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ABSTRACT

Given that faculty advising plays an important role in college level retention, this paper examines three possible forms of faculty advisor-student relationships--paternalism, agency, and contract--and found the contract form to be superior. The paternalistic model in which the advisor assumes responsibility and authority for decision making was found to be inappropriate because generally college level students are capable of participating in decisions. The agency model which gives most of the responsibility and authority for decision-making to the student with the advisor acting on the student's behalf, was inadequate because it fails to recognize the ethical freedom and responsibility of the advisor and his responsibility to third parties. The contract model was found to be superior because it puts the advisor and advisee on an equal footing allowing for them to mutually agree on decisions after discussion together thereby encouraging and recognizing the adult status of the student. Limitations involve the degree to which the pair are not in fact equal. Survey results of 495 students from Villa Julie College (Maryland) found that for 133 students, advisor availability was a significant factor in their decision to stay. Of students surveyed, 7 preferred the paternal advising model, 128 the agency model, and 352 the contract model. Included are 18 references, and a copy of the student survey. (JB)

RETENTION AND ADVISING: PATERNALISM, AGENCY, and CONTRACT[1]

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Noel/Levitz 1990 National Conference on Student Retention
July 9, 1990

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We may accept as given the perception, if ot the demonstration, that faculty advising can play an important role in a college's retention efforts and programs.[2]

What we are not so ready to agree upon is the nature of the advisor-advisee relationship that is most conducive to retention. This lack of agreement may derive from the variety of institutions, each with its own mission, goals, and clientele (Daigle 40; Brophy 42; Lenning, et al. 5); and the variety of characteristics and what is expected of advisors and advisees (Bean 710; Brophy 9,10; Crockett 247; Heard 12). But we can allow for such variety and still make some general and useful observations concerning possible types of advisor-advisee relationships and the value of each type vis-a-vis retention efforts.

This paper borrows the basic models of the professional-client relationship from professional ethics: paternalism, agency, and

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[1]This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Noel/Levitz 1990 National Conference on Student Retention, July 9, 1990.

[2]For perceptions see Beal and Noel (4?), Finney (2,7), and Heard (15). Cf. Holm (90) who found the advisor had little perceived effect on retention of "adult" students in a personalized learning program. For demonstrations see Atkins (8,22) and Brophy (38,41,43) who cite several works, Crockett (244-46), Gordon (127), and Tinto (152). Forrest (71) argues that the significance is probable but not certain.

contract. It applies these to the relationship in question: the one between advisor and advisee. And the paper argues for the general superiority of the contract model while nevertheless recognizing its limits.

"Advising" and "Retention"

Since the terms "advising" and "retention" are broad, some working definitions might be useful.

First, our discussion focusses on faculty advising as set apart from, e.g., psychological/personal counseling,[3] mere course scheduling (Kazazes 13), admissions and financial aid orientation/advising, professional advising (Crockett 250), and peer advising (Crockett 250, Daigle 41).

With Dressel we may distinguish the faculty advisor as being an assigned faculty member who (1) assists students in the selection of courses and fulfillment of degree requirements; (2) monitors academic performance; (3) responds to students' concerns or questions about electives, major, preparation for exams, study habits, academic deficiencies, career development, and personal problems (158).[4]

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[3] This is not to discount the possible role of the advisor as counselor and confidant, but only to distinguish the basic duties of an advisor from those of a counselor (see Dressel 158). Some writers are not careful about this distinction (e.g. Brophy 12, 122).

[4] Less prosaically we may, with Walsh, place the focus of advising on the students' development of their academic selves (447).

With Lenning, et al., we make take "student retention" to refer to student persistence to the (1) completion of a degree or certificate; (2) completion of a chosen program, but short of a degree or certificate; (3) completion of a chosen term or course; or (4) attainment of a personal goal, but short of a degree or certificate (2). This permits us to distinguish persisters from stop-outs (students who leave but come back), attainers (people who leave having achieved a personal goal but not a degree or certificate), and drop-outs (the opposite of persisters) (Heard 17). We should also note that dropping out may occur for positive reasons, e.g. a good job offer, or may be more beneficial than staying in school (Lenning, et al. 9).

