

THE EFFECTS OF FREQUENCY, RECENCY, AND ACADEMIC PROWESS AS MODERATORS OF SERVICE QUALITY EVALUATIONS FOR COLLEGIATE ACADEMIC ADVISING

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Faculty and administrators together have an interest in improving the efficacy of the "academic advising" process which annually consumes significant time and resources on college campuses. Research has suggested that advising outcome improves as advisor-advisee relationships are strengthened through frequent contact, but does this relationship hold with respect to service quality? This study reports an examination of the moderating effects of three situational variables – advising frequency, advising recency, and student academic prowess – on student advising quality evaluations. Findings suggest that frequency and recency have a positive relationship with advising quality, while academic prowess has a negative relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Academic advising is likely to be a significant factor in academic integration and academic success among college students, particularly freshmen. Students new to the university are often challenged by the emotionally trying process of committing to a major, identifying appropriate classes and devising an effective class schedule. By understanding a first-year student's expectations and subsequent perceptions of the advising process, institutions of higher education may be able to enact beneficial improvements in service and quality, resulting in increased student satisfaction, improved retention, and higher graduation rates.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the effects of three situational variables that are hypothesized to influence service quality evaluations of the collegiate academic advising process. Specifically, the paper examines frequency (the number of times that the student has met with his or her academic advisor),

recency (the amount of time that has lapsed since the last advising contact), and advisee academic prowess (achieved grade point average or "GPA") as influencers of service quality ratings using a SERVQUAL-style instrument. The paper is organized so that it begins with a discussion of previous research into the academic advising process, then follows with a discussion of the nature of service quality and its measurement, the development of hypotheses, a description of the methodology, then results and implications. The intended contribution is to take one step toward assisting those responsible for developing, administering and delivering academic advising services by improving our collective understanding of the influence of certain situational variables on advising quality assessment.

ACADEMIC ADVISING

Academic advising, in concert with other school resources, serves to provide the primary guidance and direction a student needs to successfully navigate through the college course selection and registration processes. College study places much greater demands on students than grade school or high school study, and the appropriate selection of

which classes to take can be a critical determinant of a student's success in meeting those increased demands. College is more academically demanding than prior scholastic activities in many ways (e.g., more independent study, outside of class assignments and preparation, and an extended commitment and persistence toward pursuing academic achievement). However, less direction, guidance, and structure is provided. Effective academic advising can become a key component in alleviating the stresses associated with both the course selection and registration processes as well as other higher educational tasks (or exercises), especially for first-year students who are likely unfamiliar with such procedures.

Research has shown that academic advising is a reciprocal endeavor, with shared responsibilities among both the advisor and advisee (Broadbridge 1996; Frost 1991; Petress 2000). Academic advisors provide far-reaching assistance and encouragement to students relative to their educational development and common well-being. Further, although aided by additional student support services, the advisor position is one of foremost guidance and support (Broadbridge 1996). An academic advisor is often the first contact a freshman has with a faculty member of the institution, and significant academic decisions are made during advising contact (e.g., class scheduling, major/minor considerations, etc.). Also at this time, advisors initiate academic empowerment by placing students at ease, helping them to gain an understanding of academic requirements, and encouraging them to be proactively involved in the decisions made.

The contribution of previous academic advising research can be classified according to three major areas: (1) students' attitude and viewpoints relative to advisement; (2) advisors' attitude and viewpoints relative to advisement; and (3) comparisons between students' and advisors' perceptions. Recommendations for improving the advising process resulting from the first category of research include (1) increasing appointment frequency, (2) circumventing parental-like direction and perspectives, and (3) enhancing interpersonal one-on-one communication skills, which includes providing useful information. Recommendations from the

second category of research include (1) specific guidelines to improve faculty acknowledgment, appreciation, and additional incentive or motivation, (2) assessment guidelines, (3) proper handling of obligatory advising, and (4) avoiding personal problem counseling as part of the advising process (Saving and Keim 1998).

