MANAGING ACADEMIC ADVISING SERVICES QUALITY: UNDERSTANDING AND MEETING NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF DIFFERENT STUDENT SEGMENTS

JUNYONG KIM, Purdue University Calumet
LORI FELDMAN, Purdue University Calumet

As universities are under increasing pressure to raise student retention and six-year graduation rates, improving quality of academic advising services has become increasingly important to universities as quality academic advising services can increase student retention rates and six-year graduation rates. While the gaps model of service quality suggests that it is critical to understand the students' needs for and expectations of academic advising services in order for higher education institutions to provide quality academic advising services, the changing demographics of contemporary college students also bring changing needs for and expectations of academic advising services of students. This article examines the needs for and expectations of academic advising services by diverse groups of contemporary college students in a comprehensive, urban, commuter university setting. The two focus group interviews and a survey study reported in this article found several significant differences in both needs and expectations between traditional college students and non-traditional students, particularly for first-generation students. Implications of the findings for design and delivery of academic advising services are discussed from a service quality management perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Along with direct mail, viewbooks, website, financial aid package, and campus visits, effective academic advising is a critical tool in the higher education institutions' marketing mix. Especially, effective academic advising serves to build long-term, satisfactory relationships with an institution's key customers – their students. Effective academic advising services can alleviate students' stress associated with course selection and registration processes and significantly contribute to a student's academic success and the institution's success. Studies show that quality of academic advising services is a key determinant of students' GPA, satisfaction as a student, perceived value of a college education for future employment, intent to leave the university, and the public's perception of the institution (Abernathy and Engelland 2001; Bahr 2008; Metzner 1989). Hence, higher

education institutions have long recognized the strategic importance of academic advising services (Metzner 1989; Wilder 1982).

Moreover, the strategic importance of academic advising services to institutions has been growing, as the government, parents and accrediting bodies have increasingly demanded that individual schools be held accountable for student outcomes. Government and other stakeholders of higher education institutions are pressuring institutions to become more accountable, more efficient, and more productive in the use of publicly generated resources (Alexander 2000). For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education announced that they were funding a project to create a national voluntary accountability system for community colleges designed to develop a common set of metrics and data points to evaluate colleges' effectiveness in achieving their specific missions, both internally and against one another (Holtz 2009).

One way that accountability of an institution has been measured was by the percentage of students who graduate with a bachelor's degree in six years or less. These numbers are traditionally reasonably high for full-time students at residential four-year colleges and universities. However, regional commuter colleges and universities that serve a high proportion of first-generation, working, and commuting students, have typically not fared well under such metrics, and they need to implement changes to improve student retention and graduation rates. Effective academic advising ensures that students take appropriate coursework at the appropriate time and helps students graduate in a timely manner. The resulting higher graduation rate can then be used as a marketing and recruiting tool for future generations of students. It can also be used to reassure parents who fear their child becoming a life-long student. To this end, many regional commuter colleges and universities are seeking to establish a highly responsive and consistent advising system to improve student success. For instance, the university where this study was conducted is implementing a software package that allows students to self-monitor their progress toward a degree in a secure online environment, standardizing advisors' job descriptions and evaluation methods, and creating a university-wide drop-in advising center.

CHANGING NEEDS FOR AND EXPECTATIONS OF ACADEMIC ADVISING SERVICES

Establishing a responsive and consistent advising system should begin with understanding students' needs for and expectations of academic advising services. The gaps model of service quality stipulates that providing high quality services requires understanding clients' needs for and expectations of the services, designing effective service processes and infrastructure to meet those needs, measuring the quality of delivered services against the expectations, and implementing actions to continuously close any identified gaps (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and

Berry 1985; Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman 1988). The gaps model of service quality has been widely adopted in the assessment of higher education institutions (Abernathy and Engelland 2001; Koch and Fisher 1998). Hence, the SERVQUAL scale, which measures service quality by measuring the gap between customer expectations and the perceived quality of delivered services, has also been widely used by higher education institutions to measure quality of education and advising services (Abernathy and Engelland 2001; Engelland, Workman and Singh 2000; Quinn, Lemay, Larsen and Johnson 2009).

In that sense, understanding students' needs for and expectations of academic advising services is the most imperative step in improving quality of academic advising services. Particularly, the changing demographics of today's college students make it even more critical for higher education institutions to reassess the diverse and changing students' needs for and expectations of academic advising services regularly. Motivated by financial needs, many students transfer from one university to another, work part-time during the school year, live in their original family home, and travel long distances to study (McClaren 2004), making it important to help them keep their workloads and class schedules manageable in order for them to achieve academic success (Hollis 2009).

In addition, the increase in the number of first-generation and adult students on campuses makes it imperative for higher education institutions to better serve these students' needs which often include remediation and developmental support (Giancola, Munz and Trares 2008; Hollis 2009). Moreover, fast growth in the international student population has brought concomitant adjustment issues for international students such as loneliness, homesickness, language difficulty, discrimination, financial problems, and confusion stemming from the dissimilarities in the educational systems in their home countries and in the United States, and the roles of

professional advisors (Charles and Stewart 1991).

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

To understand contemporary college students' needs for and expectations of academic advising services better, two focus group interviews were conducted with the students enrolled at a comprehensive, urban, commuter university located in the Midwest region. As a comprehensive, urban, commuter school, the university where the study was conducted has a student population that is representative of the "new" college student demographics. Many of the students at the university are transfer students, are first-generation college students, work thirty or more hours per week, and have families or other obligations.

Sample and Procedure

Twenty-two undergraduate students majoring in business at an urban commuter university located in the Midwest region participated in two semi-structured focus group interviews. One focus group session was conducted in the evening of a weekday to field opinions of the non-traditional, working student population and the other session was conducted in the morning of a weekday to field opinions of the traditional full-time student population. A half of the participants identified themselves as transfer students, three students identified themselves as international students, and three students identified themselves as adult students.

