Advising Systems and Institutional Coordination

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The future faced by many academic institutions is becoming increasingly complex. Huber pointed out several ways in which postindustrial society will be different from present or past environments. According to him, postindustrial society will be characterized by more and increasing knowledge, more and increasing complexity and more and increasing turbulence. These, in combination, will pose an organizational environment qualitatively more demanding than those in our past or current experience.' One issue embedded in this expanding set of environmental characteristics is how well the organization will cope with increasing uncertainty.

In other words, when uncertainty is high the successful organization is the one that is able to acquire additional knowledge to increase the likelihood that the primary task, or the organization's mission, is carried out. Some organizations turn their attention to improving coordination as one means of weathering the effects of an uncertain environment."

Can academic institutions improve their capacity for coping with the future by improving their effectiveness of coordination? A well coordinated organization is characterized by a high degree of coherence in its functioning. That is, the various work activities are orchestrated in such a manner that they supplement and complement one another and are fashioned to achieve the common objective, which is the mission of the organization. In a study of 111 research units, of which eighty-two percent were in academic institutions, Cheng found significant positive correlations between coordination and output quality and quantity. He also found, however, that coordination related differently to output quality and


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quantity over the range of uncertainty facing the unit. The higher the level of uncertainty, the more positive the relationship between coordination and output quality, but the weaker the relationship between coordination and output quantity. The results demonstrated a contingency relationship between coordination and output performance, depending on the level of uncertainty. Consequently, academic institutions experiencing increases in the level of environmental uncertainty may choose to focus on improving coordination as a means of improving output quality.

If one concludes that improved coordination can influence organizational output performance, what must be done? Where should the institution look to improve coordination? There is compelling evidence that the appropriateness of coordination depends on the uncertainty characterizing an organization's inputs. Within academe the uncertainty regarding inputs also leads to uncertainty about how the demand for the products of the institution will change and how such change will impact the institution. Decisions regarding where to focus efforts to increase coordination are, in any complex organization, difficult to make. Given that overall environmental manipulation is uncertain, colleges and universities should concentrate on those elements in the environment that are relevant for the organization, and easily influenced. Observers within any one college or university may differ about the actual relevance of academic advising programs to the overall mission of the institution. However, this lack of perceived relevance among the institution's constituents may actually provide a setting where the advising program may be more amenable to influence and change than other, more intractable, functions within the institution. This article describes how academic advising programs and systems, may be used to increase levels of coordination within an institution.

The Advising System and Coordination

Present conditions in higher education have started a scramble by these institutions to find a strategic means of maintaining a competitive advantage over its competitors.

The advising program is frequently mentioned by these same institutions as an important mechanism within the institution designed to facilitate and further the education process. In some instances where the bulk of academic advising is provided by faculty members the opportunities to expand institutional coordination are likely to be many.

What are the components of advising programs that contribute to improving institutional coordination?

First, the advising program is viewed by some members of the organization as a program that is relevant to the institution, and the institutional support, however weak, will strengthen the program. It would be an uncommon situation if the faculty and staff supported the advising program, but their respective Dean, Provost, or President publicly would not. Thus, institutional coordination of the advising program can be assured some support.


L. Argote, "Input Certainty and Organizational Coordination in Hospital Emergency Units," ADMINISTRATIVE SCIENCE QUARTERLY, 27, (1982), pp. 420-434.


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Second, advising programs have established a working relationship with the faculty from most of the institution's academic departments. When faculty are advising students in a major, they may be considered advisors belonging to a network of colleagues engaged in similar pursuits. This commonality of activities, though pursued in many individualistic ways, is present and may provide a vehicle for improving coordinating efforts. Galbraith argues that one alternative for improving coordination is to increase the capacity to process information, for example, to create lateral relationships (that is, informal links across different functional areas). Hall and Bazerman concur, suggesting that as slack resources diminish and need for information processing increases, new forms of lateral relations will have to be developed.

Third, advising may readily be interpreted by campus observers as a necessary, but not a sufficient, component of the undergraduate education process. Advising, usually thought to be an educational service for students, may also serve as a means of coping with other problems facing the institution, and may continue to be viewed by administrators and faculty as a legitimate, important role for faculty to perform. Where advising is conceived as a means of dealing with pressing institutional problems, such as, how to improve institutional coordination, faculty involvement with advising may result in increased morale if their involvement is viewed as a direct contribution to the general welfare of the institution. Anderson concluded that a major factor contributing to positive morale and satisfaction among faculty is involvement in planning and governance within the institution.

