Advising University Undergraduates in Horticulture

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Effective academic advising is essential to the development and growth of undergraduate programs in horticulture. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the interest in gardening, concern for the environment, and ecology movement all brought large numbers of students into horticulture, more than many departments could handle effectively. In the 1980s this trend has reversed, as indicated by the decline in number of horticulture students. Attracting students through recruiting programs now has become common practice.

The value of these recruiting programs is decreased if students recruited in horticulture become disillusioned and change to other fields or discourage others from entering the field. An effective program of academic advising is essential in retaining majors.

Information required for effective advising

The basic information needed in the advising process is knowledge of the institution and its programs, knowledge of career possibilities and their requirements, and knowledge of the student.

Advisors must know the goals of the college and department, its relationship to other institutions, and the curricular options available to achieve various career objectives. Admissions and degree requirements must be well-understood. Advisors should know the minimum test scores required of entering freshmen, availability of scholarships and other forms of financial assistance, availability and cost of housing, and the various programs and agencies that are intended to assist new students.

Advising undergraduates in horticulture is complicated by the diverse ways in which horticulture can be used to develop a career. For example, horticultural careers may be oriented in business management, crop production, art and design, therapy, extension, education, and research. Advisors must know the career opportunities and the courses required for success in these careers and must periodically update this information.

Finally, effective advising requires information concerning the advisee. What are the advisee’s abilities as indicated by entrance exam scores and rank in high school class? What are the advisee’s career goals? Why has a particular career been chosen? Is the career choice realistic given the facts about ability and previous performance?

Objectives of the faculty advisor

Faculty advisors help to pull all of the student’s educational experiences together into a meaningful whole so that the baccalaureate obtained is more than an assemblage of courses. They provide information essential to the decision-making process and assist students in weighing the relative importance of courses. They provide information essential to the decision-making process and assist students in weighing the relative importance of alternatives. Assist is the key word; students should make the necessary decisions, not the advisors.

There are 4 primary objectives of faculty advisors as modified from the list presented by Hardee (5) that will be discussed.

Developing a program of study. Advisors should assist students in developing a program of study consistent with their interests and competencies and with the requirements necessary to perform well in their chosen careers. Since initially most students do not know their specific career goals, a general program of courses is usually recommended in the first 2 years. In the junior and senior years the program of coursework becomes more specific. For curricula with many standardized requirements the task of course planning is relatively simple, but in curricula with many elective courses the process is more complex and advisors play a more complex role.

To be certain that the course of study is consistent with the student’s competencies, advisors should utilize scores from aptitude and achievement tests, high school performance, and performance in previous course work.

Often students resist taking the more challenging courses required for a specific career, but serious problems may develop by avoiding these courses. Advisors should help such students plan to meet the challenge of difficult courses by temporarily reducing course load or recommending additional preparatory courses that will build their competence and confidence.

Evaluating academic progress. Advisors should assist students in periodic evaluation of their academic progress to uncover strengths and weaknesses. In attempting to explain poor performance in specific courses, students might reveal poor study habits, lack of interest, problems in self-discipline, poor preparation, an unusually heavy course load, slow reading rate, emotional problems, roommate problems, heavy work schedule due to financial stress, poor physical health or excessive involvement in extra-curricular activities. Advisors can help students find solutions to some of these problems, but others require assistance from special agencies or professional counselors. Many students are not familiar with the various agencies on campus that are intended to aid them, and referral by their faculty advisors often improves their attitude and ability to be helped.

