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AUTHOR Scott, Carl
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ABSTRACT

Faculty are pressured to provide high-quality advising for undergraduate psychology majors, but lack the time and resources. One efficient solution provides comprehensive advising information via a departmental handbook that helps students solve the problem of graduating with a degree in psychology, prepared for employment or graduate school. A review of objectives for advising undergraduate psychology majors outlines the goals of an advising program. Advising is described as support for extended problem solving of an ill-defined problem--planning an undergraduate course of study. The handbook's plan applies three findings about effective problem solving: (1) representing problems completely and abstractly through subgoaling and working backwards; (2) encouraging student-initiated activity; and (3) motivating students to solve their academic career advisement problem. The plan describes each strategy and its relevance for academic advising. The handbook can meet the objectives of a high-quality advising program. Also, a well-designed handbook can serve as the main element of a marketing plan for the psychology major. This handbook improves on other similar plans (e.g., Gielen, 1987) by: (1) presenting a clearer rationale; (2) explaining how a handbook will help students; and (3) applying cognitive psychology to the handbook's design and use. (Author)

Advising-Marketing Plan for Psychology Departments

Carl Scott, PhD

University of St. Thomas

3800 Montrose Blvd

Houston, TX 77006-4696

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of the American Psychological Association

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Abstract

Faculty are pressured to provide high-quality advising for undergraduate psychology majors, but lack the time and resources. One efficient solution provides comprehensive advising information via a departmental handbook that helps students solve the problem of graduating with a degree in psychology, prepared for employment or graduate school. A review of objectives for advising undergraduate psychology majors outlines the goals of an advising program. Advising is described as support for extended problem solving of an ill-defined problem--planning an undergraduate course of study. The handbook's plan applies three findings about effective problem solving: (a) representing problems completely and abstractly through subgoaling and working backwards; (b) encouraging student-initiated activity; and (c) motivating students to solve their academic career advisement problem. The plan describes each strategy and its relevance for academic advising. The handbook can meet the objectives of a high-quality advising program. Also, a well-designed handbook can serve as the main element of a marketing plan for the psychology major. This handbook improves on other similar plans (e.g., Gielen, 1987) by: (a) presenting a clearer rationale; (b) explaining how a handbook will help students; and (c) applying cognitive psychology to the handbook's design and use.

Advising-Marketing Plan for Psychology Departments

I developed this advising-marketing plan as a cognitive psychologist interested in solving real problems, and as a chair who had to review his undergraduate psychology department. My university strives for high-quality advising of its undergraduates, but my department has a large student-faculty ratio, and, like most faculty, other pressures limit the resources available for academic advising. The solution described herein provides comprehensive advising information via a departmental handbook that helps students solve the problem of graduating with a degree in psychology and being prepared for employment or graduate school. This strategy can aid advising in all undergraduate and graduate programs. Also, a well-designed handbook can serve as the main element of a plan for marketing the psychology major, both to students at the institution and to prospective students.

I begin by reviewing objectives for advising undergraduate psychology majors that originated from advising professionals and APA experts. Next, I outline my view of advising as supporting extended problem solving, and describe some insights from cognitive psychology that can enlighten advising. Following this, I discuss the contents of a handbook. Finally, I describe the marketing component of this plan.

Eight Advising Goals

Traditional approaches to academic advising usually have been cast into a counseling framework, stressing the development of a relationship between faculty member and student (Ware, 1993). For example, the National Association of Academic Advisors (NACADA) listed eight goals for advising (given in Ware, 1993) (see Table 1). Only one of the eight goals was satisfactorily achieved in a 1982 survey of academic advisers' evaluation of their advising efforts (goal number 1, accurate program information) (Ware, 1993); these results suggested great potential for improving academic advising.

