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“In a different light”

Librarians as undergraduate student advisors

I was accepted into the Nursing program, and I'm excited to declare my major!" "I'm considering dropping my biology class." "I'm working so many hours that I barely have time to study." "This time of the semester is always difficult for me because it's the anniversary of. . . ."

As librarians who serve as academic advisors to undergraduate students, these are the types of comments we hear from advisees. We often find ourselves discussing our experiences as advisors, from the joys and challenges of one-on-one interactions with advisees to the culture of advising at our institution. These conversations often lead us to wonder about commonalities and differences among our experiences and those of librarians who advise at other institutions.

Our interest in advising aligns with our broader interest in the notion of libraries as mentoring communities. Our prior research addresses mentoring between library student employees and their supervisors, alumni perspectives on mentoring, and mentoring undergraduate library interns.¹

In our most recent project, discussed here, we explore the role of librarians in academic advising, and how factors such as the status of librarians, institutional structure, and organizational culture impact that role. In order to gather information on this topic, we distributed a survey in November 2018 through library association lists. Of the 250 respondents who took the survey, we

asked those who reported they had served as an academic advisor in the past five years (63 people) specific questions about their advising experience. In this article, we will discuss the results of our exploratory survey in conjunction with our own experiences as advisors.

Advising context at Gustavus

Gustavus Adolphus College is a private liberal arts college located about an hour south of Minneapolis-St. Paul. It is a strictly undergraduate institution, with approximately 2,500 students enrolled on a full-time basis. Our institution uses a faculty-based advising system with assistance from the Academic Support Center. First-year students are generally advised by their First Term Seminar (FTS) instructor until they declare a major. Faculty are not required to teach FTS courses, thus the advising of first-year students is done by instructors who are interested in working with incoming students.

Librarians at Gustavus have faculty status, which allows us to serve on faculty committees, teach credit-bearing courses, and serve as academic advisors. Our group

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of six librarians share common responsibilities for collection development, liaison work, and reference and instruction, and each librarian also has an area of special responsibility. Librarians who choose to serve as academic advisors do so voluntarily, and may serve as advisors regardless of their area of specialization. In addition to occasionally advising transfer students (about 7% of the student population), librarians at Gustavus often step in to serve as academic advisors to undeclared students whose FTS instructor has left the college, is on sabbatical, or has retired. At our college, librarians have participated in advisor training, including the FTS advising curriculum, transfer student advising, and workshops on the purposeful advising framework.²

Students bring a variety of questions and concerns to our advising meetings. In addition to standard topics such as course registration and degree planning, students often wish to discuss other matters related to academic performance, including study skills, time organization, and strategies for communicating with instructors. They also seek assistance with personal concerns that affect their academic life, from financial aid to roommate problems.

As librarians primarily advise first-year and sophomore students, issues that impact students further along in their studies, such as job searching and internships, do not come up as frequently. As these examples illustrate, approaches to advising may differ, even within the same department. Thus, our work with advising led to an interest in learning more about the experiences of librarians advising at other institutions.

In the following, we discuss what our survey results and our own experiences suggest about the state of librarians as undergraduate advisors.

Advising contexts at other institutions

Survey respondents from institutions where librarians have faculty status, regardless of the type of appointment, re-

ported to a higher degree librarians serving as undergraduate advisors. Librarians at undergraduate private institutions were more likely to advise undergraduates than librarians at other types of institutions. Although the rate of participation by institution type varied, survey respondents from private institutions with undergraduate programs only were the sole group for whom greater than 50% reported serving as undergraduate academic advisors (69.44%). Respondents from public institutions were much less likely to serve as advisors.

Librarians most likely to advise reported working in the following areas of library specialization: reference (61.11%), instruction (59.72%), and collection development (41.67%). Of the respondents who have advised in the past five years, the majority (66.67%) said that advising is optional for librarians. It is notable that nearly one-third of the respondents are required to participate in advising. The majority of survey respondents receive training in advising, primarily on-campus opportunities (61.11%). Happily, only 4.44% (4 individuals) indicated that they received no training.

Not surprisingly, similar to our situation at Gustavus, librarians reported most frequently advising first- or second-year undeclared students (71.92%) and transfer students (15.07%). In addition, most respondents report working with a small number of students (15 or less) per year. Topics that librarians most frequently reported discussing with advisees included degree planning (13.41%), course registration (13.18%), class schedules (14.09%), selecting a major (12.05%), and nonacademic concerns (10.91%).

