



Assessment Bulletin

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Summary

Students experience advising during their first two years in varying ways. This report explores the interplay of factors influencing how students use and rate the quality of advising services.

- One fifth of first-year and undeclared students report receiving no advising.
- Students who didn't receive advising are more likely to identify reasons related to their own behavior or lack awareness.
- More than 25 percent of students, excluding undeclared students, use more than one type of advising resource.
- Students who see multiple advisors rate their experiences less positively than peers with more continuity in their advising relationships.
- Students who are more motivated to use the services are more likely to have a primary advisor and rate the quality of advising more highly.

These data offer benchmarks for tracking the effectiveness of current efforts to improve academic advising.

Experiences with Academic Advising: A Survey of First- and Second-Year Students

Compared to other aspects of the UMass Amherst experience, advising often receives low ratings from students. Graduating seniors completing the UMass Amherst Senior Survey generally rate the quality of the advising received lower than other aspects of their experience in their major. UMass Amherst students' ratings of advising are also lower when compared with students' ratings at other research universities through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). These results suggest a problem, but provide little insight into the reasons behind them. This question is made all the more complex because advising at UMass Amherst is offered through various venues and, except for specific programs where students are required to contact an advisor to get their Registration Access Code, students are not required to meet with an advisor (although communications to students strongly recommend they do so). Therefore, the UMass advising experience can be particularly varied and, for some students, uneven.

To better delineate the issues related to advising quality, the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) contracted with the Student Assessment, Research, and Evaluation Office (SAREO) to administer a phone survey focused on UMass Amherst students' experiences with advising. In spring 2003, a random sample of first- and second-year students was sur-

veyed, achieving a 77 percent response rate (N=413).

This report focuses on three issues that are central to understanding students' advising experiences: how often and from whom they receive advising assistance; how they rate the advising they receive; and what factors influence their decisions to access advising.

Sources and Frequency of Advising Assistance

Surveys like NSSE and the UMass Amherst Senior Survey ask students one global question about their advising experiences: "How satisfied have you been with advising at UMass?". Interpreting the results of this type of question is difficult, because the question assumes that all students have had the same access to advising and are rating the same advising resource. However, as Tables One and Two illustrate, UMass Amherst students experience advising during their first two years in varying ways.

There is substantial variability both within student categories (i.e. first-year students, undeclared students) and across these categories. Note in particular that first-year and undeclared students generally receive advising less often than their counterparts, with 20 percent of each group receiving no advising. In addition, note how many students use more than one type of advisor, with over a quarter of all groups

office of Academic Planning & Assessment
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Provides service to the campus community in evaluating student learning and program effectiveness. OAPA can assist departments and individual faculty members in several areas: • **Developing evaluation plans** for new programs, grant proposals, and externally and internally funded projects • **Exploring and articulating** student learning outcomes appropriate to a course or program • **Finding useful ways** of assessing student success in achieving program goals • **Developing strategies** for ongoing reviews of program effectiveness for quality improvement, accreditation, and other purposes • **Contact: Martha L. A. Stassen, Director of Assessment, phone 413-545-5146, email mstassen@acad.umass.edu**

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Table One.

Number of Times Students Received Advising During Academic Year

Number of Times	First Year N=182	Sophomore N=231	Undeclared N=105	Declared N=308
None	21%	14%	20%	11%
One	19%	15%	25%	16%
Two	33%	34%	28%	34%
Three or More	27%	38%	28%	40%

Table Two.

Types of Advisors Seen During Academic Year

(Among those receiving advising; students could select more than one)

Type of Advisor	First Year N=182	Sophomore N=231	Undeclared N=105	Declared N=308
Faculty/Staff in Major	46%	61%	-	73%
Pre-Major Advising	33%	34%	51%	28%
Other Faculty/Staff	12%	9%	14%	9%
Special Programs Advisor	8%	11%	9%	10%
Students Seeing More Than One Type of Advisor	27%	29%	14%	33%

except undeclared students using more than one resource.

Advising Quality and Continuity

In this study, only those students who actually accessed advising were asked to rate the quality of advising at UMass Amherst. In general, these students' evaluations were positive, with 90 percent indicating that they were "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with various aspects of the advising experience.

However, given the variability in the types of advising experiences indicated above, it is important to look at students' ratings by the types of advising relationships that they have been able to develop. The research on advising supports the value of students developing long-term advising relationships, where the advisor and student can establish a positive and helpful working relationship with each other. This survey showed that almost two-thirds

(64%) of the respondents who access advising report having a faculty or staff member they consider their primary source for advising or that they see each time they access advising assistance. Also, declared students (70%) are more likely than undeclared students (46%) to report this type of continuity in advising.

