International Student Academic Advising – The Advisee Perspective

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Background

In late Spring 2006, a working group of University of Florida faculty, staff, and graduate students was formed with a common interest in studying the transition and adjustment experiences of international students. This group represented a wide range of practical, scientific, educational, and personal experiences with international students. Early work of the group consisted of identifying areas of need regarding international students, as perceived by university administrators, colleges, departments, and centers on campus with stakes in understanding international student adjustment, and possibly intervening to facilitate healthy and successful transition to and through the University of Florida. Meetings were held with the Vice President for Student Affairs, Graduate School Interim Dean and Associate Director, Executive Associate Director of the International Center, Director of the University Counseling Center, and Associate Dean for Student Affairs in the College of Engineering. In addition, the working group held numerous meetings to exchange ideas and increase familiarity with the literature on international student adjustment. As a research agenda began to unfold, we learned that President Machen had specific questions regarding the advising climate for international students. Because this was one of several areas to independently emerge as a focus for the working group, a project was designed to begin addressing international student advising experiences.

Purpose and Design of the Study

The main research question was: What is the quality of the international graduate student advising experience at the University of Florida? The focus of the study was advising experiences from the perspective of the international student. Later work was planned to gather data about the advising experiences from the advisor perspective. Survey methodology, relevant instruments, and additional items and questions were selected for the study. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (#2007-U-0224). The electronic listserv of all international student email addresses at the International Center was used to recruit participants. Therefore, all UF international graduate students were invited to participate in the study. The survey was anonymous, administered through a web survey tool that is accessible to the Department of Housing and Residence Education.

Sample

In late Spring 2007, prompts to complete the survey were sent through the listserv and also announced at regular gatherings of mostly international students (e.g., “Global Coffee House” events held at the Reitz Union). Four reminders to complete the survey were sent to all international graduate students at approximately weekly intervals after the initial request was sent. A total of 399 international students completed the survey. Based on Fall 2006 university report to the Institute of International Education, there were 2,672 foreign graduate students at the University of Florida. The survey response rate represents approximately 15% of the international student population.

Although 399 students participated, 27 indicated that they did not have an advisor. Unless otherwise indicated, those students were excluded in subsequent analyses. The gender distribution was 55% male and 45% female. The average age of participants was 29 (SD = 5). 66 different countries were represented in the sample. Approximately 53% were from Asia, 22% were from Central or South America, 16% were from Europe, 5% were from Africa, and 3% were from the Middle East. Students from 15 UF colleges participated, with Engineering (ENG;
32% of the sample), Agricultural and Life Sciences (ALS; 22%), and Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS; 22%) being most represented. Approximately 85% of the students were in doctoral programs and 15% were in master’s degree programs. On average, students had been studying for about 6½ semesters at UF, and had been in the U.S. for an average of just under three years. About 82% had completed 10 or fewer semesters at UF and 85% had been in the U.S. for 5 years or less.

The largest percentage of students (40%) had worked with their advisors for two or more years. About two-thirds of the sample had worked with their advisors for a year or longer. Most students (45%) came to their program to specifically work with their advisor or selected their advisor after starting their program (30%); 15% were assigned to an advisor. About 16% of the students had changed advisors since attending UF (and only 8% of these had initially been assigned an advisor).

**Results**

**INSIGHT 1:**

**ONE-FIFTH TO ONE-THIRD OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS EXPRESSED DISSATISFACTION WITH ADVISING RELATIONSHIPS.**

The vast majority of the students (94%) did not anticipate changing advisors in the next 6-12 months, although 24% indicated they would change advisors if they could. On several survey items, student satisfaction seemed mixed. For example, in terms of the amount and quality of time spent with advisors, approximately 47% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with advisory time but 33% expressed clear dissatisfaction (disagreed or strongly disagreed) and 20% reported feeling neutral about time spent. However, about 60% of the students indicated that their advisors had helped them to secure funding for their graduate studies, just over that same amount (63%) indicated that they viewed their advisors as advocates for them when advocacy was needed, and 55% agreed or strongly agreed that their advisors were sensitive to their needs. Approximately 46% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “My advisor sees me as a source of labor to advance his/her research” whereas 29% agreed or strongly agreed with that statement, and 25% were neutral. This set of findings suggests that perhaps half to two-thirds of the students are clearly satisfied with some very specific aspects of their advising relationships while one-fifth to one-third of the students expressed clear dissatisfaction (a rather large group of 20-25% of the sample responded neutral to these items). Although it is difficult to interpret these findings without a clear criterion for expected levels of satisfaction, if these findings are representative and neutral responses are excluded, then approximately 2,000 to 2,900 of UF international students are clearly satisfied and 875 to 1,450 students are clearly dissatisfied.