Unfortunately, the third category of comparative advising research relative to students' and advisors' perceptions and satisfaction is relatively unexamined (Saving and Keim 1998). However, research does suggest that the presence of several student qualities enable the advising procedure to achieve greater effectiveness. Among these qualities are interaction frequency, preparedness, information precision, applicable disclosure, timeliness, follow-through, and the readiness and ability of the student to ask pertinent questions. Additional helpful factors include student assertiveness and poignancy during advising sessions and a heightened focus (from both student and advisor) on the task at hand (Petress 2000). In such beneficial advisement relationships there is a greater level of student involvement both inside and outside of advising sessions.

Additionally, research conducted by the Higher Education Quality Council contends that an effective advising logistical system is fundamental to success. It is important to note that the manner in which the institution, academic units, and students perceive the advising system can determine whether the procedure is considered necessary and valuable or an administrative hurdle (Broadbridge 1996).

In summary then, advising research implies that regular and consequential student/faculty interaction promotes students' participation and enthusiasm regarding the advising process, and that advisors play a key role in facilitating such significant interaction as well as bolstering and endorsing perseverance (Frost 1991). Relationship building between advisor and advisee is a necessary ingredient for success and good advising systems foster the development of effective relationships formed through frequent interactions over time. But do these frequent advisor-advisee interactions

improve the evaluation of service quality among advisees? And how does recency of advisor-advisee contact play a role in service quality evaluation? Prior research is silent on these questions.

SERVICE QUALITY

Service quality is a measure of how well the delivered level of service matches customer expectations. Accordingly, if a service provider is to deliver high quality service, it must conform to customer expectations on a consistent basis over time (Lewis and Booms 1983). Service quality first began to receive significant attention in the late '70s, and this work resulted in several ground-breaking articles, including Sasser, Olsen, and Wyckoff (1978), Gronoos (1982), Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1982), and Lewis and Booms (1983). Three underlying themes are suggested in this early literature: (1) service quality is more difficult for the consumer to evaluate than goods quality; (2) service quality perceptions result from a comparison of consumer expectations with actual service performance; and (3) quality evaluations are not made solely on the outcome of a service, but also on evaluations of the process of service delivery.

Service quality measurement has benefitted greatly by the work of Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, who developed a model and measurement approach which they named SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1985, 1988, 1994; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry 1990; and Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml 1993). SERVQUAL is based on the idea that service quality is derived from the difference between consumers' expectations about performance of a general class of service providers and their assessment of the actual performance of a specific service within that class.

This expectation/performance-perception approach has become widespread in the assessment of higher education (Alfred and Weissman 1988; Gramling and Schatzberg 1996; Krishnan and Bathala 1999; McMichael 1992; Ramsay and Clark 1990; Tan 1996). Gaining estimations of both expectation and performance and the factors related to them offers valuable insights, and service quality in higher

education is an issue of increasing significance as evidenced by recent education, marketing and management literature (Athiyaman 1997; Koch and Fisher 1998; Reavill 1997; Tang and Zairi 1998a, 1998b).

DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESES

Advisement frequency refers to the total number of advising contacts that the student has experienced in the current academic year at the time of the study (late in the Spring semester). Frequency has been demonstrated to have a positive association with service quality ratings in other service environments (Engelland et al. 1998), and that relationship is expected to apply in this context. Social judgement theory as developed by Sherif and Hovland (1961) and later refined by numerous scholars can provide a theoretical basis for the relationship. This theory suggests that when evaluating other people and things (e.g., brands or service providers) individuals develop *latitudes of acceptance*, *latitudes of rejection*, and *latitudes of noncommitment* which they employ as parameters to speed the evaluation. The latitude of acceptance consists of all the potential behaviors that are deemed acceptable by the subject, and in the service setting might consist of how quickly one is served, the degree of friendliness exhibited, the competence level of the staff, and other related factors. When a subject experiences a preponderance of acceptable behaviors, his or her internal latitude of acceptance supports the development of a favorable attitude towards the service experience.

