**Advising Behaviors Supporting St. Olaf Students' Vocational Discernment**

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*I've selected some excerpts in which I am the principal author*

## ***Conceptualization of Vocation***

The term "vocation" has its roots in Christian thought on purpose and religious duty. For example, Yonker et al. (2019) adopt their small liberal arts college's definition of vocation as the "lifelong process of tuning into God's call, understanding who we are in Christ, and living our lives accordingly." However, the term vocation is now often used in secular contexts. The Lutheran Center at St. Olaf College defines vocation as who a person is "called to be" and what they are called to do across all parts of life – "not only in professional work, but also in family and friendships, community engagements, relationship with the earth, search for meaning, and pursuit of justice… living intentionally toward both personal flourishing and the common good" (St. Olaf College n.d.). In our survey, we implied a definition of vocation as "a sense of purpose and direction in life" to make the questions more accessible and able to be easily understood by respondents.

## ***Interpersonal Engagment, Advisor Qualities, and Advisor Identities***

Research indicates that interpersonal engagement, advisor qualities (e.g., approachability and empathy), and advisor identities, are important for advisee satisfaction. Iatrellis et al. (2024) found that student reviews of highly-rated advisors emphasized attributes, such as empathy, approachability, and effectiveness, in guiding students towards achieving their academic goals. Conversely, advisors with less favorable reviews were often perceived as inadequately addressing students' concerns about their academic journey, suggesting persistent challenges student-advisor interactions. Yonker et al. (2019) similarly found that a personable advisor was important to student satisfaction. Research by Sheldon et al. (2015) found that supportiveness and mentoring were more important to students than the knowledge and availability of the advisor. Our study focuses in part on identifying the attributes of good academic advisors, particularly in relation to helping students with their vocational discernment.

The demographic characteristics and social identities of academic advisors may impact student perception of the efficacy of advising. For example, Iatrellis et al. (2024) found that student satisfaction with advisors was similar across the gender of advisors, but younger advisors were reviewed more favorably than older ones. A major limitation we found in the existing literature, however, is the lack of research on the impact of race and ethnicity on student-advisor interactions.

Futhermore, the literature underscores that both the quality and frequency of advisor-advisee interactions contribute to a beneficial advising experience (Bryson et al. 2023; Sheldon et al. 2015; Smith and Allen 2014). Smith and Allen (2014) found that students who met with their advisors more frequently and relied on them as primary sources of academic information, rather than using websites or informal social networks of friends and family, were more likely to understand how their academic pursuits aligned with their career and life goals.

## ***Validity and Reliability***

The validity of research is the extent to which a measure, such as a survey question, examines the construct that researchers claim it measures (Neuman 2019:170). To achieve face validity, or confirmation of the soundness of a construct's measure by members of the scientific community, we consulted our research professor. To achieve content validity, we ensured that our measures represented all aspects of our conceptual definitions (Neuman 2019:216). For example, we focused our questions on academic advising around our implied definition of vocation. We distinguished our operational definition of academic advising from mentoring, focusing on faculty who provide curricular support to the student.

Measurement reliability refers to the stability of a measure, such as a research question. The reliability of a measure is established when consistent results are achieved when the same conditions are replicated (Neuman 2019:170). We achieved this by clearly conceptualizing all constructs, as shown in the above discussion of variables. Our items used mixed levels of measurement, with most being at the nominal level and two at the ordinal level.

We also safeguarded reliability by using multiple indicators of a variable, measuring the students' perception of how academic advising had impacted their sense of purpose and direction, as well as measuring the medium through which advising behaviors were engaged in (e.g., in-person, email). In addition, we conducted a pilot study by submitting the survey to other students in SOAN 371.

## Research Results and Discussion

### ***Advising Behavior Index***

Table 9. *Index of Vocation-Promoting Advisor Behaviors*

| Item | Percent |
|---|---|
| 0 | 3.4 |
| 1 | 5.3 |
| 2 | 12.8 |
| 3 | 18.4 |
| 4 | 18.7 |
| 5 | 12.5 |
| 6 | 11.2 |
| 7 | 7.5 |
| 8 | 5.6 |
| 9 | 2.5 |
| 10 | 2.2 |

The mean on the Vocation-Promoting Advisor Behaviors Index was 4.32, and the standard deviation, or average distance from the mean, was 2.277, which means approximately 95% of respondents reported their advisor engaging in between two and four of these behaviors. In addition, the index scores shown on the histogram are relatively normally distributed, as shown in Figure 1.

