



## Assessing Academic Advising Using Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scales (BARS)

By Paul L. Govekar and Jill Ellen R. Christopher



Peer reviewed

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*Paul L. Govekar [p-govekar@onu.edu](mailto:p-govekar@onu.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Management, College of Business Administration, Ohio Northern University. Jill Ellen R. Christopher is an Associate Professor of Accounting, College of Business Administration, Ohio Northern University.*

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### Abstract

Academic advising has been found to be important to the retention and success of college students. Many colleges of business administration do not have the luxury of an advising center to provide academic advising to their students, and the faculty is assigned this task as an additional responsibility. Most colleges do not have a system in place to assess the quality of the advising that is done. This paper outlines a process for developing a behaviorally anchored rating scale that can be used to assess the quality of faculty-based student advising. In the case presented, the rating scale is designed to be used for developmental purposes to help faculty improve their student advising.

## Introduction

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) includes academic advising in at least three of its standards for accreditation (AACSB International Standards, 2006). Academic advising is specifically mentioned in Standard 5 (Financial Strategies), Standard 8 (Staff Sufficiency – Student Support), and Standard 9 (Faculty Sufficiency). Faculty-based advising has been found to be an important factor in student retention (McArthur, 2005). Academic advising, when defined broadly, covers a lot of ground. It can help students in such areas as financial aid, support services, degree completion, career goals, and assessing job offers. Academic advisors can do much, then to enhance a student's experience in college (Help!, 2006). However, most campuses do not have a way to ensure that students are receiving quality advising. When students are not well-advised, student retention is negatively affected (Academic Advising, 2004).

Many colleges of business administration do not have the luxury of an advising center to provide academic advising to their students. In these colleges, the task of academic advising falls to the faculty. If such academic advising is an important aspect of the faculty's responsibilities, then it follows that there should be a means of assessing the quality of such advising for developmental purposes. To create a developmental assessment of faculty advising, we turned to an approach that was in fashion two or more decades ago--the Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scale (BARS) approach.

This paper proceeds as follows: First, we provide a review of BARS and the literature on its usefulness. Next, we outline the process we used to develop our assessment instrument. Finally, we discuss how this instrument will be used in our circumstance, primarily as an advising assessment tool, but also as evidence of effective advising that faculty members can choose to use to support their applications for merit, tenure, or other similar types of advancement.

## BARS

Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scales are, in effect, a combination of a graphic rating scale and the critical incident method of rating. A description of important job behaviors is used to anchor the scale. The evaluator is asked to select the description which best matches actual behavior on a specific job dimension during the rating period (Rarick and Baxter, 1986).

The major steps involved in the development of BARS have been variously interpreted, but generally include:

1. Generate critical incidents
2. Develop performance dimensions

3. Reallocate incidents
4. Scale the incidents
5. Develop the final instrument (Rarick and Baxter, 1986).

The initial work for BARS was completed by Smith and Kendall (1963). Since then, there have been arguments for and against the method. In an early review of the literature, Schwab, Heneman, and DeCotiis (1975) concluded that there is little reason to believe that BARS are superior to alternative rating instruments. More recently, Tziner, Joanis, and Murphy (2000) found that both behavior observation scales (BOS) and graphic rating scales (GRS) were superior to BARS in terms of rater satisfaction, goal observability and ratee's perceptions of goals. In an educational setting, Solomon and Hoffman (1991) compared the use of BARS and GRS for student evaluations of instructors at an AACSB-accredited business college. They concluded that the lack of overall bias in either of the methods provided little justification for the use of BARS. The objection here centered on the difficulty and cost of developing BARS for evaluation of teaching.

On the other hand, Campbell and Cairns (1994) argue that BARS is a valuable measurement technique for a learning organization. McIntyre and Gilbert (1994) found that BARS can be effectively used to evaluate student behavior in case courses. Finally, Rarick and Baxter (1986) conclude that BARS "have the potential to increase both the accuracy of employee appraisal and ultimately the effectiveness of the organization" (p. 39). The main advantages to BARS include clear standards, accurate measurement, better performance feedback, and better consistency. Disadvantages include the cost in both time and dollars to develop and implement the scale, a possible activity trap where supervisors and subordinates (students and professors) become more concerned with activity performance than accomplishing actual results, and the possibility of an inexhaustive behavioral scale (Rarick & Baxter, 1986).

The area of faculty advising and its effectiveness appears to be an area that lacks significant research. In 1979, Miriam Raskin identified faculty advising as a critical issue that needed more research. Still, little has been done to determine even the breadth and depth of faculty advising. This project is an attempt to add to that sparse literature.

