

# Are Missouri State Students Satisfied with Academic Advising?

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## Abstract

Academic advising is an important interaction tool between advisors (professional and faculty) and students. Advising sessions not only consist of graduation requirements but also a valuable resource for campus connection and integration into the University. Advisors have the potential to positively impact student outcomes, such as retention and graduation rates. Therefore, this study examined the perceived satisfaction with advising at Missouri State University. Students were given a short survey about their advising experiences, such as types of advisors, advising requirements, and advising appointments. Further, we measured their satisfaction through a survey of different advising functions, such as finding advising to be a positive experience. Interestingly, we found that many of the advising requirements are unclear or unknown for colleges, while many students expressed appropriate advising requirements. Many students are willing to continue advising appointments after requirements have been lifted, and students find advising to be very positive at the University.

## Introduction

In an age where financial support is almost primarily results-driven, academic institutions desire to constantly highlight their successes by measuring student outcomes, student satisfaction, and retention rates. This aspiration is especially true for the academic advising programs within a college campus. Advisors seek to establish a relationship with their advisees to better serve them and their unique needs and are often one of the first authority figures on campus that an incoming freshman meets. Students' relationships with their advisors early on can make or break their chances of retention and success (Drake, 2011).

Academic advising programs and approaches can vary from institution to institution, from department to department, or even by advisor. Depending on their situation, students may meet with an assigned faculty member within their chosen academic field, a professional academic advisor with an emphasis in their chosen field, or a professional academic advisor whose focus is on undecided students (Self, 2008). Each of these advisor types have advantages

and disadvantages ranging from accessibility to advising expertise, but much of the literature related to academic advising focuses on the weaknesses of faculty advisors.

Professional academic advisors spend the majority of their time focusing on advising appointments and related duties. In contrast, faculty members' primary responsibilities lie in teaching and researching, depending on the institution. Many faculty members are already pressed for time and do not feel they have the time or proper training to take on advisees (Hemwall, 2008). The latter may certainly be true: alarming statistics report that less than 30% of public educational institutions and 40% of private educational institutions require training for faculty advisors (Nutt, 2003).

Regardless of how an academic advising program is structured or organized, all academic advisors have one common goal: to make sure students successfully and contently graduate with all of the tools they need to make it in the "real world." Students at Missouri State University are exposed to academic advising early and often. Incoming freshmen attend an orientation session in the summer called SOAR (Student Orientation, Advisement & Registration) where they learn about general education and graduation requirements, campus resources, and the University public affairs mission. Students meet with an academic advisor during SOAR to discuss their four year course plan. Transfer students confer with an advisor before their first semester at the university to discuss transfer credits and future plans. After SOAR/transfer advising, students are required to meet with their assigned academic advisor each semester (through 75 credit hours) to discuss coursework for the next semester and obtain a registration release. Even though students are no longer required to meet with an advisor each semester once they have completed 75 credit hours, continuing appointments is highly recommended to stay on track for graduation and post-graduation plans.

To ensure students receive the best education and college experience, creating effective training programs for student services personnel is more important than ever. At Missouri State University, an academic advisor training program known as the Master Advisor Training Program has been flourishing since 1996 and has been nationally recognized by the National Academic Advising Association (Academic Advisement Center, 2012; Hunter & White, 2004). At this training program, academic advisors and faculty advisors discuss the best practices expected of Missouri State University advisors, including enhancing "understanding of and support for the University's public affairs mission" and establishing "positive relationships with all advisees" (Advising Basics, 2011). These practices are put to the test hands-on during Master Advisor workshops in the form of role playing and case study discussions.

Of course, successful training programs do not necessarily ensure a successful advising program. Continued assessment is desirable to make

sure goals and missions of the academic institution's advising program are met. Furthermore, advisor expectations and student perceptions should be examined to make sure there is no disconnect. Therefore, our study sought to be a preliminary assessment of student perceptions of academic advising at Missouri State University. To begin to understand how students feel about their advising experiences thus far, we formed a simple survey (utilizing both quantitative and qualitative measures) in the spirit of established advising satisfaction scales (Cuseo, 2012; Winston & Sandor, 1984). Questions were created to mirror the best advising practices here at Missouri State University.

## Participants

This experiment was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Our study tested 96 undergraduates from a pool of introductory psychology (PSY 121) students at Missouri State University. These students are required to complete research credits for class credit. Among these students were 35 males and 61 females, with an average age of 21.21 ( $SD = 5.57$ ). Half of these students were considered freshmen ( $N = 48$ ), 28.1% were sophomores ( $N = 27$ ), 11.5% were juniors ( $N = 11$ ), and 10.4% were seniors ( $N = 10$ ).