In each focus group session, the participants discussed their overall satisfaction with the quality of advising services provided by the school, critical incidents or encounters with academic advisors that were particularly satisfying or dissatisfying, reasons to seek academic advising services, and the expectations they have when they meet with their advisors. The moderator of the focus group study introduced each topic in order, and allowed the participants to discuss each topic for ten to 15 minutes. The participants' verbal comments and non-verbal responses were

recorded on video tapes. The moderator also took notes of some key non-verbal responses during the sessions and transcribed participants' verbal comments later. Each session lasted approximately 80 minutes. Content analysis of the transcribed participants' comments revealed the following themes with regard to students' needs for and expectations of academic advising services.

Overall Satisfaction and Critical Incidents

The participants expressed a wide range of satisfaction levels with the current academic advising services regardless of with which specific advisor they were interacting. This indicates that the variations in students' satisfaction with the academic advising services may be due to the different needs and expectations each student may have with regard to academic advising services rather than the variations in the quality of advising services provided by individual advisors. The participants indicated that the flexibility and availability for appointments is one of the main reasons for their satisfaction. The participants mentioned that their advisors' timely responses to their appointment requests and being ready at the times of the appointments were also important. The participants seem to be particularly happy with spontaneous email reminders to set up appointments sent by some advisors before registration periods. In addition, the participants also liked the print outs of "bingo sheets," forms, or other information the advisors handed to them.

On the other hand, the participants indicated high level of frustration with the academic advisors' lack of knowledge of upper level courses and the curriculum structures. For instance, a few transfer students complained that their advisors did not know the equivalency of the courses and had been told to register for a course only to find out that the course contents are exactly same as what they have already taken at their previous schools. Other participants also indicated that the advisors do not seem to have enough knowledge of upper level courses and were unable to help students

choose business elective courses that fit their majors or career goals. Some also indicated that advisors gave them wrong advice because the advisors were not aware of the changes to course prerequisites or degree requirements. Further discussion revealed that the participants' dissatisfaction is exacerbated by the students' expectations that the advisors would have expert knowledge of the courses and the curriculum because the advisors are specialized in advising management students only.

The academic advisors' unwillingness to help students emerged as another common theme. Several participants indicated that their advisors are simply unwilling to share some information with the students unless students specifically inquire about them. Many participants also indicated that their academic advisors were not willing to do extra research when they do not have immediate answers to students' questions. In such cases, students expect the advisors to research the issue or ask another person to find the answers while students are there. However, the participants indicated that they were often told to research the issue on their own or go see another person instead. Lack of walk-in counseling was also mentioned with regard to advisors' unwillingness to help. Several participants indicated frustration with being told to make an appointment and come back for simple issues (e.g., verifying prerequisites, overriding registration priority, and checking course equivalency) that they expect to take less than a minute to address, particularly when the advisors were not counseling another student. Working adult students whose work schedules and family constraints make it difficult for them to come to campus on an additional day found this problem especially troublesome. Finally, a couple of participants reported the incidents where the student's personal paperwork was misplaced or the student's registration record was completely deleted from the computer system and indicated that such inaccurate maintenance of students' records lead to highly emotional and extremely unsatisfactory experiences.

Needs for and Expectations of Academic Advising Services

The participants identified class scheduling, early registration, course credit transfers, and consultation for scholarship or internship opportunities as the main reasons why they seek academic advising services. However, the participants generally agreed that, beyond their first year, they did not feel strong needs to meet with academic advisors regularly or frequently. Many participants believe that, once they were given their plans of study or the "bingo sheet," it is their own responsibility to make sure they take all the required courses and find appropriate elective courses to complete their graduation requirements.

The majority of the participants acknowledged their own responsibilities in the academic advising process and indicated that they do not expect the advisors to do everything for them. However, for a few areas where they expect their academic advisors to help them, the participants indicated that their expectations are quite high because of the university's brand name, relatively small size of the student body academic advisors serve, and the advisors' specialization in the management curriculum. For example, the participants indicated that they expect the academic advisors to know about the courses beyond the course descriptions in the catalog such as required assignments, overall work load, and the relevance of the course to particular degree programs offered by the School of Management.

In addition, the participants also expect the academic advisors to be able to provide comprehensive advices on students' plans of study by integrating scholarships, study abroad opportunities, and career and internship opportunities, in addition to course information. In addition, the participants expect advisors' undivided attention to their problems at least during their 15 minute appointments, and do not expect to be left unattended because the advisors were counseling another students over the phone. Lastly, the participants expect the

advisors to put more effort in finding solutions for students' problems before they send students to do their own research or to talk to someone else. A few participants indicated that, as independent adults, students seek help from academic advisors only when they could not find the necessary information or figure out solutions after their own research, and thus, they expect truly meaningful help from the advisors when they see their advisors. Finally, while a majority of the participants disagreed, some participants expect the advisors to be able to advise students on personality or strictness of the faculty members who teach courses.

SURVEY STUDY

Sample and Procedure

To investigate the issues identified in the two focus group interviews further, a survey study was conducted. A team of trained field workers intercepted undergraduate students at various campus locations of a comprehensive, urban, commuter university, and asked students to fill out a two-page long questionnaire. In the questionnaire, participants rated the importance of 38 attributes of academic advising services that were developed based on original SERVQUAL attributes and the findings of the two focus group interviews described earlier. The importance of each attribute was measured on a seven-point scale anchored by "very unimportant (1)" and "very important (7)." The participants also evaluated the quality of academic advising services provided by the university with regard to each attribute on

another seven-point scale anchored by "worse than expected (-3)" and "better than expected (3)." The mid-point (0) of this scale was labeled "exactly as expected." Student's perception of overall quality of academic advising services they currently receive was also measured on a seven-point scale anchored by "very low (1)" and "very high (7)." The questionnaire also collected participants' demographic information. In a five-day data collection period, 471 students provided usable responses to the survey. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the 471 participants.

