

IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTES OF AN ACADEMIC ADVISOR: A CASE STUDY

By

ELISE MARIE ROMERO

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A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College

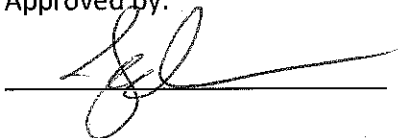
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors Degree  
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THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

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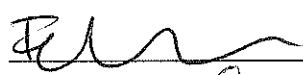

Dr. JESPER NIELSEN

Department of Marketing, Eller College of Management

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## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .....	4
STATEMENT OF PUPROSE .....	5
STATEMENT OF RELEVANCE.....	5
LITERARY REVIEW.....	6
METHODOLOGY.....	7
DATA ANALYSIS.....	8
FINDINGS.....	9
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS.....	10
FURTHER RESEARCH .....	11
APPENDICES.....	12
• Appendix A: Summary of Advisor Salaries.....	12
• Appendix B: Moderator Guide for Advisor Interviews .....	12
• Appendix C: Student Survey.....	13
• Appendix D: Survey Results.....	16
WORKS CITED .....	18

## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined important attributes of academic advisors to students. This study was conducted via an interview with four academic advisors from four different majors, and a survey to students. Students were given a time period of two weeks before spring break to do the survey. This time frame allowed me to catch students at the middle of the semester where they could drop a class if need be which would have triggered an interaction with their advisor making the interaction top of mind. The purpose of this study was to determine how advisors feel they are doing at their job and what attributes are important to the student, which can be considered by the university. Descriptive statistics and correlations were used to analyze data.

## **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

Academic advising is a very important part of a student's college career. Advisors help ensure success for the student by assisting in scheduling the correct classes, guiding students in career related areas when applicable, and supporting in personal issues when needed. However, in order for the role of the advisor to be successful, the student has to be satisfied and utilize their advisors. The purpose of this study is to identify certain attributes that students find most important and how satisfied they are with their academic advisor. The attributes focused on in this study were identified by myself and current students attending the University of Arizona.

This is an area that affects a large number of people and has affected me personally by having both a good and bad advisor. This is a career I would like to pursue and the reason I am conducting my thesis.

For the purpose of this study, the definition of academic advising is:

“Academic advising is an interactive process in which the adviser helps the student set and achieve academic goals, acquire relevant information and services, and make responsible decisions consistent with interests, goals, abilities, and degree requirements. Decisions concerning careers and/or graduate study may be part of the advising process. Advising should be personalized to consider the special needs of each student, which may include appropriate referral services.” (University of Oklahoma, 2003)

## **STATEMENT OF RELEVANCE**

Academic advising has come a long way; the role has evolved from teachers/principals mentoring students to now having an advisor for each major in some cases. This role has been around since the birth of education; however it has only been formally defined for a few decades. In 1979 the National Academic Advising Association was established and had 429 members within its first year, today there are over 10,000 members (NACADA, 2014). Today advising is primarily focused on student development. With the development of nontraditional forms of higher education such as community colleges, online degrees, and others, along with the increase of traditional universities it is no wonder we have seen so much growth in this field.

When students go to see their advisor, there are a number of reasons why the student would set up the appointment, and the interaction between the student and advisor will vary greatly. The most common is to discuss class schedules and/or certain credits the student needs for their specific degree. Other reasons include the student is on academic probation and it is required that the student and advisor meet to discuss how the student got there, what it means, and where to go from there. Some students confide in their advisor to discuss personal issues they are dealing with which may be effecting how they are doing in class. From this, the advisor can help the student determine if it is appropriate for them to take a leave of absence, or drop a few classes in order to still be successful in school while dealing with the outside issue. Advisors can also assist students with career related activities whether that is getting an internship or a job after college. All of these interactions are typically held in person but can be done via email. In today's world, interaction via email is becoming the primary form of communication; mainly due to convenience. A down side to email is a lot can be lost in translation and it is difficult to determine tone which can lead to misunderstandings.