Challenges of advising

In general, respondents felt that advising by librarians is valued at their institutions, particularly by library colleagues and directors. More than 85% strongly or somewhat agreed that advising is valued by their colleagues, and more than 77%

strongly or somewhat agreed that it is supported by library directors. However, responses suggest that advising by librarians is not always formally recognized or rewarded by institutions. Respondents most frequently indicated that advising is a minor consideration in tenure and promotion decisions (36.36%) and that advising is neither rewarded nor recognized (29.87%).

Survey respondents identified many of the challenges we have experienced at our institution. The most frequently reported challenges were additional workload (36.69%), brevity of the advising relationship (24.46%), and emotional labor (21.58% of responses).

For example, one respondent stated, “Most of the time I enjoy it, but when students struggle (with academic dishonesty, criminal activity, serious health problems, etc.) it’s really stressful.”

Similarly, another respondent commented: “Sometimes the emotional labor is hard. I have had students cry in my office, and have had to help students find mental health resources.”

When we advise transfer students and students whose first-year advisors are unavailable, we are advising students in a period of transition. First-year students generally form a fairly close relationship with their FTS instructor and may feel somewhat frustrated at having to start over with a new advisor.

Conversely, the new advisor may receive limited information about the student’s interests and may need to spend more time in conversation with the students about their goals and aspirations. Some of these students declare a major quickly and therefore the advising relationships are short-lived. Other advisees are in this transitional period for a longer time and need closer advising as they consider their options for a major. In addition, while some transfer students are moving towards new opportunities, others are running away from challenging situations at their previous institution, and so they may need additional support.

As librarians, we want to be helpful and provide accurate information. For some survey respondents, this makes advising a challenge:

- “While I enjoy advising and interacting with students on a different level, I also find it stressful as I worry that I’ll miss something important.”
- “When I first started advising, it was a complete disaster. Training had been inadequate [and] I didn’t have enough peripheral knowledge of degree requirements to be able to give much advice. I had to look everything up. Now that I’ve been advising for a couple of years, things have gotten better.”

Some of the other comments highlighted the challenge of gaining a broad familiarity with the curriculum, and some pointed to institutional obstacles, such as faculty who do not endorse the notion of librarians as advisors and advising coordinators who forget to assign advisees to librarians.

Benefits of advising

We’ve seen that in most cases advising is optional for librarians, it is not always rewarded at the institutional level, and it presents a number of challenges. Why do many librarians choose to serve as advisors in spite of that?

Survey results and our own experiences suggest that librarians serving as advisors experience a wide range of benefits. The most frequent response was connecting with students beyond the classroom, followed by raising the profile and visibility of librarians, gaining a better understanding of the curriculum, focusing on the whole student, engaging with other units on campus, and gaining shared experiences with faculty advisors.

Some respondents highlighted the benefits to individual librarians and to the library as a whole:

- “It is a great way for students to see us in a different light, and it’s a great way

to showcase how librarians are vital to the academic mission well beyond our traditional information services.”

- “I have enjoyed getting to know the students beyond a one-shot instruction session or a brief reference interaction. Our advising is also appreciated by the teaching faculty, as we help lessen the advising load.”

- “I love it. I feel like it’s been a natural fit for my service-orientation, and a way to get to know students better than I do in brief reference consultations or one-shot instruction. I know more about the university curriculum, and it’s something that I can do that other faculty understand/respect.”

- “I generally really enjoy getting to work with students in this capacity. I love seeing them grow, and I like being able to provide support and advice.”

Some respondents noted that their advisees became more comfortable spending time in the library and talking with librarians, thus improving their research skills and study habits. In addition, through the process of helping students with advising questions, the librarians surveyed learned a great deal about campus policies, procedures, and the various offices on campus. This information can be used to help other students who may have reference questions related to housing, course registration, counseling services, or financial aid.

A few of the survey respondents indicated that they had taught a First Term Seminar or similar course and served as an academic advisor to the students in the class. Three of the librarians at the authors’ institution have taught FTS courses and feel that the general benefits of advising are enhanced by teaching this type of course. As the FTS instructor, librarians have frequent contact with their students and get to know each student’s personality. FTS cohorts are often close-knit groups, allowing instructors to learn much more about their advisees’ daily joys and struggles. Through these interactions, trust is built and the relationship between

advisor and advisee can provide impactful opportunities for mentoring.