Stated Importance of Academic Advising Service Attributes

The participants rated all 38 attributes to be quite important, the importance ratings ranging from 5.12 to 6.41. The mean importance rating of the 38 attributes was 6.02 and the median importance rating was 6.13. However, a repeated measures ANOVA revealed that the 38 attributes were not equally important to students (*Wilks' Lambda* = .53; F = 10.08, p = .000). Consistent with the findings from the focus groups interviews that the main reasons for students to see academic advisors are to class schedules and early class registration, advisors' knowledge of degree requirements (M = 6.41, *S.D.* = 1.16), course prerequisites (M = 6.33, *S.D.* = 1.20), and curriculum changes (M = 6.33, *S.D.* = 1.19) were among the more important attributes. Protecting confidentiality (M = 6.31, *S.D.* = 1.24) and privacy (M = 6.29, *S.D.* = 1.22), as well as maintaining error-free students records (M = 6.27, *S.D.* = 1.27), were

TABLE 1
Sample Demographics

Full-time	87.4%	Freshmen	10.2%	Education	6.8%	Male	46.8%
Part-time	12.6%	Sophomore	16.4%	Technology	6.8%	Female	53.2%
First-generation	12.1%	Junior	27.9%	Management	48.1%		
Transfer	6.2%	Senior	45.5%	Liberal Arts and	23.0%	Commuter	96.2%
International	3.8%			Social Sciences		Resident	3.8%
		Working	80.0%	Nursing	3.8%		
		Work 30+hrs	43.4%	Engineering	11.5%		

also among the ten most important attributes, supporting the notion that violation of these expectations would lead to dissatisfaction. Advisor's willingness to help (M = 6.36, *S.D.* = 1.18), understanding students' needs (M = 6.29, *S.D.* = 1.18), having students' best interest at heart (M = 6.28, *S.D.* = 1.17), and providing services as promised (M = 6.28, *S.D.* = 1.22) were also among the more important attributes.

On the other hand, some attributes that led to particularly satisfactory or dissatisfactory experiences in the two focus group interviews turned out to be relatively less important in the survey. Proactive and spontaneous actions by advisors such as sending reminders of upcoming events and deadlines (M = 6.00, *S.D.* = 1.36), contacting other parties on behalf of students (M = 5.66, *S.D.* = 1.51), keeping notes of conversations with students (M = 5.41, *S.D.* = 1.22), or providing walk-in counseling services (M = 5.71, *S.D.* = 1.44) were among those attributes. This finding indicates that

these actions may not be a part of students' scripts of a typical academic advising encounter, but rather are unexpected spontaneous actions that evoke intense responses by students. Advisors' knowledge of non-course issues such as scholarships (M = 5.99, *S.D.* = 1.44), internships or career (M = 5.87, *S.D.* = 1.50), and study abroad opportunities (M = 5.12, *S.D.* = 1.83) were also rated relatively less important by the survey participants. This could be because non-registration issues are handled by separate staff at the university where the survey was conducted. Tangibles related to academic advising services such as easy to navigate (M = 5.68, *S.D.* = 1.49) or informative advising websites (M = 5.67, *S.D.* = 1.44), reliable registration system (M = 5.91, *S.D.* = 1.48), visually appealing materials, and neat and professional appearance of advisors (M = 5.49, *S.D.* = 1.68) were among the less important attributes.

TABLE 2
Ten Most Important Academic Advising Service Attributes by Student Segments

Traditional Students (n = 374)	Mean (S.D.)	Transfer Students (n = 29)	Mean (S.D.)	1st-Gen. Students (n = 57)	Mean (S.D.)	International Students (n = 18)	Mean (S.D.)
knowledge of requirements	6.40 (1.19)	knowledge of requirements	6.79 (.62)	confidentiality of records	6.68 (.63)	neat professional appearance	6.06 (1.39)
willingness to help	6.32 (1.22)	knowledge of curriculum changes	6.79 (.56)	providing service as promised	6.65 (.61)	ease of making appointment	6.00 (.91)
knowledge of prerequisites	6.32 (1.23)	willingness to help	6.72 (.53)	willingness to help	6.63 (.88)	creating long-term plan of study	6.00 (1.03)
knowledge of curriculum changes	6.30 (1.22)	knowledge of prerequisites	6.72 (.53)	protecting privacy	6.58 (.78)	knowledge of scholarships	5.94 (1.55)
understand needs	6.28 (1.20)	easy to follow bingo sheet	6.72 (.59)	knowledge of requirements	6.58 (.71)	visually appealing materials	5.89 (1.23)
protecting privacy	6.28 (1.23)	maintaining error free records	6.72 (.65)	giving individual attention	6.58 (.82)	knowledge of upper level courses	5.89 (1.53)
confidentiality of records	6.26 (1.27)	providing service as promised	6.69 (.71)	having students' best interest at heart	6.53 (.83)	readiness to respond to students' requests	5.89 (1.60)
maintaining error free records	6.25 (1.29)	having students' best interest at heart	6.66 (.55)	knowledge of curriculum changes	6.51 (.87)	willingness to help	5.89 (1.53)
providing service as promised	6.25 (1.25)	providing services at promised time	6.66 (.55)	providing services right the first time	6.49 (.91)	providing walk-in counseling	5.83 (1.72)
having students' best interest at heart	6.24 (1.24)	creating long-term plan of study	6.66 (.90)	knowledge of prerequisites	6.47 (.95)	knowledge of curriculum changes	5.83 (1.76)

Differences in Attribute Importance across Student Segments

The literature and the results of the two focus group interviews suggest that non-traditional students such as transfer students, first-generation students, and international students may have different needs for academic advising services compared to traditional domestic students. A series of independent samples t-tests revealed that the relative importance of the academic advising service attributes indeed vary across different groups of students.

For example, as shown in Table 2, "easy to follow bingo sheet" and "crating long-term plan of study" were among the ten most important attributes to transfer students while confidentiality or privacy of students' records were not among them. Likewise, "giving individual attention" was a uniquely important attribute to first-generation students. In addition, international students seem to have very distinctive priorities for academic advising services attributes from the other groups of students, although the number of international students who responded to the survey was small (n = 18) and the difference needs to be examined further. From Table 2, it also appears that transfer students and first-generation students rated importance of academic advising service attributes higher than traditional students did while international students' ratings are lower than overall ratings.

To examine the possible differences in importance of academic advising service attributes across different groups of students further, a series of independent-samples t-tests were conducted. First, a series of independent samples t-tests on attribute importance ratings between transfer students and non-transfer students revealed that transfer students rated 16 out of 38 attributes significantly more important than non-transfer students did at 95 percent confidence level. Table 3 lists the means and t-test statistics for the 16 attributes. This finding indicates that transfer students have stronger need for academic advising services in general compared to non-transfer students.

