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Use Of An Advising Team

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ABSTRACT

The Michael J. Coles College of Business at Kennesaw State University uses selected faculty members on an Advising Team, and provides access to them through walk-in advising hours. Compared to our previous approach of assigning students to all faculty members, the benefits of this system for the students are more efficient and effective advising. Students have access to advising at more times, and are more likely to get correct answers quickly. The benefits for the faculty are that the faculty members on the Team enjoy advising and can have their performance expectations tailored to include advising, while those faculty members who are not interested in advising do not have to participate. This system acknowledges the differing interests, performance requirements (e.g., research), and abilities of faculty members. Other colleges and universities may find this approach beneficial for their students and faculty.

INTRODUCTION

Kennesaw State University [KSU] is a predominantly commuter school offering classes Monday-Thursday from 6:30 am until 11:00 pm, during the day on Friday and Saturday, and occasionally on Sunday. The common business school advising model of assigning a group of students to a specific faculty member did not work very well because the students and faculty advisors often had incompatible schedules. The Michael J. Coles College of Business at KSU addressed this issue by creating the Advising Team and adopting a walk-in advising approach. This approach has increased student access to advising information and faculty satisfaction with the advising process.

CHARACTERISTICS OF KSU

KSU is a public, state-assisted university located in a suburb of Atlanta. Approximately 17,500 students were enrolled during the fall semester of 2003. Undergraduate enrollment was 15,500, with approximately 2,750 of those students declared as business majors. The master's programs in business had a total enrollment of approximately 750. There are approximately 85 full-time faculty members in the Coles College of Business. Sixty percent of KSU undergraduates are non-traditional students. The average age of the undergraduates is 25. KSU does not require students to get advising help or an advisor's signature at any point in their education.

PREVIOUS ADVISING STRUCTURE

Prior to 1995, the Coles College of Business used the advising model that was the norm for KSU and common for many business programs – each student was assigned to a faculty member for advising. The advisor was a faculty member in the department of the student's declared major. Undeclared students were assigned to a central university advising office. All faculty members in a department were assigned advisees on a rotating basis by the Registrar's Office, sometimes with input from the department chair. The Registrar's Office included the advisor's name on the registration information mailed to each student. The faculty members were not routinely notified of their advisees. There was no formal system for distributing advising information, training new faculty on program requirements, or monitoring the availability of advisors. There were several significant drawbacks to this common approach to advising:

- Schedule conflicts
- Varying levels of advising knowledge
- Varying levels of advising interest on the part of the faculty

Schedule Conflicts

Students had to visit their advisors during office hours or make an appointment. Most of the students preferred dropping in during office hours, but the schedule of a given student often did not coincide with that of his/her advisor. Faculty members' office hours typically were concentrated around class times. Even when making appointments, the faculty preferred to make their schedule most efficient by scheduling them around times they were already expecting to be on campus, usually defined by their teaching schedules. The student might have a Monday/Wednesday/Friday class schedule, but the advisor's teaching schedule was Tuesday/Thursday. Or the student attended day classes but the faculty member taught at night. Some faculty taught solely on the weekends in the executive MBA program while their advisees attended classes only during the week. Since many of our students are employed and have families, it was not easy for them to make a special trip to campus to meet with an advisor.

Varying Levels of Advising Knowledge

A second problem under the previous advising structure was the varying levels of advising knowledge of the faculty. As mentioned earlier, all faculty were assigned undergraduate advisees, but some taught almost exclusively in the graduate programs. There was no training in advising topics for new faculty, and rapid growth at KSU meant almost one-half of the faculty members in 1995 had arrived within the previous 5 years. In addition to the small curriculum changes that occur each year, KSU's university-wide core curriculum was changed significantly in 1991. Significant changes in the business school core requirements were made in 1992 and 1995. Changes generally affect only newly matriculated students, so multiple versions of program requirements are in effect at any one time.