As individuals become more familiar (and involved) with the service experience through repeated exposure, they develop a better understanding of the service and service provider and their latitudes of acceptance and non-commitment decrease while their latitudes of rejection increase. Because the number of behaviors they value becomes reduced and the number of objectionable behaviors increases, they become more discerning in their judgments and are more able to recognize good service when they experience it. The good service they receive encourages them to return again when they need help. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H₁: Frequency of advisement will be positively related to service quality rating.

Advisement recency refers to the amount of time which has transpired since the last advising contact. Recency theory posits that recent experiences tend to be more vivid in one's memory than earlier experiences, especially when there is a relatively long period of time between experiences (Miller and Campbell 1959). That is, as time diminishes details about prior events, individuals tend to reconstruct attitudes and impressions so as to be consistent with the scarce details that they can remember. Moreover, their fading memory dims the details about differences between prior expectations and prior service performance, and consequently, remembered differences between expectation and performance will tend to be less. In short, recent experiences of satisfaction or dissatisfaction make a greater impression on quality perceptions than prior experiences (Athiyaman 1997), and this relationship should hold for SERVQUAL-style difference scores. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H₂: Recency of advisement will be positively related to service quality rating.

Student academic prowess refers to the ability and preparedness of students to succeed in a collegiate academic program. Achieved grade point average has frequently been used as a surrogate for academic prowess as it provides an easily-obtained general indication of the student's academic ability. Interestingly, prior research regarding freshmen indicates an inverse relationship between GPA and student satisfaction with advising (Abernathy 1997). High GPA students appear to more easily read and follow published instructions with respect to issues commonly addressed in advising sessions such as, course selection and registration processes. They have confidence in their ability to devise an effective schedule and properly register, and often are offended, agitated or disconcerted by the requirement that they must meet with an advisor who looks over their shoulder and "approves" what they have done. To such students, this "stamp of approval" is considered a superfluous academic formality and an unnecessary bother.

Conversely, low GPA students may have more questions about their academic program of study. Poor classroom performance may indicate that such students must be more careful in making course selections and registering, and they may be faced with re-evaluating the validity of their choice of major. Typically, there can be high involvement in the advising process for low GPA students, especially with respect to the attendant potential loss of financial assistance, the re-taking of unsuccessful courses, and other sanctions applied to the scheduling process or by the program of study. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H₃: Academic prowess will be negatively related to service quality rating.

METHODOLOGY

Two samples of respondents were studied, the first involving freshmen and the second involving upperclassmen (sophomores, juniors, and seniors). Participants in the first sample consisted of 279 first-year students enrolled in general psychology sections at a major research state university located in the Southeastern region of the United States. Participants in the second sample consisted of 162 upper-class students, also enrolled in sections of general psychology. General psychology is a common social science elective that attracts students from a wide variety of colleges, schools and majors across campus. Extra credit was offered as an incentive for participation in the study. No information relative to age, gender, or race was obtained.

To analyze and evaluate service quality, an adapted version of the SERVQUAL instrument (Parasuraman et al. 1988) was administered to both samples so as to assess the level of contiguity or discontinuity of expectations and perceptions in relation to academic advising. The instrument was adapted for the intended purpose using appropriate measurement development methodology (Churchill 1979; Gerbing and Anderson 1988).

Elicitation of subjects was conducted by providing each with a packet consisting of a consent form

which included instructions, classification, college or school affiliation, and general academic advising information, the SERVQUAL measure of student *expectations* (of the academic advising process), and the SERVQUAL measure of student perceptions. Each of the SERVQUAL measures contained 20 items aimed at assessing five dimensions (assurance, empathy, reliability, responsiveness, and tangibles). Prior focus groups were conducted as a check for face validity and to refine the survey instrument. All items were rated using a seven-point Likert scale. Actual student GPA was obtained from university records. Both frequency and recency were single item, self-report, continuous measures.