Next, a series of independent samples t-tests on attribute importance ratings between first-generation students and non- first-generation students revealed that first-generation students rated eight of the 38 attributes significantly more important than non- first-generation students did. Table 4 lists the means and t-test statistics for the eight attributes. The list of eight attributes suggests that first-generation students considered advisors' responsive and empathetic attitudes in dealing with students more important compared to non-first-generation students. Since first-generation students may not have other family members who might guide them through college experiences, it is understandable that they have stronger need for more attentive and responsive academic advising services. However, any significant difference in attribute importance rating was found neither between international students and domestic students nor between working students and non-working students. Additionally, the attribute importance ratings were not correlated to how many hours the working students work per week either. However, the failure to find significant differences between international and domestic students may be largely due to the small sample size of international students (n = 18), and a follow-up study including more data from international students would be necessary.

In addition, to examine if some academic advising attributes become more or less important as students progress toward completion of a degree, an ANOVA was conducted on the attribute importance ratings using students' standing toward to completion of degree. The results indicated that the importance of advisors' knowledge of study abroad programs differs across students in different standing toward completion of degree ($F(3,465)$ = 4.05; p = .007). Post-hoc tests based on LSD procedure revealed that the importance rating of advisors' knowledge of study abroad programs by senior students (M = 4.83, *S.D.* = 1.84) was significantly lower than sophomore students' (M = 5.58, *S.D.* = 1.70; p = .002) and junior students' (M = 5.32, *S.D.* = 1.82; p = .015). However, importance ratings of

TABLE 3
Academic Advising Attributes That Are More Important to Transfer Students

Attribute	Student	Mean	S.D.	t	df[+]	Sig.
reliable registration system/software	non-transfer	5.86	1.50	-4.17	38.91	.000[**]
	transfer	6.62	0.90			
contacting others on students' behalf	non-transfer	5.61	1.53	-3.90	38.61	.000[**]
	transfer	6.34	0.94			
easy to follow bingo sheet	non-transfer	6.14	1.39	-4.55	51.45	.000[**]
	transfer	6.72	0.59			
informing students of upcoming events or deadlines	non-transfer	5.97	1.39	-3.63	42.31	.001[**]
	transfer	6.52	0.74			
creating long-term plan of study for students	non-transfer	6.11	1.28	-3.07	35.94	.004[**]
	transfer	6.66	0.90			
treating students in caring fashion	non-transfer	6.02	1.33	-2.13	468.00	.034[*]
	transfer	6.55	0.83			
knowledge of curriculum changes	non-transfer	6.30	1.22	-4.18	47.77	.000[**]
	transfer	6.79	0.56			
maintaining error free records	non-transfer	6.24	1.30	-3.56	44.43	.001[**]
	transfer	6.72	0.65			
providing services at promised time	non-transfer	6.17	1.31	-4.00	52.10	.000[**]
	transfer	6.66	0.55			
prompt services	non-transfer	6.07	1.28	-3.04	38.62	.004[**]
	transfer	6.55	0.78			
prompt email/phone responses	non-transfer	6.11	1.24	-3.91	48.09	.000[**]
	transfer	6.59	0.57			
knowledge of upper level courses	non-transfer	6.14	1.25	-2.97	39.54	.005[**]
	transfer	6.59	0.73			
providing service as promised	non-transfer	6.26	1.24	-3.00	40.10	.005[**]
	transfer	6.69	0.71			
knowledge of prerequisites	non-transfer	6.31	1.22	-3.65	50.85	.001[**]
	transfer	6.72	0.53			
knowledge of requirements	non-transfer	6.38	1.18	-3.19	42.86	.003[**]
	transfer	6.79	0.62			
having students' best interest at heart	non-transfer	6.26	1.20	-3.40	47.82	.001[**]
	transfer	6.66	0.55			
willingness to help	non-transfer	6.34	1.21	-3.41	50.09	.001[*]
	transfer	6.72	0.53			
providing services right the first time	non-transfer	6.22	1.24	-2.25	36.86	.031[*]
	transfer	6.59	0.82			

[+] adjusted for inequalities of variances.
[*] significant at .05 level.
[**] significant at .01 level.

TABLE 4
Academic Advising Attributes That Are More Important to First-Generation Students

Attribute	Student	Mean	S.D.	t	df[+]	Sig.
confidentiality of records	non-first-generation	6.25	1.30	-4.10	133.83	.000[**]
	first-generation	6.68	0.63			
knowledge of equivalence for transfers	non-first-generation	6.00	1.57	-2.92	107.03	.004[**]
	first-generation	6.42	0.92			
providing service as promised	non-first-generation	6.23	1.27	-4.08	135.54	.000[**]
	first-generation	6.65	0.61			
giving students individual attention	non-first-generation	6.16	1.29	-3.29	98.50	.001[**]
	first-generation	6.58	0.82			
protecting privacy	non-first-generation	6.25	1.26	-2.76	102.35	.007[**]
	first-generation	6.58	0.78			
willingness to help	non-first-generation	6.32	1.21	-2.36	88.22	.021[*]
	first-generation	6.63	0.88			
prompt email/phone responses	non-first-generation	6.11	1.26	-2.38	96.84	.019[*]
	first-generation	6.40	0.82			
having students' best interest at heart	non-first-generation	6.25	1.21	-2.25	93.15	.027[*]
	first-generation	6.53	0.83			

[+] adjusted for inequalities of variances.
[*] significant at .05 level.
[**] significant at .01 level.

no other attributes differed across students in different standings. This result indicates that students' needs for academic advising services remain unchanged over the entire courses of their studies for the most parts even though the focus group interview participants stated that once they get their plan of study (or bingo sheet) they did not feel much need for further academic advising services.

Evaluations of Academic Advising Service Attribute Performances

While analyses of students' stated needs and importance of various academic advising service attributes help understanding students' needs for academic advising services, it should be noted that stated needs do not always represent the true needs or priorities of attributes accurately. Moreover, even if they provide accurate understanding of students' needs, it is also important to understand where service gaps may exist and how big the gaps are to improve the overall quality of academic advising services. Therefore, students' evaluations of the 38 academic advising service attributes were analyzed.

