulk of academic advising should occur for new freshmen. An excellent advising program can be organized by counselors who see small groups of students throughout the summer. It is possible to provide orientation, testing, advising, and registration for most new freshmen in a carefully organized and coordinated summer program in which students spend no more than one or two days on campus.

In a counselor advising system, the college and the educational process become part of the subject

matter specialties of the counselor. Counselors must know as thoroughly as possible the nature of the programs and courses offered by the college, instructors, rules and regulations, graduation and transfer requirements, divisional and departmental requirements, tests and records, and supportive agencies in the community. Counselors are freer to become specialists in these areas than instructors who operate primarily from within a subject matter discipline. Perhaps because of this broader perspective counselors are less likely to recruit students to subject matter than are instructors.

There are problems, of course, with a counselor academic advising system. One of the most insurmountable problems is that counselors often do not like or want to do academic advising. Counselors often perceive academic advising as a time-consuming, clerical process not demanding of their professional competencies. Such perceptions are a natural outgrowth of most counselor education programs in which counseling is taught as a therapeutic process to be made available on an individual basis only for those with personal problems. Many counselors want to be therapists; they have had little opportunity to realize their skills in the larger role as educators who can have considerable impact on the educational process. Administrators who wish to use counselors as academic advisers should select them carefully and should provide numerous opportunities for their re-education.

### Program Specialization

In larger colleges with extensive comprehensive programs it is too much to ask counselors to become specialists in all phases of all programs. There is too much information and it changes too often. Some colleges assign counselors to instructional divisions as one way of keeping up with size and change. While many colleges assign counselors to divisions to do the advising in those divisions, several colleges have actually built offices for their counselors in the divisions.

Another problem with the counselor advising system is that counselors can become perceived by students and instructors as programmers rather than counselors. If the college does not furnish a sufficient number of counselors for academic advising then counselors will indeed spend too much of their time with the nitty-gritty details of academic advising. If that happens they become highly paid clerks whose greater competencies in helping students explore life and vocational decisions become lost in a flurry of forms and figures.

The reasons given for instructor systems of advising are also varied. One of the reasons most often



given is that instructors know students better than counselors. Instructors meet students in class and have opportunities to know their interests, skills, problems, and reactions much better than counselors. If the instructor is given a small advising load of students who are also in his classes, he does have an opportunity to become well acquainted with students.

It is also argued that the instructor is the expert in curriculum and instruction and thus knows the college best. Instructors can provide a valuable experiential background for the student who explores a program in which the instructor is a professional. If instructors can move beyond the confines of their own subject matter disciplines they can reflect the broader program of the college. Academic advising is, of course, intricately related to curriculum and instruction, and when instructors do advising there is greater opportunity to integrate the process of advising with the program of curriculum and instruction.

#### **Instructor Interaction through Advising**

A number of leading educators have suggested that faculty advising is the best way to integrate instructors into the student personnel program. The college that encourages instructor interaction with students outside the classroom often does so primarily through an instructor advising system. In this way the instructor is forced to learn more about the institution and hopefully comes to see the student in different ways: at least the student has an opportunity to see the instructor in a different role. When instructors volunteer for these out-of-class activities they are likely to be better advisers and better instructors. When instructors are *required* to participate in academic advising, both advising and instruction may suffer.

Administrators often argue in favor of faculty systems of advising on the basis of lower costs. With the great increase in numbers of students in community colleges, a personalized advising system can be expensive. It appears to make sense that the way to keep costs down is to distribute students among instructors for advising. If instructors are given released time to perform this function, however, it is questionable whether it is less expensive to use instructors in preference to counselors. If instructors are not given released time, advising becomes for many a perfunctory activity.

It is also argued that instructors will get the advising job done, whereas counselors are prone to probe psyches rather than assist students in what is often perceived as a relatively simple process of decision making. Where counselors have communicated their program as "the psychic repair center"

students may have more confidence in instructors for the advising process.

There are problems, too, with an instructor academic advising system. Often the program of academic advising is poorly conceived and coordinated; instructors are left to fend for themselves. Since academic advising has been a traditional function of instructors they are expected to function adequately. Without appropriate institutional support and direction, instructors may perform this function with disinterest and in ways that may do more harm than good for students.

Instructors can also become too narrowly focused in regard to their subject matter specialization. Some instructors feel they are hired to teach their subject; institutional efforts to get them involved in other programs are viewed as impositions and sometimes as even encroachment on academic freedom.

