How to Become an Academic Advisor


I cannot count how many times I have been asked, “How does someone become an academic advisor?” It’s exciting when someone shows an interest in the advising career path. The job of academic advisor is rewarding and allows opportunities to make real differences in students’ academic careers. The advising profession is made up members from diverse backgrounds. So, how does one become an academic advisor?

The first step is to review current academic advisor job postings on NACADA’s Web site. Summarizing the duties, characteristics, and responsibilities of entry level academic advisor positions will help an advisor profile emerge. Next, look at best practices for training new academic advisors; a good place to start is the New Advisor Guidebook

This simple process results in five recommendations potential advisors should consider before beginning a career path leading to a job of as an academic advisor.

1. Review the duties and responsibilities of an academic advisor position

A common set of duties and responsibilities can include:
- Advise students about academic requirements and selection of courses
- Disseminate information on institutional policies and procedures
- Understand the institution’s interpretation of FERPA rules for the release of student information to faculty, parents, students, etc.
- Evaluate and determine the transfer of credits; research course descriptions to determine transferability
- Review and interpretation of placement and other standardized test scores, unofficial transcripts, and courses prerequisites
- Perform and interpret degree audits
- Know graduation requirements
- Assist students with career planning
- Monitor student registration activities and recommend solutions to academic difficulties.
- Maintain systematic and frequent contact with advisees
- Coordinate communications to the students regarding such things as registration and academic probation; this could include the maintenance of a student listserv
- Maintain accurate records (including electronic records) of interactions with students
- Be a student advocate when appropriate
- Serve as a liaison and foster intentional relationships with other advisors, offices, colleges, and departments.
- Refer students to the appropriate specialized staff for such issues as comprehensive counseling, financial assistance, study abroad, etc.
- Participate in the development, implementation, review, presentation, and revision of orientations for the first-time college students and transfer students
- Stay abreast of changing institutional information including admissions requirements, new programs, course changes, deadlines, important dates, costs, expanding facilities, updates in college-wide initiatives, transfer requirements, and state and federal mandates
- Engage in professional development activities, including but not limited to, memberships in professional organizations; attendance at conferences, workshops, division, and department training sessions; stay current with information technology skills.
• Participate in the planning, implementation, and the evaluation of the academic advisement program's goals and objectives.
• Participate in institutional student development and retention programs
• Serve as resource for faculty/staff
• Develop advising materials and presentations to support individual and group student sessions
• Demonstrate respect for all individuals.

2. Determine specific job skills preferred or required

The second step includes reviewing and summarizing the most cited job skills by employers. It is important that prospective advisors match their experiences alongside each skill listed.

The most cited job skills preferred or required in academic advising are:

• Interpersonal skills
• Teaching skills or excellent skills in public speaking
• Coordination, planning and organizational skills
• Excellent computer skills
• Effective communication skills particularly with diverse populations. Ability to build good rapport with a variety of constituents
• Service oriented attitude
• Ability to learn easily and disseminate detailed information
• Ability to work independently and collaboratively with others or in teams
• Good attention to details
• Ability to work with complex systems in a fast-paced and dynamic environment
• Flexible, patient, creative
• Skills in problem solving
• Good sense of humor

3. Determining the level of higher education preferred or required

Often prospective advisors ask “What education level is required to be a professional advisor?” Can I apply for advisor positions after finishing my bachelor’s degree?” Step three helps answer these questions.

Finding an academic advising position which only requires a bachelor’s degree is possible; however those positions usually require the degree also be within the subject area of the advising assignment. Most, academic advising positions require a master’s degree in one of the following areas:

• Higher Education
• College Student Personnel
• Higher Education Administration within Student Affairs
• Counseling
• Human Services such as Psychology and Social Work
• A specific discipline related to the area to be advised such as one within liberal arts, fine arts or a business discipline

Masters degrees in higher education or college student personnel are a logical fit for most positions in academic advising. The degree teaches the philosophical, economical and social foundation of higher education, as well as the structure of faculty governance and student affairs. The subject matter covered in graduate-level student personnel courses coveys a comprehensive understanding of student administration, theories and models of student personal, social, intellectual, vocational and moral development along with student learning outcomes and assessment. Most counseling graduate programs include subjects similar to those learned in higher education programs such as theories of life
development. Learning how to effectively use case studies, quantitative and qualitative research provides opportunities to put theories into practice. If working with undergraduate students is a primary goal, then completion of a master’s degree is a good start. Kansas State University, in conjunction with NACADA, offers an online graduate certificate and master’s degree in Academic Advising. Additionally, ACPA profiles for graduate programs indicating that “academic advising” was as a component of their program can be found in the Clearinghouse.