Finally, advising is one function that can be described and illustrated in a manner readily understood by people in the community. This is not true for the more esoteric components of the educational process or for some descriptions of academic disciplines that make up the curriculum. Consequently, the institution may use descriptions of the advising programs to provide a concrete example for those in the community who are interested in the students the level of available expert assistance: and the quality of the out-of-classroom activities found on campus. Most people have had some personal experience related to the advising process, and they have a degree of competence to understand and evaluate the advising program and the institution.

How Advising Aids Coordination

If advising by faculty is to attain the promises usually listed in institutional publications, several developments are required:

— The institutions should define the parameter of the advising task and the roles that faculty advisors are to assume. It must be understood that faculty will be active partners in this "role" and "function" defining activity. Although this step may be viewed as a basic application of common sense, there are still some institutions where the step has not been taken successfully.

— Advisors need some basic understanding of the characteristics of the institution's programs and departments and of the students who comprise the undergraduate population. As

the environmental press on institutions, and the characteristics of students attending college, continue to change, the need for informed and knowledgeable advisors will increase. Cameron points out that postindustrial environments will require that institutions increase their sensing and receptor capabilities because of the tremendous amount of knowledge that will be available. Therefore, advisors should keep up with organizational changes and trends.

— Advising is concerned with helping the student to become adjusted to the institution and its academic resources. The advising function is thus a vital component of the educational mission of the institution and must maintain an open and effective link to the curricular planning and teaching functions. In terms of Galbraith's framework for improving institutional coordination, the link between advising and teaching may serve as an example of a vertical information system wherein data gathered in one functional arena, for example advising, may be transmitted and used by those concerned with teaching or curricular revision. It goes without saying, that information flow may just as readily move in the other direction, again to the benefit of the institution.

Given the premise that advising is viewed by faculty as being of less importance than teaching or research, involvement in advising functions may also present less of an ego threat to the faculty. Consequently the duties of advising may be perceived as not overly challenging or risky, leading, in turn, to a view of advising as a complex but moderate challenge that is within parameters of competence of the faculty member. Hence, change or improvement in the advising program would likely not be an arena of resistance.

— Finally, the role of advisor provides the faculty member with opportunities to analyze or integrate humanitarian perspectives and professional expertise in helping relationships in what Tyler and others call the resource collaborator role. Within this advising framework, the student and the advisor are central active agents and experts in organizing, conducting, and evaluating their own lives. Both parties have coequal status in defining the terms of their own reality, and each has a unique perspective to offer the other. Although the advisor is, in fact, the teacher, both advisor and advisee are students of the process of educational development. In short, within the framework of this perspective, both the advisor and the advisee have resources and limits that must be understood and respected. Institutions with well-designed advisor training programs are essential to strengthen the links between advising and the improvement of coordination.

Advising and Coordination

Members of the advising system function as boundary spanners within the institution. Boundary spanning individuals are those who are internal communication leaders (they are frequently consulted on work related matters that have substantial communication with areas outside their unit). The advisors are linked to the academic department and, through

9 Galbraith.
their membership in the advising function, to other units in the institution establishing a network of lateral relations within the institution. Furthermore, advisors may also have substantial contact with constituencies that are related, but external, to the institution; with parents; prospective students; guidance counselors; alumni; and, other friends of the institution. These boundary-spanning connections develop good public relations for the institution.

According to Huber, successful postindustrial organizations are expected to take aggressive measures in educating boundary-spanning personnel about current and anticipated goals, domains, structures and processes. The purpose of these efforts will be not only to enhance employee motivation and esprit-de-corps, but also to enhance understanding and judgment about how to recognize and what to do with nonroutine information." Advisor training efforts, therefore, must be expanded if the advising system is to contribute to coordination within the institution.

Members of the advising system facilitate the coordination process by gathering and disseminating information within the institution. Huber suggests that in postindustrial organizations we will observe teams of peers whose overall function is to acquire and distribute information about the environment and to engage in management decision making. Given the need for fast initiation and production of innovative products or services Huber also believes the initiation and production of innovations for external consumption will be by specialized units and that the transfer of the intended innovation from one unit to another will be a formal process." Within the academic arena advising personnel may find themselves functioning as a creative planning group, using their access to sources of information as one means of fashioning realistic and timely choices for their institution.