Consistent with research in the field, students' satisfaction with advising varies with the continuity of advising relationships. Students who see multiple

advisors rate their advising experiences somewhat less positively than peers with more continuity in their advising relationships (see Figure One). Those students who have a primary advisor are more than twice as likely to rate advising overall as "excellent," whereas those with multiple advisors are more likely to rate advising overall as "fair" or "poor."

Similar patterns emerge when considering more specific advisor characteristics, such as knowledge, availability, accuracy, and helpfulness as well as overall satisfaction (see Figure Two). For all five of these characteristics, students with a primary advisor give their advisor a higher rating than those students with multiple advisors. While the differences between "very" and "somewhat" are dramatic in many cases, the differences in total positive ratings are largest on perceptions of advisor helpfulness and in overall satisfaction with advising. Ninety-six percent of students with a primary advisor rate the information they receive as helpful, compared to 85 percent of those without a primary advisor. A similar pattern emerges for overall satisfaction: 93 percent of those with primary advisors are satisfied, compared to 81 percent of those without primary advisors.

No Advising Received: Why?

As indicated earlier, a large number of first- and second-year students receive no advising assistance.

Figure One: Overall Advising Rating by Primary Advisor Status

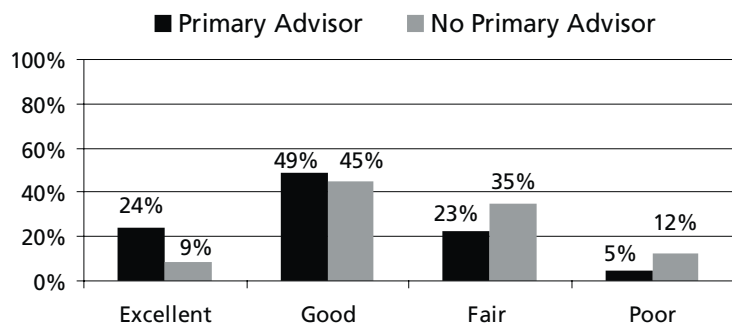
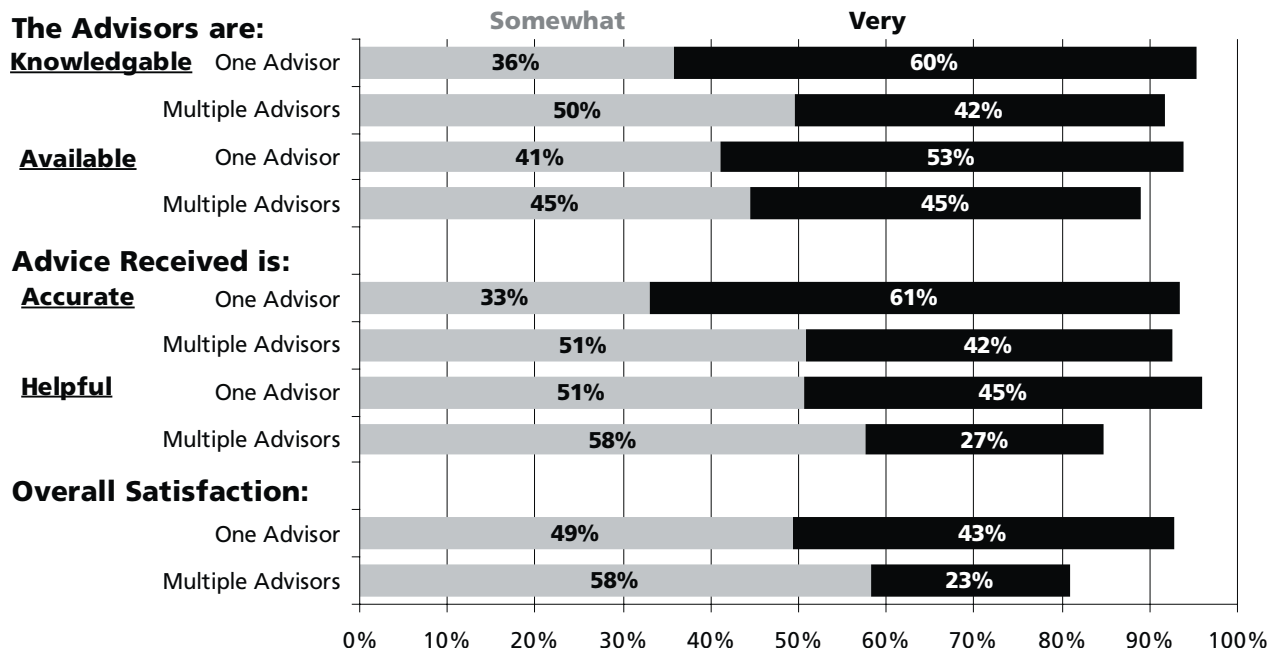