4. Determining the amount of work experience and kinds of experience preferred or required.

The fourth step is to determine the amount of experience required. Nearly all academic advisor positions prefer some related work experience. Prospective advisors inevitably must address “How can I acquire this experience beforehand?” Undeniably, advisors encourage their undergraduate advisees to enroll in internships during their academic career to begin the process of gaining experience prior to the job search. Undergraduates who secure part-time, -on-campus work in offices of student affairs (such as assessment, advising and counseling, disability support services, student life, athletics, admissions, enrollment management, student financial aid, and scholarships) gain work experience and an insight into the field.

One way to gain worthwhile, excellent hands-on experience is to attend graduate school full-time while completing an advising assistantship. Many assistantships require students to teach. This is a purposeful way to acquire skills and gain experience in teaching, disseminating detailed information, and discussing academic and non-academic issues with undergraduate students. Furthermore, writing a graduate thesis provides an opportunity to interview professionals in the advising field and perform research applicable to the field. Interviews, literature reviews and research are excellent ways to gain insight and knowledge of the profession. Successful candidates for advising positions are able to deliver their viewpoint both verbally and in writing.

Individuals who must work full-time and attend graduate school on a part-time basis should seek work in a collegiate setting and, if possible, in an area allied to student affairs. Volunteering to assist with a student-related activity held on a near-by campus or shadowing an advising professional are two options that can help gain valuable experience. These experiences may have the added bonus of helping the prospective advisor find a mentor in student affairs.

5. Development of a personal advising philosophy and a commitment to the profession

Acquiring a personal advising philosophy is an important element in this process. Academic advising as a profession is committed to lifelong learning and to making a difference in the acquisition of higher education. An excerpt from Nikki Allen Dyer’s (2007) article in the *New Advisor Guidebook* providing insight into the development of a personal academic advising philosophy can be found in the NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources.

Become involved early in one’s career. Student rates for joining professional organizations are deliberately inexpensive and should be budgeted into school expenses. Many graduate programs encourage students to join and often help to support attendance at professional conferences where the prospective advisors can network with professionals, learn of new topics and research, and reflect on the direction the field is moving.

Conclusion

In summary:

- Step 1: Review current academic advisor job vacancies and make a list of the requirements and the duties of the jobs.
- Step 2: Compare each individual job requirement to experiences and possible transferrable skills. Write down future options for obtaining those requirements. Seek the advice of an undergraduate career counselor.
Step 3: Plan to obtain a masters degree. Review graduate programs in higher education or student personnel and the availability of assistantships.

Step 4: Determine preferred work experiences. Look for opportunities to gain related advising experience.

Step 5: Begin developing a personal advising philosophy. Network with other professionals through professional organizations. Perform a literature review and read what other advisors are currently discussing. Find out the “hot” topics in the advising profession.

References


Boretz, E. (2006). Drawing from your formal education, how do you use your discipline(s) not only in your own advising but also in collaboration with colleagues from other disciplines in their work as advisors? Retrieved March 18, 2008 from The Mentor. On the Web at www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/.


**Resource web links**

- The NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources located at [http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/index.htm](http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/index.htm)
- ACPA’s listing of universities and graduate programs that mention advising [http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/Links/ACPA.htm](http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/Links/ACPA.htm).
- Kansas State University/NACADA online graduate certificate and masters degree in academic advising on the Web at [http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/GradPrograms/index.htm](http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/GradPrograms/index.htm). These are popular programs and several graduate students have transferred courses from these programs toward a master’s degree at a local university.
- Advisor position announcements can be found at [http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/PositionAnnouncements/index.htm](http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/PositionAnnouncements/index.htm)
- The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal [http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor](http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor)

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