## **Procedure**

In our application of BARS to academic advising, we developed the instrument one quarter prior to its initial use, following the process in Rarick and Baxter (1986), which can be similarly found in Cocanougher and Ivancevich (1978) and in a number of Personnel Management, Management, and Organizational Behavior textbooks such as Carrell, Elbert, and Hatfield (2000), Daft, (2003), Robbins, (2000), and Robbins and Judge, (2007). Our business college's undergraduate program is accredited by the AACSB, and our institution

is a private university located in the Midwest. The faculty academic advisors to be evaluated are all full-time, participating faculty, and each student has only one advisor.

Initially, we wanted to ensure that we captured critical incidents that were considered important by both advisors and advisees. Thus, our first step was to send out a very open-ended e-mail message to 335 students, asking each student to describe and evaluate the performance of his academic advisor. These evaluations provided clues to behaviors that the students feel are important. We believed that by using these behaviors, our final instrument would result in reduced rating errors by students since the scales and evaluation traits used are job specific and meaningful to the students (Solomon and Hoffman, 1991). There were no leading statements or questions contained in the e-mail. Students were able to take the question in any direction they desired. The text of the message read as follows:

*Hello everyone,*

*You might not know this, but faculty members are evaluated on their student academic advising, both for merit pay as well as for one of the College's overall assessment measures. The College of Business is very interested in your opinion of the level of quality advising that your advisor provides to you, and we are asking for your assistance in helping us know where your advisor's strengths and weaknesses lie, pertaining to advising.*

*We do not have a form per se for you to use, but would you mind typing up a short paragraph or two about your experience with your advisor, and forwarding this information to (Faculty Secretary) (<mailto:\*\*\*>)? (Faculty Secretary) will then remove all references to you, so that your anonymity will be ensured.*

*If you have specific comments either way, please provide them, so that your advisor can continue to do what you think (s)he is doing well, and can do better in areas in which (s)he is weak. To repeat, your advisors will not know who is saying what. All references to you will be removed before anyone sees the comments.*

*Thank you in advance.*

Fifty-six students (17 percent) responded to this initial e-mail. Each faculty member had at least one advisee who responded. These student responses formed the basis for the first step in the development of our advising BARS--generating critical incidents. We then reviewed the students' comments and

determined from their advisor behaviors that demonstrate effective performance as well as ineffective performance.

From the comments submitted by the 56 students, we identified a list of 50 critical incidents, such as “my advisor has excellent knowledge of program requirements”; “it is sometimes hard to reach my advisor in person”; “my advisor helps me plan my schedule for the year”; “my advisor makes me feel like I am an inconvenience”; “some advice from my advisor would be nice”; etc. We felt that it was important to identify, as Miller (1988) found when examining his review of literature on teaching evaluations, the handful of advising behaviors about which both students and advisors were knowledgeable, and which were important to both groups.

The next step in the BARS process is to develop performance dimensions. To do this, we submitted our entire list of critical incidents to the business faculty not on our committee and asked that each faculty member group the incidents into behavior categories, and to then name the categories. By involving both the raters (students) and ratees (advisors) in the BARS process, we hoped to maximize the domain of evaluated performance, as alluded to in Blood (1974). One such behavior might be “My advisor is available when needed”, with associated critical incidents being “my advisor is easily accessible and stays in contact with me throughout the quarter”, “my advisor is usually accessible”, “it is sometimes hard to reach my advisor in person”, etc. After this process, we had categorized many critical incidents into seven performance dimensions: advisor’s knowledge of college/university program requirements, advisor’s availability when needed, advisor’s concern about a student’s progress toward graduation, advisor’s concern about the student as an individual, the advisor’s help in planning for the student’s future, the ease of the appointment scheduling process and the advisor’s record in meeting appointments as scheduled, and the advisor’s responsiveness to student questions.

The third step in developing a BARS is to ask another set of people who are familiar with the performance aspects of the job to reallocate the incidents, which have been mixed up, among the just-identified performance dimensions. To do this, we gave a list of the performance dimensions, and the original, unsorted list of critical incidents to members of our faculty committee to gauge the consistency of their matching of critical incidents against performance dimensions to those of the rest of the business faculty. The results of this step were highly consistent with those of the previous step.

The fourth step was to scale, or rank, the behaviors, in order from most effective performance to least effective performance. This step also involved, in some cases, creating additional mid-range critical incidents, since for some performance dimensions, students’ responses had not provided a full five-item

range of behaviors. This step was carried out by all six members of the committee.

The last step was to develop the final evaluation instrument by narrowing down the selection of ranked critical incidents per performance dimension to five.

