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Adventures in Advising: Strategies, Solutions, and Situations to Student Problems in the Criminology and Criminal Justice Field

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Abstract

Teaching and research are often the most focused upon aspects of working within academia in criminology and criminal justice (Sitren & Applegate, 2012; Jonson & Moon, 2014; Pratt, 2014), but an overlooked and underappreciated part of an undergraduate's overall higher education success is academic advising (Light, 2001). There has been scant research on advising within criminology and criminal justice, and this paper seeks to fill this gap by detailing reflections on the advising process within a successful and growing criminology and criminal justice program. Strategies for advising overall will be presented as will particular situations and student needs. Lastly, a case study of how advising works for a criminology and criminal justice department from a large, public institution located in the Southeastern United States will be discussed and demonstrate how the strategies, situations, and student needs apply.

Keywords: undergraduate advising, higher education, criminal justice, criminology, internships

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Introduction

The field of criminology and criminal justice has grown as a discipline exponentially since the 1960s, transforming from an off-shoot of sociology into an established academic specialization that more and more students are seeking out (Clear, 2001; Pratt, 2014; Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999). Some of this interest is propelled by the increase in sensationalized crime dramas, true life studies in forensics and investigation, and prime time murder mysteries that highlight the lives of criminal justice professionals in a "sexy" fashion (Harris, 1993), but what started as a primarily law enforcement and corrections driven discipline (Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999) has shifted into a degree that can encompass many different career paths from investigating cybercrimes as an intelligence analyst to working to protect wildlife and forests as a fish and game warden (O*Net Online, 2016).

While popular culture often informs student interests and desires within the criminal justice field, it often takes a lot of guidance to make sure students are on the right track with their academic careers and that they possess realistic expectations of what their degree can do for them. This area is where undergraduate academic advising becomes very important as it is often the front line of defense in informing student decisions, guiding them in their academic progress, and navigating the minefield that makes up undergraduate student affairs, issues and lifestyles. Considering this, it is easy to see how undergraduate advising is one of the most important and heavily used services within a school (Metzner, 1989). But what exactly does it mean to academically advise a student? Are there difference styles of advising? Is one style or method necessarily better than others? Do student needs play a large role in advising? Does the method or style of advising change depending on the situation that is presented to the advisor? All of these questions are important to consider as students often report that advising is one of the parts of higher education that they are most dissatisfied with (Allen & Smith, 2008), so knowing how to appropriately target student needs can help improve their overall experiences as an undergraduate and their overall satisfaction while earning their criminology and criminal justice degrees.

The importance of advising within the field of criminology and criminal justice has not really been commented on, so the focus of this paper will be threefold: first, different strategies of general undergraduate advising will be discussed, highlighting the advantages of different approaches. Second, different situations that arise in advising will be explored, showing how undergraduate advising must be flexible. Third, student expectations and needs will be introduced, giving undergraduate advising a purpose and goal to strive toward. Lastly, I will end this paper by applying the information presented to describe undergraduate advising strategies, situations, and student needs at a department of criminology and criminal justice at a large, public institution located within the Southeastern United States as an individualized case study.

Strategies in Advising

There are several different methods to advising students, but it should be noted that overall academic advising has three main goals: curriculum or what advising deals with, pedagogy or how advising does what it does, and student learning outcomes which is the results of advising that hopefully ends with student success (Campbell & Nutt, 2008). To achieve this objective, it is important to know how to appropriately reach a student and meet their needs. However, there are many different approaches to reach this goal, and this section of the paper will focus on all of these different advising methods.

The Prescriptive Advising Approach – Advising like a Doctor

The prescriptive advising approach is advising in its most basic form. It is an advisor-driven, outcome-oriented approach that focuses on the advisor telling the student what to do and then expecting them to take personal responsibility in accomplishing this goal (Smith, 2002). An analogy for this approach is that the advisor is acting like a doctor, giving the student a prescription or a

formula for success and expecting the student to follow the instructions to ensure the health of their academic success (Crookston, 1972). This approach is heavily influenced by the authority of the advisor and student responsibility for their actions, and it should come as no surprise that grades and classroom performance are of high importance in this method (Allen & Smith, 2008). Many functions of advising fall underneath the prescription advisor role such as informing students of their remaining coursework, speaking to students about their grades, helping students choose classes, informing them about minor and internship opportunities, and answering general questions that students may have. This approach is one that is straight-forward and focuses mostly on answering questions and providing information, but it can backfire by focusing too much on administrative tasks, reducing students to mere numbers or statistical data instead of recognizing them as human beings with human problems, ignoring overall student needs, and creating dissatisfaction when the prescribed answers given do not lead to a viable solution (Crookston, 1972).