**INSIGHT 2:**

**STUDENTS IN AGRICULTURE & LIFE SCIENCES AND ENGINEERING EXPERIENCE LESS TYPICAL ADVISING PROCESSES.**

Closer inspection of the overall satisfaction items revealed some interesting differences between international students representing different colleges and genders. Cell sizes were too small in many colleges to include them in the analyses, so these comparisons were limited to the largest colleges represented in the sample. It is important to note that each college or department has its own way of structuring the advising process for its graduate students. When asked to rate whether the manner in which the students came to work with their advisors was typical in their department, students in ALS and ENG were not significantly different from each
other and both of these groups rated their agreement with that statement significantly lower than the rating obtained from students in CLAS. Of course, all three colleges represent a wide range of diverse departments so future and more refined examination of this item may be warranted to determine where atypical advisor-advisee assignments occur.

**INSIGHT 3:**

NO GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SATISFICATION WITH ADVISING TIME IN ENGINEERING BUT ALS WOMEN ARE LESS SATISFIED AND CLAS WOMEN MORE SATISFIED COMPARED WITH MEN IN THOSE COLLEGES.

Although there were no overall differences between colleges when students were asked about their satisfaction with time spent with advisors, there were differences between men and women across the three colleges. Men and women in ENG were comparable in their satisfaction ratings of time spent with their advisors, however marked (and opposite) differences emerged for men and women in ALS when compared with CLAS. Men in ALS were substantially more pleased with the amount and quality of advising time compared with ALS women whereas women in CLAS were substantially more pleased with advising time compared with men in CLAS. This pattern of similarities and differences for ratings about whether advisors were sensitive to advisee needs was identical to the results for satisfaction with advising time.

**Satisfaction with Advising Time**

![Satisfaction with Advising Time](chart)

**INSIGHT 4:**

RAPPORT, APPRENTICESHIP, AND IDENTIFICATION BETWEEN ADVISORS AND ADVISEES ARE FAVORABLE. HOWEVER, UF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS RANKED THEIR LEVEL OF RAPPORT AND APPRENTICESHIP LOWER COMPARED TO A U.S. STUDENT SAMPLE.

As part of the survey, students completed the Advisory Working Alliance Inventory (AWAI) to help gauge the quality of several major dimensions of advising relationships. According to Schlosser and Gelso (2001, p. 161), the AWAI measures Rapport ("how well the advisor and advisee get along interpersonal"), Apprenticeship ("tasks of the advising relationship and the degree to which the advisor facilitates the advisee's professional development"), and Identification-Individuation ("how much the advisee wants or does not want to be like his or her advisor"). The measure is scored such that higher scores reflect more rapport, more positive
experiences with tasks and facilitation of professional development, and greater desire to identify with the advisor. A total or overall quality of advising relationship score can also be derived. Scores can range from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). For comparison purposes, results for the international students sample at UF are displayed with findings from a study of 268 domestic U.S. graduate students (Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). The results indicated that Rapport ratings were generally favorable (approaching the “Agree” range for positive relationships with advisors), Apprenticeship and Identification ratings were more modest (in the “Neutral” range). Compared with the sample obtained by Schlosser and Gelso, the UF international students reported significantly lower scores on Rapport and Individuation, but were not significantly different on Apprenticeship.

![Advisory Working Alliance](image)

There were no differences between men and women on two of the three AWAI dimensions. Although women (M = 3.30, SD = .75) reported significantly higher Identification than men (M = 3.11, SD = .77), the effect size (practical importance) of this difference was relatively small. Age, number of semesters of study at UF, and length of time in the U.S. were not significantly correlated with any AWAI dimension. There were no significant differences on any AWAI dimension when comparing students who already had a graduate degree from a U.S. institution with those who did not yet have a graduate degree, nor were there differences between students currently pursuing a master’s degree and those pursuing the doctorate degree. Grade point average was not significantly associated with the AWAI dimensions, nor were the amounts of time students spent studying or working. There were no AWAI differences between students receiving assistantships to support their training compared with those supporting their education through other sources.

