

# ACADEMIC ADVISING IN A UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF NURSING: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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Academic advising is considered an integral part of a student's university life. A major goal of academic advising is to give students advice regarding such matters as programme requirements, course selection, academic regulations, and career counselling. Furthermore, students often seek academic advice that will improve their individual learning styles and satisfy their needs. Today students are entering nursing programmes with a greater variety of educational preparation and work related experience. This not only makes academic advising more complex, but makes it even more essential.

Our School of Nursing responded to this need by establishing an academic advising system in the mid-1970s. It was felt that this system would provide consistency in giving information about academic matters to students. From the onset, all faculty were involved in academic advising and counselled students from either the Basic or Post RN Baccalaureate Programme. As student numbers increased and faculty were obliged to advise both groups of students, faculty members needed to be well informed about the academic requirements of both programmes. Over the years, each faculty member was responsible for giving academic advice to fifteen to twenty students.

During the 1982-1983 academic year, some faculty members began to voice concerns about the efficacy and efficiency of the academic advising system. The concerns revolved around the following issues: the lack of available information necessary for academic advising; frustration and confusion on the part of both faculty and students about the difficulties in keeping abreast of academic regulations and requirements; the potential for giving wrong advice; and confusion with regard to the role and responsibilities of the advisor.

The authors of this paper were given the task of reviewing the academic advising system for the Basic Baccalaureate Programme and bringing

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recommendations to the faculty. This paper describes the steps taken in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the system and the recommendations taken to faculty, and discusses some preliminary observations after the implementation of a core advising system in September 1984. A survey approach was used to assess the present system, as well as to ascertain ways of improving it. Answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What do students and faculty perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the present academic advising system?
2. What suggestions do students and faculty propose to improve the academic advising system?

### **Literature Review**

A review of the literature on academic advising within a university setting revealed common threads, concerns, and remedies. Different authors acknowledge that academic advising is given low status within universities, and is not considered highly in the tenure and promotion process (Bossenmaier, 1978, 1979; Mahoney, Borgard, & Hornbuckle, 1978; Polson, & Jurich, 1979; Wilder, 1981).

Both faculty and students report dissatisfaction with the process of academic advising (Bossenmaier, 1978, 1979; Grahn, Kahn, & Knoll, 1983; Polson & Jurich, 1979). This dissatisfaction is further accentuated by the fact that students have a different perception of the purpose of academic advising than do faculty members. Faculty see it in relation to academic matters only, while students perceive its role and purpose to include both academic and personal matters (Hornbuckle, Mahoney, & Borgard, 1979; Moore, 1976). Bossenmaier (1978) defines it as "the activity engaged in by members of the teaching faculty and directed toward assisting students with their educational and vocational concerns" (p.192). Even though the literature suggests that academic matters be the main focus, it recommends that advisors be aware of the services available on campus that could be of benefit to the students.

Bossenmaier (1979) and Mahoney et al. (1978) suggest that faculty members frequently are not knowledgeable about matters that are fundamental to academic advising. This assumption is supported in two recent documents that pertain to student services within a university setting (Matthews & Turner, 1983; and Stewart, 1983).

Bossenmaier (1978) believes that academic advisors must have certain important characteristics (such as knowledge of the curriculum and the

university), helping relationship skills, and be available. Wilder (1981) supports Bossenmaier's belief that academic advising is a time-consuming activity and that advisors must have not only a reduced teaching load but also specific preparation for the advisor role.

It is reported in the literature that both students and faculty believe that a core system is a worthwhile method to use in academic advising (Bossenmaier, 1978, 1979; Grahn et al., 1983; Habley, 1983; Mahoney et al., 1978). Findings from the Grahn et al. (1983) study demonstrated that this system was time saving for both students and faculty. An unanticipated finding in their study was that faculty members were able to share their expertise in academic advising. This led to an upgrading of the quality of advising, it facilitated orientation of new faculty to the system, and promoted a sense of community within the advising faculty.

In summary, the literature suggested that the responsibilities of academic advising needed to be considered more seriously by faculty and universities, and that a core group of advisors might be an efficient and effective way of managing this responsibility.

## Method

A survey approach was used to collect that data. A questionnaire was developed using open-ended questions. The questions were reviewed by two faculty members for clarity. Respondents were asked to list three strengths and three weaknesses that they perceived in the present system, and to give suggestions for change.