The Developmental Advising Method – Advising like a Teacher

Widespread dissatisfaction with the prescriptive method of advising lead to the advent of the developmental perspective which views advising like a teaching or mentoring relationship (Lowenstein, 2005). This approach not only views the instrumental, administrative tasks of advising as being important, but also states that the advisor should consider the student's life circumstances, their goals, and their individual abilities when establishing an academic plan (Crookston, 1972). To fully embrace the developmental approach, an advisor should realize that a student's academic performance is tied to their life performance so personal, financial, and inter-personal relationships need to be taken into consideration to be able to advise students well (Propp & Rhodes, 2006). If the prescriptive advising method is one based on advisor authority, then the developmental perspective is one based on shared responsibility between the advisor and student – a collaborative and process-oriented approach that focuses on teaching students critical problem-solving skills and the self-reliance that they will need to survive in the "real world" outside of the environment of higher education (Smith, 2002; Propp & Rhodes, 2006).

The application of this holistic approach puts an advisor in the position of being a personal mentor and an academic counselor where one is technical enough about the academic requirements of the department and university but also takes a personal concern with a student's life and their individual goals (Propp & Rhodes, 2006). This approach views advising as an engaging educational process where advisors guide students down the best path by setting expectations, providing support and feedback, and helping students gain skills that make them competitive in the workplace and in their personal and professional lives (Campbell & Nutt, 2008). This type of advising can be considered the gold standard of what advisors should aspire to when speaking with students; however, it can be hard to put into practice with limited time, money, resources and staff to meet the in-depth needs of hundreds to thousands of students that typical undergraduate programs have (Smith, 2002).

The Proactive or Intrusive Advising Method – Advising like a Prognosticator

The final method or strategy of advising is deemed the proactive method. What this method entails is that an advisor puts into practice consistent, concentrated efforts to reach out to students and get them in touch with the resources they need to succeed (Museus & Ravello, 2010). This method is also called intrusive advising because an advisor is intruding into a student's personal space by sending them reminder messages for registration, having mandatory advising meetings, monitoring student progress, and sending alerts if a student is not performing adequately (Varney, 2007). This method is not "hand holding" as some have deemed it but rather a "pre-emptive strike" to catch problems before they happen and intervening in a way that motivates students to address these problems on their own (Propp & Rhodes, 2006). This approach is different than the prescriptive and developmental aspects of advising as not only are advisors encouraging and helpful but they make a deliberate attempt to initiate contact with students to make sure they are on the right path (Propp & Rhodes, 2006). The good thing about this method is that it brings together the best aspects of the

prescription and developmental methods, allowing advisors to pay attention to students as a whole and being especially aware of student needs and predicting instances where a student might be struggling and in need of assistance (Varney, 2007). The proactive approach can be a good method to keep in contact with students, push them to stay connected with campus resources and seek out help if they need it, and make them accountable for their academic progress, but it can be hard to know when to contact students and how to step in and push students to seek the help they need before it is too late to fix whatever problems they have gotten themselves into (Varney, 2007).

Situations

While the different advising strategies give a general overview of how an advisor is expected to behave, supply basic information pertaining to higher education and obtaining a college degree, and meet student needs, they do not necessarily address the specific different situations that an advisor may run into. Academic advising is often the only structured environment that students will encounter while being an undergraduate (Propp & Rhodes, 2006) so it is important to know how to respond appropriately when different situations present themselves. In this section, I will cover some of the basic student situations that an advisor may encounter and have to adjust their advising style to.

