IMPROVING ACADEMIC ADVISING : A CASE STUDY

AKADEMİK DANIŞMANLIĞIN GELİŞTİRİLMESİ:BİR VAKA ÇALIŞMASI

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to investigate the proposals of advisors and students for improving academic advising. The 287 academic advisors and 735 students from different departments participated in this study. Students and academic advisors were asked to state their proposals on how to improve the effectiveness of the present academic advising system at METU. The proposals obtained from academic advisors and students were qualitatively analysed regardless of student grade level and academic advisors' department or faculty. Based on the analysis of data, the suggestions of students and academic advisors were grouped under several headings such as flow of information, who should be an academic advisor, responsibilities and load of advisors, and the use of technology in advising process. The results of the study are discussed in light of available previous research findings.

KEY WORDS: *Academic advising, university, improving*

ÖZET : Bu çalışmada amaç, akademik danışman ve öğrencilerin akademik danışmanlığın geliştirilmesi konusundaki önerilerini incelemektir. Çalışmaya Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi'nin değişik bölümlerden 287 akademik danışman ve 735 öğrenci katılmıştır. Öğrenci ve akademik danışmanlara Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi'nde uygulanmakta olan akademik danışmanlık sisteminin geliştirilmesi konusunda önerileri sorulmuştur. Öğrenci ve akademik danışmanlardan toplanan öneriler sınıf, bölüm ve fakülte farkı gözetmeksizin kalitatif olarak çözülmüştür. Yapılan analiz sonucunda, akademik danışman ve öğrenci önerileri; bilgi akışı, kim danışman olmalıdır, danışmanların sorumluluk ve yükleri, ve teknolojinin danışmanlık sürecinde kullanımı genel başlıkları altında toplanmıştır. Araştırmanın bulguları daha önce yapılan araştırmalar ışığında tartışılmıştır.

ANAHTAR SÖZCÜKLER: *Akademik danışmanlık, üniversite, iyileştirme*

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing demands along with rapid social, technological, and scientific advancement put a strong pressure on educational institutions for improving the quality of education and services offered. Consequently, educational institutions improve and increase not only the quality of instruction and the instruments required, but also all other services offered to its consumers; students quality of instruction and the instruments required, but also all other services offered to its consumers; students and personnel. Among these services academic advising, are social, cultural and recreational activities, health, counseling, sports, and academic advising, the latter being the main concern of the present study.

Formal and informal advising that students receive from university faculty has been found to be positively related to students' academic performance, intellectual curiosity, interpersonal skills, and development of educational and career goals [1, 2, 3]. In addition, faculty play an important role in helping students adjust to and integrate into university life [4].

Crookston [5] focused on two types of academic advising: prescriptive and developmental. His definition of prescriptive and traditional advising was that the advisor

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dictated institutional requirements to the student. In traditional advising, a one to one relationship is not formed between the student and the advisor. In developmental advising, on the other hand, a bond is formed between the student and the advisor in a working and learning relationship. Some researchers found that developmental advising was linked with higher retention rates, and it made the university more student-oriented [6, 7].

Although many authors agree with the philosophy of developmental advising [8], most institutions do not embrace this philosophy [9]. Developmental advising is not endorsed in cases where there is a lack of commitment by faculty and key administrators, and lack of training, time, understanding of the developmental concept, and evaluation [7, 10]. Many research studies indicated that faculty staff could not be of help to students in planning their professional future and dealing with their problems [11] and many faculty tend to consider academic advising as an extra load [12].

Alexitch [13] found that not all students are receiving the style and content of advising that they would prefer to receive from faculty. Students indicated that they had received only minimal developmental academic and career advising. The frequency of advising activities received by students was significantly lower than the frequency they preferred. Demir [14] found that students and academic advisors perceived academic advising activities differently, and had different expectations from advising. While students perceived advising activities as insufficient and ineffective both in quality and quantity, the academic advisors perceived their advising activities as sufficient and effective.

There is no doubt that advisors are in a position to contribute substantially to the creation of the positive environments for students [15]. Advising undergraduate students has traditionally been expected to be the responsibility of the university faculty, but in reality the preparation to carry out this important responsibility has often been neglected [16].

