Advisor Analysis
Maryam Fanara

Introduction

A group of advisors from San Francisco State University were asked to attend a focus group to support the WASC reaccreditation process for the Capacity Review. The purpose of this focus group was to find out what these faculty members thought – and how they thought – about students at SF State, and what the university does and doesn’t do to help them succeed. During this focus group we explored the advisor’s general feelings about the obstacles students face in terms of moving through the system. We further discussed the student’s ability to receive quality advising and the advisor’s capacity to provide it. Finally, we discussed how the budget cuts have affected the advisor’s work. This analysis offers a better understanding of the situations faculty face in trying to help students graduate, as well as their ideas on what students need in order to be successful.

What is your definition of a successful student?

The focus group began with questions about student success. The advisors shared their thoughts on how they defined a successful student. One of the advisors asserted that a successful student is someone who can complete his or her degree in a timely fashion. The advisor concluded that it is important for students to positively represent the university once they have gone on to their chosen professions. This was the only participant who mentioned this, but the others nodded in agreement. According to the group, a major aspect of student success is becoming a part of the network of students who represent and support the university after they graduate.

What can the university do to help its students succeed?

One of the group members suggested that students should familiarize themselves with the class bulletin and the courses they need to succeed. The advisor expressed the importance of providing the students with “the tools [necessary] for them to be able to attain their goals and to be successful.” The advisor went on to say: “I want my students to be able to move on without me and be able to work with other people because I want them to expand their network. The more connected they are and [the more they] are able to make their own decisions the [the more successful they will be].”

The general agreement from all the members of the group is that it a successful student is someone who can navigate the system. One advisor said that not knowing how to operate within the system is an obstacle for many students. The others agreed. The advisors attributed this in part to the changes in graduation requirements over the past 18 months. As a result of these changes, the advisors said they have had to take special care to assist some students who have become discouraged and confused.

One advisor had a suggestion for how the university can help students succeed: “I think departments need to communicate more effectively because many students get the ping pong effect when we are not all on same page. Everyone from the top down is not on the same page, then you have people telling the students that they need to go to a certain office but then that office tells them they need to go to this other office and that builds frustrations and makes us ineffective at what we are here for.” According to the advisor, this “ping pong effect” is understandably discouraging for students and they tend to shut down as a result. The students become so unhappy after being bounced around from office to office that the advisors have to deal with the student’s frustrations before they can get down to advising. One advisor suggested that the university circulate a newsletter or an e-mail to the main directors to ensure that everyone is on the same page.
Another advisor said that “nothing replaces the relationship any student builds with an advisor or faculty advisor.” This same advisor also stated that it would be beneficial for advisors to be cross trained in all aspects of advising. According to the advisor, being cross trained would eliminate the traveling time a student has to do between their major advisors and their general education advisors.

**Overall, are new students prepared for college level math and writing courses?**

When asked about whether or not advisors have to deal with students who are not ready for college level courses, one advisor said, “We do come across a lot of students who are not academically prepared and it’s a real struggle to work with them especially when they want to go into the sciences and they are still struggling to get past math 59 or 60, the remedial courses, and explaining the process they have to go to get their degree.” This is a common occurrence among the advisors who often provide their services to students who are fresh out of high school.

**What can the university do to help advisors do their job? What can they do to help the students?**

One advisor expressed the importance of mandatory freshman advising. The advisor said, “Even though it seems formidable to advise all the students, it ensures that freshmen know what to take and that there is coordination between departments so the right information is given to students.” The other advisors agreed. Further, the advisors agreed that it is important to continue to counsel students who are having difficulty socially adjusting to life on campus. The advisors said that they assist students by introducing them to various groups and organizations on campus to help them feel more involved.

**Do we provide support for different learning styles?**

One of the group members said: “We don’t deal with it directly, but it is something that comes out when we are meeting with the student. The particular teaching style of the faculty might not be suitable for some students.” This advisor went on to explain that students often say they like certain professors, but it’s hard for them to follow the content because of the teaching style.

Another advisor brought up the topic of online courses. The advisor expressed that online courses do not work for all students because they are not “one-to-one.” According to the advisor there are certain courses that are only offered in the online format and it’s causing some students to fail.

**Are students academically prepared?**

The general consensus among the group was that there are often significant adjustment issues for students once they enter college. Many students expect to be told what courses to take. The advisors want the students to become more involved in the course selection process. Additionally, the group reiterated the importance of requiring freshman advising to ensure that accurate information is given to each student.

**Do we support our DPRC students?**

Supporting DPRC students was an unknown area for the advisors. Many said that the right people to address that question were not in the focus group. However, one advisor did say that she didn’t think SF State had the adequate resources for DPRC students.
What are students’ expectations of advising, and are they different from what you as advising professionals think you should be doing in advising?

On the question of what students expect from advisors, one advisor said: “There are so few of us and so many students, we try to accommodate them; we try to advise them, add evening advising workshops, we try to outreach as much as we can, but it is a very overwhelming situation. We try the best we can. It may not be the most effective way we as counselors would consider [to be] good counseling.”