This final set of five behaviors per performance dimension is referred to as the set of “behavioral anchors” for the performance dimension (Rarick and Baxter, 1986). As a double-check, the behavioral anchors for each performance dimension were mixed up, and all students in every course section taught by each member of the committee were asked to rank the behavioral anchors for each performance dimension in what they felt was the correct or proper order (See Figure 1 below.). These rankings were subjected to a simple frequency analysis, which revealed that they were generally consistent with the rankings developed by the members of the committee. Where there was a tie between two behaviors, the wording of either one or both anchors was revised to more distinctly clarify its/their meaning (See Table 1 below Figure 1.). The bold-face numbers in the table represent the most frequently selected dimension for each anchor.

## Figure 1

### Student Assessment of Behavioral Anchors

Below are seven job elements concerned with faculty advising of students. Under each job element are five behaviors. Please rank order the behaviors from “A” the behavior that describes excellent performance for that job element to “E” the behavior that describes poor performance for that element. Within each job element use each ranking only once. Your ranking must result in each behavior having a ranking of “A,” “B,” “C,” “D,” or “E”.

#### **My advisor is knowledgeable of college/university program requirements.**

1. My advisor has excellent knowledge of program requirements and the course progression that leads to graduation
2. My advisor has very good knowledge of program requirements and the course progression that leads to graduation
3. My advisor is not good at recommending classes that will fulfill a requirement
4. My advisor is somewhat lacking in this knowledge, but knows whom to ask
5. My advisor has little knowledge of my curriculum

#### **My advisor is available when needed.**

6. My advisor is usually accessible
7. My advisor is easily accessible and stays in contact with me throughout the quarter

8. My advisor is extremely hard to get hold of
9. My advisor is easily accessible and reminds me about advance registration advising at the proper time
10. It is sometimes hard to reach my advisor in person

**My advisor is concerned about my progress toward graduation.**

11. My advisor is helpful in planning my schedule for the quarter
12. My advisor helps me plan out the rest of my time in college
13. My advisor looks over my plans before signing off on my course request forms
14. My advisor signs my course request forms without reviewing my plans and progress
15. My advisor helps me stay on track each year

**My advisor is concerned about me as an individual.**

16. My advisor takes an interest in what I am doing around campus
17. My advisor makes me feel like I am an inconvenience
18. My advisor shows interest when I mention something I've done
19. My advisor makes me feel that he/she cares about me as a student and a person
20. My advisor demonstrates no concern for me as an individual

**My advisor helps me plan for my future.**

21. My advisor is just not interested in helping me plan for my future
22. My advisor advises me about my future career and acts as a reference for me
23. Some advice from my advisor would be nice
24. My advisor reviews my plans for the future career and makes appropriate suggestions
25. My advisor takes a genuine interest in my future plans, acts as a reference for me, and provides me with career connections

**Advising appointments are easy to make and my advisor meets these appointments.**

26. My advisor does not establish an appointment schedule or often misses appointments he/she has made
27. My advisor is flexible about meeting times
28. I must make appointments with my advisor through the faculty secretary
29. My advisor sets appointments and meets them
30. My advisor sends reminders about scheduling meetings and is on time for appointments

**My advisor is responsive to my questions.**

- 31. My advisor is able to answer all my questions
- 32. My advisor is unwilling to help me with answers to my questions
- 33. My advisor tells me where to go to get my questions answered
- 34. My advisor gets thorough answers to my questions immediately
- 35. My advisor researches answers to my questions

**Table 1**

**Results of Student Rankings of Behavioral Anchors**

**My advisor is knowledgeable of college/university program requirements.**

| <u>Ranking</u> | <u>Anchor 1</u> | <u>Anchor 2</u> | <u>Anchor 3</u> | <u>Anchor 4</u> | <u>Anchor 5</u> |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| A              | <b>120</b>      | 21              | 2               | 6               | 1               |
| B              | 21              | <b>120</b>      | 2               | 4               | 3               |
| C              | 2               | 5               | 44              | <b>89</b>       | 10              |
| D              | 3               | 2               | <b>67</b>       | 46              | 32              |
| E              | 4               | 2               | 35              | 5               | <b>104</b>      |

**My advisor is available when needed.**

| <u>Ranking</u> | <u>Anchor 6</u> | <u>Anchor 7</u> | <u>Anchor 8</u> | <u>Anchor 9</u> | <u>Anchor 10</u> |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| A              | 15              | <b>70</b>       | 1               | 58              | 5                |
| B              | 26              | 51              | 2               | <b>65</b>       | 7                |
| C              | <b>105</b>      | 16              | 8               | 15              | 11               |
| D              | 4               | 7               | 11              | 10              | <b>114</b>       |
| E              | 0               | 6               | <b>128</b>      | 2               | 13               |