By extension, the application of Huber's paradigm suggests that advisors would engage in two types of information acquisition. One is scanning of the organization's environment for information about the existence of problems or opportunities, or for information to be used in the future. For instance, information from parents, alumni, or students about perceptions of the institution held by high school students may serve as an example of the scanning function. The other type of information acquisition is the probing of the organization's environment for information not routinely collected, often in response to a specific problem or opportunity. An example of probing may be an attempt to determine the levels of stress or anxiety experienced by students or the availability for students of computer terminal access to complete assignments. Huber goes on to suggest that in postindustrial organizations the recognized importance of internal and external scanning will cause higher-level administrators to impose policies that will protect scanning units from the demands of line managers and others desiring probes."

This is not to suggest that all advisors necessarily have to function as organizational scanners. One option is to have a smaller group of advisors, representative perhaps of the eight categories of academic disciplines described by Biglan, function in a scanning capacity. Biglan classified academic departments using three divisions which he called hard/soft, pure/applied, and life/nonlife.

The implication of Biglan's work for organizational scanning is that a group of advisors representing the eight Biglan categories might provide the institution with both information

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13 Huber, p. 944.
and recommendations that are less subject to bias and more grounded in the reality of the institution than is commonly found in the reports of institutional committees or task groups."

The use of advisors as workers in the cause of institutional coordination follows a basic criterion of sociotechnical design. According to Chems information gathering systems should be designed to provide information in the first place to the point where action on the basis of it will be needed. In the case of professional advisors who gather information about students, the institution, and its environment should share it with the faculty. In addition, faculty have a responsibility, in collaboration with their administrators, to analyze, interpret and use such information to reach realistic policy and programmatic decisions on behalf of the institution. Properly directed, faculty information and coordination systems may provide various academic work teams within the organization the right type and amount of feedback to enable them to learn to control the variances which occur within the scope of their spheres of responsibility. In addition, such coordination systems may enable organization leaders to anticipate events facing the institution which are likely to have a bearing on organization performance and productivity."

Benefits for the Advisor

It is Waterman's position that no individual has the time or the talent to develop all of the knowledge, skills and personal qualities that could be enjoyed or found useful in the pursuit of personal goals.\(^{14}\) Waterman thinks faculty participation in the advising program, especially where institutional agendas of coordination are explicit and important components, results in both personal and corporate benefits. One may expect that a person acting alone in the pursuit of a goal may be motivated to join together with others having compatible desires, so that by working toward their common interests all may increase the probability of achieving the quality of life that each desires.\(^{15}\)

Research suggests that lack of power and opportunities for participation in decision making have had negative effects on faculty members. In contrast, Austin believes consultive decision making supports people's needs for personal achievement, autonomy, and psychological growth.\(^{16}\) Advisors functioning in a liaison role between their department and other work systems in the institution create special benefits for themselves. Schwartz and Jacobson report that liaisons or communications linkers, are more influential within the power structure, and are rated as more persuasive with their direct contacts than nonliaisons. Also, liaisons are more frequently found to be opinion leaders in the organization. It is possible to expect that the liaison person may be valued by a group not only for what he or she knows but also for whom the liaison person knows outside the primary work group. Advisors from academic departments, especially where advising involves them in coordinating


functions within the institution, may play a crucial role for the department by influencing the formation and change of organizational and job attitudes of interest to the department.

Another related benefit outside the scope of the advisor's academic department is the potential for increasing one's own political influence within the institution. According to Pettigrew the base of one's power rests on the possession, control and tactical use of five resources. These are expertise, control of information, political access and sensitivity, assessed stature by relevant others, and the amount and kind of group support given by one's own departmental colleagues. Advising, as a boundary-spanning activity, facilitates the development of these power resources. As a result, boundary spanning individuals with their internal and external expertise may be influential in both technical as well as administrative decision making. Thus advising, through the provision of a means for the development of an individual's skill or competence, indirectly provides a vehicle for development of the organization.

Tushman and Scarlan state that from an organizational point of view, the existence of job, task, or role overlap increases the number of linkages to external information areas because boundary spanning individuals, in this case advisors, frequently serve a linking function for several areas in the organization. On the other hand, this substantial degree of role overlap increases the boundary spanning individual's relative importance to the institution and enhances his or her control over the acquisition and interpretation of external information."

Regardless of the benefits that accrue to the advisor-participant, one must not forget that there are substantial differences in abilities, maintenance patterns, and willingness to assume new responsibilities among faculty. It may be comforting, but it is misleading to assume that all faculty should be involved productively in advising activities. The challenge for the institution is to determine which individuals are interested in acquiring new skills and which faculty are more inclined toward the application of skills they already have. Assignments within advising therefore, just as in other functional areas of the organization, must be completed with some measure of sensitivity to benefits and costs that accrue to the individual and the organization.

