

The Advising Coordinator: Managing from a One-Down Position

HAROLD C. KRAMER

The position of advising coordinator poses an administrative challenge. By virtue of its function and location in the organization, the role is unique. According to Eble,¹ the prime responsibility of an administrator is to ennoble and invigorate the idea of service and to handle the minute and multitudinous details through which others may serve and be served. The advising coordinator experiences the best and the worst of such a challenge. The coordinator is to manage the provision of a service but not be a manager of advisors. How does one manage from a low-profile position? What does it mean to manage from a "one-down" position?

But first, who are coordinators? What do they do? A recent survey² provides some information about persons in this role. The advising **director/coordinator** in four-year institutions typically has been in the position from one to three years, has ten or more years of experience in postsecondary education with about one to three years of experience in academic advising. About thirty-eight percent hold the doctorate, over one-half are employed in a staff position holding neither rank nor tenure, and about fifty percent devote three-quarters or more of their time to their coordinating role. Finally, advising coordinators, on the average, supervise one to two clerical staff and five to seven professional staff, with their own supervision generally provided by the Vice President or Dean of Academic Affairs.

In terms of allocation of coordinator work time, the majority of time, about thirty-five percent, is spent in meeting with students. Approximately fifteen percent coordinators devote to meetings with advisors and administrators, with the time remaining divided among functions of organizing, developing materials, evaluating, providing information, and other miscellaneous activities. The advising coordinator role is both important and difficult to perform.

The role is important because of increasing emphasis on advising in many schools and colleges. A recent study³ found inadequate academic advising a major campus characteristic influencing student retention at the reporting institutions. Furthermore, the most frequently mentioned specific action-program undertaken was to improve academic advising. Thus, the office of the advising coordinator has peak

HAROLD C. KRAMER, *Cornell University.*

¹K.E. Eble, *The Art of Administration* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978), p. 3.

²D.J. Carstensen and C. Silberhorn, *A National Survey of Academic Advising. Final Report*, (Iowa City, Iowa: The American College Testing Program, 1979).

³Carstensen, *A National Survey.*

visibility as the focus of a program judged most in need of improvement and, simultaneously, as a program the institution has chosen to help achieve that end. The message for the advising coordinator in some institutions may be, "produce or else!" Reasonably we may conclude that many advising coordinators have scant basis to doubt the importance of their role in the overall scheme of the institution.

The advising coordinator role is difficult because of its unique task: managing or coordinating faculty serving as academic advisors. What a professor does is not a job; what a professor does is to lead a distinctive way of life within a particular community of professional people — a college or university faculty: College professors are jealous of their independence, proud of their specialized competences, not easily led, and suspicious of being told what or how they serve.' Even if we disregard the idiosyncratic personal needs of some faculty, the task of coordinating work in academe remains complex.

The advising coordinator faces a significant challenge. On the one hand, some persons view advising as an institutional sector critically needing improvement. On the other, the coordinator, most often in a non-faculty staff position, must find a means of working collaboratively with a group of independent-minded academicians. Attempts by the advising coordinator to stimulate faculty interest and performance in the area of advising students may be met by faculty reaction ranging from studied indifference to active resistance.

This reaction by faculty stems in part from a lack of consensus among academicians on the philosophical issue of the fundamental necessity of faculty advising. Some faculty question whether college students need advising services at all, while others believe that advising services should be provided, with varying opinions regarding scope.' One basis for faculty reluctance about advising may spring from a common view within the profession of a norm or model that emphasizes the importance of research. Whether or not they themselves do research or want to engage in original scholarship, most faculty seem to believe that the most meritorious behavior of an academic man or woman is performance of significant research.' If this particular norm is held strongly and institutionalized in various ways by faculty, then it will pose an ever-present obstacle to faculty wishing to emphasize teaching and service endeavors over research. The advising coordinator, whose position is designed to emphasize service activities by faculty, in this case advising students, may thus become a handy target for those wishing to substantiate the norm of research as the highest calling for faculty members.

Another explanation for the diversity among faculty attitudes toward advising reside in differences existing between disciplines comprising an "academic profes-

*R.T. Blackburn, "The Meaning of Work in Academia," in *New Directions for Institutional Research: Assessing Faculty Effort*, edited by J.I. Doi. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974), p. 77.

*Blackburn, R.T.

*J.H. Bogard, P.H. Hornbuckle, and J. Mahoney, "Faculty Perceptions of Academic Advising," *Journal of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators*, 14 (1977), 9.