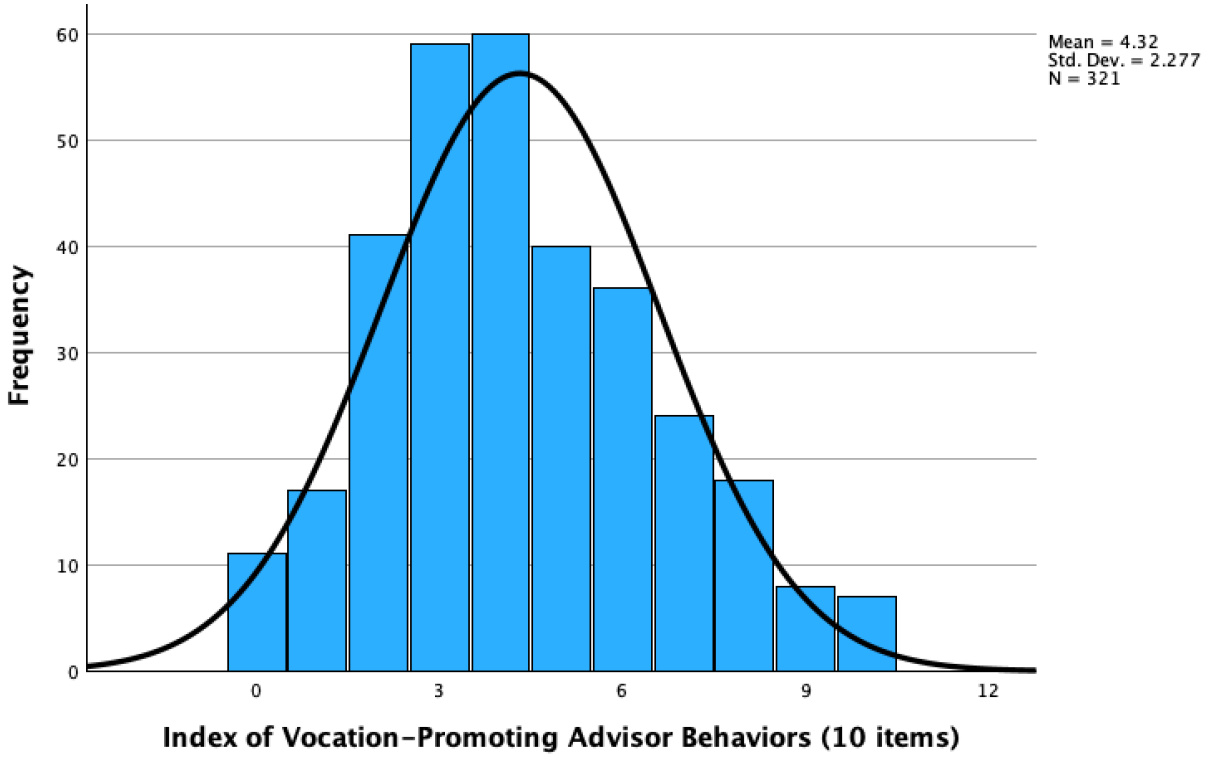


Figure 1. *Index of Vocation-Promoting Advisor Behaviors*

We calculated a Spearman's rho correlation coefficient for the relationship between our index of vocation-promoting advisor behaviors and level of vocational discernment. We found a weak-to-moderate, positive significant correlation ($r(2)=0.235$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents whose advisors engage in more of these types of advising behaviors tend to have a stronger sense of vocation. This is consistent with Smith and Allen (2014), who found that students who mostly relied on their advisor for information were more likely to understand how their academic pursuits aligned with their career and life goals. It appears that more time with the advisor is positively associated with vocation. This is also in line with Sheldon et al. (2015), who found that longer and more frequent meetings with advisors had a positive impact on student academic performance (e.g. higher GPA). They also found that the advisor's availability and supportiveness were more important to students than the advisor's knowledge.

We conducted independent samples t-tests to compare the mean index score of the binarized demographics of race and ethnicity, gender, first-generation/continuing-generation, and international/domestic status. As shown in Table 10 below, we found a statistically significant difference between binarized gender and the vocation-promoting behavior index ($p = 0.035$). Advisors of female students engaged in a lesser variety of vocation-promoting behaviors than advisors of male respondents. This is interesting when compared to Iatrellis et al. 2024 who found that there was no preference for an advisor of the same gender. It may be that while female students do not find it important to have an advisor of the same gender, they are not receiving the same amount of vocation-promoting advising behavior. Surprisingly, first-generation students had significantly higher scores on the index ($p =0.041$) than their counterparts. Similarly, BIPOC students had higher scores ($p=0.008$) on the index than White students. This could be owed to the efficacy of programs that target minoritized students, in

which they learn to interact more sincerely with their advisors and take initiative more often. Other binary demographic characteristics were not significant.

Table 10. *Relationship Between Advisor Behavior Index and Demographic Variables*

| Demographic tested against Index of vocation-promoting advisor behaviors | Mean score on Index | t-statistic | Degrees of freedom | 95% confidence interval | | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Lower bound | Upper bound | |
| Binarized race and ethnicity | BIPOC = 4.97<br>White = 4.14 | 2.666 | 291 | 0.217 | 1.440 | 0.008 |
| Binarized gender | Female = 4.24<br>Male = 4.90 | -2.121 | 279 | -1.279 | -0.048 | 0.035 |
| First-Generation | Yes = 4.90<br>No = 4.17 | 2.057 | 310 | 0.031 | 1.415 | 0.041 |
| Disability | Yes = 4.12<br>No = 4.37 | -0.821 | 309 | -0.821 | 0.338 | 0.412 |
| International | International = 4.30<br>Domestic = 4.29 | 0.35 | 312 | -0.809 | 0.839 | 0.972 |

We used a one-way ANOVA to compare the mean scores on the vocation-promoting academic advising behavior index across class years (first-years, sophomores, juniors, and seniors). We found a significant difference ($F(3, 311) = 6.045$, $p < 0.001$), and used Tukey's HSD to further probe these differences. We found that first-year students had an average index score of 3.45, significantly lower than sophomore and senior-year students whose average scores were 4.62 and 4.85, respectively. The seniors' higher average can be explained by having more time to interact with their advisors and provide the chance for the advisor to administer vocation-promoting advising behavior as opposed to first-year students who may not have as many face hours. We recommend that advisors administer more vocation-promoting advising behaviors by increasing contact time, which can be achieved through an expanded academic advising schedule for first-year students or a higher number of mandatory check-in meetings.

Table 11. *Tukey's HSD of Index Score and Class Year*

| First-years in comparison to… | Mean score on Index of vocation-promoting advisor behaviors | 95% confidence interval | | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 3.45 | Lower bound | Upper bound | |
| Sophomores | 4.62 | -2.10 | -0.24 | 0.007 |
| Seniors | 4.85 | -2.3 | -0.5 | <0.001 |