Implications for the Advising Coordinator

American corporations need leaders who can establish a purpose for their organization that is similar to the purpose that people are striving for in their personal lives. It has become necessary that the Advising Coordinator encourages the faculty to continue growing professionally, to remain current in their fields, and to assume different roles and responsibilities as new initiatives are needed to preserve educational quality. The advising coordinator usually functions as an internal consultant and a strategic planner, but in relation to the faculty, the coordinator must function more as a politician than a professional manager or academician.

An initial question the coordinator might ask is, what should a person be asked to do in

21 Tushman and Scarlan, p. 95.
the role of advisor? More specifically, what form of personal change may be required of the advisor? Nicholson differentiates between personal development and role development. Personal development describes a person's adjustment to change by altering his or her frame of reference, values, or other identity-related attributes. Consequently an advisor may reinterpret the parameters of the advising activity as they relate to the concept of self. In other words, advising may be viewed as a critical educational process that requires the institution's most competent personnel to be involved. On the other hand, a person's adjustment strategy can be proactive with respect to the characteristics of one's work, for example, when the person tries to change role requirements so that they better match his or her needs, abilities, and identity. This strategy, role development, might be especially germane to those faculty advisors who recognize and desire to use advising roles as a means of contributing to institutional coordination. Persons who comprise the membership of the small, institutionally-representative group of environmental scanners discussed earlier may choose the role because it fits their perceived competencies. However asked, the question of the advisor role merits attention, early in the exploration stage and throughout the life of the advising project.

A second item for consideration concerns how well the organization is meeting the needs of its members. Because of rapid change, long-established traditions no longer adequately serve people in their organizational roles. The position of Levinson and Weinbaum is that organizations find it difficult to maintain a current interpretation of what they expect of their members, what they expect of themselves, what the members should expect of the organization, and presumably, what the individual members might expect of themselves. The message for the coordinator is that in many organizations the psychological contract between member and organization is therefore more likely to be confused, inaccurate, and misinterpreted.

According to Levinson the process of fulfilling mutual expectations and satisfying mutual needs in the relationship between persons and their work situation can be conceptualized as a process of reciprocation. This suggests that any analysis of particular programs or activities designed to benefit the institution should also include an explicit analysis of benefits and costs for the individuals involved. Zalenznick argues, on the one hand, the advising coordinator, as a student of organizations, should be clear that attention to form prior to attention to substance in one's dealings with advisors threatens a person's sense of what is reasonable in undertaking actions. On the other hand, making form secondary to substance has another virtue: it can secure agreements on priorities without the need of predetermining who will have to give way in the ultimate give-and-take of the negotiations that must precede decisions on organization structure.

Finally, Zalenznick believes the coordinator has a choice of three basic leadership strategies: homeostatic, mediative, and proactive.

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The homeostatic strategy addresses the need for preserving the organization — to insure its internal stability and continuity in the face of internal disruption. The mediative strategy aims at change in the organization, made under the impact of external pressures. The initiation of a program of using advisors to aid institutional coordination is a mediative strategy. On the one hand, the continuance of a mediative strategy places undue reliance on the use of external pressures as a source of motivation for change. On the other hand, a proactive strategy, rather than reacting to external pressure, induces change in the environment to use creatively the resources of the organization.

Proaction is the strategy of major innovation, but it also tends to induce resistance, aggression and in some cases, outright hostility within the organization: it forces disruption of internal relations in the interests of changing the environment. It is within this framework of proaction that the use of advising systems, that is the development and refinement of advising practices, as a means of improving or expanding institutional coordination has been presented.

Substantive organizational change requires more than wishful thinking and good intentions. No amount of talking about "change" will substitute for solid knowledge systematically organized, interpretations based on a comprehensive conceptual framework, and diagnostic hypotheses amenable to continuous testing and alterations. Inevitably, according to Levinson, if one is to have a community impact, the clinician must become an organizational diagnostician, and the organizational development specialist, a clinician. The main point is after all, not to prod the contemporary university to behave more like a business, but to nudge it to behave like an organism that must feed itself, change, and adapt to its environment. Keller said the wise academic executive will find a means of using existing organizational structure, for example, the advising program, to initiate efforts designed to resolve broader institutional agendas, such as the improvement of institutional coordination.


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