Research studies on academic advising can generally be examined in three groups: (1) students' opinions about advising (2) advisors' views about advising (3) comparisons between students and advisors about advising [17]. Academic advising as a developmental process seems to contribute to the success of both the student and the institution. What party benefits more may be questioned, but it is of no question that all benefit. In the last decade academic advising process has been discussed in the Turkish higher education system in relation to its role and effectiveness [18, 19, 20, 21]. For increasing the effectiveness of academic advising, a suitable approach may be to examine the concerns of directly involved parties: academic advisors and students. Within this frame the purpose of the present study was to examine the perceptions of academic advisors and students related to the improvement of the effectiveness of academic advising system at the Middle East Technical University (METU).

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

The participants in the present study were 287 advisors and 735 undergraduate students attending a large size Turkish public university. A stratified random selection technique was used to include students from different departments, faculties and grade levels. There were 374 male and 361 female students of whom 214 were freshmen, 211 were sophomore, 180 junior and 130 senior students. Furthermore, there were 204 students from the Faculty of Engineering, 169 from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, 149 from the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, 110 from the Faculty of Architecture, 103 from the Faculty of Education. Academic advisors represented

different academic titles; 53 were professors, 52 associate professors, 23 assistant professors, 35 instructors and 124 research assistants.

2. 2. Procedure

Students and academic advisors were asked one open-ended question where they were expected to reflect their opinion on the problems and effectiveness of the present academic advising system. They were also expected to state the problems they faced and propose solutions. The department secretaries helped in arranging the schedule for the administering of this opinionniare. The students answered the opinionniare in the scheduled class hour, and the advisers answered it in their office. All answered opinionnaires were gathered in two weeks' period by the researchers. Since the main focus of the present study was the overall assessment of academic advisory system based on of academic advisors' and students' opinion. The data analysis was carried out regardless of department, faculty and the grade level. The responses of advisors and students were categorized according to the themes explored in the data.

2. 3. The case

Middle East Technical University is an English medium university, where most of the courses are taught in English. There are five faculties: arts and science, engineering, administrative sciences, architecture, and education. There are about 39 departments, about 17.000 undergraduate students, and 1900 faculty members including research assistants.

Academic advising at METU is a tradition initiated with the foundation of the university. Advising at METU is defined in the Rules and Regulations for Assessment of Undergraduate Students as the responsibility of the department faculty. Yet, this item does not include any further explication about the advising responsibility.

The advising process starts by assigning a group of freshmen students to a faculty as an academic advisor. The group size assigned to an advisor depends on the number of department faculty and the number of students admitted each year. The advisor assists students with the courses they will take each semester and helps them to select elective courses in accordance with rules and regulations. The advisor also keeps student files, where courses and progress records are recorded. The advisor approves the courses students want to register, and assists students who look for other alternatives such as double major, minor or teaching certificate. Furthermore, advisors are considered as the contact persons among students, departments and the registrar office. The advisor and the registrar office reciprocally check student records and agree if a student had fulfilled the requirements for graduation.

At present, the registration issue is computerized and there is much information on the system about students' courses and progress that is helpful for advisors. In addition to advisor activities, registrar office and the public relations office cooperatively publish a monthly student bulletin where information about changes regarding students and advising process is included.

3. RESULTS

Qualitative analysis of the students' and advisors' responses related to the effectiveness of academic advising was summed under the following themes; flow of information, who should be the academic advisor, responsibility of academic advisors, advising load, and the use of computer technology in advisory system. Each theme is further explicated through suggestions provided by students and advisors on the improvement of the effectiveness of academic advising system.

3.1. Flow of information

Students expected their academic advisors to

know about the academic rules and regulations, and to inform them about scholarships, job and work opportunities, to know about the curriculum and the courses offered, inform students about the elective courses offered, and follow the progress of students.

According to the academic advisors, information about elective courses, services for students, scholarship, aids, job opportunities, curriculum and courses in the curriculum was not properly disseminated. Some advisors raised the importance of having more clear rules. Next, rules and regulations were found to change so often that it was hard to follow them. Some advisors demanded a well-prepared manual (advisory catalogue) that would be available to all. Lack of sufficient and clear information was thought to cause loss of valuable time and energy.

3.2. Who should be an academic advisor?

Students' proposals on who should be advisor tend to change; some students ask for a tolerant, interested, sincere, and expert advisor while others mention only the academic title of those who should be academic advisors, which varied from research assistants to full professors. Some of the students concentrated on the faculty who were graduates of the same institution because they thought these advisors would be more familiar with related rules and regulations. Another suggestion was that academic advisors should be selected among those who volunteer and who are available when needed. It was interesting to notice that some students suggest that academic advisors be selected according to some personality characteristics, such as tolerance, interest, and sincerity.