RESULTS

Basic descriptive information regarding the five dimensions of each measure is presented in Table I for both the freshmen and upperclassmen samples. Values achieved for internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) and average inter-item correlation are within acceptable limits, and the scales were deemed to be internally consistent in this application.

The SERVQUAL instrument measures quality by assessing the gaps between expectation and performance perception for each of its five dimensions (assurance, empathy, reliability, responsiveness and tangibles) to provide improvement diagnostics and then by assessing the weighted total gap. Results reported in Table I indicate that freshmen rated advising quality as slightly worse than the upperclassmen (-1.00 for freshmen vs -.72 for upperclassmen). Based upon the dimensional gaps, freshmen rated the greatest service deficiencies in assurance, responsiveness and tangibles dimensions, while upperclassmen rated the greatest deficiency in responsiveness.

A standard multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the amount of variance in the principal dependent variable of service quality that were accounted for by the factors of and frequency, recency, and academic prowess. In the freshmen sample, there was a significant regression relationship among service quality and the predictors examined, $F(3, 275) = 8.98$, $p < .00001$, that

accounted for approximately 9 percent of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .079$). Estimated standardized coefficients (Betas) indicated that frequency of advising was most significant (.20), followed by recency in meeting with an advisor (.14) and then academic prowess (-.12). See Table II. Thus, all three research hypotheses were supported.

In the upperclassmen sample, there was a significant regression relationship among service quality and the predictors of recency and academic prowess, but not frequency, $F(3, 158) = 7.63$, $p < .00008$, that accounted for approximately 13 percent of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .110$). BETA values indicated that recency in meeting with an advisor was most significant (.29) with academic prowess (.16) next. See Table III. Thus, the second hypothesis was supported while the third hypothesis relationship was supported, but in an inverse direction. This finding may either substantiate the uniqueness of the freshman year experience or reflect the developmental process of students. The answer likely involves a combination of both.

After testing the hypotheses with both samples, a further investigation was made regarding the relationships among the independent variables. First, in the freshmen sample, the relationship between advising frequency and GPA was examined. It was anticipated that students typically would have met with their advisor three times during the current academic year, once at the beginning of school to sign-up for Fall classes, again at mid-Fall to sign-up for Spring classes, and then again at mid-Spring to sign-up for the following Fall. No statistical difference was found between the mean GPA for students who met with their advisor three times, versus the mean GPA for students who met with their advisor more frequently. The relationship between advising appointment recency and GPA was also examined, and again no statistically significant differences were found. The correlation between recency and frequency was .28, so these two variables do exhibit some inter-dependence. In addition, upperclassmen

TABLE I
Descriptive Information – Means, Standard Deviations,
Reliability Coefficients, and Mean Inter-Item Correlations

Measure	Mean		Standard Deviation		Coefficient α		Mean Inter-Item Correlation	
	Study1	Study2	Study1	Study2	Study1	Study2	Study1	Study2
Assurance								
Expectation	5.95	5.90	1.01	1.05	.86	.84	.61	.57
Performance	4.95	5.20	1.43	1.34	.85	.86	.60	.62
Gap	-1.00	-.70						
Empathy								
Expectation	5.68	5.71	1.16	1.01	.89	.86	.66	.60
Performance	4.85	5.02	1.59	1.49	.91	.88	.73	.67
Gap	-.83	-.69						
Reliability								
Expectation	5.79	5.78	1.15	1.03	.90	.86	.71	.62
Performance	4.90	5.06	1.49	1.48	.90	.91	.71	.72
Gap	-.89	-.72						
Responsiveness								
Expectation	5.92	5.94	1.10	.99	.88	.81	.71	.60
Performance	4.63	5.09	1.65	1.41	.87	.80	.72	.61
Gap	-1.29	-.85						
Tangibles								
Expectation	5.90	5.76	1.00	.97	.99	.88	.89	.59
Performance	4.92	5.14	1.40	1.33	.89	.86	.64	.57
Gap	-.98	-.62						
Advising Quality								
Expectation	5.85	5.82	.977	.896	.97	.95	.59	.52
Performance	4.85	5.10	1.384	1.278	.97	.96	.62	.58
Gap	-1.00	-.72	1.477	1.381				
Recency	3.67	3.80	.711	.533				
Frequency	2.63	3.29	2.185	2.732				
Acad. Prowess	2.61	2.65	.789	.792				