*E.C. Ladd, "The Work Experience of American College Professors: some Data and an Argument," *Current Issues in Higher Education: Faculty Career Development*, (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1979), p.p. 3-12.

sion." One researcher' reported wide variation in the social connectedness (level of involvement with colleagues); preference for and time spent on teaching, research, and service activities; and the scholarly activities of faculty members in different types of academic departments.

In like manner, the chairpersons of different types of academic departments differ in the amount of time they devote to various administrative roles.' Time spent on duties involving teaching and advising varied according to the departmental base of the chairperson. These differences existed even after differences in research emphasis among departmental groups were taken into account. Clearly, the advising coordinator must recognize the distinctive demands that different types of academic departments place upon their faculty and chairpersons. In part, discipline-generated priorities guide the faculty in their professional work. The successful coordinator will understand and use this information to enhance the advising system.

A related reason why faculty are understandably cool about the notion of advising service is they perceive that advising is neither important for professional advancement nor support the satisfaction of many basic needs. We may expect that persons generally will do what is in their best interests. If advising improvement is in the best interest of faculty constituting the organization, then efforts to convey this reality are called for. It may be necessary to raise levels of awareness of competence, and awareness of connections, between sources of satisfaction in advising and other professional duties, and those particular and universal needs inherent in all faculty." Or, changes in the organization's reward and incentive structure of the organization may be required so that the institution's operational goals become, in part, the faculty's professional and personal goals. Specific faculty considerations of how proficiency in advising leads to acquisition of important and valued incentives and rewards may help minimize skepticism among faculty that involvement with advising deters rather than expedites personal or professional attainment.

The Management Task

The advising coordinator is a member of middle management. Typically, occupants of such organizational roles are assigned much responsibility with little authority. Their tasks often are ill-defined, their relationships to staff and executives ambiguous, their rewards few, and many constraints placed on performance of their tasks.¹¹

As his primary task, a middle manager implements organizational policy by developing and maintaining operating activities. In the advising coordinator's case, the task is to plan, organize, staff, direct, and evaluate academic advising." The

'A. Biglan, "Relationship Between Subject Matter Characteristics and the Structure and Output of University Departments," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 57 (1973), 204-213.

'D. Sims, "A Framework for Understanding the Definition and Formulation of Problems in Teams," *Human Relations*, 32 No. 11 (1979), 909-921.

'J.L. Bess, "The Motivation to Teach," *Journal of Higher Education*, 68 (May-June 1977).

'D.M. Dressler, "Becoming an Administrator: The Vicissitudes of Middle Management in Mental Health Organization," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 135 (March 1978), 357-360.

'H.C. Kramer, and R.E. Gardns, *Managing Faculty Advising* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1978).

coordinator stands in the middle, linking the college or university's executive staff and advisors providing services to students.

In this role, the coordinator must interact successfully across many task-system boundaries in the institution. This activity of boundary spanning⁵³ permits the coordinator to gather and disseminate information about advising to the institution's myriad of organizational units. In addition, the coordinator is constantly involved in representing the advising system to all those with whom the coordinator interacts. Two dimensions of perceived leadership behavior exist: initiative and consideration of **others**.¹⁴ The first dimension concerns the extent to which one in a leadership position defines and structures the leadership role and the role of others toward goal attainment. That is, the leader actively intervenes to clarify the leadership role and to direct the work of others. The second dimension is consideration of others. Essential to effective performance in this management role is the degree to which the coordinator establishes and maintains good working relationships with advisors as well as with the executive to whom the coordinator reports. A key concept with regard to this multiplex boundary-spanning role is **negotiation**.¹⁵ The coordinator engages in a complex process of negotiation with advisors and academic administrators with differing constituencies, formal and informal affiliations, control over resources, and bargaining leverage. To deal with these intra-system differences, the coordinator needs to develop an accumulation of personal sensitivity and potency.

Power does not come automatically with the designation of leader, nor with the delegation of formal authority; people often have to obtain it not from the official structure but from the more hidden political processes." The management activities of developing, maintaining, and regulating the aggregate of services termed the advising system call for considerable skill and sensitivity. Even in the seemingly innocuous activity of discussing aspects of advising problems with faculty colleagues of the advising team, the point comes home. Team members will judge separately about problem recognition, problem definition, problem formulation, and the context of the problem. Since each of these judgments may be right in the context of the reality within which they occur, the process by which any judgment gains acceptance within a team is one not of evaluation against some objective standard, but of persuasion, maneuvering, setting up side deals, and other such political **activities**.¹⁷

Enmeshed in this **personal** and corporate maelstrom, the advising coordinator **must** guard against bureaucratization of the advising system. According to Crozier, bureaucracies are built because people are "trying to evade face-to-face relationships and situations of personal dependency whose authoritarian tone they cannot bear."¹⁸ As an effective leader, the coordinator must provide a role model with

¹⁴H.C. Kramer, *Boundary Spanning: Implications for Student Personnel, College Student Personnel*, in press.