Questionnaires were distributed to a total of 168 students in second, third, and fourth years during the first week of class in September. At this time, the purpose of the study was explained. Participation in the study was voluntary. At the same time, the questionnaires were distributed in the mail boxes of the 23 faculty members who had been academic advisors to the Basic students. No reminders were given to encourage either students or faculty to respond following the initial distribution of the questionnaire. Finally, using the membership list of the Canadian Association of University Schools of Nursing, a letter was sent to 23 schools of nursing asking them for information about their systems of academic advising.

### *Data analysis*

All returned questionnaires from students and faculty were used in the data analysis. Content analysis identified themes within the noted strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for change.

## Findings

Forty-five (27%) of the students responded to the questionnaire. Even though the response rate was low, definite similarities were noted in the responses. Four major areas emerged as perceived strengths and two major areas as perceived weaknesses (Table 1).

Forty-nine percent of the respondents had no comments on possible changes in the system and 16% felt no changes were necessary. Recommendations included the need to have a more organized method of acquainting the faculty and students with the academic advising system; requiring advisors to be more knowledgeable about academic matters; and advising exclusively on academic matters in this system. A few students also raised the question of confidentiality in advisor-student meetings.

Fifty-two percent of the faculty responded to the questionnaire; they identified four major strengths and three major weaknesses in the present academic advising system (Table 2). Other areas of concern mentioned by faculty included the large numbers of students seeking advice; students "dropping in" without an appointment; difficulty contacting students; and whether or not academic advising is an effective use of faculty time.

Table 1

### *Major Strengths & Weaknesses Identified by Students*

Strength	% of respondents	Weaknesses	% of Respondents
Assistance with choice of classes and academic requirements	61%	Difficulty contacting advisor	38%
Counselling and guidance in academic matters	51%	Advisor lacked knowledge of programme and academic requirements	29%
Personalized interest in students	24%		
Counselling and guidance in personal matters	11%		

**Table 2**

*Major Strengths & Weaknesses Identified by Faculty*

Strengths	% of Respondents	Weaknesses	% of Respondents
A resource person for the students	30%	Lack of faculty commitment to the role of academic advisor	30%
Enjoyed the student contact	30%	Poor delineation of role and functions of the advisor	40%
Required to have knowledge of academic requirements and regulations	30%	Lack of knowledge of academic requirements and regulations	40%
Sharing of the academic advising workload	20%		

Of the faculty members who made suggestions for changing the academic advising system, 60% felt that a core group should be responsible for advising students, and that this responsibility should be built into their workload. Other suggestions included group advising, with specific groups of students; providing a good orientation to the system; and keeping faculty informed of requirements and regulation changes.

Ninety-six percent of the schools of nursing responded to our letter of inquiry. Many of the responses were very detailed and indicated a strong interest in the topic. Twelve schools (55%) indicated that they use a core group of faculty to provide academic advice to their students. The composition of this core group varied from a small group of faculty or coordinators of programmes, to a position of overall undergraduate academic advisor with a faculty advisor in each year of the programme.

Six schools (27%) reported that their advisor system involved all members of their faculty; three schools (14%) reported having no academic advising



system; and one school (4%) stated that students were informed of the advisor system, but were assigned to an advisor only upon request.

The responses from the other universities suggested that academic advising was seen as being important, and that there was a great deal of interest and concern about this topic. All schools having an advisor system reported that the main focus was on academic matters and identification of problems related to this issue. Personal matters were referred to other sources for counselling.

## Discussion

The low rate of response from the students is hard to understand but may have occurred because the survey was done early in September when the students might have thought that they had more important matters to address. They might also have felt that the system was not causing them any difficulties and did not feel that they needed to answer the questionnaire. The fact that 65% of the respondents had no suggestions for change, or saw no need for change, led us to believe that the students who responded were satisfied with the system and felt that the perceived strengths outweighed the weaknesses. However, the low rate of response from the students raises questions regarding the validity of the findings and the generalizability of the results.

The responses and comments from faculty were not surprising; they supported the acknowledged concerns that had led to the review of the present academic advising system. The major weaknesses identified by faculty are congruent with the suggestion made by Bossenmaier (1979) and Mahoney et al. (1978) that faculty members frequently lack knowledge about academic matters that are fundamental to academic advising.

The fact that 55% of other university schools of nursing had a core group of faculty designated as academic advisors re-inforces the suggestion made by 60% of our faculty that a core group of advisors would be beneficial.