Varying Levels of Advising Interest

Individual faculty members have varying levels of interest in advising undergraduates. That interest level often affected how accurate their answers were and/or how much effort they put into finding correct answers to their advisees' questions. The "grapevine" helped many students find the faculty members who were more knowledgeable and also willing to help students who were not officially assigned as advisees. New faculty who were trying to meet their advising obligations also heard through the grapevine who could and would help them when they had a question. As a result, some faculty members did much more advising than others and more than their "fair share."

NEW ADVISING TEAM STRUCTURE

In the mid-90's, a new Office for Undergraduate Business Programs was created. One of the major responsibilities of this office was the supervision of advising. To replace the traditional advising model, the Associate Dean created the "Advising Team" and instituted a walk-in approach. The Advising Team is made up of two or three faculty members from each academic department, plus a staff advisor. The staff advisor serves as the advising coordinator, reporting to the Associate Dean. Currently the Team has ten members. Each Team member commits to a two-hour block of time per week for the entire semester to advise anyone who comes at that time. The Office for Undergraduate Programs coordinates the walk-in schedule. There is an attempt to prevent overlap and to spread coverage in order to maximize the times advising is available. Additional hours are added during registration periods. The staff advisor prepares the schedule after asking the Team members to submit their day and time preferences.

Students are not assigned to individual Team members. Team members are expected to be able to advise any business major, so the students can seek out whichever Team member is "on duty" when they have a question. They do not have to return to the same Team member for all their advising, although that may be more efficient if there is a continuing issue. Team members' expertise is in the details of program requirements, paperwork, graduation requirements, etc. For advice on career issues, students can still seek out any business faculty member as well as those on the Advising Team.

Increased Availability of Advising

A major advantage of the new structure is the increased availability of advising for an individual student. Since the students may visit with any member of the Advising Team, they have more opportunities to access advising

help. They are no longer limited to the office hours of a single faculty member, which may be an inconvenient time or day. They no longer have to depend on the grapevine to find help with their advising questions if their assigned advisor is unavailable or unhelpful. Now they have approximately 20 hours scheduled for walk-in help each week, and more during registration periods. The Team contains at least two faculty members from each department, so the students are still guaranteed access to a faculty member associated with their major area if that is their preference.

Increased Quality of Advising Information

A second major advantage of the new system is its effectiveness in getting students the correct information. Because the Team members are interested in and committed to advising, and spend considerable time doing it, they stay up-to-date on advising issues. The Office for Undergraduate Business Programs distributes new advising information when needed, and with the smaller group of interested people, it is easier to make sure that changes are noticed and understood. This was particularly important when KSU converted from the quarter system to the semester system in 1998. The Team members are more likely to know the correct answer to a student's question. If they do not know the answer, they know how to get it. The students are getting the information they need more efficiently.

The recently retired Assistant Registrar often stated that after we implemented the Advising Team, the Registrar's Office noticed a significant decline in the number of business majors who had problems with their coursework when they filed for graduation. Also, the previous Dean of General Education, who chaired the university-wide advising council, encouraged other colleges within the university to adopt our Team and walk-in-hours approach. She believed it provided much better service than the previous approach where students were assigned to all faculty members.

Increased Faculty Satisfaction

A third major advantage of the new system is increased faculty satisfaction with the advising process. Under the previous advising structure, the advising was theoretically spread over the entire business faculty. Changing from approximately eighty-five faculty members as advisors to ten clearly increases the advising workload of the faculty members on the Team. On the other hand, it drastically reduces or eliminates the advising required of the non-Team faculty, allowing them to focus on other responsibilities. The non-Team faculty who are not interested in advising undergraduates are particularly happy to be relieved of that responsibility. The Team members are satisfied because they have actively committed to serving on the Team. They get satisfaction from working with students in this area. The heavy advising loads are considered significant service activity in annual performance evaluation and in promotion and tenure discussions. Under the previous structure, everyone was expected to do advising, but there was little attention paid to who actually did it and how much. As a result of the explicit commitment to be on the Advising Team, advising service is more valued by the administration.