The Distance Learning Student

Distance learning is a special type of education that allows a student to attend classes online in a digital forum that mirrors an in-classroom experience (LaPadula, 2003). 62.5% of higher education institutions currently offer an open online forum that allows a large number of students to earn their entire degrees digitally, and 32% of students report having taken at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Online education is still a new horizon however as many higher education institutions report being unsure about its viability or the ability of distance learners to match the performance of on campus students (Allen & Seaman, 2013; LaPadula, 2003). However, there may be many reasons why a student chooses to be a distance learner ranging from physical distance to military service and family obligations, but the fact remains that having a viable online program opens up many opportunities for students that would be otherwise be excluded from the traditional four-year on-campus college experience (O'Lawrence, 2006). However, with a new digital forum comes new challenges as technology makes it easier to become impersonal and a lack of student services online can make distance learning students more isolated (Smith, 2002; LaPadula, 2003). The methods that best accompany distance learning are the prescriptive and proactive approaches which allow problems to be stemmed off and addressed before they can happen and for the student to have access to an support network specifically designed for distance learners to ask questions of advising. There appears to be a direct correlation between the quality of advising received and the performance of distance learners (LaPadula, 2003), so quality advising in this situation is a must for these students to excel.

The Adult Student

Just as distance learning is making its mark on the changing landscape of higher education, the average composition of the student body is shifting to accommodate our changing time. This change primarily makes itself seen through the influx of adult students which now make up 40-45% of students enrolled as undergraduates and whose enrollment may one day overtake their younger, more traditional counterparts (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Stein & Wainstreet, 2006). The adult student is also a special sub-category under distance learning as many distance learners tend to also be adults already working in their professional fields but just seeking more education either for shifting careers or advancement in their current ones (O'Lawrence, 2006; Stein & Wainstreet, 2006). This population can present a problem for advising as adults coming back to college may feel marginalized, left out of the college experience, are not in the habit of coming to campus when they experience an issue, and may have different life problems and situations than the majority of younger, traditional students (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Stein & Wainstreet, 2006). These students may need a more

developmental approach from advising as their life experiences and problems shape their educational desires, experiences, and intellectual growth as a student (Bland, 2003). Having a caring and thoughtful advisor that is available to lend extra support, point out proper resources, and offer concrete solutions to their problems helps adult students more easily adjust to the educational landscape especially if they are also in distance learning (O'Lawrence, 2006; Donaldson & Graham, 1999).

Racial and Ethnic Minorities

Most college mission statements embrace a spirit of diversity and acceptance, and recruitment patterns are put in place that encourage under-represented populations of different races, genders, and ethnicities to apply to their local colleges and universities. However, there are several barriers that impact racial and ethnic minorities from seeking out higher education, most of them being financial in nature (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Racial and ethnic minorities tend to also be predominantly first-generation college students, so they may come into the college environment without the familial support and financial support needed to succeed nor have knowledge of resources on campus that can help them adjust (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). The feeling of being a fish out of water can make racial and ethnic minority students feel unprepared overall for the college environment and less attached to their college coursework and less engaged with their academic performance (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001). Being a racial and ethnic minority especially at a predominantly white university can put these students at a disadvantage from an advising perspective. Concerted efforts must be made to be inclusive and sensitive to diversity and issues of race (Museus & Ravello, 2010). Some students might feel marginalized and misunderstood especially if they are a first-generation student (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). In this situation, a more holistic approach to advising seems to work as it acknowledges a student's needs and individualized situation when coming up with an academic plan. Some proactive advising skills might also come in handy when dealing with racial and ethnic minority students as it can be a tool to keep them on track and put them in touch with resources like scholarships and internship opportunities that can positively shape their undergraduate experience (Museus & Ravello, 2010).