Overall, participants' evaluations of the academic advising services attribute performance ranged from zero (for providing walk-in counseling) to .75 (for protecting confidentiality of students' records), indicating that the academic advising service performances are at least at expected level. A series of one- sample t-tests using zero

(representing performance at "exactly expected level") as test value revealed that the participants evaluated the performance of the academic advising staff to be significantly above their expectations with regard to all but five attributes of informative website, informing upcoming students of events or deadlines, keeping notes of conversations with students, knowledge of scholarships, and providing walk-in counseling. In addition, analyses of Pearson correlation coefficients between students' performance evaluations of each of the 38 attributes and their overall service quality rating showed that evaluations of all attributes performances were positively and significantly correlated with students' overall service quality ratings at 95 percent confidence level. However, the performance evaluations of the attributes that represent academic advisors' responsive and empathetic attitudes - willingness to help ($r = .63$), treating students in caring fashion ($r = .61$), readiness to respond to students' requests ($r = .61$), giving individual attention ($r = .60$), and having students' best interest at heart ($r = .60$) - were most highly correlated with students' overall service quality perceptions.

Differences in Performance Evaluations across Student Segments

Compared to generally positive performance evaluations by the whole sample, a few differences in attribute performance evaluations across different students segments were found. For example, transfer students' academic advising services performance evaluations were not significantly different from zero except for the two attributes of confidentiality of students' records ($M = .79$, *S.D.* $= 1.37$; $t(27) = 3.03$, $p = .005$) and protecting students' privacy ($M = .61$, *S.D.* $= 1.42$; $t(27) = 2.26$; $p = .032$). However, a series of independent samples t-tests revealed that transfer students' performance evaluations were not significantly different from non-transfer students' for all attributes but walk-in counseling. Transfer students' evaluation of walk-in counseling ($M = -.61$, *S.D.* $= 1.99$) was significantly more

negative ($t(1,461) = 1.98$, $p = .048$) than that of non-transfer students ($M = .04$, *S.D.* $= 1.66$).

First-generation students' academic advising service performance evaluations were even lower, ranging from -.74 (for creating long-term plan of study for students) to .29 (for protecting students' privacy). None of their performance evaluations was significantly greater than zero while their evaluations of 16 attributes were significantly below zero. Table 5 lists the mean evaluations and one sample t-test statistics for the 16 attributes that were negatively evaluated by first-generation students. A series of independent samples t-test also showed that first-generation students' evaluations were significantly more unfavorable than those of non-first-generation students for all attributes but for walk-in counseling and knowledge of study abroad programs. These results indicate that first-generation students have higher expectations and standards for academic advising services than those of non-first-generation students.

In contrast, international students' performance evaluations for the 38 attributes were positive, ranging from .61 (contacting others on behalf of students) to 1.72 (keeping confidentiality of students' record). International students' performance evaluations were significantly greater than zero for 24 of the 38 attributes and they were also significantly more positive than those of domestic students for 16 attributes. Combined with relatively low stated importance ratings for academic advising attributes, these results indicate that international students may have low expectations and weak needs for academic advising services and are more lenient in evaluating academic advising services quality, though the results are inconclusive due to the small sample size of international students. This may be because most of the international students who participated in this survey came from eastern cultures - China and India - where students tend to be less critical of their advisors and faculty compared to western cultures. Alternatively, international students who chose to study abroad and have been admitted to

TABLE 5
Academic Advising Attributes Performing Below First-generation Students' Expectations

Attribute	One Sample T-test Test Value = 0					Attribute	One Sample T-test Test Value = 0				
	Mean	S.D.	t	df	Sig.		Mean	S.D.	t	df	Sig.
creating long-term plan of study for students	-0.74	1.45	-3.85	56	.000**	informing upcoming events or deadlines	-0.49	1.38	-2.69	56	.009**
readiness to respond to students' requests	-0.61	1.39	-3.35	56	.001**	knowledge of upper level courses	-0.47	1.65	-2.17	56	.034*
keeping notes of conversations with students	-0.60	1.43	-3.16	56	.003**	instilling confidence into students	-0.47	1.47	-2.44	56	.018*
informative website	-0.60	1.24	-3.64	56	.001**	ease of making appointment	-0.47	1.40	-2.55	56	.014*
knowledge of scholarships	-0.57	1.41	-3.03	55	.004**	treating students in caring fashion	-0.42	1.29	-2.45	56	.017*
understand students' needs	-0.56	1.41	-3.00	56	.004**	giving students individual attention	-0.40	1.50	-2.03	56	.047*
knowledge of equivalence for transfers	-0.54	1.32	-3.10	56	.003**	providing services right the first time	-0.40	1.31	-2.33	56	.023*
having students' best interest at heart	-0.53	1.44	-2.76	56	.008**	helping students balance course loads with life issues	-0.40	1.28	-2.38	56	.021*

* significant at .05 level.
** significant at .01 level.

foreign institutions may be more self-motivated and independent than others and rely less on advisors' guidance in pursuing their academic goals.

Working students' academic advising services evaluations were similar to overall evaluations, ranging from -.05 (walk-in counseling) to .69 (keeping confidentiality of students' record). However, a series of independent samples t-tests revealed that working students' evaluations of academic advising services attributes were not significantly different from those by non-working students for 23 attributes but were significantly lower than those of non-working students for 15 attributes. Table 6 lists the 15 attributes. These results indicate that working students have higher expectations and standards for academic advising services than those of non-working students.