Even without broad support at the institutional level, perhaps because advising does appear to be supported by library colleagues and deans and directors, librarians are willing to give their time and expertise to advising. At the authors’ institution, librarians are not required to advise but many do choose to participate. Mirroring the responses in the survey, we value and are supportive of the work of our librarian colleagues who choose to advise. And those of us who advise often turn to each other for ideas about how to handle new and challenging situations.

Conclusion

In sum, our study suggests that librarians who advise undergraduates are likely to have faculty status; work at undergraduate private institutions; work in reference, instruction, and collection development; work where advising is optional; and receive training in advising. Librarians most often advise first-year and sophomore undeclared and transfer students. Our study and our experiences suggest that despite challenges (ranging from additional workload to emotional labor), the benefits (ranging from increased visibility to rewarding interactions with students), make it worth the while for librarians who opt to serve as advisors.

While our experiences are anecdotal, and acknowledging the limitations of our study, we did find evidence that librarians are indeed serving as academic advisors and that they want to talk about it. With this in mind, we suggest three questions for further research:

1. *What roles do institutional culture and organization play in academic advising by librarians?* This question is inspired by our desire to learn why librarians at private institutions appear to be more likely to serve as undergraduate advisors, and what factors influence whether advising

by librarians is mandatory or voluntary at a given institution.

2. *What factors influence individual librarians' decisions to serve as academic advisors?* Our survey just skimmed the surface of this question, and deeper qualitative inquiry might provide a more robust understanding of the factors influencing librarians' service as advisors. For instance, respondents were not always certain that their work as advisors was valued by supervisors or administrators, yet some hoped that their participation would help demonstrate librarians' relevance or raise the profile of the library on campus.

3. *Are librarians doing more advising in recent years as compared to the past, and if so, is the increase in advising related to libraries' increased focus on outreach?* If that's the case, is it working? Are we raising our profiles and reaching more students?

By exploring these and other questions, hopefully our profession can gain a more nuanced understanding of librarians' roles in academic advising.

Notes

1. Examples of our related research: Michelle Twait, Jeff A. Jenson, and Anna Hulseberg, "Creating a Mentoring Community in an Undergraduate Library," in *Mentoring in Librarianship: Essays on Working with Adults and Students to Further the Profession*, ed. Carol Smallwood and Rebecca Tolley-Stokes (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 3-12; Michelle Twait and Anna Hulseberg, "Librarians as Undergraduate Student Advisors," poster presentation, American Library Association Annual Conference, New Orleans, June 2018; Anna Hulseberg, Jeff Jenson, and Michelle Twait, "More than Just a Job: Student and Supervisor Perspectives on Mentoring" presentation, Brick and Click: An Academic Library Conference, Maryville, Missouri, November 2017; Matt Bailey, Danya Leebaw, Anna Hulseberg, and Michelle Twait "Part of a Community: Creating Meaningful Experiences for Under-

graduate Interns," presentation, ARLD Day, Minnesota Library Association Academic & Research Libraries Division, Chanhassen, Minnesota, April 2017; Anna Hulseberg and Michelle Twait, "Mentors Making a Difference: Mentoring Students in Academic Libraries" roundtable session, ACRL National Conference, Indianapolis, April 2013; Anna Hulseberg, Jeff Jenson, and Michelle Twait, "Libraries as Mentoring Communities," presentation, Minnesota Library Association Annual Conference, St. Cloud, Minnesota, October 2009.

2. See <http://libguides.gustavus.edu/ALA2018> for information on the purposeful advising framework used at our institution. ❧

Open learning for uncertain times

ALA and ACRL are committed to supporting our members, staff, and all librarians and library workers during these uncertain times. Now more than ever, academic and research librarians and libraries are essential to a thriving global community of learners and scholars. Whether you are working on campus or supporting your community remotely, ACRL has a variety of easily accessible options for free online professional development to help you build your skills during the COVID-19 pandemic. Complete details are on ACRL Insider at www.acrl.org/acrlinsider/archives/19294.

Visit the ACRL Pandemic Resources for Academic Libraries LibGuide at <https://acrl.libguides.com/pandemic> and the ALA Pandemic Preparedness page at www.ala.org/tools/atoz/pandemic-preparedness for more resources on COVID-19.