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Academic Advising at Western: Some Feedback from Alumni

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Report 1993-02: Academic Advising at Western: Some Feedback from Alumni

Repeated studies in recent years, both at Western and elsewhere, have found students less satisfied with advising services than with instruction or various university services. For example, 77% of recent Western alumni are "very" or "mostly" satisfied with the undergraduate courses they took at Western, while only 41% are similarly satisfied with the academic advising they received--from whatever source it came. Satisfaction with advising received from faculty and major departments was lower than satisfaction with advising from the Academic Advising Center.

Because of the concerns these studies raise, Western's Academic Advising Center requested that the 1992 alumni survey of the class of 1991 include a special set of questions on the Center. The focus of these questions was to provide feedback to the Center on ways to improve services, but the entire issue of advising is of great enough concern that a report was written to be more generally available. A total of 1412 (76%) alumni of the class of 1991 completed the survey about one year after their graduation. Of that total, most (57%) did not use the Center, reporting that they never felt the need. Of alumni who did use the Academic Advising Center, only 10% used it more than once. One in six say they were unaware of the office.

Of those who used the Academic Advising Center, half (50%) sought advise on at least one occasion regarding "class scheduling or selection." About two-fifths (43%) sought help "choosing a major or making major life decisions." Another two-fifths asked about specific university policies, and about the same asked for information concerning transfer courses or GUR's. Nearly one-third (29%) asked about pre-professional courses or programs. Another 10% sought "other" types of advice.

The Academic Advising Center is more often used by students who are younger, who study more but who get less good grades, who entered

Western as native freshmen, who changed their majors more often, who received financial aid while at Western, who value well-rounded education more than occupational training, and who found departmental advising especially weak. Other background characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity, so not predict use of the center, nor do most student orientations regarding the value of higher education or occupational plans.

Students requesting relatively specific information from the Academic Advising Center were quite highly satisfied. For information on transfer or GUR courses and on university policies, about 38% were "very" satisfied, another 52% were "moderately" satisfied, and only 10% were "not" satisfied. For class selection, figures were 32% "very" satisfied, 51% "moderately" satisfied, and 17% "not" satisfied. For choosing a major or making "major life decisions," however, satisfaction falls to 19% "very" satisfied, 51% "moderately" satisfied, and 30% "not" satisfied. Advice concerning pre-professional programs is similarly lower, with 19% "very" satisfied, 53% "moderately" satisfied, and 28% "not" satisfied.

In order to guide planning efforts, the Academic Advising Center requested analysis of the reasons why particular students reported that they were not satisfied with their visits to the Center. Nearly all the explanations focused on shortcomings of the advice itself--that it was not useful, not new, not accurate, confusing or vague, etc. Similarly, where staff were criticized, the great majority of criticism was for lack of knowledge--for instance, failure to give useful advice. No evidence was found that any particular group of students (e.g., particular majors or ethnic-minorities) are less satisfied than others. Moreover, very few cases were found in which Academic Advising Center staff had been rude or non-responsive.

In broad strokes, the best interpretations for of what was found appears to be that advising works well for those who have specific needs, but that dissatisfaction arises when students receive advice they see as less

useful than they want or expect, often because their questions are complex ones involving life planning. This interpretation is consistent with national studies of advisors, who report that most problems arise when students expect more than the advisers feel they can provide--for instance, solutions to very questions such as what major to choose.