Rethinking Academic Advising through a Career Development Lens

Rationale for the Topic/Problem Statement/Opportunity for Growth:

Academic Advising is one of the few non-class events that regularly occur for every Southern Miss student. It is also a critically important activity that contributes to the success and retention of our students in a variety of ways. Currently academic advising occurs in various ways across campus, often to meet the unique needs of students in different majors but sometimes leading to an inefficient or ineffective use of resources. According to Southern Miss’s Office of Institutional Research (IR), the majority of students highly rate the quality of their academic advising experiences but less than 1 percent of seniors rated the campus staff as helpful, considerate, or flexible. This suggests there is room for improvement in how we approach our students. Academic advising is also strongly linked to students’ efficient progression to graduation. Also according to IR, Southern Miss is in need of improvement in graduation rates and retention of students, with a four-year graduation rate of less than 30% and nearly 30% of freshman not re-enrolling in the university from 2012-2013.

The National Association of Academic Advising (NACADA, 2006) articulates that the core concept of academic advising includes attention to the “assessment of abilities, aspirations, interests, and values” to assist students in meeting their academic goals. In other words, the basis of advisement is to assist students with articulating and completing their career development plans. Thus, this proposal outlines an idea for restructuring academic advising at Southern Miss and focuses on these authors’ area of expertise, career development. We propose a strong career development component in a new centralized academic advising structure at Southern Miss will add a planful, thorough, intrusive advising component to the current Southern Miss advising system that is currently missing. A career development course could provide the time and structure to enhance the advising experience for the many students that need greater time and faculty resources dedicated to their educational and career decision-making process. The proposed career development course would encompass and expand upon the core concepts of academic advising proposed by NACADA, as well as provide a more helpful, considerate, and flexible experience for Southern Miss students.

Overall, academic advising is key factor in the success of college students, with comprehensive advising being the cornerstone of college student success and retention (Drake, Jordan, & Miller, 2013). For example, data from one university found an 8 percent increase in retention rates among their first graduating cohort after implementing a centralized, intrusive advising program (Backhaus, 1989). A large national study of college retention found that institutions with the highest retention rates incorporated increased advising staff and advising that combined academic advising with career development assistance (ACT, 2004), suggesting career development programming is an important aspect of successful advising programs.

The effectiveness of college career courses has been studied extensively (Folsom & Reardon, 2003) and even linked to student retention rates and academic performance (Folsom, Peterson, Reardon, Mann, 2004-2005). In a study set to be published in 2015, examining a career course designed nearly identically to the course proposed here, had some interesting findings related to student success. Reardon and colleagues
(2015) found that student enrolled in a university career course had, on the average, lower High School GPAs and SAT scores than the general student body at their southeastern university. Despite this, those that successfully completed the course had higher graduation rates than students with higher HS GPAs and SAT scores that did not take the course. In fact numerous research studies over the course of many years have supported the effective use of career courses with college students across a variety of indicators important to Southern Miss Students. Career courses have significantly decreased career indecision (Johnson & Smouse, 1993), enhanced career maturity (Hardesty, 1991), increased career decision-making confidence (Grier-Reed & Skaar, 2010), clarified aspirations (Rehmer, O’Neill, Gohs, 1984), and improved psychosocial development (Stonewater & Daniels, 1983). Currently the Southern Miss psychology department offers a career course for psychology majors, PSY 251: Careers in Psychology, which incorporates many general career development components. Evaluation of student outcomes from this course show increased stability in students’ career goals and a reduction in thinking negatively about their career. These tangible impacts of a career development course as an integrated component of more planful and intrusive advising will certainly benefit Southern Miss Students.

Expected Outcomes/Impact on Student Learning or the Student Learning Environment:

Implementation of centralized advising with a mechanism to include career development into this process would impact Southern Miss undergraduate students in many ways.

1. Student awareness of their personal values, interests, and skills, as well as knowledge of Southern Miss major/degree options would be enhanced by more informed advisors and the career development course.
2. Increased academic success and increased retention are reasonable outcomes of students engaging in more personal career development programs and a streamlined advisement process.
3. Increased decidedness among undeclared majors, as well as more confidence in making future career decisions, likely leading to shorter degree completion times.
4. Through the more efficient major choice process and greater self & options awareness, retention may be further enhanced as students are happier with their Southern Miss experience, and more satisfied in their chosen majors, additionally enhancing our university’s reputation.