Sixteen students within this sample had not declared a major, and the remaining 80 students represented numerous departments and colleges at Missouri State University. Specifically, 10 (12.5%) were students of COAL (College of Arts and Letters), 23 (28.8%) were part of COBA (College of Business Administration), 18 (22.5%) were part of COE (College of Education), 15 (18.8%) were part of CHHS (College of Health and Human Services), 5 (6.3%) were part of CHPA (College of Humanities and Public Affairs), and 9 (11.3%) were part of CNAS (College of Natural and Applied Sciences). A wide variety of majors were also represented in this sample of students, including social work, music education, and housing/interior design.

The students in our sample reported utilizing advising services from a variety of sources, starting from the moment they began their collegiate career at Missouri State University. The advising sources students reported include professional advisors ( $N = 16$ ; 16.8% in a campus-wide advisement office versus  $N = 50$ ; 52.6% in a specific departmental advising office), faculty advisors ( $N = 26$ ; 27.4%), and Missouri State University's freshman orientation program known as SOAR ( $N = 3$ ; 3.2%).

## Materials and Procedure

After indicating experimental consent, participants completed an online questionnaire about their academic advising experience. Basic demographic information was collected, such as gender, status (freshman, sophomore, etc.), major, residency, and ethnicity. Participants were then polled about their last advising experience. For example, they indicated the last time they went to an advising session, who they received advising from, and what the advising

requirements were for their major.

Next, participants were asked to read 24 statements, each depicting a positive academic advising experience. Participants were instructed to use a seven-point Likert-type scale (where 1 indicated “strongly disagree,” 4 indicated “neutral,” and 7 indicated “strongly agree”) to indicate the extent to which they felt these statements described or did not describe their advising experience. The 24 statements covered multiple aspects of the overall advising experience, including perceived knowledge and competency of the advisor, ease of communication and contact, and level of trust. Example statements include “I feel like I will graduate in a reasonable amount of time thanks to my advisor’s planning,” “My advisor is prepared for my advising appointments,” and “I find academic advising appointments to be a positive experience.”

Additionally, participants were asked if they were currently required to meet with an advisor. If they indicated that they were still required (due to completion of less than 75 credit hours) to meet with an advisor before being allowed to enroll for classes, they were asked if they would continue to seek advising services once they met the 75 credit hour requirement. If participants indicated they were not interested in meeting with their advisor once it was no longer required, they were given the opportunity to explain their reasoning. Similarly, participants who indicated that they were no longer required to meet with an advisor but continued to do so were also asked to explain their reasoning.

## Results

Students reported utilizing numerous advisor sources throughout their college career, as 73 (76%) indicated that they had sought advising advice from more than one type of advisor. Of the different advising sources available to them, students were asked to identify each source that they have used during their time at Missouri State University. Sixty-five (67.7%) have attended Missouri State University’s Student Orientation, Advisement & Registration (SOAR) program, 26 (27.1%) indicated they have met with a general professional advisor, 61 (63.5%) have had an assigned advisor specific to an academic department’s advising center, 31 (32.3%) have been advised by a faculty member, and 28 (29.2%) have sought advising advice from fellow students or friends. When asked to identify the last source of advising they had utilized, 3 (3.16%) last attended SOAR, 16 (16.84%) had met with a general advisor, 50 (52.63%) had met with an assigned departmental advisor, and 26 (27.37%) said they had met with a faculty advisor.

When students that had a declared major ( $N = 80$ ) were asked to list any known relevant advising requirements, 65 of these students (81.3%) confidently identified appropriate departmental requirements. Examples of confident written answers include “I have to see my advisor once a semester

for honors college,” “I have to meet with my advisor for the first 6 semesters of classes,” and “I have to see (sic) advisor once every semester until I have 75 hours. I have to see my advisor to register.” However, 15 of the declared students (18.8%) were unsure of their department’s requirements. Common responses included variations of “I am not sure” and “None that I know of.”