Eight Advising Recommendations

Ware (1993) surveyed academic advising related to undergraduate psychology programs, and he offered eight recommendations (see Table 2). I have divided his eight into two sets of four administrative and four content recommendations. The four administrative recommendations for advising programs are: (a) chairs should promote advising, (b) someone should be responsible for advising, (c) formal training should be provided, and (d) advising programs should be evaluated and faculty rewarded for good performance.

The four content recommendations for advising programs are: (a) information should be given about academic programs, careers, and post-baccalaureate opportunities; (b) students need to

examine themselves, use decision-making skills, and be encouraged to take responsibility for themselves; (c) faculty advisors should display respect for and interest in students, and understand the needs of special student populations; and (d) advising should employ a variety of materials and advising systems.

Advising programs should address the eight NACADA goals and Ware's eight recommendations. I believe that the plan I describe in this paper satisfies each goal and recommendation at least to a minimal level. Before describing the plan, I want to describe some realistic limitations that academic advising efforts face; my solution for academic advising works within these limitations.

Resource Limitations for Advising

Four limitations prevent or interfere with faculty accomplishing academic advising goals. First, the demands on faculty for quality teaching, research productivity, and supervision of students' research, leave little time and energy for academic advising, especially advising that aspires to meet the eight NACADA goals. Faculty have estimated that their work week consumes 58 hours in teaching, research, and committee or professional service (Boice, 1989). This time estimate does not allow much additional time for academic advising activities.

Second, faculty may not embrace all of the eight academic advising goals, may be impatient with students' attempts to discover their interests, or may feel unprepared to advise young or unusual students. Some advising safety net is needed for these situations.

Third, as the costs of higher education continue to grow rapidly, the importance of academic advising increases. Advising errors that require additional, avoidable coursework may cost students dearly in time and money, and constitute an important ethical consideration for faculty.

Finally, mixed success in defining and encouraging high-quality teaching suggests that motivating and training faculty to achieve high-quality advising also will be a daunting task. Some interim solutions are needed during the slow process of change.

A solution for academic advising problems must also consider these and other limitations on the resources available to faculty advisors. My solution respects these limits.

Academic Advising as Support for Problem Solving

I view academic advising as support for extended problem solving, where the problem is how to graduate with a degree in psychology, prepared for work or further study. My delivery system for advising support is an undergraduate handbook. I think that an undergraduate handbook is a realistic approach to meeting both the eight advising goals of NACADA and the eight recommendations of Ware (1993) for advising in psychology, and working within the resource limitations of faculty advisors.

An advising handbook for psychology majors is not new. I first encountered a departmental handbook as a graduate student at the University of Houston in the mid-1970s. More recently, students gave me copies of handbooks from the University of Western Australia and Yale University.

Gielen (1987) described her York College undergraduate psychology handbook; it has many commendable elements, which I will discuss below. Her brief rationale for a handbook included students' information-overload and the inconvenience of extra coursework to meet graduation requirements. My contributions to Gielen's and others' work in this area are: (a) A clearer rationale for why a handbook is needed; (b) an explanation of how the handbook will help; and (c) principles based on cognitive psychology that can guide the design and use of the handbook.

Described in its most abstract form, the rationale for this marketing-advising plan is to apply the results of cognitive research on problem solving to help students represent an intimidatingly big problem--how to successfully complete a major in psychology--in a more approachable manner. The handbook applies three findings from cognition: (a) representing problems completely and abstractly through subgoaling and working backwards; (b) encouraging student-initiated activity; and (c) motivating students to solve their academic career advisement problem. Each strategy and its relevance for academic advising is described below.

Problem solving can be described as transforming a problem space from the initial problem state to the goal state by means of operators. To solve problems effectively, solvers must construct representations of the problem that are accurate and complete enough to support its solution. Representations that are incomplete or that incorrectly depict a relationship can interfere with successful problem solving. Problems differ in the clarity of their goals, problem space, and possible operators (Weisberg, 1993). Well-defined problems have clear descriptions and a single correct answer(s), and ill-defined problems require extensive work to define what is known, possible goals, and permissible operations. Ill-defined problems, such as planning an undergraduate course of study, depend upon extensive effort to develop representations that can support successful solutions. The major finding about problem solving has been that the quality of problem representations (also known as mental models) is the major factor in problem solving success (Johnson-Laird, 1983).