In summary, the survey findings supported the major themes elicited in the literature review: academic advising is time consuming; it requires special knowledge and commitment; and it must be recognized as an important responsibility, and thus should be part of the faculty member's workload. Furthermore, the survey results also support the idea that core-advising is an effective and efficient way of handling the responsibilities that accompany academic advising.

Our experience as academic advisors and the results of this study have raised a persistent question. Is academic advising a more important issue for students or for faculty? It is our belief that, in fact, it is a greater issue for

faculty because the repercussions of giving incorrect advice and information many not only affect the student concerned, but also the faculty member and the programme. The main concerns of the students are to receive proper academic advice and to complete the academic requirements. In contrast, faculty have many responsibilities, of which this is one. Organizing this responsibility in a way that leads to optimum use of faculty time can only be beneficial to faculty and students.

### **Recommendations**

These findings led us to recommend to the faculty that academic advising for the Basic Baccalaureate Programme be carried out by a core group of faculty members.

Other recommendations were that:

1. Responsibilities for academic advising be included in faculty workload assignments;
2. A committee consisting of three elected members of faculty and the Coordinator of the programme be formed;
3. Committee members be knowledgeable about university, faculty, and school regulations and services, have good interpersonal skills, and be available at specified times;
4. The core advising system be evaluated over the next few years.

We are pleased to report that these recommendations were accepted by the faculty in the Spring of 1984. A core group of faculty advisors, known as the Academic Advising Committee (AAC), has been functioning since September, 1984. Terms of reference which are congruent with the survey findings and the literature have been developed.

The purpose of the AAC has been defined as being, "To advise students in planning their academic programmes, approve class selection, and discuss academic progress or concerns." The AAC is now a Standing Committee of the School of Nursing, and responsible to the Executive Committee. The 240 Basic degree students have each been assigned to one of the four advisors, and were informed of the changes in the academic advising system. The committee members met initially to review the terms of reference and to discuss their roles and responsibilities. Other meetings were held during the year, as necessary, (e.g. to plan pre-registration).

### ***Interim review***

The AAC has now functioned for one year, and has carried out a formative evaluation of the revised academic advising system by seeking feedback from academic advisors, faculty, and students. These findings are encouraging. For

example, from the advisors perspective, the time commitment was not as great as anticipated. This, we believe, was because the students were well informed of the academic requirements and regulations and kept abreast of any changes. One area of concern that has arisen is that some students have tended to go to the coordinator rather than to their assigned advisor. This was due, in part, to problems of accessibility and to knowledge that the related issue would need to be discussed later with the coordinator. In the future, students will be encouraged to see their advisor directly, rather than going to the coordinator, but, this will not prevent them from approaching any faculty member for advice.

Faculty response identified two advantages of the new academic advising system: advisors were knowledgeable about academic regulations and policies, which was perceived as beneficial to the students; and not having to be an academic advisor permitted faculty to make better use of their time for other duties. Faculty identified as disadvantages the belief that they would become less knowledgeable about regulations, and the perception of a loss of personal contact with the students. However, faculty believe that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages and overwhelmingly recommended that the core advising system be continued.

The responses from the students also support the use of such a system. They perceived that the advisors were knowledgeable about academic regulations, accessible, and found that the planning for pre-registration done by the AAC greatly facilitated the entire registration process. They also noted potential problems related to the large number of students assigned to each advisor. The responses from both faculty and students indicated that the previous weaknesses have now become the strengths of the academic advising system. The current advisors support these findings and recommended that academic advising be continued by a core group of faculty.

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## RÉSUMÉ

### **Orientation pédagogique au sein d'une école universitaire de sciences infirmières: problèmes et solutions**

On admet généralement que l'orientation pédagogique fait partie intégrante de la vie universitaire de l'étudiant. La présente communication décrit les mesures prises pour évaluer les points forts et les points faibles d'un système d'orientation pédagogique au sein d'une école universitaire de sciences infirmières.

Les résultats d'un examen de la littérature pertinente ainsi que d'un sondage auprès de professeurs, d'étudiants et d'autres écoles de sciences infirmières en milieu universitaire semblent indiquer que l'orientation pédagogique doit être considérée comme une responsabilité importante des professeurs. La création d'un noyau de conseillers a semblé être une méthode efficace d'assumer cette responsabilité.

Cette démarche est entrée en vigueur en septembre 1984. Une évaluation préliminaire effectuée par des conseillers, des étudiants et des professeurs vient corroborer les avantages d'un système d'orientation de tronc commun et l'auteur recommande de poursuivre cette démarche.