However, simply going in to see your advisor once a year or even once a semester a student cannot take advantage of all the resources available that the academic advisor has to offer. In order to do so, there needs to be an effort on both sides.

## **LITERARY REVIEW**

Advising including counseling was reinforced post WWI when the military needed to help veterans address their psychological and vocations skills. There was another surge during and after WWII when veterans would return to attend college under the G.I. Bill. When the baby boomers entered into the college market in the 1960's and 1970's there was an amplified need for advisors and counseling because of the increase in demand. Following this in 1976 the first statewide Academic Advising Conference at California State University/University of California/Private University was held on September 30 in Fresno, California. A year later a national academic advising conference was held in Vermont (Cook, 1999).

Academic advising is the only guaranteed one on one interaction for a student in their undergraduate career. This makes it a key component for student retention, but not the only component. Alexander Astin (1977, 1993) determined that the persistence or retention rate of students is greatly affected by the level and quality of their interactions with peers as well as faculty and staff. With this type of connection, I believe currently the advising profession is highly under rated and needs to be taken more seriously by the schools, the advisors and the students.

Every student is required to see their academic advisor at least once within their academic career for a degree check. Because this is a guaranteed interaction that reaches all students advisors should be well integrated with career services, financial aid, and residence life. Students drop out for two main reasons, one is they are not enjoying school and don't know what they want to do after school, and two the cost can get to be overwhelming. Therefore placing students in the appropriate classes is vital for retention. Along with having strong connections between advising to career related services, whether that be within the advising role or referring the student over to career services; and financial aid are essential (Nutt, 2003). Additionally studies have shown that students who are more involved as an undergraduate are more likely to be involved and give back as alumni (Heyman, 2008). Being involved can include Greek Life, student clubs, becoming a TA for a teacher, attending school events, living on campus, etc. There are so many outlets that students can be overwhelmed and need direction on which path may be best for them.

Academic advising today has moved towards a more holistic relationship between the students because of the changing student base that have different needs than before. This change is based on the Vygotsky's (1978) "Zone of Proximal Development" theory, as well as by Dewey's (1938) emphasis on personal experience and the students own ability. This means, instead of advisors simply focusing on the present and the immediate future for the student, the past coursework and experiences need to be taken into account when planning for the student. This becomes increasingly important when there is a student from a different culture involved. In

addition, it is part of the advising role to keep the student stimulated and challenged in what they are doing, because if they are not tested the student will become bored, less engaged, and possibly drop out. On the contrary, if the student is overly challenged then they will become overwhelmed and perhaps lose interest in school (Bohonos, 2013). This is a delicate balance that will not always be obvious to both the student and advisor, but needs to be communicated and sought out.

People innately want to pay it forward when something good has been given to them. Thus when a student has a pleasing undergraduate experience, they are more likely to give after graduation. Research shows that students who were more involved as undergraduate give more as alumni, however it takes about eight years after graduation for a gift to be a meaningful size. This has to do with economic status, marital status, if children are involved etc.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Data Background*

Data for this study was collected by my, Elise Romero. I began by having an IRB application approved to be able to interview academic advisors in person to get a feel of what their average day was like, the pros and cons of their job, and how effectively they believe they are doing their job. Following those completed interviews, I submitted an amendment to my IRB application to send out a survey to students via online and on paper.

### *Demographics*

I interviewed advisors from different majors and school sizes to get a well-rounded view of the advisor population at the University of Arizona. The first advisor I meet with was Sasha Wilson from the School of Architecture which has 439 students\*. Sasha is the only undergraduate advisor for architecture students. The second advisor I interviewed was Stephanie Christopher from the Eller College of Management. She is an advisor for the Marketing, MIS and Operations Management majors; her case load of students is about 500+ which is the average for the Eller advisors. Eller as a whole has an undergraduate population of about 5,622 students\* and splits up its advising by last name before students are admitted and then by major once admitted to the college. The third advisor was Anne Samuelson from the Anthropology major which is part of the College of Social and Behavior Sciences which has 4,450\* students as a whole. She advises about 450 students, and is the only Anthropology academic advisor there, though there is a student advisor Danielle Van Dobben who I did not interview, and is available to these students as well. The role of the student advisor is to introduce students to the ANTH BA and BS degrees as well as answering general questions. The fourth advisor was Heidi Creel from the Political Science major her case load is about 450 students which is in the College of Social and Behavior Sciences which has 4,450\* students as a whole. Heidi shares this role with Michael Greeley, they divide the students by last name, Heidi advises students last names L-Z.