¹⁵A.W. Halpin, *Theory and Research in Administration*, New York: MacMillan 1966).

¹⁶D.J. Levinson, and G.L. Klerman, "The Clinical-Executive Revisited," *Administration in Mental Health*. (Winter 1972), 64-67.

¹⁷R.M. Kanter. *Men and Women of the Corporation* New York: Basic Books, 1977).

¹⁸Sims, p. 917.

¹⁹K. Horney, *The Neurotic Personality*, (New York: Norton, 1973).

which persons can identify positively, using this relationship to motivate advising system personnel to accomplish the organizational task of advising. The coordinator's actions should serve as a model for the advisor, a model that, at least in part, the advisor could replicate with advisees." As we might expect, this form of service by the coordinator is not devoid of hazard. We resist the systematic efforts of "others" to shape our personalities by presuming to teach us how to perform such personal tasks as teaching or administering among our **peers**.²⁰

Organizational Aspects of the Role

Administration is a complex set of tasks requiring both acquisition of technical skills and interpersonal competence. Development and integration of competences required of the job of clinician-executive²¹ pose a significant challenge for the coordinator. In this work, the coordinator must use skills of a clinical-educator to accomplish the goals of a functioning system in a larger organization. Neither **clinical** nor administrative skills, by themselves, are sufficient for the effective performance of the task of system leader.

The coordinator must conceive of the entire organization as a functioning system: its structure and culture; differentiation and integration of occupational roles; stratification and patterning of authority; the communication system and obstacles to open communication; and bases for organizational stability and **change**.²²

Understanding the institution and its people, awareness of relationships between advising program and personnel and other significant segments of the organization, and appreciation of the institution's historical, present, and future goals are crucial building blocks for the coordinator.

As executive of the advising system, the coordinator must develop the capacity to think about the advising program as a system. Thus, the object of observation and reflection is not simply the individual advisee or advisor, but subgroups of advisors at the level of academic departments or divisions, schools and colleges, and the institution as a whole. As an executive, the coordinator must base decisions upon consideration of both the healthy and the more psychopathological qualities of all members of the social system — advisees as well as advisors. The question becomes then, not only what is beneficial or detrimental to individual players in the advising scenario, but what benefits or liabilities accrue to all members of the advising team as well as to the institution.

Another issue for the coordinator concerns relationships between the advising program and other helping professions at the institution. Because resources in most institutions are limited, interaction between helpers frequently takes on aspects of a zero-sum encounter, where one person's gain is another's loss. The **coordinator** must compromise reasonably between the advising system and the institution's other **help-**

²⁰Homey.

²¹Kramer, p. 2.

²²D.J. Levinson, and G.L. Klerman, "The Clinical-Executive," *Administration in Mental Health*, (Winter 1972), 53-64.

²³Levinson, p. 56.

ing systems. Not only must such accords be reached to decrease the incidence of interdepartmental squabbling, but also the collection of help-providing agencies should be perceived as a network of services provided by the institution — services maintained by the institution, each to assist the other in performing valued functions and to support the super-ordinate goals they share as important components of the institution.

Since every task system must relate in some way to other agencies and institutions, another organizational requirement for the coordinator is representing the advising system to other persons, agencies, and groups in the institution. The coordinator must arrange for contributions the advising system needs to function and develop. In addition, the coordinator must also be concerned with the quality and quantity of the advising system's effects to the local academic community. The success with which the coordinator carries out both functions will determine the level of power or influence enjoyed by the coordinator.

The effectiveness that power brings evolves from two kinds of capacities: first, access to the resources, information, and support necessary to carry out a task; and second, ability to obtain cooperation in doing what is necessary. Both capacities derive not so much from a leader's style and skill as from one's location in the formal and informal systems of the organization — in both job definition and connection to other important people in the **organization**.²³

The coordinator's attempts to develop and maintain clear-channel lines of supply, that is, to gain the resources necessary for the advising system, information about organizational activities, and support from key influential persons in the organization, remains critical to a long-term and smoothly functioning tenure in the coordinator role.