These students may be unsure of their requirements because departmental website information is missing or inaccurate. Of the 53 different majors represented in our sample, 51 (96.23%) had at least brief information about advising on their webpages. However, only 45 (88.24%) of these had advising information that was easily accessible (as in, prominently displayed on their homepage). Furthermore, one of these pages (1.96%) directly linked to the university’s Academic Advisement Center homepage without mentioning any advising information relevant to their major. When examining accuracy, eight majors (15.69%) listed incorrect advising requirements. These pages stated students were no longer required to meet with an advisor after completion of 60 credit hours when the correct number of credit hours is 75. Of the entire sample, only one department (1.89%) correctly posted this requirement. Departments with no information on their website were contacted by phone, and advising requirements were still unclear after these discussions.

Participants were asked if they are currently required to meet with an advisor in order to register or if they voluntarily continued to seek advising services. Seventy-four (77.1%) students indicated they are still required to meet with an advisor in order to register, while 22 (22.9%) students noted they are no longer required to meet with an advisor but continue to do so anyway. Of the 74 students who are still required to meet with an advisor, 43 (58.1%) guessed they will most likely continue to schedule appointments with their advisor even when it is no longer required, 8 (10.8%) were not interested in meeting with an advisor past their major’s requirements, and 23 (31.1%) would possibly consider advising when it is not required.

Interestingly, we found that the students who did not wish to meet with an advisor after their requirement period ended were much further along in their academic careers ( $M$  credit hours = 54.29;  $SE$  = 8.85). Using a between subjects ANOVA, this mean value was much higher than students who marked they would continue to go to advising appointments ( $M$  credit hours = 31.08;  $SE$  = 3.57) or may continue to go to advising appointments ( $M$  credit hours = 31.55,  $SE$  = 4.99),  $F(2, 69) = 3.06$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $n_2 = .08$ . Students who did not want to continue their advising appointments had significantly higher credit hours than students who did continue ( $p = .05$ ,  $d = .76$ ) and were marginally greater than students who were unsure about continuing appointments ( $p = .07$ ,  $d = .82$ ). This finding may indicate that older students feel more comfortable about their degree plans after several semesters at the University, which lessens the need for advising appointments in their opinion. However, we did not find a

significant difference of students across colleges who marked that they would continue advising or not,  $X^2(12) = 8.55, p = .74$ .

Students who indicated they were no longer required to meet with an advisor but continued to do so were given the opportunity to explain their reasoning. Common themes consisted of graduation requirements, class scheduling, and post-graduation opportunities. Examples of graduation related answers included "I am trying to graduate in three years instead of four, so I need her help so that I can graduate on time" and "I believe it is wise to talk to someone about my plans and make sure that I am track to graduate on time." Statements related to class scheduling included "I like the knowledge that faculty members can provide in choosing classes specific to my desired field of study and having a solid contact in the medical field," and "I like her opinion on what classes I should be taking for the following semester." Finally, answers related to post-graduation opportunities included "...to generally make sure I'm on the right track for Pharmacy school" and "...since I want to pursue schooling after MSU my advisor is encouraging and gives me great guidance."

Additionally, students who indicated they would not be interested in meeting with an advisor when it is no longer required commented on their disinterest. Most expressed some sort of frustration with the process, with many stating advising is not worth their time. Examples of responses included "I prefer to take care of things myself, on my own time. It frustrates me that I have to wait to sign up for classes," "...I have registered for the classes I have chosen at any appointment. I am aware of the courses I need, and I do not need the advisor's input," and "An appointment with an advisor serves me no benefit."

The 24 Likert-type scale scores were averaged to create an overall average score for each participant. Overall, our participants were very positive about their advising experiences,  $M = 5.43$  ( $SD = 1.13$ ); this score indicates somewhere between an agree and moderately agree answer on our seven point Likert scale. Male ( $M = 5.33, SD = 1.19$ ) and female ( $M = 5.49, SD = 1.15$ ) participants showed the same average advising rating,  $F < 1, p = .52$ . Similarly, there were no significant differences by college,  $F < 1, p = .90$ , and Figure 1 shows average scores by college. Finally, there also was not a significant difference by advisor type,  $F < 1, p = .82$ , indicating that general advisors ( $M = 5.58, SD = 1.24$ ), departmental advisors ( $M = 5.47, SD = 1.01$ ), and faculty ( $M = 5.26, SD = 1.33$ ) all receive the same advising ratings (contrary to previous research).

When asked if their advisor makes Missouri State University's public affairs mission an important topic in advising sessions, fifty-four participants (56.3%) marked a 4 (neutral) or less. This result was surprising, as the public affairs mission is a crucial part of first-year programs and orientations and is highly evident in University programs and events. As previously mentioned, a core part of the advisor training program at Missouri State University speaks to

the importance of emphasizing the public affairs mission in advising sessions.