TABLE II
Standard Multiple Regression Analysis for Sample I

N=279	Beta	Standard Error of Beta	B	Standard Error of B	t(275)	p-level
Intercept			-1.742	.497	-3.508	.0005
Recency	.1400	.059	.268	.114	2.361	.0189
Frequency	.2015	.059	.136	.040	3.398	.0008
Academic Prowess	-.1234	.057	-.230	.108	-2.143	.0330

TABLE III
Standard Multiple Regression Analysis for Sample II

N=162	Beta	Standard Error of Beta	B	Standard Error of B	t(158)	p-level
Intercept			-4.435	.816	-5.439	.0000
Recency	.2874	.076	.745	.196	3.798	.0002
Frequency	.0900	.076	.045	.038	1.189	.2363
Academic Prowess	.1593	.074	.277	.130	2.141	.0338

were found to have a higher frequency of advising contact average than freshmen (3.29 as compared to 2.63). Also, the upperclassmen rated advising service quality better than freshmen (-.72 as compared to -1.00).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to examine the influence of three situational/personal variables on service quality evaluations of collegiate academic advising by both freshmen and students beyond the first-year experience. By understanding the influence of these variables, service quality evaluation scores may be more accurately interpreted in any ongoing program of service quality improvement. The results suggest several observations.

First, advisement frequency had the strongest influence of the three variables in the freshmen sample, but failed to show significance in the upperclassmen sample. This result implies that academic institutions may be well advised to

encourage more frequent contact between advisor and *freshmen* advisees. Strong relationship building efforts may pay dividends in enhanced appreciation for the advisor and advisor role, resulting in a higher level of service quality perception. However, increased academic advising frequency may not be an appropriate recommendation for all students, especially upperclassmen.

A potential explanation that accounts for this dichotomy may be that the role of advising (and advisors) changes with students' educational development. As students gain experience in the advising process and with other educational tasks, the number of times a student and advisor meets diminishes in importance. That is, what is important to students regarding advising undergoes development as students progress from the first-year forward, and consequently the factors which influence advising quality evaluations change. Therefore, the value of advising, as opposed to frequency, may instead be the overriding factor affecting service quality evaluations. Moreover, although a discrepant service quality gap resulted,

upperclassmen did rate the advising service quality higher than freshmen, which suggests that there may be differences in what factors they consider to be significant and exemplary of advising quality. In sum, freshmen may need to meet their advisor more frequently to gain an understanding of the advising "basics" such as, course selection and registration processes, whereas upperclassmen may be more concerned with the ultimate outcome of the advising session. In other words, the overall effectiveness of the advisement becomes the key component. This explanation seems reasonable because upperclassmen are more familiar with the "basics" noted above and are more directly concerned with moving toward graduation by meeting program of study requirements. Consequently, students realize the value of advising and recognize that the process can entail more than originally thought.

The frequency variable was operationalized by recording the number of advising contacts in the current academic year. Upperclassmen may have significant prior advising experience which was not captured by our methodology. In retrospect, this certainly could have had an influence on their advising expectations and performance evaluation. Also, when considered in light of the results of previous studies involving grade point averages (Abernathy 1997), lower performing students may require more assistance on advisement issues than higher performing students. Accordingly, and specific to freshmen, enforcing a "one-size-fits-all" policy on academic advising frequency may have deleterious effects on service quality ratings. A better program would have advising frequency guidelines that are roughly coordinated with academic prowess, so that poorer performing students are scheduled more frequently than better performing ones. Such a program could be in operation until a student acquires a specific number of credit hours that might classify them as a second semester sophomore, for example. In addition to frequency, advising style may also need to be adapted according to the needs of individual students.