\*number of students per college is based on the 2012-2013 year given by UofA Fact Book

### *Interview Protocol- Advisors*

After being approved I contacted advisors from four different schools and conducted a pre-interview letting them know my intentions and goals for my full length interview that would come later on. I inquired what time during the spring 2014 semester would be most favorable for them for the full length interview. In meeting with Stephanie Christopher on 12/12/13 we determined that I would email her about a week and a half ahead of time to set that meeting. Sasha Wilson indicated that either two weeks before school started or after the first two weeks of school would be a good time for the interview. From there, I emailed Anne and Heidi about two weeks before school started to set up the full length interview. For all the advisor interviews I set up an appointment and went to their office to conduct the interview. I used a moderator guide to help shape the conversation we had (Moderator Guide attached, Appendix B).

### *Interview Protocol- Students*

Next, I developed a survey to be sent out to students based on what the advisors said and what some of my peers believed to be important aspects of advisors. I targeted juniors and seniors because traditionally they would have more interactions with their advisors compared to freshmen and sophomores. Out of 175 responders who identified what year they are, 134 were juniors and seniors.

I contacted some teachers I am close with and inquired if they could put my survey on their Blackboard page (website page for the class) or if I could come into class to conduct my survey. Teachers are instructed to not let student surveys be put up on the class Blackboard page because it is not directly related to the learning for that class. Therefore, I was unable to get my survey put on any Blackboard page but was able to get into three classes and conduct the survey via paper.

### *Collecting Data*

I was able to go into Ed Ackerly's 452 marketing class (about 60 students), Jenanne Ferguson's 276 Anthropology (about 20 students), as well as Ann Samuelson's Anthropology 395D (about 12 students) class to conduct surveys via paper. I was unable to get into any Architecture classes. The reason for going into classes was to guarantee responses to my survey. In addition to going into classes, my survey was available via online through Qualtrics and was sent out through email to Architecture, Anthropology, and Political Science students. Those advisors were able to include my survey in a routine email that is sent out to their listserv. Additionally I posted my survey on my personal Facebook page asking my peers to take my survey.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

I recorded the interviews I had with the advisors using my phone and listened to them again at a later date to identify common themes. These interviews were not shared with anyone else, and the advisors were told their interview would remain confidential.

I collected surveys via paper and via an online survey from February 26 through March 17<sup>th</sup>. This time frame was chosen because it was in the middle of the semester where students

generally have an idea how they are doing in classes and can drop classes if need which would trigger interaction with an academic advisor (the last day to drop from an individual class for the Spring 2014 semester was March 11). Therefore if a student did go in to see their advisor the interaction would be top of mind. In addition, typically student projects, tests, and activities pick up after spring break and I did not want to risk having students not take my survey because they were too busy (Spring Break for spring 2014 semester was March 17<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup>).

I used SPSS to analyze the data I had collected. Using SPSS allowed me to get an overall view of what my data looked like. No unique identifiers were recorded for the student surveys. Frequency tables and means were used to gather the demographics of the respondents; correlations were used to detect if things were positively or negatively correlated and to see if that correlation was significant. Case summaries were used to distinguish means for a numeric variable when paired with a certain categorical variable.

## **FINDINGS**

### *Advisor Population*

There were some consistent themes from all advisor interviews; one was that their pay is not satisfactory to them for the amount of work they do (see average salaries Appendix Table A); however they are all content with how their average day is. In addition, there is a want for more help because there is a feel that if their case load of students was lighter, they could do their job more effectively than what they do now. Getting to know students on a more personal level is something the advisors I interviewed with would like to do more and could be done more easily if the case load of students was reduced. The average day for advisors consists of starting off with answering emails which usually takes a few hours, followed by appointments with students, department meeting, registration issues, and either recruitment activities or helping visiting families. It is reassuring that despite drawbacks (mainly the financial aspect) to the academic advisor position, all four advisors I interviewed love their job and always put their students first and believe that they are doing their job successfully.