**My advisor is concerned about my progress toward graduation**

| <u>Ranking</u> | <u>Anchor 11</u> | <u>Anchor 12</u> | <u>Anchor 13</u> | <u>Anchor 14</u> | <u>Anchor 15</u> |
|----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| A              | 28               | <b>84</b>        | 17               | 2                | 19               |
| B              | <b>57</b>        | 23               | 16               | 3                | <b>51</b>        |
| C              | <b>56</b>        | 17               | 30               | 4                | 44               |
| D              | 7                | 16               | <b>84</b>        | 16               | 26               |
| E              | 2                | 10               | 3                | <b>125</b>       | 10               |

**My advisor is concerned about me as an individual**

| <u>Ranking</u> | <u>Anchor 16</u> | <u>Anchor 17</u> | <u>Anchor 18</u> | <u>Anchor 19</u> | <u>Anchor 20</u> |
|----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| A              | 27               | 2                | 10               | <b>102</b>       | 8                |
| B              | <b>72</b>        | 6                | 44               | 26               | 2                |
| C              | 39               | 5                | <b>85</b>        | 14               | 6                |



|   |   |           |   |   |           |
|---|---|-----------|---|---|-----------|
| D | 6 | 46        | 7 | 5 | <b>87</b> |
| E | 6 | <b>91</b> | 4 | 2 | 47        |

**My advisor helps me plan for my future.**

| <u>Ranking</u> | <u>Anchor 21</u> | <u>Anchor 22</u> | <u>Anchor 23</u> | <u>Anchor 24</u> | <u>Anchor 25</u> |
|----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| A              | 11               | 10               | 7                | 13               | <b>108</b>       |
| B              | 5                | <b>67</b>        | 9                | 61               | 8                |
| C              | 5                | 52               | 19               | <b>63</b>        | 11               |
| D              | 15               | 17               | <b>98</b>        | 10               | 10               |
| E              | <b>113</b>       | 4                | 17               | 3                | 13               |

**Advising appointments are easy to make and my advisor meets these appointments.**

| <u>Ranking</u> | <u>Anchor 26</u> | <u>Anchor 27</u> | <u>Anchor 28</u> | <u>Anchor 29</u> | <u>Anchor 30</u> |
|----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| A              | 5                | 28               | 2                | 17               | <b>97</b>        |
| B              | 4                | 46               | 6                | <b>72</b>        | 23               |
| C              | 4                | <b>66</b>        | 10               | 52               | 18               |
| D              | 12               | 10               | <b>116</b>       | 9                | 5                |
| E              | <b>124</b>       | 0                | 16               | 0                | 7                |

**My advisor is responsive to my questions.**

| <u>Ranking</u> | <u>Anchor 31</u> | <u>Anchor 32</u> | <u>Anchor 33</u> | <u>Anchor 34</u> | <u>Anchor 35</u> |
|----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| A              | <b>49</b>        | 3                | 7                | <b>58</b>        | 33               |
| B              | <b>45</b>        | 4                | 13               | <b>53</b>        | 34               |
| C              | 37               | 3                | 34               | 24               | <b>52</b>        |
| D              | 16               | 6                | <b>94</b>        | 9                | 25               |
| E              | 3                | <b>134</b>       | 2                | 6                | 5                |

## Results

In order to test the final instrument to see whether it would effectively discriminate among the overall advising performance of individual faculty advisors, and to see whether it would be useful in identifying specific strong and/or weak areas of advising performance, a WebSurveyor questionnaire containing the final instrument was designed and electronically distributed to 335 students enrolled in the business college. Additional questions on the survey included the student's year in school and the name of the student's advisor (See Figure 2 below.). Two hundred forty-five (73 percent) of the students responded.

The results were compared to activities and skills of faculty advisors in our committee and were highly consistent with the way that these individual advisors interact with their advisees. Not only did the instrument identify known strengths and weaknesses, it also provided additional insight into the consistency of these

advisors' interaction with their advisees. The instrument was seen as beneficial by the committee members because, not only did it quantify the level of strong or weak performance, it also provided additional feedback in the form of suggestions on how to improve weak performance. For example, instead of advisees' agreeing with the statement "My advisor is available when needed", the advisees' choices provided information such as "My advisor is usually accessible", as well as other higher-ranking choices which would help the advisor know how to go about improving his/her performance. We decided that only one modification to our instrument was necessary at this point—a question to determine how advisors set up their advising sessions was needed on the survey. This question would prove useful in clarifying performance on a dimension which addresses whether the advisor reviews each student's self-determined academic plan, or sets up the plan for each student.