How many times should a student meet with an advisor?

The general agreement among the group was that students should meet with a major advisor and a department advisor at least once a semester.

In what ways are our students not ready for university study? (College and specific majors.)

The consensus here was that many new students are not sufficiently prepared before they come to college. One advisor claimed that “[students] are not receiving proper development in K–12 and we are left trying to help them catch up.”

Another advisor said: “A lot of basics have been overlooked. I have seen students who have been told they are good writers, and I have not seen anything close to that; and sometimes as an effort to push them through the system we overlook the most important thing which is what they bring, their foundation.” The advisors agreed that some students have a weak skill set due to the inadequate education they received before studying at the university level.

Are our remediation efforts working?

The group agreed that foundation courses are overlooked in order to push students through the system. The advisors also agreed that many courses at SF State require and expect good writing skills. However, many students lack the skills necessary to succeed in those courses.

What is being taught in remedial classes? Are those courses working? Are they giving students the foundation needed for other classes?

The advisors agreed that remedial courses do not work for all students – at least not in the way they were intended. One advisor had an interesting response to this question: “The answer is the question. Are they doing what they are supposed to be doing? In some instances perhaps not, and we need to look at remediation courses and see how they are designed and if they are meeting their goals. I don’t mean getting the student to pass the class but providing the foundation necessary to be successful.”

Is there a shift in student’s educational goals?

The group agreed that students today want their education to be fast and easy. One advisor said: “it varies from student to student, but for the most part I think a lot of students want something quick, fast, and easy that is supposedly going to get them a good job, that is going to give them a six figure salary. They don’t want to put the effort that is going to give them that opportunity to do that type of work.”

One advisor implied that using the Internet has made students lazy due of the ease of information. The advisor said, “[Students] can just Google whatever they want and they get everything they want.”
What is the university doing to help students achieve their goals?

The advisors concurred that SF State is doing a good job helping students stay on the path toward graduation. One advisor said: “We are at a point where we are forcing students to make a choice in what they are going to do as far as reaching goals. One of them would be a graduation plan that we have all become familiar with.”

Another advisor said that although we are helping students stay on track toward graduation, “it is creating an obstacle for students to achieve goals because it is putting them in a tunnel they have to stay in throughout their time at San Francisco State.” The advisor said that the “narrow path to graduation” doesn’t allow students to explore and develop as much as they could.

What are the changes in student expectations in the last 5 to 10 years?

Almost every advisor mentioned the idea of students demanding a “road map” of classes up to the day they graduate. The advisors discussed the students’ desire to have an instant academic plan. A “road map” however, is not always as useful as students think it is. The advisors discussed the fact that “road maps” don’t take into consideration remedial classes or the fact that class schedules are constantly changing. As such, planning out each course by semester is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Another issue advisors discussed regarding student expectations is the fact that students tend not to seek out career counseling but still expect to land a job right out of college. However, because they aren’t taking the time to think about their future goals, they are having trouble finding jobs. In addition, many students lack real world working experience. Accordingly, one advisor suggested that the university incorporate a mandatory internship to help students get an idea of what the working world is really like.

Is the University prepared to support all students? Are there certain populations that don’t get support?

The general agreement among the group was that the university is not prepared to support all students. The group further agreed that some populations are not getting adequate support. One advisor said: “It’s so hard for students to get courses”… “we are trying to advise students not to take all the GE courses at one time so they will stand a better chance at getting courses they need at the time they need them.”

One advisor expressed frustration, saying, “The university wants students to come in and graduate in a timely manner but they are not offering enough courses to allow that.”

Another issue that the advisors discussed is that many students need classes to satisfy their financial aid requirements, but there are not enough courses to go around. As a result many students are losing their financial aid.

Has the budget affected how you do your job?

One advisor said that advisors should be elevated to faculty positions and be better compensated for their work. Since advisors are taking on more work due to budget cuts, elevating their position would lift their morale, which they admitted has gone down in recent years.

One advisor said: “I think as staff the morale is getting so far down its really hard to do our jobs. There is so much work and need and we have been underpaid for years.” The advisor went on to say that the furloughs have “thrown [them] under the garbage can.”
In response to the mandatory furloughs, one advisor said: “Positive time off is nice but then you get this salary cut that doesn’t pay the bills or rent it adds more of a financial burden to me and my household but the university could care less. You are still expected to do the same amount of work even though your union tells you shouldn’t do more work…but you can’t tell a student you can’t help them because they are over your quota. The university is not looking to preserve you. We are the engine of the university and if it’s not for us who are going to advise the students? No one, because the faculty are not up to par on the regulations with advising.”

Conclusions

Students are unclear about what advising at a university is and should be; their expectations can be unrealistic. Students have trouble navigating through the university system and are not using the advising that is offered their advantage. Students are also expecting their education to be fast and easy and they become easily frustrated as they make their way through the university system.

As a university, we should focus more on explaining to the students how to navigate through the system and how to get proper advising. Promoting the need for advising through e-mails and newsletters would help to do this. Moreover, the university needs to work on regularly getting feedback from advisors.