The advisors indicated that they don't see a certain type of student more often than another. There are those students who are required to set up an appointment due to academic troubles, and there are certain students who seek out that additional human interaction. It is really up to the student to take advantage of resources the advisor offers and set up the appointment. This is especially true for the situation here at the University of Arizona where most academic advisors have case loads of hundreds of students to advise.

### *Student Population*

Out of the students I surveyed, Eller College of Management students were most responsive; the average student who took my survey had a GPA between 3.0-3.5 with a total of 79 students and a close second of 61 students with a GPA of 3.5-4.0 out of a total of 176. In addition over 70% of respondents were female. This shows me that the student with a GPA of a 3.0 and above that is female is more likely to participate in a survey then those with lower GPA's or who are male. However the majority of students that responded are not honors students even with the higher GPA.

Some consistent themes I saw from the student side is advisors not from the Eller College of Management, did not do as much career related help as the advisors from the business school. This could be from the nature of the schools themselves or an individual choice by the advisor not to place an emphasis on this aspect. There is a positive correlation between satisfaction and advisors helping in a nonacademic way (i.e. resume help, dealing with personal issues, finding a job or internship).

I found that generally academic advisors did have a positive impact on students' undergraduate experience and 134 out of 199 students are either satisfied or really satisfied with their advisor. Largely the advisor did not have much influence on the students' decision to attend graduate school in general. However, for those students who were directly influenced by their advisor to attend graduate school were highly satisfied with their advisor. Students who see their advisor more often in the semester (3-5 times per semester) are more satisfied then those who do not see their advisor as often (less than 3 times per semester).

There is a positive correlation between students who are satisfied with their advisors and if they plan to involved as an alumnus. In addition those who indicated that their advisor positively impacted their undergraduate experience was also positively correlated with planning to be involved as an alumnus. There is a slightly higher satisfaction for those students who do not deem it important that their advisor have experience in the field they are advising in. The same the same result was found when asking if having the advisor office in the same building as most of the students classes.

Students find it important that advisors have quick response time with their emails. This is completely understandable and expected in today's society. Also, students believe solving problems over email is important to them. Interestingly, students said it was not important to them that their advisor have virtual office hours. I find this unusual since solving problems over email was significant. Having high appointment availability was important to 144 out of 180 students. The majority of students did indicate that having their advisor act as a mentor was important to them. On the contrary, students indicated that having their advisor know them on a personal was only moderately important.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Students are generally satisfied with their advisor and have indicated they do make a positive impact on their undergraduate experience. Increasing satisfaction among academic advisors could potentially lead to more alumni involvement and alumni giving. This is a possible revenue stream that has not been widely tapped into yet.

Having experience in the field the advisor is advising in does not lead to increased satisfaction, neither does having the advisors office in the same building as most of the students classes. This isn't necessary to do the job when the main goal is to verify students are taking the correct classes, but would aid in recommending a career path for students after receiving their degree. As well as making visiting the advisor easier on the student, which can make appointments a more efficient process for both the student and the advisor by possibly reducing wait times, missed appointments etc.

Even though advisors do not seem to be helping in the more career related field (an average 127 out of 178 students indicated they never received this type of help), are still currently largely satisfied. However when advisors did help with nonacademic matters those students were highly satisfied, therefore to increase satisfaction as a whole, advisors can increase their involvement in this area. Or perhaps like the Eller College of Management, develop a whole department that is dedicated to professional development and have the advisors integrated with that department and offer more career related support. Again, by expanding this area of the advisor role, the university can increase satisfaction.

The implications of this study is the advisors at the University of Arizona are doing a worthy job in their roles in academic advising but I believe there is room to expand the role into more career and personal help. Instructing a student on which classes to take to acquire a degree can only go so far and could potentially be automated in the future making the role of the academic advisor obsolete.