Organizational disputes frequently involve issues of status, freedom, and **power**.²⁴ The process of inducing qualified professional academicians to join the advising system and **to contribute effectively and efficiently** to its purposes can be a major **issue**. A carrot-and-stick approach to motivation does not work well for professionals who have reached personally-rewarding levels of achievement. Generally, **professionals are motivated by the higher-level** needs of autonomy, achievement, confidence, status, recognition, and **self-fulfillment**.²⁵ The coordinator can use this information to advantage in planning the advisor training program.

If the coordinator is to foster change in the advising system, a high value must be placed on growth — of organizations as well as persons. The coordinator must possess the flexibility and tolerance needed to manage change, take the initiative in developing personal competence, and encourage and support the initiative of others.²⁶ In planning training and development programs for advisors, the coordinator

²³Levinson, p. 60.

²⁴R.M. Kanter, "Power Failures in Management Circuits," *Harvard Business Review*, 57 (July-August 1979), 65-75.

²⁵T. Dolgoff, "The Organization, the Administrator, and the Mental Health Professional," *Administration in Mental Health*, (Spring 1975), 47-55.

²⁶A. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954).

²⁷Levinson, p. 61.

dinator must keep in mind the capabilities and vulnerabilities of advising personnel. At the same time, the coordinator must remain sensitive to the needs of the advising system and the institution. Charged with managing the overall needs and effectiveness of the advising system, the coordinator must act authoritatively, even coercively, if the training needs of the service providers demand such action.

Reactions to the Coordinator

The combination of a person without faculty status — using an ambiguously perceived position that has little or no formal authority with faculty — to coordinate, direct, and supervise the work of faculty may generate frustration and stress. Various aspects of work in administration or management induce powerful regressive pressures on the administrator's psychological functioning.²⁷ Loss of spontaneous and unconstrained feedback from peers, the uncertainty inherent in significant decision-making, plus the nagging fear of failure or defeat, tend to exert a regressive pull on the person.

In light of the need to chart a course amidst persons and programs in the institution with differing and dissenting views about advising, the coordinator faces the temptation to resolve such tensions by a sudden exertion of whatever degree of authority the role contains — in short, to tell people what to do. Others only **too** readily tempt leaders to such impulsive action. A challenge for the advising coordinator is to remember that such temptations, as well as one's personal interest **in** succumbing to them, are part of the role aspects of that particular position. As a highly visible administrator, the coordinator should not be surprised by attempts of others in the institution to challenge the competence of the coordinator or the organizational authority such a position conveys. On the contrary, absence of any testing of the coordinator may signify that neither the person nor the role are perceived as important enough to bother with.

The leader of any group or organization constantly faces the expression of aggression of various sources from those under him.²⁸ This potential for conflict exists between some faculty advisors and the advising coordinator because of the lack of congruence that may exist between the professional norms of the individual advisor and the organizational expectations for advising exemplified through the role of coordinator. The coordinator will have a modicum of influence to exert and a role that requires decisions to be made. Decisions, when meaningful, always cause somebody **pain**.²⁹ Naturally those painfully affected blame the source, and the person filling those shoes must be able to tolerate this repercussion.

The advising coordinator also must expect attempts by others to dominate the coordinator's role. This neurotic act to dominate often occurs when persons feel anxious or helpless, inferior or **insignificant**.³⁰ As a protection and a defense, the

²⁷O.F. Kernberg, "Leadership and Organizational Functioning: Organizational Regression," *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 28 (1978), 3-25.

²⁸Kernberg, p. 16.

²⁹Kernberg, p. 17.

³⁰Horney, pp. 163-170.

psychologically powerless turn to control over others. If the coordinator's actions are viewed by some as another means of blocking or thwarting their own exercise of influence, or if people perceive the advising program as somehow rendering them less powerful in the larger institutional arena, then reaction is predictable. Persons thus threatened may concentrate their power needs on those over whom they exert even a miniscule amount of authority. In the case of faculty advisors, the non-faculty advising coordinator becomes a handy, tempting, and relevant target for such attempts. The advising coordinator, like many others in leadership roles, must consider a multitude of issues.

Some Personal Issues

The paradoxical nature of serving and leading may explain faculty's acceptance of administrative authority as long as it clearly appears to serve prime faculty interest. The advising coordinator faces important choices about how to serve faculty advisors. Research³³ suggests that employees tended to be more satisfied with feedback when they felt the person providing feedback was familiar with the job or unit in question. Also, feedback may be accepted more readily when the provider is trusted and acts as a helper rather than a judge.³⁴ This perception suggests that efforts by the coordinator to become familiar with all elements of advising activities, as well as comfortably conversant with advisors themselves, carry major implications for the supervisory duties of the coordinator role.