The suggestions about who should be advisor tended to change among the advisors too. The responses varied from professors to research assistant and also any voluntary academic staff. Some participants claimed that academic advising is an important service so it

should not be degraded. Still others indicated that the academic advisors should be assigned among high post faculty who are experienced and alumni of the same institution. Several advisors proposed that the same academic advisor should advise the same student until the date of graduation. This is the case in some departments but it is not uniform.

3. 3. Responsibility of the academic advisors

Students indicated that some of the academic advisors did not take advising seriously. Still others complained that they could not see their advisors when they needed to. It was strongly proposed that advising should not be considered as a simple paper and pencil work.

There seems to be an agreement among the advisors that advising should be clearly defined and the responsibilities should be clearly stated. Beside these two proposals, it was mentioned that advising should not be considered simply a paper pencil work. All the rules and regulations should be uniformly applied. Academic advising should be viewed as an academic issue. There is no need to load the advisors with responsibility of informing students about scholarships, job opportunities, and other matters beyond academic advising. In contrast to the last statement, some academic advisors claim that advisors are responsible for directing and orienting students. Academic advisor should inform students about rules and regulations. Advisors should work as coordinators between students and the department. Finally, it was stated that academic advising system is getting worse, it is not done as it should be, and it should not be perceived as an office task, but as a must to all faculty.

3.4. Advising load

Most of the students and advisors indicated that the number of students assigned to one advisor was too many. As they have too much course teaching load no more than 10 students

should be assigned to one advisor. In the present study it was observed that the number of students per advisor varies from 3 to 100.

3.5. Use of computer technology in advising system

Since the responsibilities of an academic advisor were perceived by some respondents as an issue of registration, they mainly suggested doing the registration via computers. Student registration at METU is already being done via computer network. Although some of the academic advisors suggested supplying students with needed information, encouraging them to carry out their own task with minor assistance from qualified doctoral students, this practice still does not abandon the need for academic advising.

The overall examination of students' and academic advisors' proposals proved that there were similarities and differences between the two parties. First the similarities and then the differences are summarized below.

Concerning who should be an academic advisor, both the students and advisors agree on the idea that advisors' academic degree may vary from research assistants to full professors. They also agree that METU alumni academic staff might be more helpful in academic advising because they are closer to and more familiar with the existing system. Both parties agree that academic advisors' load should be decreased. There is strong indication on the need for a well-developed academic advising catalogue, and a handbook that should be available to all students and advisors. Furthermore, students and academic advisors arise several critical points with regard to how academic advising is perceived. It was clearly pointed out that academic advising should not be considered simply as a paperwork. While students perceive it as a serious issue, advisors themselves perceive it as an academic responsibility, so both parties insist on the need for clearly defined and agreed conception of

academic advising. Finally, although there are various problems, almost all agree on the necessity of academic advising.

Students and academic advisors differ in their perceptions of the expected characteristics of academic advisors. While students suggested some characteristics like interest, tolerance, expert/ being informed and being sincere, academic advisors mentioned or suggested no such characteristics at all.

4. DISCUSSION

Results of the present study revealed that both academic advisors and students concentrated on the need for a more definite conception of academic advising. This result is similar to Broadbridge's [22] findings. That is, both parties emphasised the need to clearly define what academic advising is and specify the policy of the institution about advising and define the responsibilities of advisors. Such an attempt will clarify and standardize the conception of academic advising within the institution, and will probably prevent any misconceptions which might appear among advisors and students.

The academic advisors themselves concentrated on a different dimension. Some academic advisors considered the issue as an academic task while the others did not. Furthermore, it was claimed that academic advising could be carried out by graduate students and research assistants. In contrary, there were advisors who strongly emphasized the value of academic advising and looked for ways to help students. The difference between the two alternative views could be related to unclear policy about academic advising and the vague definition of responsibilities. Broadbridge [22] stated that some students were unclear of their own role in the advising relationship because their responsibility was not clarified at the outset. The matter of what academic title should be required for being an academic

advisor was of secondary importance.