The At-Risk Student

Despite students possessing high aspirations of educational success, many of them often encounter problems early in their academic careers (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000). Of the students that attend college, 57% leave without ever completing their degree and 75% of students drop out within their first two years (Mattson, 2007). This situation becomes even more urgent upon realizing that one of the best predictors of retention rates are first semester and first years grades (Mattson, 2007). The at-risk student is perhaps the most special situation that an academic advisor can encounter. This student is one who is usually on academic probation or at risk of being dismissed from the university. Additionally, having this status also makes students less likely to seek out advising help from their instructors or from advising staff, leaving them to fall behind until it is too late to amend the problem (Vivian, 2005). Meeting the needs of this student can be a challenge, especially as many of them are in this position due to financial, personal, or other life circumstances (Kadar, 2001). Many of the groups that are discussed earlier in this paper are at a higher risk of being an at-risk student simply through a lack of support systems in distance learning, academic planning, life circumstances, and financial ability (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Bland, 2003; Choy et al., 2000). However, the proactive or intrusive advising method has been shown to be the single best method of helping the at-risk student (Varney, 2007). This method mostly works by alerting the student to their status, working to find what is causing the problem, and then directing the student to the best intervention to address the problem (Varney, 2007). The at-risk student is often unprepared academically (Vivian, 2005), so being able to target these students can be essential in guiding them to the correct courses and giving them the parameters they need to succeed.

Student Needs and Expectations

The basic purpose of advising is to assist students and meet their various needs (Propp & Rhodes, 2006); however, knowing exactly what students want and need is not always an easy task. Students can often be unrealistic in their expectations of advising which may explain why they are often dissatisfied with the advising they have received and are more likely to blame advising when situations do not work out as academically planned (Boers, 2001; Allen & Smith, 2008; Crookston, 1972). Students can be best seen as customers of academic advising as they pay tuition and expect certain services in return from the university (Boers, 2001). Many colleges are attempting to adjust their advising departments to meet student needs like by offering web-based advising, extended hours, and drop-in/walk-in advising to make advising a convenient service (Propp & Rhodes, 2006). Additionally for many students, speaking with an academic advisor is often the only official form of university representation that they come into contact with, so knowing how to effectively and efficiently advise students can help get them on the right track early and stay on that track in order to graduate (Light, 2001; Smith & Allen, 2014).

However, student behaviors and expectations can present a problem for advisors based upon how students expect them to behave and present information. Students often expect advisors to be warm, flexible, available, business-like, caring, knowledgeable and able to handle problems at a moment's notice (Lowenstein, 2005). Students also typically expect advisors to not only advise them but to guide them in their academic and life course development (Newton, 1998). The information that an advisor is supposed to be responsible for and cognizant of falls around knowing university timelines and required coursework, referrals to proper campus resources, a student's life goals and how they can be integrated into their academic programs, an individual's personal, financial, and emotional situations when advising, and allowing a student to share responsibility for their academic success (Smith & Allen, 2014). Students prefer advisors who are mostly prescriptive when giving out the information they need, but they expect that advisors will also take a developmental approach when planning their academic progress and treat them as human beings, not as statistics in a college program (Smith, 2002). What a student ultimately wants from an advisor, however, can differ depending on what they are trying to achieve in college (ie. career development versus merely passing courses) (Alexitch, 2002).

Some individual characteristics of students (such as education level, race, age, sex, and academic performance) can inhibit students from seeking help from advisors (Alexitch, 2002). There are two different forms of student behavior: adaptive behaviors and non-adaptive help-seeking behaviors (Newton, 1998). What these behaviors mean is that some students may naturally seek out formal undergraduate advising in order to give them an advantage in their academic performance while other students may rely on informal sources such as their fellow students in order to inform their academic process, the classes to take and avoid, and to glean what they need to succeed in college. This distinction is important because students who seek help from advising tend to perform higher on academic and institutional outcomes than students who do not seek out help; these students were also more likely to persist in their programs (Smith & Allen, 2014). Students who rely on informal sources may receive inaccurate information, take the wrong courses, and fall behind in their projected paths to the point where they simply drop out and quit rather than attempt to start again in their programs (Smith & Allen, 2014). Advisors are one of the most crucial factors when it comes to student retention and graduation (Metzner, 1989), so being able to adequately address student needs is an important part of ensuring a program's overall success.