Thus an ideal retention program aims at retaining students who can benefit from staying in college and only for the amount of time the student requires to reap the benefits he seeks or deserves. In other words, e.g., a college has not failed to retain a student who has taken the computer courses she needs to upgrade her job skills and then left the college without pursuing further studies. Nor has a college failed to retain a student when the student's dropping out was in the best interest of the student.

It is worth adding that a well-developed program helps not only the student who can benefit from such help, but also the institution by maintaining and increasing the caliber of its students and by contributing to its financial viability.

* * *

The academic advisor's main interest is the welfare of the

advisor, even if that welfare entails the advisee's leaving the college. As a representative and employee of the college, the advisee also plays a role and has an interest in the retention efforts of the college. The academic advisor fulfills his responsibilities by giving the students worth retaining the best advising service possible relative to the mission and goals of the college and the needs of the advisee.

If advising aids retention, it follows that whatever enhances advising enhances retention. The literature offers many suggestions for enhancing advising ranging from training for advisors to institutional inducements for good advising (e.g. Atkins 23; Crockett 254; Forrest 69,74; Gordon 130; Hollander 10; Lenning, et al. 17; Kazazes 1). But the element of effective advising on which we wish to focus is the appropriate quantity and quality of advisor-advisee interaction.

Much has been made about the value of interaction and some discussion has taken place which attempts to identify elements of that interaction (Cahn 35, 36; Daigle 41; Finney 7-9; Gordon 127; Hollander 4-5). But we need to get a clearer idea of what such interaction might entail and here we shall find useful consideration of the professional-client relationship.

Paternalism, Agency, and Contract

In Professional Ethics, Michael Bayles articulates three basic models of the professional-client relationship: paternalism, agency, and contract. Each model differs from the others according

to the allocation of responsibilty and authority for decision-making (70-79).[5]

(1) In the paternalism model the professional assumes most of the responsibility and authority for decision-making. At times the professional may find it necessary to act or fail to act on behalf of the client without the client's voluntary and informed consent. According to this model, an advisor could be justified in drafting advisees' class schedules, e.g., without consulting the students or encouraging them to draft their own.

This model is defensible to the extent that the professional usually has knowledge superior to the client's in the matter for which the professional has been hired: the client cannot give full and informed consent and must trust the professional to exercise expert judgment. However, when the client is intelligent enough to make informed decisions, the professional should be able to provide clear and sufficient information for the client to participate in the decision making. On the face of it, therefore, the paternalism model seems inadequate when the client is capable of making decisions.

Closely related to the paternalism model is the fiduciary model which recognizes the professional's superior knowledge but allows for the client's consent to a decision. While this improves on the paternalism model per se, allowing the client a measure of

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[5] This paper assumes that the relationship between advisor and advisee is either a professional-client relationship or close enough to one not to require entering the debate about what constitutes a professional. But cf. Bayles (7).

authority and responsibility, it does not give the adult, intelligent client enough of the responsibility which the client might wish or should assume. Advisees are responsible at least to some extent for the consequences of their scheduling, so that even if they accept an advisor's draft of a schedule, their acceptance is a decision to go with the schedule and not mere consent to the advisor's authority.

(2) The agency model gives most of the responsibility and authority for decision-making to the client, with the professional acting on behalf of and under the direction of the client. An advisor assuming an agent's role might insist that the students draft their own schedules and assume responsibility for any mistakes in planning for meeting requirements.

This model holds a certain appeal for those who do not like to put control of their lives in the hands of others, even if those others have professional abilities, which the client needs but lacks. But it fails to recognize the ethical freedom and responsibility of the professional and takes from him his independence of judgment. Furthermore, it fails to take into account the professional's responsibility to third parties.

(3) The contract model puts the client and the professional on equal footing, recognizing "the freedom of two equals to determine the condition of their relationship" (Bayles 72). In this vein the advisor and the advisee might make their respective suggestions and then come to a mutually satisfying decision concerning the advisee's schedule.

In a culture such as ours, where freedom and equality of opportunity are so highly prized, this model has strong appeal. However, Bayles notes, the professional and client may not be relevantly equal. One would hope, for example, that the professional's knowledge exceeds the client's. Further, the client usually has a more personal stake in the situation for which the professional is being paid. And the professional has more freedom to enter into the relationship.