Ideally, the first discussion of a student’s academic performance should occur early in the semester, especially for freshmen, new transfer students, and students with academic

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2 The cost of publishing this paper was defrayed in part by the payment of page charges. Under postal regulations, this paper therefore must be hereby marked advertisement solely to indicate this fact.
3 Associate Professor and Coordinator of Undergraduate Advising.
Using support agencies. Advisors should assist students in using the many educational support services available at the institution. It is the responsibility of the faculty advisors in horticulture to be certain that majors are aware of these programs and use them when necessary. These specialized services vary from one university to another but they may include the following: financial aid office; student employment office; vocational counseling center; career planning and placement center; psychiatric counseling; health center; speech and hearing counseling, special speech classes and programs; learning resources center; special courses in remedial English, mathematics, physics, and chemistry; special courses in study skills, speed reading, and reading comprehension; veteran’s counseling; military advisement; residence counseling; religious counseling; marriage and family adjustment counseling; foreign student counseling; admissions office; registrar’s office; housing office; and counseling for the handicapped and special rehabilitation programs. In many universities these programs are scattered around campus. The boundaries of what one program does and how it relates to other programs are frequently not distinct.

Some of the specialized programs within the department that may be recommended to advisees include work experience and cooperative education, honors program, and special problems courses. To develop leadership skills, students should be encouraged to take part in professional clubs and other extracurricular activities.

The advising process

On the surface the advising process appears to be simple, when in fact, it is very complex. Hardee (5) refers to advising as a three-dimensional process, including first, the institution and its programs; second, the student and his goals; and third, the interaction of faculty advisor and student to plan a coordinated program of educational experiences to further the student’s goals. Kramer and Gardner (7) refer to two levels of advising; 1) informational advising in which the faculty member dispenses information about courses, programs, and regulations to the student, and 2) developmental advising, in which the faculty advisor functions as a role model of a professional (horticulturist) answering questions of a deeper nature. Sound informational advising is a prerequisite to effective developmental advising.

During the advising process the advisor must gain the student’s confidence and show genuine interest in the student’s professional development. Successful communication is extremely important. Both the advisor and advisee must agree on what they expect of each other in the advising process (7). Making notes of each conversation will help in stimulating discussion for repeat visits.

A breakdown of communication between the advisor and advisee is, unfortunately, a common occurrence. Two major causes are failure of the advisor to provide accurate information and failure to take interest in the advisee’s program. The student must not feel threatened or put down in conversations while being advised and should not be made to feel
that the advisor's time is being wasted. Questions should not be phrased so that they have double-meaning or convey value judgments that would prevent honest answers from an advisee (7). For example: "You're not seriously considering dropping that course, are you?" Or, "Why are you going to take a course in bowling? Why not take something important?"

The number of contacts between an advisor and advisee will vary, but 3 should be scheduled each semester for freshmen and new transfer students: at the start of the semester; to discuss academic performance in the first half of the semester; and to discuss preregistration and academic performance in the latter part of the semester. Each meeting should allow time to discuss special problems and career goals. Planned meetings with advanced students need not occur as often.

An effective advising technique is to have a group meeting of all advisees periodically in an informal atmosphere to allow advisees to share experiences and learn how others are approaching the educational and career planning process (3, 4). Posting office hours, an open door, and advising load

**Advising load**

The number of advisees assigned to an advisor varies. From personal experience in working with advisors and their advisees, 15 to 30 advisees per advisor seems to be an appropriate load for faculty who also teach and conduct research. An advisor who has too many advisees cannot give the time and attention needed for effective advising. On the other hand, an advisor who has too few advisees often lacks the incentive to maintain the skills and information needed for effective advising.

**Support for faculty advisors**

Effective advising requires administrative support. Borgard, Hornbuckle, and Mahoney (1) found that faculty members do not perceive advising as important for professional advancement. They concluded that the importance of advising must be defined within the teaching, research, and service criteria for faculty advancement. Grites (4) states, "There is little question that credit for effective advising must be included in the institutional reward structure, that is, in salary increments, promotions in rank, and tenure decisions. The absence of policy that equates excellence in advising with excellence in teaching and research serves as a major deterrent to faculty commitment and accounts for the attitude of many faculty toward it."

To include advising in evaluation of faculty requires a clearly defined system for evaluating the performance of faculty advisors. Guidelines and questionnaires for such evaluation are available (2, 4, 8).

Effective faculty advising is essential to educational programs, and horticultural departments must continually upgrade their programs of faculty advising if they are to be successful in attracting and retaining students.

**Literature Cited**