## **Discussion**

Our findings show that most students who are currently required to see their advisor are interested in continuing that relationship when it is no longer mandatory, and this endorsement is encouraging. As mentioned before, Missouri State University's Master Advisor training program is nationally known, and our results reflect the hard work of the advising coordinators. If our students are willing to voluntarily meet with an advisor on their own accord, it means our advisors are satisfactorily doing their jobs. However, an effective advising program should always strive to continuously assess and improve.

Our findings also show that many advisees are not educated on the importance of the public affairs mission during their advising appointments, which is surprising. The general education curriculum at Missouri State University is structured around the three pillars of the public affairs mission: ethical leadership, cultural competence, and community engagement. Each course on the general education list has characteristics related to one of these pillars, and the advisor should make it a priority to discuss these characteristics with their advisees.

An unintentional finding of our research was discovering how many students (and even academic departments) did not know their advising requirements. While freshmen may not have had the exposure needed to remember advising requirements, departments may consider updating their webpages to reflect current advising standards to reduce student questions. Information about advising requirements should be articulated to students early and often in order to make sure they stay on track to graduate on time. Furthermore, administrative personnel who represent each academic department on campus would benefit from attending a short workshop to educate them on the basic advising requirements and procedures for their students. A seminar or workshop of this nature could be sponsored by the Master Advisor training program on campus.

Due to the convenience sample of undergraduate students in an introductory psychology research pool, there were limitations to our study. In addition to our small sample, we did not have enough representation of the various majors offered at the University, diverse populations, or enough upperclassmen. A bigger and more varied sample would generalize more easily to other universities across the country. Future research should investigate if certain majors are more or less satisfied with their advising experience than others, especially when different types of advisors are involved.

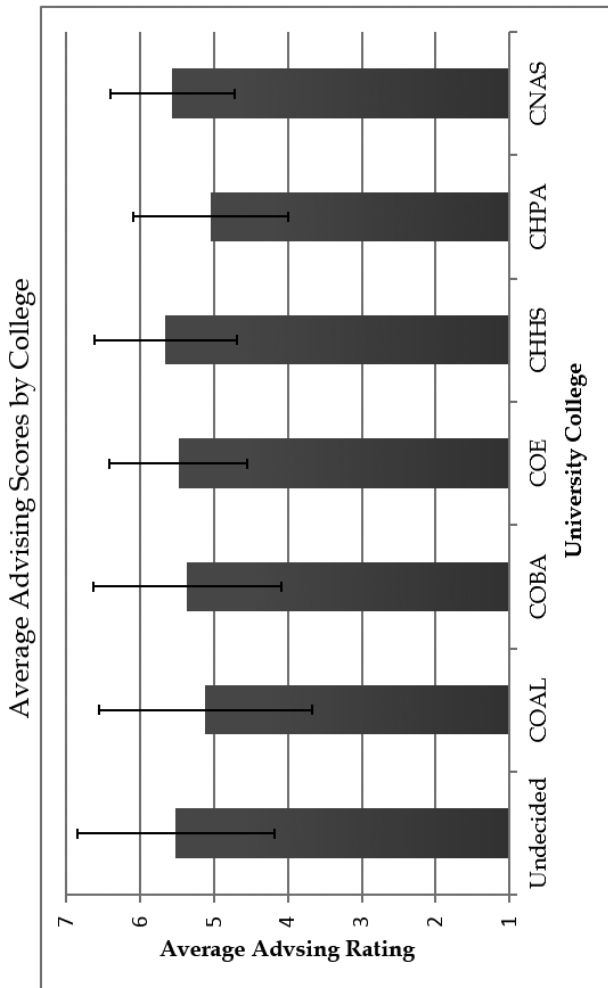


Figure 1. Average advising scores by University College. Error bars represent standard deviation. COAL = College of Arts and Letters, COBA = College of Business Administration, COE = College of Education, CHHS = College and Health and Human Services, CHPA = College of Humanities and Public Affairs, CNAS = College and Natural and Applied Sciences.

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Marlee Teasley completed this study as an undergraduate student, and she is now entering her second year as a graduate student in the Experimental Psychology program at Missouri State University. She is currently the career counseling graduate assistant at the Missouri State University Career Center. After graduating in May 2014, she wants to become a full-time academic advisor or career counselor at a university.



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