### **FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study only focuses on the attributes that I determined, in order to gain a better understanding of what attributes are most important. A more extensive study would need to be done offering a more comprehensive list of attributes along with a larger response. Each college may run their advising department differently and have different requirements for that position in terms of experience, certain required tasks etc. Universities could do further research to see how strong the connection is between students being satisfied with their advisor and how involved those students become as alumni.

A suggestion given to me was to have end of the year evaluations for advisors. I think this would be effective if each college had the resources to explore the results and implement changes based on student voice. As of now, students believe that their opinion does not matter and is not heard because they never see any direct results from their teacher evaluations. By applying changes suggested by students will boost morale because they know the university cares about what they say which in turn will boost satisfaction and possible alumni involvement and giving.

It will be interesting to see how the role of an academic advisor will evolve with the growing presence of online schools and degree programs and how this dynamic will effect the student. Interactions will shift more to email, telephone, or live chat. The Eller College of Management is currently doing Skype and phone appointments which have helped satisfy the growing demand, but there is something about the human interaction that cannot be replaced. Furthermore, with the growing threat to universities, MOOCS (Massive Open Online Course) are exclusively online, could potentially become a major competitor if they become accredited. This could reshape the higher education system as we know it, and therefore challenge the role of the academic advisor. Software to determine a certain path of classes for a student that can accommodate special situations (transfer credits, AP credits, etc) is probably already in existence but not main stream. That part of the academic advisor role may soon be outdated and will have to evolve and might be primarily focused on personal development and/or career help in the future.

## APPENDIX A

### Full-time Academic Advisors

- Average salaries for full-time academic advisors, as reported in the March 25, 2013 edition of Inside Higher Education, is listed below.

<i>Title</i>	<i>Research</i>	<i>Other Doctoral</i>	<i>Masters</i>	<i>4-yr</i>	<i>2-yr</i>	<i>Avg.</i>
Head, Student Academic Counseling	60,591	76,338	59,220	57,014	55,384	63,980
Academic Advisor/Counselor	41,562	41,973	42,956	41,112	40,024	42,968

## APPENDIX B

### Moderator Guide for Advisor Interviews

#### Moderator Guide

1. Describe to me the average day as an advisor.
2. Describe what an ideal day would look like.
  - a. Why would those things make it ideal?
3. Do you think this department is effective and why?
  - b. What are student's attitudes like when they come in to see you?
4. What would you do to improve it?
5. What are the pros of this advising structure?
6. What are the cons of this advising structure?
7. Has advising always been structured this way at this college?
  - c. Do you see more (or less) advisors being added in the future?  
(Separating students via major or class standing)

d. Do you think having the advising department physically separate from the college itself have any effect on students?

8. Are there different types of advising appointments or do they all serve the same purpose?
9. What type of student utilizes advising?
10. Do you see every student in the college?
11. Would you be willing to send out an email to your students?

## APPENDIX C

### Student Survey

My name is Elise Romero and I am an honors marketing senior conducting research to complete my honors thesis. The purpose of this study is to understand what students find valuable about the student – academic advisor relationship. We all see our advisors for one reason or another, and are required to interact with them at least once before graduation. I am interested to learn more about how well this relationship works. Your participation is important to determine effectiveness of this relationship and identifying opportunities for improvement.

If you have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate email me at [emb@email.arizona.edu](mailto:emb@email.arizona.edu)

How often do you see your academic advisor per semester? (Please circle)

0                      1-3                      3-5                      5+

Are you satisfied with your advisor? (Please circle)

(Not satisfied)

(Really satisfied)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Please indicate if attributes list below are important to you as a student:

	Important	Moderately Important	Not Important

Has experience in the field they are advising in			
Has office in same building as most of your classes			
Offers career related help			
Helps with transition to graduate school (if asked for)			
Has high appointment availability			
Quick response time to emails			
Who treats you like a person, not a number			
Notifying students of career opportunities (position openings)			
Offer resume help			
Solve problems over email			
Has virtual office hours (i.e. appointments via Skype )			
Know you on a personal level			
Acted as a mentor			

Has your academic advisor helped you in a non-academic way? (Check all that apply)

	Never	Sometimes	Frequently
Finding internships			
Finding a job			
Dealing with personal issues			
Other (please list):			

--	--	--	--

Do you have plans for graduate school?