The first specific application is from research that has contrasted experts' and novices' approaches to solving problems, and found that, compared to novices, experts spent more time developing a problem representation, used more abstract frameworks in their representations, and were more strategic in evaluating progress toward solutions (Haberlandt, 1994; Larkin, McDermott, Simon, & Simon, 1980). For example, in solving physics problems, first-year physics students typically used surface

features of problems (e.g., inclined planes, pulleys) to organize their solution attempts, while physics professors used physics principles (e.g., Newton's Second Law) as the major elements of their problem solutions (Larkin et al., 1980).

The application of this research to academic advising would have students consider their course planning according to abstract considerations related to their future endeavors in graduate school and/or employment as well as their interests and skills, and not just by scheduling or other surface features of courses. The advising handbook aids problem solving by helping students to develop a more accurate and complete representation of the problem of completing a major in psychology, within the framework of the important concerns.

Two problem-solving strategies that can help to produce a more complete and accurate representation of a problem are subgoaling and working backward. Subgoaling (also known as means-end analysis) encourages students to view the big problem of completing a major in psychology as a series of smaller subproblems which are structurally related to one another. Subgoaling's (Halpern, 1996) benefits probably result from solvers' developing a more complete representation of a problem that was unwieldy in size because its total number of considerations exceeded the individual's working memory capacity. When overwhelmed, people are more likely to forget (or fail to notice) important considerations that aid in representing or solving a problem. However, by representing the big problem as a series of linked subproblems, capacity overflow during problem solving is less likely to occur.

The task of completing a major is described as separate subtasks to address during advising; for example, these subtasks would include meeting university and department requirements, deciding what area you wanted to work in, gaining experiences that would help you decide, and applying to graduate school. Moreover, the abstract framework of the goals helps to prevent wasteful, disorganized efforts.

A second strategy that can help develop an accurate problem representation is working backwards: Solving a problem by beginning at a likely solution and working backwards to the current situation to identify possible solution paths (Halpern, 1996). Applied to advising, the working backward strategy echoes the abstract representation application described above: The student should consider the goal of graduating, prepared for post-baccalaureate employment or graduate school. By attending to the nature of the solution (needed GPA, experiences, relationships with faculty, etc.), students can insure that their planning includes necessary educational experiences. Included in these outcomes would be demonstration of characteristics desired by both graduate schools and employers: For instance, reliable, motivated, flexible, and cooperative students who are skilled in communicating and in using computers and other technology.

A second application from cognitive psychology is the importance of student-initiated processing for successful learning. Sometimes termed the generation effect in memory research (Searleman & Herrmann, 1994) or a constructivist or active learning approach in education programs (Mathie et al., 1993; Sandoval, 1995), student-centered learning activities have been recommended by a number of educational reformers. An undergraduate handbook would encourage student-centered activity by requiring students to read the handbook, monitor their progress toward their degree, discover their interests, incorporate these interests into their coursework and academic experiences, and to research employment and graduate school possibilities. Most of these tasks should be presented as exercises for students to complete.

A third application is the importance of motivation in solving real-life, big problems. In a number of studies, giving solvers a clear idea of a problem's goal and the criteria of a good solution has facilitated solving creative problems (Weisberg, 1993). However, it is not clear why problem solving improved in these studies. One possible cognitive explanation is that students had a more complete representation and/or a more abstract representation of the problem (as discussed above). Another, motivational explanation is that solvers have a greater sense of control as a result of the better representation of the problem, and thus perform better (Rodin, 1986). In the context of advising students, students may find it more meaningful to plan the tasks of one's academic career by considering future possibilities. The whole planning process may seem more manageable with the support of the advising handbook and an academic advisor.