Most of those who were involved in academic advising process complained about the load including courses, projects, academic advising and administrative duties and a large number of students to be advised. In reality, paperwork load at METU is reduced in the last several years because students select their courses and get registered via Internet. Since the whole task of academic advising is not related to registration and paperwork, the load can be reduced. The reason for this reduction can be related to the need for curriculum planning, orienting, use of full range of university resources, communication, sharing, formulating future goals and career planning and the strategies to be followed for achieving the planned goals [23]. These responsibilities may be more critical than the simple registration task. Institutions that have employed computer assisted advising programs have found them to be an effective tool for improving advising [23].

Moore [12] indicated that academic advisors tend to consider academic advising as an extra load. A clear statement in university advisory regulations will, to some extent, reduce the confusion and lead to a more structured definition of responsibilities and policies of academic advising.

Communication was another important element raised in the responses of the students and advisors. Students had a tendency to complain about the lack of communication with their advisors. Some claimed that they could not see their advisors at all throughout the whole academic semester. At this point some advisors may reject this complaint and state that it may be a problem of the student, not the problem of advisor. Yet, if we are looking for a more effective academic advising, we have to consider such complaints and search for them because effective academic advising requires understanding of student characteristics and being sensitive to student needs. Lumpkins and Hall [16] found that students expect their advisors to be trustworthy, friendly and interested in the student's welfare. It would be great to falsify the claim. Rather than rejecting it from the very beginning and considering it a waste of time, measures should be taken to rectify the concern of students in this regard.

In the situations where goals are not clearly specified it would be difficult to assume the effectiveness of academic advising and advisor, which may later be reflected in the performance of the whole institution. The third issue students raised was the question of who should be an academic advisor. Students look for someone to whom they can easily talk and share their problems (both in academic and personal sense), guide them in their coursework, provide needed information, be available when needed and at least refer her/him to a related unit, section or person. Sometimes students may even want to see a smiling face that could make them relax. For the student the academic title hold by the academic advisor seems not very critical, but experience and the above-mentioned issues sound more critical. Academic advisors should be carefully selected because individual differences among faculty members in terms of interests, competencies and personality play a major role in the advising process [25]. Student recommendations for improvement of advising include more visits per academic term, better interpersonal skills and better information [1]. In addition, the advising scheme must be supported by the institution; otherwise, even the most efficient and organized advising system will be open to failure [25].

Having an effective academic advising system seems to depend on multiple factors. First, a clear definition of the academic advising concept is needed and a clear statement of policy for academic advising is required. Second, responsibilities of academic advisors and students should be well stated. Next, those assigned as academic advisors should appreciate academic advising and not consider it as a paper-pencil work. It needs to be conceived as

an academic responsibility. Furthermore, professionalising academic advising may be good will for the future. Winston, Miller, Ender and Grites [26] specified the components of an ideal advising model. Academic advising should be offered only by personnel who voluntarily choose to advise, who receive systematic advisory skill training, who would assume advising as a specified responsibility, whose performance is systematically evaluated, and who are rewarded for skillful performance. For the present, the institutions may establish academic advising centers and have few such advisors who will cooperate with all other advisors in the institution. If available, potential advisors should be screened to ensure that they are willing to talk to students about personal, career and educational goals and about academic progress and problems. At the minimum, the advisor should (1) be familiar with requirements of the respective field and career opportunities for students; (2) be knowledgeable about the university's rules and regulations and its resources; (3) have a basic understanding of human behavior and communication. Higher education institutions that have a well-established infrastructure of a computer network should make use of computers and network in academic advising, especially in keeping some student records for advisory purposes. This will ease the burden of advisors in the flow of information that the participants of the present study mainly complained about and will reduce amount of time and money spared for this purpose.

Academic advising should be appreciated, not underestimated. Those who take the responsibility should be rewarded, and incentives should be offered by the institution itself. It would be better to assign to one academic advisor fewer students if s/he is really expected to help the student within the real sense of academic advising.

The benefits of computer-assisted advising include reduced time in evaluating students'

academic progress, improved accuracy in advising, ease in obtaining and sending information, reduction in costs, and more efficient use of advisor time. Each institution can develop a systematic and periodic evaluation of advising program, which is essential to their effectiveness. The ability to assess whether an advisory system achieves its goals largely depends on students' and administrators' sensitivity to the system. Students' perceptions of academic advising activities should be assessed periodically. Effective advising systems meet the needs of the university's constituencies and further its goals. The improvement on academic advising can promote students' satisfaction with their university experience and encourage them to remain in university long enough to fulfil their educational goals, future plans, social and personal development [27].

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