In a related manner, the coordinator must identify and develop organizational roles secondary to that of advising coordination. From one perspective, we may view the coordinator as an internal consultant in the organization. In addition to administering the advising program, the coordinator may choose to develop the roles³⁵ of troubleshooter, environmental sensor, teacher, research analyst, implementor, or advisor-critic within the organization. Such investment by the coordinator to exercise leadership helps others to extend their own efforts. In academic organizations, individuals do not so much work for the leader as for what the leader represents on their behalf.³⁶ If the coordinator can identify and describe clearly the advising program's goals, to persuasively articulate the bond between the advising program goals and the institution's mission, then common purposes can unite the efforts of a diverse group of talented individuals. The facility to orchestrate the talents of others, and to be perceived by them as providing a valuable personal — as well as a needed institutional — service is in short supply at many institutions.

The advisory coordinator, moreover, must devise personal strategies to carry out a hierarchy of planning. At one level the coordinator engages in normative planning,

that is, what ought to be achieved. In the case of advising, the coordinator must consider desirable goals for advising in light of institutional priorities. This process outlines the ideal goals of the advising program.

At another level, the coordinator must engage in strategic planning: that is, what the advising program can accomplish. Given the specific situation and the human and other resources available, what are reasonable sub-goals or objectives for the program? Managing may be likened to a certain parlor game: under certain conditions one raises, calls, or passes as the situation dictates. To know which program objective to stress and which conveniently to ignore may be one version of a desirable art in the coordinator.

No goal can be attained unless the appropriate sequence of operations is chosen and implemented. To choose and implement, the coordinator must engage in operational planning, the activity of choosing specific action designed to achieve specific objectives. In effect, the coordinator must conceive, articulate, develop, monitor, and evaluate the ideas that lead to the advising program becoming a valued, vital force in the institution.

Finally, the coordinator needs to find a way of balancing personal needs with those of the institution and persons with whom the coordinator works. Expectations from the top to run the program with expectations of the coordinator held by professional academicians. In a real sense, the coordinator is in the middle. In some ways the coordinator works in the center of a psychopolitical arena³⁷ and in many respects must often function more as a politician than as a professional manager or academician. The coordinator's work requires ingenuity and persistence, but productive service also requires dealing with both success and failure. For if one thing is certain, the advising coordinator may expect the tingle and throb of each to visit the one in that role. The environment, particularly the frustrations and deprivations associated with bureaucracy and lack of power, activates the defenses against anger and rage that in turn lead to symptom formation.³⁸ The advising coordinator has many opportunities to both face and respond to challenges. For the coordinator, like many others, survival in bureaucracies falls to those individuals who know how to negotiate a double-bind situation, while advancement in bureaucracies falls to those individuals who can create opportunity out of paradox.³⁹

Success is a dilemma not only when a person is able and ambitious, but also when he or she relishes the challenge or game of succeeding. Nice guys, like bad guys, lose — but there are losing ways of winning and winning ways of losing. To be able to look squarely, realistically, and with curiosity at both triumph and disaster, to understand and not to blame, can liberate. Every success carries the stressful element of defeat; every defeat some seed of a different success.⁴¹ To plan, to lead, and to organize — these are the challenges of the advising coordinator, a manager managing from a one-down position.

³³M. Greenblatt, "Psychopolitics," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 131 (1974), 1197-1203.

³⁴A. Zelenznik, M.F.R. Kets de Vries, and J. Howard, "Stress Reactions in Organizations: Syndromes, Causes, and Consequences," *Behavioral Science*, 22 (1977), 151-162.

³⁵Eble, p. 161.

³⁶D.W. Allen, "Hidden Stresses in Success," *Psychiatry*, 42 (1979), 171-176.

³⁷Eble, p. 113.

³⁸S.M. Klein, A.I. Kraut, and A. Wolfson, "Employee Reactions to Attitude Survey Feedback: A Study of the Impact of Structure and Process," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 16 (1971), 497-514.

³⁹E.F. Huse, "Performance Appraisal - A New Look," *Personnel Administration*, (March 1967), 1-19.

⁴⁰R.E. Kelley, "Should you have a Consultant?" *Harvard Business Review*, 57 (November-December 1979), 110-120.

⁴¹Eble, p. 88.

⁴²Ross M. MacDonald, "Behavioral Objectives: A Critical Review," *Instructional Science*, 2 (1973), 1-52.