Right after graduation                      Getting Experience First                      Not interested  
 Maybe in the Future

Did your advisor have a direct influence on your decision to attend graduate school?

No influence                      Slight influence                      Direct influence                      N/A

If so, is it the same area as your bachelor's degree?

Same field                      Related Field                      Non-related Field                      N/A

Did your academic advisor impact your undergraduate experience?

Very negatively                      Negatively                      Not really                      Positively                      Very Positively

Please rate your undergraduate experience. (Please circle)

(Negative Experience)

(Positive Experience)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Do you plan to be actively involved with this college as an alumnus? (Please circle)

(Not Involved)

(Very involved)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

**Please circle:**

Are you male or female?

Are you a: freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior?

Are you an Honors Student?

What is your current GPA?

2.0-2.5

2.5-3.0

3.0-3.5

3.5-4.0

Have you had an internship? If so, during what year (please circle all that apply)?

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

N/A

## APPENDIX D

### Survey Results:

#### Are you satisfied with your advisor?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1 (Not Satisfied)	11	5.3	5.5	5.5
	2	17	8.1	8.5	14.1
	3	37	17.7	18.6	32.7
	4	58	27.8	29.1	61.8
	5 (Really Satisfied)	76	36.4	38.2	100.0
	Total	199	95.2	100.0	
Missing	System	10	4.8		
Total		209	100.0		

#### Did your academic advisor impact your undergraduate experience?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very negatively	5	2.4	2.8	2.8
	Negatively	5	2.4	2.8	5.7
	Not really	56	26.8	31.8	37.5
	Positively	88	42.1	50.0	87.5
	Very positively	22	10.5	12.5	100.0
	Total	176	84.2	100.0	
Missing	System	33	15.8		
Total		209	100.0		

**Correlations**

		Are you satisfied with your advisor?	Has your academic advisor helped you in a non-academic way? (Check all that apply)- Dealing with personal issues	Has your academic advisor helped you in a non-academic way? (Check all that apply)- Finding a job	Has your academic advisor helped you in a non-academic way? (Check all that apply)- Other (please list):	Has your academic advisor helped you in a non-academic way? (Check all that apply)- Finding internships
Are you satisfied with your advisor?	Pearson Correlation	1	.222*	.187*	.225	.210*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003	.013	.147	.005
	N	199	179	178	43	179
Has your academic advisor helped you in a non-academic way? (Check all that apply)- Dealing with personal issues	Pearson Correlation	.222**	1	.448**	.724**	.433**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003		.000	.000	.000
	N	179	179	177	42	178
Has your academic advisor helped you in a non-academic way? (Check all that apply)- Finding a job	Pearson Correlation	.187*	.448**	1	.370*	.728**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	.000		.015	.000
	N	178	177	178	43	178
Has your academic advisor helped you in a non-academic way? (Check all that apply)- Other (please list):	Pearson Correlation	.225	.724**	.370*	1	.380*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.147	.000	.015		.012
	N	43	42	43	43	43
Has your academic advisor helped you in a non-academic way? (Check all that apply)- Finding internships	Pearson Correlation	.210**	.433**	.728**	.380*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	.000	.000	.012	
	N	179	178	178	43	179

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlations**

		Do you plan to be actively involved with this college as an alumnus?	Did your academic advisor impact your undergraduate experience?	Are you satisfied with your advisor?
Do you plan to be actively involved with this college as an alumnus?	Pearson Correlation	1	.192*	.226**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.011	.003
	N	175	175	175
Did your academic advisor impact your undergraduate experience?	Pearson Correlation	.192*	1	.587**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.011		.000
	N	175	176	176
Are you satisfied with your advisor?	Pearson Correlation	.226**	.587**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.000	
	N	175	176	199

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

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