Second, in both samples, the cumulative effects of the variables of interest (frequency, recency and

academic prowess), were relatively small based upon the computed R^2 . Clearly, there are more important factors, such as the quality of the advising itself (including advisors' willingness to advise, support for the procedure, expertise and knowledge of the process, and advising style) that influence service quality evaluations of advising services. Yet, these are factors that can be managed by the institution to result in incremental improvements in the perceptual outcome of the whole process and thus, enhanced advising service quality.

Third, recency also influences service quality evaluation, suggesting that in an on-going program of service quality improvement, recency should be controlled so as to compare ratings accurately over time and across departments. Without such control, observed improvements in ratings may simply be artifacts of differences in advising recency. In both samples, recency exhibited a significant relationship in the same direction. In fact, the degree of influence more than doubled, from .14 to .29, from the freshmen sample to the upperclassmen sample. Therefore, the above observations suggest that recency maintains its influence throughout the duration of undergraduate education.

CONCLUSIONS AND RESEARCH EXTENSIONS

This study has found that frequency, recency and academic prowess do have an influence on the advising quality ratings of freshmen of at least one comprehensive university; and that recency and academic prowess (although the latter in a contradictory direction) influence the advising quality ratings of upperclassmen. There are three strengths to this research. The first is timeliness. There is a good deal of current interest in service quality measurement and improvement, especially in the higher education context. Increasingly, colleges and universities are recognizing that they are a service provider, and that the services they provide must meet the needs of their customers and stakeholders (Engelland et al. 2000). The results of this study suggest that faculty can improve the quality of academic advising by paying attention to

the inter-relationship among recency, frequency, and academic prowess, particularly for freshmen.

A second strength of this investigation is the relatively large number of freshmen sampled (approximately 10 percent of the freshman class of the surveyed institution) reflecting a broad diversity of college and school affiliations and academic advising approaches. The chosen research setting involves a comprehensive institution that employs a large variety of faculty personalities and with differing advising styles. In addition, there is a broad diversity in the official advising procedures followed by the various academic units. Thus, even though the study was conducted at only one institution, the generalizability of the results to other settings is robust. Also, this research adds further understanding to our knowledge base regarding factors that predict academic success among freshman as well as supports the idea that the first-year experience is distinct from ensuing years.

A third strength is the inclusion of students from all year classifications, freshmen through senior. That is, the findings cumulatively reflect students' views of advising that correspond to different academic stages and educational progression. This increased sampling is meaningful because the subsequent changes related to such student development can be identified and monitored with respect to the variables that influence (or no longer influence) service quality evaluations, as was the case with frequency and academic prowess. Future research might attempt to gain a better understanding of why and how moderating variables of service quality evaluations change from the first-year to the second and so on, as well as what variables become more significant with each academic step.

These findings raise some additional issues for future research that involve a more thorough understanding of the determinants of advising quality. First, the differential finding relative to frequency suggests that there are other factors that may influence or moderate the frequency – quality relationship. Additional research should be undertaken that assesses other possible influences, such as total advising contacts, years in school,

knowledge of the advising process, advisor preparedness, and advisor skill. Perhaps investigation of these variables will explain why freshmen relate to advising quality and advising frequency differently than upperclassmen.

Second, the study should be replicated with a broader sample of students at a variety of colleges and universities. Despite the strength of the current sample, it is representative of only one university. Selecting respondents from a geographically diverse population of universities would be an important future step to understand and control for any regional cultural influences in the advising process. In addition, the research should involve a random sampling of students from different types of colleges and universities, so as to understand and control for school type differences.

Finally, research which further understands the role preparation and motivation of academic advisors may be fruitful to help understand the determinants of advising quality more thoroughly. Our research implies that something beyond frequency, recency and academic prowess has a greater influence on quality evaluation, and we suspect that the quality of the contact itself is a major determinant.

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