Contents of the Handbook

Although the idea of an undergraduate handbook is not new, my rationale, based in cognitive research, clarifies the goals and needed elements of such a handbook. Two years ago, my department surveyed 40 students about the adequacy of advising about a number of issues. (A haphazard, approximately 25% sample of majors made anonymous responses, dropping their completed survey through a slot into a closed box.) Students' responses were that the department's advising about university requirements, psychology department requirements, and psychology courses was good; however, psychology majors wanted better advising about psychology internships, independent research courses, career preparation and opportunities, graduate school preparation and opportunities, and teachers and demands of other departments. In addition, 88% requested a guide for psychology majors. Based on these responses, a colleague and I began to draft sections of the handbook.

Gielen (1987) listed elements of the York College handbook, many of which were included in the Yale handbook. A summary of

the contents of her 82-page guide is given in Table 3.

The handbook project is a large undertaking (see Table 4 for a list of contents), and my approach has been to use the subgoaling strategy, and produce modular components that are immediately useful. The first sections that I wrote concerned internships and letters of recommendation, two areas for which students had requested better advising. In Appendix A, I have presented the information on letters of recommendation. Note that this information provides information that assists students in representing and structuring this task, gives students active roles, and motivates students with a greater sense of control. If the list of desirable comments from referees was provided to students early in their academic career, the working backward strategy would be realized.

The handbook can meet most or all of the NACADA advising goals and Ware's recommendations. Most of the eight advising goals described above were informational and/or could be accomplished via written materials and student-completed work sheets. (Two of these goals--numbers 7 and 8--seemed to belong more to the domain of professional counseling rather than to academic advising.)

As described above, Ware's eight recommendations can be met through the handbook: (a) By initiating the handbook project, the chair can promote advising; (b) the chair or another faculty can be responsible for developing the handbook and coordinating feedback from faculty and students for revisions; (c) the handbook should include clear descriptions of the active roles that students need to play, and senior students' opinions can be included in revisions for the next year; (d) the handbook provides information, but also requires students to study themselves and weigh options in planning their schedules and activities; (e) the handbook and face-to-face encounters are the chief delivery systems, but can be supplemented with information from other articles, books, speakers, and videos; (f) the formal training of faculty in advising is low-key, but allows for activities ranging from conscious-raising to more action-oriented steps, as prescribed in the transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992); (g) the handbook should provide information relevant for traditional and nontraditional students, and for students with varying post-baccalaureate goals; and (h) the potential for evaluating advisors is greater because the criteria for high-quality advising are more explicit.

Marketing the Psychology Major

A low-key marketing plan can be based on a short brochure that describes the psychology department's goals, faculty, facilities, student achievements, and handbook. The brochure is designed for use by Admissions Department staff, and will increase students' interest in a well-organized psychology

department that is student-oriented. By emphasizing the psychology handbook, the brochure will depict a department that is prepared to support students' academic careers. Moreover, anecdotes and word-of-mouth marketing from current students and graduates, in combination with the brochure, will comprise an effective and inexpensive marketing campaign to attract high-quality students to psychology.

Conclusion

The handbook is an example of formalizing informal knowledge. Sternberg and Lubart (1995) differentiated between formal and informal sources of knowledge: Formal knowledge commonly exists in textbooks and other sources, and informal knowledge usually is gained from on-the-job or in-the-field experiences. However, informal knowledge can be taught; for example, the book entitled What they don't teach you at Harvard Business School (McCormack, 1984), presented informal knowledge that aids success in real-life business. Sternberg and Lubart reported that creative scientists, relative to less creative scientists, reported greater reliance on informal sources of knowledge, for instance, at professional meetings or from mentors. This marketing-advising plan communicates much of the informal knowledge needed for success as a psychology major, and makes it available to all interested students.