Strategies/Actions to Be Implemented:

We believe advising could be more effective and inviting if found in one centralized location, perhaps physically housed with other student services (e.g., Career Services, Financial Aid, Writing Center). The recent Student Success Steering Committee recommendations (e.g., Recommendation 1.4 & 1.6) suggest implementation of a comprehensive Student Success Center that can serve the function of a “student answer center”, as well as a Student Services Center. Our proposal is in line with those recommendations and would further them to say a Southern Miss Success and Services Center should be located in close physical space to optimize students’ experience. Colleges and Departments could determine the level to which students are advised in
the centralized center, saving some specific functions of advising for the department or program as deemed appropriate. Additionally, department trained staff could be physically housed in the Center to provide more of a one-stop experience for most students. Full-time and appropriately credentialed advising staff members could specialize by colleges, majors, or undecided student advising. Both scheduled or drop-in advising could be provided at this one-stop location to meet the students’ needs for flexibility in how they interact with staff. Staff advisors could work with departments to coordinate department-specific activities, including meetings about major-specific course work, career options, faculty interaction/mentoring opportunities, and skills-based workshops/classes for students on probation or otherwise not succeeding. Centralized advising staff could also assist with referral to other campus services, such as the Writing and Speaking Center, Counseling Center, Career Services and associated workshops, and UNV courses to enhance the use of these resources.

To determine the advising needs of each incoming student, we suggest using a screening tool at the point of admission that routes students into appropriate academic and career advising options given their decidedness on a major. This screener would inform admissions staff of the need for students to be routed into a declared major, advising within a small choice of like majors (or college), or a required career development course. The Occupational Alternative Questionnaire (OAQ; Zener & Schnuelle, 1972; modified by Slaney, 1980) and Goal Instability Scale (Robbins & Patton, 1985) have been suggested as short, free tools to use for this purpose (Reardon & Lenz, 1998; Bertoch, Lenz, Reardon, & Peterson, 2015).

As it has been suggested that one of the biggest predictors of retention is commitment to a career goal (Wyckoff, 1999), our intention is to target undecided students for enrollment in a career development course. All students entering the university undeclared or deemed by their advisor to need additional assistance with confirming their major/career choice would be required to complete the proposed, 3-hour career development course that leads them through an theoretically and empirically informed career development process. The course would provide students the support needed to meet the Student Success Steering Committee Recommendations 4.1 that all students, entering Freshman and transfer students, declare a major by the time 30 college credit hours are earned. The course would include components necessary for effective intrusive advising, including modules to discuss self knowledge, career options, decision-making, and the impact of our thoughts on our career choices and success. Additionally, a large and small group model will be utilized for this course. Students can be grouped into small groups according to their interests, needs, or background. This will allow for a community to develop among like students as well as a supportive environment that can address individual career development needs.

**Student Cohort:**

This QEP would have a major impact on every undergraduate Southern Miss student.

**Measurement/Assessment:**

Success of restructured advising and implementation of a career development course could be evaluated in a variety of ways.
1. Career development course student cohorts could be administered a pre and post test to evaluate the change in their self knowledge (i.e., values, interests, skills), options knowledge (i.e., career options, Southern Miss majors), career decision making skills, career decidedness, college major decidedness, and career decision-making confidence.

2. Faculty evaluations of the appropriate fit of new majors within their field

3. Long-term effects of these changes could be assessed through measures of:
   a. Student academic success (e.g., increased GPA, decreases in probation/suspension, enhanced performance in key courses)
   b. Overall university retention variables (e.g., increased 4 and 6 year graduation rate, decreased semester hours necessary for graduation)
   c. Student satisfaction with Southern Miss experience, faculty interactions, and staff interactions
   d. Increased utilization of other campus resources (e.g. Student Success Center, Writing and Speaking Centers, Career Services)
   e. Time to and satisfaction with job obtainment post graduation

Resources:

Resources for implementation include a sufficiently large and centralized space to house advising and coordinated student services. Staff should be appropriately trained advising staff, with bachelors and graduate degrees in areas of college student development, career counseling, and other similar training. Of emphasis in this proposal is the career development course, which would require a successful proposal and implementation of the course. Additionally, necessary faculty teaching resources would be needed for adequate offerings of a required course. Ideally, funding would be available for a trained faculty instructor of record as well as stipends available for graduate students or Southern Miss staff to serve as small group leaders.

References