Similarly, an ANOVA of attribute performance evaluations using students' standings toward completion of studies revealed significant differences for only two attributes of advisors' knowledge of internship or career opportunities

$(F(3,458) = 2.97; p = .032)$ and informing students of upcoming events or deadlines $(F(3,460) = 3.05; p = .028)$. Post-hoc tests based on LSD procedure revealed that evaluation of advisors' knowledge of internship or career opportunities by senior students $(M = -.06, S.D. = 1.47)$ was significantly lower than sophomore students' $(M = .41, S.D. = 1.35; p = .016)$ and junior students' $(M = .28, S.D. = 1.43; p = .035)$. This result indicate that students' expectations for this attribute of academic advising services become higher as students progress toward completion of their studies. Likewise, post-hoc tests based on LSD procedure revealed that evaluation of informing students of upcoming events or deadlines by senior students $(M = -.06, S.D. = 1.63)$ was significantly lower than sophomore students' $(M = .44, S.D. = 1.45; p = .019)$ and freshmen students' $(M = .52, S.D. = 1.37; p = .022)$. This result seems to suggest that such proactive actions by advisors are most appreciated by less seasoned students but such actions lose their importance as students become more familiar with the registration processes and deadlines.

TABLE 6
Working Students' Performance Evaluations of Academic Advising Attribute

Attribute	Student	Mean	S.D.	t	df[+]	Sig.
giving students individual attention	non-working	0.66	1.46	2.49	462	.013 **
	working	0.21	1.57			
providing service as promised	non-working	0.66	1.45	2.09	462	.037 **
	working	0.29	1.54			
readiness to respond to students' requests	non-working	0.62	1.63	2.38	133.98	.019 **
	working	0.18	1.51			
having students' best interest at heart	non-working	0.60	1.54	2.09	463	.037 **
	working	0.23	1.55			
understand students' needs	non-working	0.63	1.62	2.40	462	.017 **
	working	0.20	1.54			
keeping confidentiality of students' records	non-working	1.01	1.46	1.98	460	.048 *
	working	0.69	1.39			
protecting students' privacy	non-working	1.00	1.47	2.26	462	.025 **
	working	0.63	1.41			
contacting others on students' behalf	non-working	0.43	1.28	1.97	462	.049 **
	working	0.11	1.43			
knowledge of study abroad programs	non-working	0.38	1.26	2.16	461	.032 **
	working	0.06	1.28			
willingness to help	non-working	0.68	1.61	2.23	462	.026 **
	working	0.27	1.62			
creating long-term plan of study for students	non-working	0.45	1.61	1.98	462	.048 **
	working	0.08	1.65			
treating students in caring fashion	non-working	0.77	1.58	2.69	461	.007 **
	working	0.29	1.54			
ease of making appointment	non-working	0.68	1.55	2.03	462	.043 **
	working	0.31	1.58			
knowledge of equivalence for transfers	non-working	0.59	1.42	2.56	461	.011 **
	working	0.14	1.51			
helping students balance course loads with life issues	non-working	0.52	1.49	2.14	462	.033 **
	working	0.14	1.55			

[+] adjusted for inequalities of variances.
[*] significant at .05 level.
[**] significant at .01 level.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Through two focus group interviews and a survey of students at an urban, comprehensive, regional, commuter university, this article attempted to uncover diverse groups of contemporary college students' needs for and expectations of academic advising services. In sum, the results show that first-generation students and transfer students have stronger needs for and higher expectations of several aspects of academic advising services compared to typical college students. In addition, the results indicate that international students may have different needs and expectations of academic advising services compared to domestic students, although this result is inconclusive due to small sample size of international student survey participants. The Importance-Performance Grid in Figure 1 summarizes the findings and provide useful insights into which aspects of academic advising services must be emphasized and improved to serve different groups of students more effectively.

FIGURE 1
Academic Advising Services Attribute Importance-Performance Grid by Students Segments
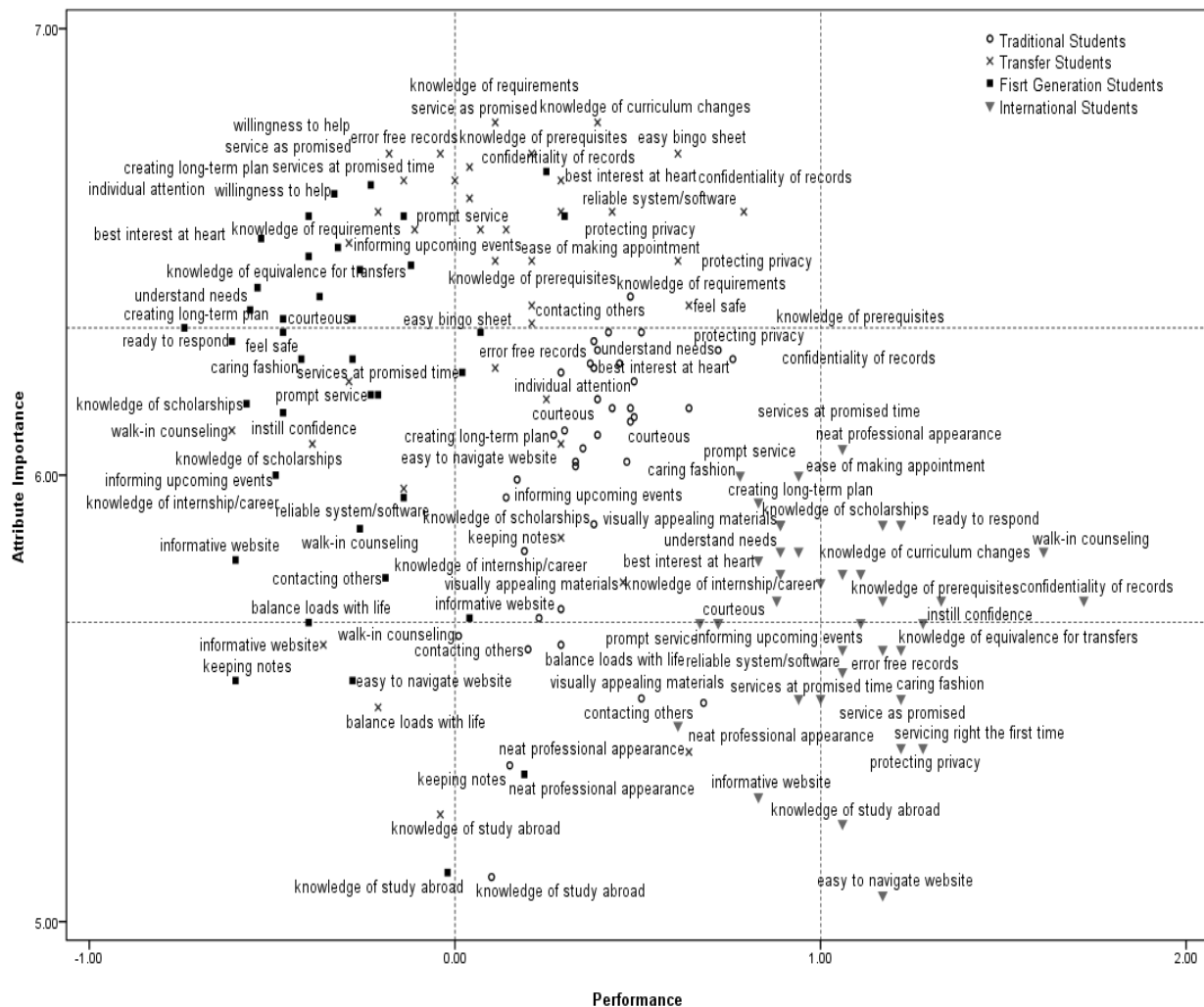
Implications for Academic Advising Service Quality Improvements