## Figure 2

### Student Completed Rating

#### **My advisor is:**

- Dr. A
- Dr. B
- Dr. C
- Prof. D
- Prof E
- Dr. F
- Dr. G
- Dr. H
- Dr. I
- Dr. J
- Dr. K
- Dr. L
- Prof. M
- Dr. N
- Dr. O
- Not a CBA student

#### **My advisor is knowledgeable of college/university program requirements.**

- A. My advisor has excellent knowledge of program requirements and the course progression that leads to graduation
- B. My advisor has very good knowledge of program requirements and the course progression that leads to graduation
- C. My advisor is somewhat lacking in this knowledge, but knows whom to ask
- D. My advisor has some knowledge of my curriculum

- E. My advisor has little knowledge of my curriculum

**My advisor is available when needed.**

- A. My advisor is easily accessible and stays in contact with me throughout the quarter
- B. My advisor is easily accessible and contacts me about advance registration advising at the proper time
- C. My advisor is usually accessible
- D. It is sometimes hard to reach my advisor in person
- E. My advisor is extremely hard to get hold of

**My advisor is concerned about my progress toward graduation.**

- A. My advisor helps me plan out the rest of my time in college
- B. My advisor helps me plan my schedule for the year
- C. My advisor helps me plan my schedule for the quarter
- D. My advisor looks over my plans before signing off on my course request forms
- E. My advisor signs my course request forms without reviewing my plans and progress

**My advisor is concerned about me as an individual.**

- A. My advisor makes me feel that he/she cares about me as a student and a person
- B. My advisor shows an interest in what I am doing around campus
- C. My advisor shows interest when I mention something I've done
- D. My advisor demonstrates no concern for me as an individual
- E. My advisor makes me feel like I am an inconvenience

**My advisor helps me plan for my future.**

- A. My advisor takes a genuine interest in my future plans, acts as a reference for me, and provides me with career connections
- B. My advisor advises me about my future career and acts as a reference for me
- C. My advisor reviews my plans for the future career
- D. Some advice from my advisor would be nice
- E. My advisor is just not interested in helping me plan for my future

**Advising appointments are easy to make and my advisor meets these appointments.**

- A. My advisor sends reminders about scheduling meetings and is on time for appointments

- B. My advisor provides appointment options and sets appointments
- C. My advisor provides appointment options
- D. I must make appointments with my advisor through the faculty secretary
- E. My advisor does not establish an appointment schedule or often misses appointments he/she has made

**My advisor is responsive to my questions.**

- A. My advisor gets thorough and timely answers to my questions
- B. My advisor gets thorough answers to my questions
- C. My advisor responds to my questions
- D. My advisor tells me where to go to get my questions answered
- E. My advisor is unwilling to help me with answers to my questions

## **Discussion**

We plan to request that students complete the online version of the advising assessment quarterly after each registration period. This is the time of the greatest direct interaction between students and their academic advisors and should provide the clearest picture to each advisor. Initially, each advisor will only receive her/his own results and overall averages for each performance dimension. It is expected that faculty members will use these results to improve their performance as academic advisors and in their annual self-assessment.

The goal that we are pursuing with this instrument is the assessment of the advising program. Faculty members may, however, also use their individual results as evidence to support advising effectiveness in their applications for merit pay, promotion, and tenure. Submission of individual advising assessment data collected with the instrument developed in this study is not required for any of the previously-mentioned types of application.

## **Future Instrument Development/Research**

While the instrument in hand appears to have face validity, our next step will be to actually evaluate its validity through subsequent use. As part of our overall College assessment program, we make use of the AACSB/EBI Undergraduate Business Exit Assessment, which is administered to all graduating students within the College. Factor 11 in the AACSB/EBI assessment instrument concerns student satisfaction with his/her academic advisor's availability, knowledge of requirements, interest in students' progress, and helpfulness of recommendations. These are the same areas that are covered in the BARS instrument developed as described herein. Once we have sufficient data points from actual use of our BARS instrument, we will then assess the validity of our BARS instrument by statistically comparing the results of the AACSB/EBI survey to those obtained from our survey.

Areas that need further exploration include the definition, roles, and functions of faculty members as undergraduate student advisors; the analysis of student and faculty perceptions of academic advising; the appropriateness of including career planning within the scope of the faculty advisor's role; and the development of models of faculty advising suitable to the educational paradigms that are emerging in the twenty-first century.

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