As before, cell sizes and related confidentiality concerns precluded comparing AWAI scores across all countries or colleges represented in the sample; instead the largest groups were compared. The comparisons indicated that there were no significant differences on AWAI scores as reported by students of Asian, Central and South American, and European descent. Likewise, there were no significant differences in AWAI dimensions when comparing students from the three most represented colleges in the sample (ALS, ENG, and CLAS).
INSIGHT 5:
LOWER LEVELS OF RAPPORT, APPRENTICESHIP, AND IDENTIFICATION ARE LINKED TO A DESIRE TO CHANGE ADVISORS.

Approximately two-thirds of the sample (65%) agreed or strongly agreed that they currently had the advisor they wanted; nearly one in three students disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement (18% of the sample) or felt neutral (18%). Women in CLAS tended to rate this item more favorably than men in CLAS, but the opposite pattern appeared in ALS and ENG. Perhaps not surprisingly, students who anticipated changing advisors within the next 6-12 months and those who reported that they would change advisors if they could, rated their advisors substantially lower on each of the Advisory Working Alliance factors. Because the effect sizes were nearly identical in the “anticipated” and “would change if could” analyses, only the results comparing student who would change with those who would not are displayed below. The results indicate that students who want to change their advisors experience poor interpersonal relationships with their current advisors, did not report that their current advisors were adequately mentoring them professionally, and did not aspire to be like their current advisors.

If You Could, Would You Change Your Advisor?

![Bar chart showing mean & 95% CI for YES and NO responses to the question of whether students would change advisors.](chart)

AWAI Subscale

INSIGHT 6:
ALS WOMEN AND CLAS MEN HAVE LOWER LEVELS OF RAPPORT AND APPRENTICESHIP.

It is also interesting to note that, although there were no overall differences between colleges, as with the satisfaction ratings, there were significant interactions involving gender for all three of the AWAI dimensions. Similar effects emerged for Rapport and Apprenticeship scores. For both dimensions, there were no substantial differences between men and women in ENG. However, men in ALS reported substantially higher Rapport and Apprenticeship with their advisors compared with women in that college. In contrast, women in CLAS reported substantially higher Rapport and Apprenticeship with advisors compared to CLAS men. In fact, men in CLAS reported the lowest average Rapport and Apprenticeship scores of all groups in that analysis. These findings suggest that ALS women and CLAS men are relatively more dissatisfied with the quality of their interpersonal relationship with their advisors, and they do not see their advisors as contributing usefully to their professional development through appropriate apprenticeship activities.
In the analysis of Identification-Individuation, there were no substantial differences between men and women in ALS. Women in ENG tended to report higher Identification scores compared with men in Engineering. In CLAS, the gender gap was even more pronounced with the difference approaching half a standard deviation. These findings suggest that women in
Engineering and CLAS were more likely than men in those colleges to prefer to be like their advisors and to see things similarly to their advisors.

Summary and Conclusion

In general, most international students sampled in this survey reported positive relationships with their advisors, both in terms of specific satisfaction items and broader dimensions of rapport and professional mentoring. Against this backdrop of generally favorable impressions of advisors, however, there were also findings that suggested considerable variation in terms of satisfaction and support. Although the majority were positive in their appraisal of advising, from one-fifth to one-third of the students were dissatisfied. Indeed, one in four of the students surveyed would change advisors if that was possible. Across the board, those students expressed dissatisfaction with the interpersonal quality of their current advising relationship and the amount of professional development mentoring they were receiving. There was also variability in advising impressions that appeared to be a function of college and student gender. Men in Agriculture and Life Sciences and women in Liberal Arts and Sciences provided the most positive and favorable ratings of their advising experiences; ALS women and CLAS men were the most negative in their appraisals. Findings could not be explained by length of time at UF or in the U.S., nor were there differences resulting as a function of degree program (master’s or doctoral), prior U.S. graduate school experience, funding situation, or academic performance.

By definition, the advising relationship consists of two main players, and only one side of that relationship was surveyed in this study. Future work will need to examine the perspective of advisors in advisory relationships and juxtapose those impressions against these findings for a clearer picture to emerge of the advising situation for international students at UF. Likewise, closer examination of within-college variations seems warranted, as does some comparison research between international and domestic advising experiences at UF and elsewhere. Perhaps future work can also identify model faculty, programs, or departments that are implementing innovative advising activities, with a potential future goal of distilling the research findings and innovative activities into a set of best practices recommendations for the university.