The handbook strengthens the department's advising process by reaching a departmental consensus about advising guidelines, and by providing basic advising information to students despite variations in individual advising meetings. Moreover, the handbook aids the training of faculty advisors because the goals of advising, such as program and career information, are readily available. In developing the handbook, many departmental issues concerning goals and optimal student activity come under scrutiny; as a result, the development of the handbook clarifies the program that it was meant to make clear to students.

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Appendix A

Fall, 1995

To the student requesting a letter of recommendation:

A letter of recommendation is an important part of your application to graduate school and an important part of our job as teachers. In order for us to do a good job of supporting your application, we need some information about you and the programs to which you are applying.

For any letter of recommendation, we need to know the following information about you:
your total GPA;
your GPA in the last two years;
your psychology GPA;
your GRE scores;
any awards or scholarships you have won;
any research projects to which you have contributed;
and, what you want to do after graduate school.

For each letter of recommendation, we need to know the following information about the program:
1. the minimum and median GPA of students accepted,
2. the minimum and median GRE scores of students accepted,
3. a brief description of the degree program, and
4. a rationale for going to this program, such as a copy of the letter of interest that most programs request.

Our goal is to help you gain admission to the programs of your choice; help us by providing the information requested on the attached sheet.

Sincerely,

(faculty names)

Appendix A (continued)

Recommendations to Support Applications for Graduate School

Applicant: _____

For any letter of recommendation, we need to know the following information about you:

your total GPA _____;

your GPA in last two years _____;

your psychology GPA _____;

your GRE scores: V _____, Q _____, A _____, PSYC _____;

any awards or scholarships you have won;

any memorable academic experiences or performances;

any applied experiences that were particularly valuable;

any research projects to which you have contributed;

and, what you want to do after graduate school.

Please complete the information on the next sheet for each school.

Appendix A (continued)

School/Program	GRE median/ min	GPA median/ min	Interests /Faculty	Form /Ltr	Date due

On the back, indicate other information that will help.

Appendix A (continued)

Other Information Helpful for Graduate School Applicants

Students should read the relevant sections of Patricia Keith-Speigel's The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admission (1991), which is in the reserve section of Doherty library and in the Psychology Department. In addition, students need to be aware of some of the factors that graduate admission committee members consider, other than GRE scores, GPA, or being an author on a published or presented paper. A survey of faculty who were involved in graduate admissions rated a variety of other characteristics. Below are some of the items that evaluators indicated were positive in an applicant's application or personal statement, in descending order from most positive.

1. Applicant's personal statement reflects a sustained and focused interest in an area appropriate to your program.
2. Applicant writes very well.
3. Applicant includes a research paper (independent study project) in submitted application packet that is relevant to your program.
4. Application materials indicate that applicant paid considerable attention to assessing a "match", i.e., that applicant's interests and your program seem right for each other.
5. Applicant is a "self-starter" (according to recommendation letters, hereafter called referees).
6. Applicant is highly motivated to achieve, according to referees.
7. Applicant earned an A in required upper division statistics class.
8. Applicant is responsible and dependable, according to referees.
9. Applicant won several scholarships.
10. Applicant has a professional manner, according to referees.
11. Applicant possesses good computer software skills.
12. Applicant has extensive data entry and analysis experience.
13. Applicant has volunteer experience in a community facility.
14. Applicant has paid work experience relevant to your program.
15. Applicant participates effectively in class.
16. Applicant is an outstanding speaker, according to referees.
17. Application forms and statements are neatly typed.
18. Applicant is outgoing and friendly, according to referees.
19. Applicant has a more modest GPA (about 3.3 overall), but mostly A's during the last two years.
20. Applicant has extensive volunteer experience.

Students should be mindful of the above list, and direct their referees to specific experiences or accomplishments that substantiate any of the items. Any one of these subtle but positive characteristics will not guarantee admission, but the collective impact of a set of the items may be substantial.