Another problem that is sometimes raised in regard to instructor advising systems is that some instructors use the system to recruit students to their classes or to classes in their departments. It is easy for an instructor to make subtle suggestions to students regarding courses they should take; some instructors are not subtle at all in their "advising."

Few instructors have the time necessary for in-service education designed to help them become effective advisors. If they teach full loads, participate on committees, and sponsor clubs and organizations, there is little time left for in-service education. Unless there is an opportunity for instructors to learn about test interpretation, programs and courses, rules and regulations, transfer requirements, and many other aspects of the academic advising process, they cannot be expected to perform effectively.

If instructors are to participate in the process of academic advising in a professional way then some important conditions must exist:

1. Academic advising must be recognized by the college as an important activity in the life of the institution. This means that instructors are rewarded for their participation perhaps by recognition of their contributions at the time of evaluation for rank and pay or in reduced class loads.

2. There must be a sensible student load. In the Carnegie report, Raines suggested that there be no more than 15 advisees without a reduced teaching assignment.

3. There must be a continuing in-service program for all advisors, and a special, more intensive program for new instructors before they are allowed to participate.

4. There must be special concern for the advisory

skills of instructors which means that only those who qualify should participate.

5. There must be an adequate number of professional counselors available to handle referrals as well as students who are undecided about life and vocational goals.

6. There must be sufficient clerical help available to insure that instructors have information when they need it and do not perform clerical tasks themselves.

7. Cooperation and coordination must exist between the academic dean and the student personnel dean to insure the best use of faculty time in the best service to students.

8. Instructors must guard against using the system to recruit students into courses and programs not of the students' choice.

9. Finally, there must be a program of evaluation by students, instructors, and counselors in order that sensible modification can be made in a system that is ever changing.

If these conditions are met then it seems reasonable to believe that an instructor advising system can function as well as any other. If these conditions are not met then instructor advising systems will continue to be the poorly designed, grossly ineffective systems they are in far too many community colleges.

#### **Academic Advising: A Team Approach**

If the process of academic advising proposed earlier is accepted as a viable model, then the question of who should perform the function seems to be answered best in terms of a team approach. Each member participating in the process should contribute in terms of his competencies and interests.

The student is responsible for decision making throughout the process. He should explore the special materials made available to him so that he is informed about the choices to be made and about procedures. It is the student's responsibility to schedule his own courses but with the help of other students specially trained for the task. With appropriate programmed materials students can also select their own courses with a minimum of supervision. The student's role in the process will depend on his own experience, ability, and clarity of goals.

In the team approach counselors should have responsibility for helping students explore life and vocational goals. Ideally, such exploration should occur in small personal interaction groups during the summer for new students. A programmed guide designed to help students explore life and vocational goals could be developed if face-to-face groups are not possible. Once students are attending college

there is still a need to offer continuing opportunities for life and vocational goal exploration. Special seminars on occupations, experiential approaches to job sampling, personal development courses, and voluntary encounter groups, are only a few of the ways the college can provide significant opportunities for students to discover meaning in their lives.

In addition to this direct involvement with students, counselors would prepare special information for instructors and students to be used in the academic advising process. Counselors would also provide in-service education activities for instructors and student assistants.

#### **The Role of the Instructor**

The role of the instructor in the team approach would be in assisting students with choice of program and courses. Once the student's general vocational area had been decided upon he would meet with selected instructors to review the various programs offered by the college in his chosen vocational area. When a special program is chosen (electronics technology, nursing, forestry, teaching) the student, with assistance from the instructor, would select the courses for the immediate term and perhaps plan a sequence of courses for his tenure at the community college.

This description of roles in regard to the process of academic advising is, of course, greatly oversimplified. Students do not always move from step to step in the logic of the proposed system. Some counselors and instructors will move through more steps than they have responsibility for. Since the process is a natural sequence of human events, there will be much overlap from step to step. For these reasons it is most important that the team approach to academic advising be carefully conceptualized and coordinated. Under the team approach, coordination should be the responsibility of both the dean of students and the dean of instruction.

It may be easier to organize a system of academic advising using counselors only or instructors only. Each approach has its merits and its difficulties. But it should also be possible to combine the professional competencies of counselors and instructors in such a way that the educational planning of students results in well-formulated goals and sound decisions. Academic advising occurs every term for every student; it is the prelude to the central activity of the college—instruction. Certainly the college should organize its resources to insure that this prelude is sufficiently effective so that the student will have the greatest possible opportunity to discover his potential through the college experience.