Based on the findings from the two focus group interviews and a survey study, some interesting implications stand out. First, students' quality perceptions of academic advising services as well as their expectations appeared to vary widely among different groups of students. One fix for the heterogeneity of students' academic advising service expectations would be to communicate what students can expect and what not to expect from their academic advisors to students and correct some unrealistic expectations students might have (i.e.,

expecting advisors to comment on faculty members' personalities or grading). Such communication of clear and realistic expectations of academic advising services can be reinforced through freshman orientations classes or brochures, using academic advising website, signs posted in the advising reception area, and perhaps through materials handed out at each advising session.

At the same time, students' needs for and expectations of academic advising services should be clearly communicated to academic advisors through their job descriptions and training programs. In doing so, it is critical to

recognize the differences in needs for and expectations of academic advising services between different groups of students as the studies reported in this article demonstrated them. Like any other service providers who deal with diverse customers with different needs and expectations, academic advisors and universities must adopt a differentiated service approaches in which different versions of service blueprints and scripts are developed for different segments of customers, students, with each segment's best interests at heart and with their service priorities in mind. Universities must make ongoing training and professional development of academic advising staff a key part of their strategic initiatives. Such training should not simply focus on mechanical aspects of training, but rather on the changes in expectations of new generations of students and of different segments of students.

Another critical implication of the findings is the importance of focus on the core areas of academic advising services - helping students register for the right courses and finish their study successfully in a timely fashion. All across the board, students indicated that advisors' knowledge of course and registration issues (e.g., course pre-requisites, degree requirements, and curriculum changes) to be the most important attributes of academic advising services. In light of curriculum and degree requirements changes many higher education institutions are undergoing to accommodate the increasing demand for more active learning courses such as experiential learning and service learning courses, this finding emphasizes the importance of clear and seamless communication between faculty and academic advising staff regarding those changes.

In addition, the findings highlight the needs for training programs and performance evaluation systems that nurture and reinforce customer-oriented service culture among the academic advisors. The participants in both focus group interviews and the survey study consistently indicated that academic advisors' willingness to help and readiness to respond to their requests

are keys to quality academic advising services. While the participants indicated that students naturally grow accustomed to conducting many of their routine transactions (e.g., registration and bill paying) on their own beyond their first years, they also indicated that their needs for academic advising services remain strong throughout their durations of study. This suggests that students who seek academic advisors' guidance beyond their first years are likely to come expecting academic advisors' help with what they could not do themselves. Participants clearly stated that they expect advisors to put more effort into finding solutions to problems rather than just pointing students to places where they might find solutions. Some advisors may feel that they are teaching students to be independent and self-reliant problem solvers, but such intent appears to fall flat in an era where students are providing much of the "service" themselves. The expectations advisors have of their own positions may not yet have caught up with the students' needs and expectations. As frontline service employees' own service models shape their customer orientation, competence, and behaviors (Di Mascio 2010), an explicit job description and evaluation system that cultivate academic advisors to view advising services as the acts of formulating relationships with students through problem solving with responsiveness and empathy will significantly improve the quality of their advising services.

The finding that performance evaluations of all attributes were significantly correlated with students' overall academic advising quality ratings indicate that all aspects of academic advising services can be used to improve students' experiences with academic advising services, even if they may be rated to be relatively less important by students. For example, the findings indicate that academic advisors can enhance students' perceptions of academic advising services quality by making sure that each student walks away from each advising session with some tangibles (e.g., their "bingo" sheet or a printout of the requirements for different minors) in hand. This is in line with the findings that effective use of tangibles

can enhance quality perceptions of intangible services, like academic advising service, that relies on providers' knowledge and expertise (Bitner 1993). At one point, in service as an advisor, one of the authors not only provided copies of "bingo" sheets to students, but highlighted the bingo sheets with multiple colors to show which classes to take in which of the remaining semesters. This simple act provided significant guidance and reassurance to the students.

The data presented in this paper also makes a strong case for having professional advisors assisting students rather than having faculty advisors. The diverse needs and high expectations different types of students have for academic advising services indicate the complexity of advising tasks and the need for high level of dedication to advising tasks by advisors. While advising and interacting with students is a minor and often neglected part of a faculty member's role at many universities, professional advisors are specifically trained and evaluated on the attributes identified in this article. In this sense, professional advisors will be more consistent in their application of university rules, knowledgeable of the curriculum and degree requirements, and dedicated to students. Consequently, professional advisors will be able to help students navigate their way to graduation more effectively, although faculty advisors can be very useful in mentoring students and in providing specific career guidance.

Increasing the quality of academic advising services and students' perception of it is also important to administrators and to the strategic missions of higher education institutions. Accrediting bodies and government are increasingly looking at six-year graduation rates as a measure of quality of higher education institutions (Scott, Bailey and Kienzl 2006), wishing to hold colleges and universities accountable for their use of public funds, particularly in the form of federal financial aid. Given the external stakeholders' focus on increase six-year graduation rates, improving quality of academic advising services can be a very effective and cost-efficient way to increase student retention rate and lower the number of years to graduate. Strategically designed academic advising services focusing on helping students with course selection and plans of study toward graduation will help students sidestep errors that may delay their graduations, and, thus, improve an institution's position in external stakeholders' minds. In addition, a better advising experience as students will also help to build loyalty for the school ensuring a long-term relationship with alumni, which is a critical resource for higher education institutions.