Table 1

NACADA's Eight Advising Goals

1. Provide accurate information about policies, procedures, resources, and programs (3.99 out of 5)

2. Assist students to develop educational plan consistent with life goals (3.35)

3. Assist student in evaluating progress toward educational goals (3.33)

4. Make referrals to other institutional or community support services (3.30)

5. Provide information about students to the institution and academic departments (3.25)

6. Assist students to consider life goals by relating their characteristics to careers, work, and higher education (3.01)

7. Assist students in self-understanding and self-acceptance (2.73)

8. Assist students in developing decision-making skills (2.55)

Note. Ratings were by academic advisers surveyed in 1982; mean ratings in parentheses were on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was no services for this goal, 2 was achievement not very satisfactory, 3 was achievement somewhat satisfactory, 4 was achievement satisfactory, and 5 was achievement very satisfactory of goal. (cited in Ware, 1993)

Table 2

Ware's (1993) Eight Recommendations for Academic Advising

Administrative

1. Chairs should promote advising.

2. Someone should be responsible for the advising program.

6. Effective advising requires formal training in advising and rewards for successful advising behavior.

8. Regular evaluation of advising programs can help improve advising; evaluating faculty's advising performance can aid their development.

Content

3. Working relationships with students require displaying respect for and showing an interest in students, and informing students about their responsibilities to make advising effective.

4. Advising gives information about academic programs, career opportunities, and postbacculaureate educational opportunities. Also, students need to examine themselves and to use decision-making skills.

5. Advising requires a variety of materials and delivery systems.

7. Diverse student populations require knowledge of their specific needs.

Table 3

Gielen's (1987) York College Handbook

Introduction
- -Purpose of handbook
- -Brief history & background about science of psychology

College-wide requirements

Psychology major requirements
- -Complete listing of courses
- -How to choose courses
- -Suggested course sequences for different specialties
- -Progress monitoring pages to be completed by student

Bibliography of every area of psychology

Description of faculty research interests

Departmental resources
- -Academic advising
- -Tutoring
- -Student advising
- -Departmental research library
- -Extracurricular activities: Psychology Club and Psi Chi

How to study

How to write a research paper

Information of graduate school and employment
- -Applying to school
- -Seeking employment
- -Letters of recommendation
- -Resumes
- -Interviews

Partial Listing of recent graduates and employment or graduate schools attended

Other features
- -Cartoon of Oscar, typical psychology student, muddling through
- -82-page length

Table 4

Student Handbook: Problem Solving to Meet Advising Goals

Subtasks

- Complete required courses in the major
  - Rationale for department
  - Types of courses
  - Special considerations for scheduling, sequencing
  - Research skills to be gained
  - Specialty areas and prerequisite knowledge
  - Capstone courses
  - Specialized resources
- Identify and develop interests in areas of psychology
- Develop relationships with faculty
  - Letters of recommendation
  - Research thesis
  - Identify areas of faculty expertise
  - Goal: semi-independence
  - Be aware of faculty agendas
- Accumulate useful experiences
- Prepare for graduate school
  - requirements
  - possible schools
  - resources
  - timetable
- Career options: How to find information
- Creating a customized degree
  - Decide on what you want to do
  - Find out about requirements
  - Take courses that you need
  - Customize capstone courses to fit interests and future goals

Roles:

- Discover area(s) of interest
- Get research/applied experience
- Develop relationships with advisor and profs (letters of recommendation)
- Research grad schools or employment opportunities
- Thorough preparation for job/grad application

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Signature: Carl Scott

Printed Name/Position/Title: Carl Scott / Assoc. Professor

Organization/Address: Psychology Dept.
Univ. of St. Thomas
3800 Montrose Blvd.
Houston, TX 77006-4696

Telephone: (713)525-3182

FAX: (713)525-3181

E-Mail Address: scott@stthom.edu

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Jillian Barr Joncas
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