An Academic Advising Case Study

I'll now take the opportunity to apply what I've presented within this paper to an individualized case study – undergraduate advising and student services within a criminology and criminal justice department at a large, public institution located in the Southeastern United States. This particular department was chosen for two reasons: 1) it has been steadily growing over the past

five years and 2) it has received national recognition for both its online and campus programs. Currently it is responsible for 1,654 undergraduates pursuing a major in criminology and criminal justice, and this department offers several opportunities for students in terms of scholarships, internships for academic credit, and graduate education. The staff in this department, in comparison to the student load, is quite small with four individuals taking up the reins of undergraduate advising, two individuals being available for graduate advising, and one person being in charge of internships. Though it seems like this is a lot for a crew of so few people, this department has a very supportive environment of administrative staff in terms of a program director, an office manager, a social media organizer, a course planner and scheduler, a budget and official management specialist, and an IT professional.

The data for this case study were taken from personal observations of working with students and speaking with the advisors in this department for over the course of two years. I am merely describing the experiences of advising within this department of criminology and criminal justice to demonstrate how it relates to advising as a whole; I am not attempting to generalize the experiences in this department to all other advising departments in criminology and criminal justice as some case studies advocate (Gerring, 2004). All departments experience unique challenges that make them different from one another and how they apply their advising styles. One unique aspect of this department which could explain its high level of office support and organization is that it is both a department and a college, so many of the services that would be provided by different offices at other colleges are covered within the same area here. This distinction makes the job of advising here much more difficult, so flexibility, consistency, and organization become important parts of this job in helping students. In following this department for over two years, it definitely becomes apparent how much hard work goes into its day to day operations.

Strategies of Advising within Criminology and Criminal Justice

When it comes to strategies of advising, an advisor must wear many hats, so the methods used to help students changed depending on the situation that advisors encountered. Most students expected a prescriptive method of advising where they simply asked questions about what classes to take, how many credits they had remaining, if the coursework they took at other colleges or universities counted for this program, how to register for the classes they needed, and basic information about pursuing a second major, a minor of interest, a dual degree, or an internship for academic credit. The concerns of these students appeared to often be addressed quickly and efficiently, but the majority of advisors noted that they seemed to take much more responsibility for a student's welfare than they took for themselves. Some of this added responsibility comes from the fact that this is a smaller department and the administrative and advising tasks are handled by the same individuals, but students often expect these advisors to be chief problem-solvers for any unexpected situation or to resolve conflicts that they had with professors over teaching styles, grades, and availability.

But not all the advising here was prescriptive in nature. Developmental strategies came into play especially when a student was discussing a career path, an internship for academic credit, or if they want to pursue additional education beyond a bachelor's degree in the criminology and criminal justice field. It becomes especially important in these cases to understand a student's life circumstances and how they can shape their educational experiences in order to advance them successfully to where they want to be, especially in cases of federal employment which requires a clean background check, a dedicated work history, and a high GPA. The internship coordinator at this department is especially proficient with developmental advising as they work diligently to get students placed in positions that are going to best help their career goals. This individual is also a pre-law and federally certified advisor, and many students came in with questions about both of those areas that were easily able to be addressed. This advisor often has the difficult position of giving students a "reality check" when their career desires do not exactly match up with their academic performance or their personal willingness to engage in the career. This advisor informed me that this disconnect happens often for students who wish to be federal agents, but yet do not want to be involved in

violence or pointing a gun at someone as law enforcement might have to do. The undergraduate advisors themselves were also quite proficient at developmental advising as they were often expected to counsel or talk students through their various life situations. Though this role made some of the advisors uncomfortable, they were able to use their knowledge of campus resources to help get students in touch with the help they needed.

Proactive or intrusive advising was also apparent in its use within this department especially for new transfer students, prospective students, newly admitted students, and at-risk students. For transfer students, a mandatory orientation was held where they were filled in on university requirements, how to search for classes, what classes were needed to graduate, and what courses transferred. Advisors showed students step-by-step how things worked at this university so that they could avoid costly financial and academic mistakes before they occurred. The internship coordinator would also speak at these orientations to let students know what options were available career-wise for them, especially as the transfer students were already upper division students and did not have to work through liberal study requirements upon transfer. At-risk students seemed to be a little more tricky and difficult to deal with for advisors often because these students were dealing with life problems and circumstances that have detrimentally affected their academic standing. These students tended to take a lot more of an advisor's time to deal with, and many advisors noted that they felt emotionally drained and frustrated trying to address the problems of these students. Some advisors felt powerless in certain situations because their hands would be tied due to university rules and departmental requirements, and the students were more likely to get upset or become dissatisfied in these situations. This department though would still use proactive advising techniques to let these students know they were at-risk, either by informing them of their academic probation status or alerting them to departmental requirements for D and F grades in criminology and criminal justice courses. These methods would often alert students to the risks they faced (dismissal from the major or the university or both) and would prompt students to come into advising for assistance with their life circumstances and academic issues.