Figure Two: Students' Ratings of Advising by Consistency of Advising Relationship



Here, we focus on the 17 percent (N=72) of the respondents who reported receiving no advising during the academic year. We asked these students to indicate whether each of a series of issues was a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason why they did not receive assistance. Figure Three shows students' ratings of the importance of a range of reasons, some dealing with the students' own actions and some with issues related to the availability and quality of advising. The pattern of responses is interesting in that students are much more likely to identify reasons related to their own behavior (i.e., I didn't need assistance, I asked my friends instead, or I didn't take the initiative) as the primary reasons why they didn't receive advising. Lack of awareness of how to access advising comes next, with half indicating this as a major or minor reason. Issues that are most related to the quality of advising and its availability are identified far less often, with around 20 percent of the students saying they tried to get an appointment and couldn't or heard bad things about advising. Fewer (14%) indicate that they had a previous bad experience with advising.

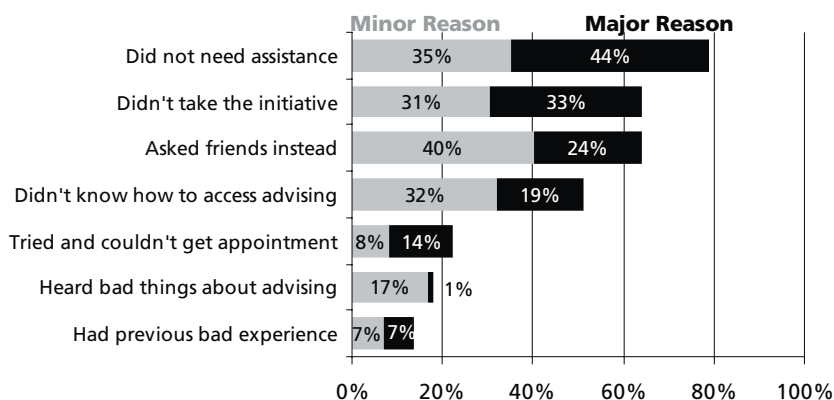
Student Motivation: A Key Factor

As the results in Figure Three suggest, students' own motivation to use advising services can play an important role in whether or not students use the advising services available. When asked, two-thirds of the students surveyed said they were very (15%) or somewhat (51%) motivated to seek academic advising while at UMass. Those students who report being very motivated are twice as likely to have received assistance (97%) as those who report being very unmotivated (48%). They also access

advising more frequently. On average, students who are very motivated access advising three times a year, while those who are unmotivated access advising only once a year.

Interestingly, students' motivation is also related to the quality of students' advising experiences. Motivated students are more likely to have a primary advisor (as opposed to seeing multiple advisors over time) and rate the quality of advising received more highly. There are no differences in motivation level for the use of advisors in a major, pre-major advising, or special programs. However, unmotivated students are

Figure Three: Reasons Why Students Did Not Access Advising



more likely to say they have received advising from someone not affiliated with an advising office.

Students and Advising: A More Complete Picture

As this study illustrates, there is no common advising experience among first- and second-year students at UMass Amherst. Students vary in their sources of advising assistance, in how often (or whether) they access those sources, and in their own motivation for accessing advising help. Despite findings in other surveys that show lower ratings for advising in general, when students who have actually used advising are asked about specific elements of their experience they rate their advisors highly on a number of dimensions (advisor knowledge and availability, advice accuracy and helpfulness, and overall advising satisfaction). The somewhat-lower ratings for

the helpfulness of the advice and the overall satisfaction with advising reflect differences in the continuity and consistency of students' experiences with advising relationships.

One of the most important findings in this study is the central role that students' own motivation plays in their use of advising services and their evaluation of those services. Clearly, any understanding of the quality of advising on campus needs to consider students' own interest in using advising and identify methods for encouraging unmotivated students to use the resources available. For example, results show that students with a required Registration Access Code are more likely to see an advisor more often.

These results suggest that additional effort should be put into ensuring that students are aware of what advising services would be most appropriate for them, developing methods for encour-

aging students' interest in using those services, and making those resources as accessible as possible.

In closing, it is important to note that these data were collected before any of the currently proposed advising and student support improvements were implemented (see, for example, the University's "On Improving Campus Diversity: Action Plan" at <http://www.umass.edu/campusdiversity>). Therefore, these results can provide important benchmarks for tracking the effectiveness of the campus' new efforts to improve undergraduate academic advising for all students.

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