A particular sort of contractual relationship is one based on friendship "a close relationship of mutual trust and cooperation: a mutual venture, a partnership" (Bayles 73). An advantage to this model is the degree of the professional's interest in the client's welfare: the intent goes beyond getting paid for the job or doing the job well. However, the facts that the professional is being paid and that, professionally, the professional and client are unequal, suggest the hazards of trying to force a friendship onto a professional relationship.[6]

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I believe that of these three models the contractual one lends itself best to the advisor-advisee relationship. Of course this model has its shortcomings and either of the other two models might be more appropriate in certain situations. Nevertheless, the general superiority of the contractual over the paternalistic and

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[6] Furthermore, the question whether friendship between a teacher and a student is ever appropriate merits a discussion all its own, thus we shall not confront the issue here. The more general contract model should be of sufficient interest for our purposes (cf Cahn 36).

agency models can be argued from the very concept of advising and from the experiences and perceptions of advisors and advisees.

Let us return to our working definition of advising. The emphasis is on helping students develop their academic selves and on contributing to their self-confidence (Lenning, et al. 17). Toward this end the advisor assists students in scheduling courses and programs; monitors students' performances; and responds to students' questions concerning their academic, personal, social, and professional lives, with such response coming sometimes in the form of simply listening and sometimes in a more active forms such as the encouragement to clarify life and career goals (Crockett 244-48).

In the light of this definition one argument we can offer in defense of the contract model involves arguing against the paternalism and the agency models. The paternalism model is the in loco parentis model, one which has disappeared from most colleges. Colleges today do or should treat their students as adults who must assume much of the responsibility for their own education (cf. Finney 9,10). Indeed, where younger students are concerned, one of the benefits of a college education is the opportunity to mature with guidance. Of course, students vary considerably in their readiness for decision-making (Crockett 248), their levels of maturation (Tinto 91-93), and their learning styles (Heard 12). But all of these differences are or should be seen as existing within the context of adulthood burgeoning or well-advanced. Thus the paternal model of an advisor-advisee relationship is less

appropriate than the models which recognize the responsibility of the students for their own learning.

The fiduciary model -- a moderate form of the paternalism model -- has an attraction not seen in the more general category of paternalism: it recognizes the authority and expertise of the advisor, while giving the advisees the opportunity to consent to the advisor's decision. The crucial point here is that the model calls for the advisees' consent, not their decision. But as Crockett notes,

> Advising is a decision-making process by which students realize their maximum educational potential through communication and information exchanges with an advisor: it is ongoing and multifaceted, and the responsibility of both student and advisor. (248)

The advisor should not be given the authority to or the responsibility for making decisions alone where the advisee is also responsible for the consequences of the decision. And advisees that cannot assume such responsibility do not belong in college.

The agency model, on the other hand, places too much of the responsibility and authority for decision-making on the student. Certainly students new to college life need guidance from an advisor that places a responsibility on the advisor beyond that of an agent. And even students who are well into their college careers but who can benefit from seeing an advisor are seeking the advice of one they expect to be knowledgeable and authoritative. Indeed, if advisors are agents at all, they are agents of the

college, not of the advisees. To apply the agency model to the advisor-advisee relationship, therefore, would be a disservice to all concerned.

In one sense, then, the contract model wins by default: the other two are simply untenable. But the contract model is not immune to criticism. For one thing, advisees often appear to expect the advisors to make the decisions and to assume responsibility for the consequences of those decisions. Many of us who have served as academic advisors have been confronted by angry students who will fail to graduate because of an earlier scheduling mistake. Surely, the advisees yell, this is the fault of the advisor![7] Also the college is often faced by angry parents who expected the college to serve in loco parentis, an expectation that is allegedly justified by the parents' paying of the tuition. And many advisors put themselves in a paternal position, sometimes out of expediency and sometimes out of a patronizing sense of their relationship to their advisees.

In the other extreme, students, parents, and/or advisors may expect the student to assume sole responsibility for their decisions. Students are, we have admitted, adults and the advisor's primary function is to teach, not to rear, nurture, or scold. Of course to those embracing this extreme we might ask what purpose the advisor serves beyond keeper of the rubber stamp. And if there is no other purpose, then use of faculty as advisors would

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[7] In fact advisors may even be in danger of malpractice suits (Hollander 9-10).

be a gross waste of time.