EVALUATION OF THE ADVISING TEAM APPROACH

No advising system is perfect. There was no organized effort to gather evaluative data about advising prior to the development of the Office for Undergraduate Business Programs. We cannot statistically demonstrate that the Advising Team and walk-in hours approach is better than what we had before. However, we know that the new system provides more advising hours to an individual student than the old system did. We also have abundant anecdotal evidence of problems under the old system of "advisors" who could not answer their advisees' questions, or even worse, who gave wrong answers because they were not up-to-date on the requirements.

Periodic internal surveys of the students indicate they are generally satisfied with the advising they receive under our current Team approach. For example, in the most recent survey, 152 students during the spring semester of 2000 answered a question about the helpfulness of the Advising Team members. A five point response scale was provided, with the number one labeled as "Low" and five labeled as "High." The survey also included space for additional comments.

Of the 152 who responded, 51 students (33.6%) said they had not talked with an advisor during that academic year. Of the 101 who had, 59 (58.4%) rated the advisor's helpfulness as High (5 on the 5-point scale). Another 29 students (28.7%) rated it as a 4. Only 4 students (4.0%) rated the advisor's helpfulness as a 1 or 2, and two of those students could not remember the advisor's name. In other terms, we have had students comment on "advisors" who were not actually members of the Advising Team. Sometimes they were not even talking about a business faculty member. Therefore, we are more confident about the usefulness of comments by students who are certain they were talking with a member of our Team.

Student Concerns

The majority of the students have expressed positive or no comments on the advising structure. The complaints that have been made are not surprising. First, there is the complaint that no one was available when they wanted to meet. The business school does not have the resources to provide advisors all day and evening every day, nor multiple advisors at prime times, so it is a fact that some students will not get help when they want it. But the current system provides much more availability than the previous one. Each term the advising schedule is set up to cover as much time as possible at the most useful times possible for the students.

Second, some students state they would prefer to be assigned to an individual who would know them and their situation. We explain to these students that they can visit the same advisor every time if they wish to do so. They are not forced to change advisors. However, that means they will limit themselves to the scheduled hours of one person and that reduces the benefit of the Team approach for that student.

Third, some students want to set an appointment rather than use the walk in approach. Individual advisors can choose to make appointments and in special circumstances, they do. Also, the staff advisor may make appointments between academic terms when the faculty members are not available and there is not much traffic. However, the walk-in approach is strongly preferred. It was developed in response to the many students who made appointments and then didn't show up on time or at all, often calling later to reschedule. Also, during a busy time like registration, it is not reasonable to allow one student to make an appointment and "cut" into a line of students who have been waiting their turns for walk-in advising.

External Validation

The Coles College of Business participates in a benchmarking program coordinated by the business school accrediting agency, AACSB International (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business). Several surveys of graduating seniors included one question about faculty advising: "How satisfied were you with the quality of faculty advising?". Students responded on a 7 point scale, with 1 representing "very dissatisfied" and 7 representing "very satisfied." For the 2001 survey, the average response for our students was 5.00. According to an article on the AACSB website (www.aacsb.edu – eNEWSLINE, V1 Issue 3), the average response for the 183 participating schools was 4.59.

CONCLUSION

The Coles College of Business at Kennesaw State University has adopted an advising structure for its undergraduates that uses selected faculty members serving on an Advising Team. These advisors are available at posted walk-in advising hours. The benefits of this system for the students are more efficient and effective advising. Students have access to advising at more times and are more likely to get a correct answer quickly. The benefits for the faculty are that faculty members on the Team enjoy advising and can have their performance expectations tailored to include advising, while those faculty members who are less interested in advising do not have to participate. This system acknowledges the differing interests, performance requirements (e.g., research), and abilities of faculty members. Other colleges and universities may also find this approach beneficial for their students and faculty.