The importance of clear and accurate communication between advising staff, faculty members, administrators, and students also emerges as an important implication from this study. Faculty and administrators must be scrupulously vigilant about communicating curriculum changes to advisors so that students are provided with the most accurate information. This sharing will enhance teamwork between faculty and advisors and ensure greater adherence to plans of study. Such transparency will also reduce situations in which advising errors, because of misinformation, delay or prevent a student's graduation. Another area of communication that is important is keeping students informed of their academic progress. With increasing pressure on universities to raise six-year graduation rates, this is one way to keep students on track. The university at which the authors work recently implemented an academic advising software program that enables students have real-time access to their academic record in a format that makes it clear what courses they still need to complete. Once students have easy "self-service" access to this information and routine transactions, academic advisors can dedicate their time and effort to help students with more complex or urgent problems.

Limitations and Future Research Questions

Since this study was conducted at a single regional commuter university, it is unclear

whether the identified need for and expectations of academic advising services are comparable to those of the students at traditional universities. Therefore, conducting another study at a traditional university would be helpful to see whether the need for and expectations of academic advising services of commuter university students are comparable to those of traditional college students.

In addition, the number of international students participated in the survey study was too small (n=18), making it impossible to draw any conclusively meaningful inferences about the differences between international and domestic students' needs for and expectations of academic advising services. However, the distinctive pattern of attribute importance ratings and performance evaluations displayed by international students participated in the survey suggests that a follow-up study with more international students would be necessary and fruitful.

Finally, it would be interesting to see if importance and expectations of an academic advising service attribute changes depending on the past performance of the advising staff on the attribute. For example, as Maslow's need hierarchy theory suggests, an attribute may become more important for a future service encounter if students perceive particularly poor performance on the attribute, or an attribute may become less important for a future service encounter if students perceive positive performance on the attribute. Likewise, previous experiences with advising service staff may affect students' expectations of future performances. A longitudinal research that explores the dynamic relationships between past service performance, attribute importance, and service expectations over the courses of students' duration of studies would be interesting.

CONCLUSION

Universities have become much more sophisticated marketers over the last 20 years, particularly as they seek to recruit students in an increasingly more competitive higher education marketplace. As the government and accreditors are continuing to pressure universities to demonstrate effectiveness and accountability, academic advising is becoming a more critical tool in the higher education institutions' marketing arsenal. Effective academic advising can serve as a differentiator in prospective students' decision making stage and it can significantly aid universities to improve student retention rate and graduation rate by ensuring that students take the right courses at the right time. Finally, by helping students feel confident and cared for, effective academic advising can have the long-lasting effect of fostering positive and loyal relationships between students and universities. Advancement offices at universities can draw upon such relationships in subsequent years for their public relations and other marketing activities.

REFERENCES

Abernathy, Ty and Brian Engelland (2001), "The Effects of Frequency, Recency, and Academic Prowess as Moderators of Service Quality Evaluations for College Academic Advising", *Marketing Management Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 97-107.

Alexander, F. King (2000), "The Changing Face of Accountability: Monitoring and Assessing Institutional Performance in Higher Education", *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 71, No. 4, pp. 411-431.

Bahr, Peter (2008), "Cooling Out in the Community College: What is the Effect of Academic Advising on Students' Chances of Success?" *Research in Higher Education*, Vol. 49, No. 8, pp. 704-732.

Bitner, Mary Jo (1993), "Managing the Evidence of Service", in *The Service Quality Handbook,* E. E. Scheuing and W. F. Christopher, *eds.* New York, NY: American Management Association, pp. 358-370.

Charles, Harvey and Mac A. Stewart (1991), "Academic Advising of International Students", *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 173-181.

Di Mascio, Rita (2010), "The Service Models of Frontline Employees", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 74, pp. 63–80.

Engelland, Brian, Letty Workman and Mandeep Singh (2000), "Ensuring Service Quality for Campus Career Service Centers: A Modified SERVQUAL Scale", *Journal of Marketing Education,* Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 236-245.

Giancola, Jennifer Kohler, David C. Munz and Shawn Trares (2008), "First- versus Continuing-Generation Adult Students on College Perceptions: Are Differences Actually Because of Demographic Variance?" *Adult Education Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, pp. 214-228.

Hollis, Leah P. (2009), "Academic Advising in the Wonderland of College for Developmental Students", *College Student Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 31-35.

Holtz, David (2009), "Community College Accountability", *Inside Higher Ed*, October 7, 2009, (accessed on October 12, 2009), available at http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/10/07/accountability.

Koch, James V. and James L. Fisher (1998), "Higher Education and Total Quality Management", *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 9, No. 8, pp. 659-668.

McLaren, Jennifer (2004). "The Changing Face of Undergraduate Academic Advising," *Guidance and Counseling*, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 173-175.

Metzner, Barbara S. (1989). "Perceived Quality of Academic Advising: The Effect on Freshman Attrition", *American Educational Research Association*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 422-442.

Parasuraman, A., Valarie A. Zeithaml and Leonard L. Berry (1985), "A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and Its Implications for Future Research", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 49, pp. 41-50.

Quinn, Anita, Gina Lemay, Peter Larsen and Dana M. Johnson (2009), "Service quality in higher education", *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 139-152.

Scott, Marc, Thomas Bailey and Greg Kienzl (2006), "Relative Success? Determinants of College Graduation Rates in Public and Private Colleges in the U.S.", *Research in Higher Education*, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 249-279.

Wilder, Jerry R. (1982), "Academic and Career Advising: Institutional Commitment and Program Recommendations", *Peabody Journal of Education,* Vol. 59, No. 2, pp. 107-111.

Zeithaml, Valarie A., Leonard L. Berry and A. Parasuraman (1988), "Communication and Control Processes in the Delivery of Service Quality", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 52, pp. 35-48.