Situations in Advising within Criminology and Criminal Justice

When it comes to different situations in advising, this department encountered all of them and had to adjust their advising styles to match the situation. The advisors stated that distance learning students were a different type of student – one that needed more attention due to their disconnected nature. Many of these students tend to be professionals working to advance their positions within law enforcement or corrections or they had family and work obligations that made it hard for them to be a traditional student. Many distance learning students in this program are also adults with families, so they tended to have a different maturity level than main campus, younger students. Phone and email support for distance learning students who might not otherwise have access to traditional advising was provided by this department, and an online orientation is required by this public institution's distance-learning office for online students. There are also several support services and resources available digitally for distance learning students at this public institution. The advising and administrative staff within this department is composed of several different racial, ethnic, social, and age backgrounds to help adult students and students who are racial and ethnic minorities adjust to college. Having a diverse array of life experience within this department seemed to help these advisors relate to their students' needs more efficiently and effectively give them advice on what resources they should look into or academic paths they should take. Lastly, in-depth services for students who are at-risk either on academic probation or dismissed from the university were provided by this department on a case-by-case basis in order to make students aware of options that are available to them and to explore every route that can be taken to ensure a student's success.

Student Needs within Criminology and Criminal Justice

As I stated earlier, advisors are expected to wear many hats and address many different areas of student need. One moment a student could ask for basic information; the next a student could

expect counseling and for an advisor to provide advice on a chosen career path. According to the advisors in this case study, some students expected to be coached about the rest of their lives or have entire academic paths mapped out for them that included post-undergraduate education. Obviously such differing needs from a student body can prove to be quite the challenge to even the most seasoned advisor, and no amount of preparation can help an advisor adequately address all the needs of students that come through their door. However, many advisors within this department note that it is their jobs to help serve students and something they pride themselves upon. Many of the students that come to advising within this criminology and criminal justice department are practicing help-seeking behaviors, and they want to make sure they're on track for graduation or preparing adequately for further education or their work experience. But traffic on an average day in undergraduate advising for this department is about 15 to 25 students, so many of the 1600 students in this department do not contact or seek out advising help unless they have an issue or are in academic or personal distress. It is for these students that the proactive advising methods can be and do prove to be so helpful. For this department, if a student has made a concentrated effort to contact them, show up to office hours, or reach out through email or telephone, they will do everything in their power to meet their needs. Like any department, efforts to be more efficient, consistent, and connected could be made when meeting student needs, but with their growth, adjustments in advising styles and situations are slowly being made to better accommodate their students.

Conclusion

Undergraduate academic advising is one of the most important indicators of academic success for undergraduate students (Metzger, 1989), and this statement becomes no less important for the field of criminology and criminal justice. However, academic advising is also one of the more underappreciated positions on campus (Light, 2001), and many of the advisors in the case study department noted this fact by stating that they wished students would have more respect for what they do and that they would respond with maturity and diligence when it comes to their academic success. Advising in criminology and criminal justice takes on different meanings when considering the expanding platform of distance learning and the educational needs of individuals already working in the criminal justice field but wanting to advance their careers. Unfortunately, our field is one that is plagued by "sexy" misinformation on prime time television docudramas, so the jobs of advisors and internship coordinators in particular are to challenge the "reality" versus "fantasy" of criminal justice career opportunities. However, it is easy to see how advising in this field is very similar to advising in other higher education fields: the purpose of advising is ultimately to serve students and make sure their needs are being met in order to produce successful graduates that can enter the workforce and make a difference in society. To this end, the advisors of this case study fulfill their purpose well and continue to help students within their growing and successful department.

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