So we must defend the contract model on more positive grounds. This paper has offered suggestions in this direction: the emphasis on interaction, the acknowledgement of both the expertise of the advisor and the responsibility of the advisee, the role of the advisor as guide, not parent, etc. And several references to the literature have indicated support for this model (e.g. Cahn 36, Brophy 7, Crockett 248). But it may be appropriate to interject a more personal observation.

At Villa Julie College, I have been advising for ten years. All relevant indicators point toward the superiority of the contractual model over the others. Villa Julie is a private, independent four-year liberal arts college, with a variety of students and programs. Faculty advising plays a major role in the college's retention program (along with admissions and financial aid counseling, psychological counseling, peer advising, extracurricular activities, and remedial programs). Freshmen and sophomores must see their advisors for midterm grades and for schedule approval; juniors and seniors have the option of seeing their advisors for these. All students are encouraged to think of their advisors as performing the functions discussed above and are encouraged to take full advantage of the advising services.

In a survey distributed to students during the final week of the Spring 1990 semester, students were asked to state how important availability of an advisor is to them and how they

perceive the nature of the advisor-advisee relationship.[8] Of the 495 students surveyed (out of a student body of 1099 FTE), 133 claimed that the availability of the advisor was significant to their decision to stay at Villa Julie College; 7 saw the paternalism model as best, 128 saw the agency model as best, and 352 saw the contract model as best. Comments further supported the students' preference for the contract model.

In my own experience and the experience of other advisors with whom I have discussed this paper, students are more receptive to advising when they are put on equal footing in decision-making and when they are treated as adults, if not peers, rather than as children or inferiors.

The evidence so far, then, suggests the superiority of the contract model. The nature of advising, the literature, and the experiences of advisors and advisees point to this superiority. Our discussion has been a cursory, if not preliminary, one which begs for critique and elaboration. It is the modest aim of this paper to stimulate such study.

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[8] A copy of the survey is appended to this paper.

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VILLA JULIE COLLEGE * STEVENSON, MARYLAND 21153

ADVISING SURVEY

At Villa Julie, academic advisors are available for every student -- to assist in course planning and to be sources of information about their respective disciplines and areas of interest or experience.

1. Did you know that Villa Julie offers each student an academic advisor?
   ___ YES ___ NO

2. Do you know who your advisor is? ___ YES ___ NO

3. Are you aware of the duties of the advisor, as stated above? ___ YES ___ NO

4. Has the availability of an advisor made any difference to your decision to stay at Villa Julie? ___ YES ___ NO To leave Villa Julie? ___ YES ___ NO

5. If you answered "YES" to #4, has this made
   ___ A BIG DIFFERENCE
   ___ A MODERATE DIFFERENCE
   ___ A SMALL DIFFERENCE

6. In your opinion, the advisor-advisee relationship works best when:

   ___ A. The student assumes most of the responsibility for deciding what courses to take.
   ___ B. The advisor assumes most of the responsibility for determining what courses the student should take.
   ___ C. The advisor and student assume joint responsibility for deciding what courses the student should take.

7. Briefly explain your answer to #6._____
   _____
   _____

8. Is your own relationship to your advisor similar to the one you checked in #6?
   ___ YES ____ NO ___ I DO NOT SEE AN ADVISOR

   * If "NO," which statement in #6 characterizes your perceptions of your actual relationship with your advisor? ___ A ___ B ___ C

9. What year are you? ___ 1ST ___ 2ND ___ 3RD ___ 4TH ___ Other

10. Are you ___ FULL-TIME DAY ___ PART-TIME DAY ___ EVENING?

11. What is your (estimated) grade point average
    ___ LESS THAN 2.0
    ___ BETWEEN 2.0 and 3.0
    ___ GREATER THAN 3.0

12. Are you ___ MALE or ___ FEMALE?

13. What is your age group? ___ UNDER 22 ___ 22 OR OLDER

14. What is your ethnic group? ___ AMERICAN INDIAN ___ASIAN ___ BLACK
    ___ HISPANIC ___ WHITE ___ OTHER