FRESHMAN ADVISORY GROUPS AT MARIETTA HIGH SCHOOL: AN EXAMINATION AND EXPLORATION OF THE EFFECT ON SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AND ADAPTATION TO HIGH SCHOOL

A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

According to the Ohio Department of Education 2007-2008 School Year Report Card, Marietta, Ohio, High School (MHS) did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and for the 2008-2009 school year, MHS was labeled as “at risk” for the school improvement status. If AYP is not met for consecutive years, then MHS is in danger of consequences from both the state and federal governments. In an attempt to raise test scores and student academic performance, MHS has implemented advisory groups in the 2008-2009 school year in all four grade levels after finding the concept to be successful in other school districts. Advisory groups were set up similar to homerooms and each teacher was assigned 25 students and the group met for 40 minutes once per week on Wednesdays during most weeks of the first semester. All class periods were shortened on the day of advisory to allow time for the meetings. The freshman advisory meetings were co-facilitated by four members of the senior class and were focused on providing guidance from older students who had already survived the freshman year. This mixed method study examined and explored the effect that the freshman class advisory program had on school connectedness and adaptation to the high school. There were approximately 250 freshmen participating in the advisory program. After completion of the first semester, each freshman completed a Likert scale survey on their impressions of the advisory program and the survey also provided space for constructed response answers to gather qualitative data. It was expected that the results would show that the freshman advisory program at MHS had been beneficial for helping students get adjusted in their first year and feeling welcome in their new school.
DEDICATION

To everyone who has helped me get to where I am today.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to my wife Susan for countless hours of patiently grading chemistry tests & homework papers and supporting me during my first year of teaching while completing my master’s degree.

I thank my daughter Robin for understanding when I was too busy.

I thank my adviser, Dr. Bauer, for the patience you displayed over the last two years during my return to school as an older student and for the guidance in completing this project. From one OSU alum to another, Go Bucks!

I give special thanks to Principal Mike Elliott and the members of the freshman class at Marietta High School (class of 2012) for providing the data for this project.
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Children go through many transitions during the K-12 school years. From that first day when they leave the familiar surroundings of home and support of parents for pre-school or kindergarten, to the transition after elementary and middle school grades to different school buildings with new schoolmates and new teachers, students must adapt to their external changing environment. During these years, students are also growing and maturing as they progress from childhood to becoming young adults. A change from the familiar can be a source of stress in these students at any time during the 13 years of school. Adolescence can be a particularly stressful time when students are facing multiple changes, such as new schools, body changes, and relationships with peers and with parents. How students adapt to these changes can affect their behavior and the effort they make in school. Responding to these changes by providing a positive environment is one way to counteract students’ negative adaptations.

High Schools That Work (HSTW) is a school improvement initiative that originated in 1987 with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), which lists itself as a non-profit, non-partisan organization with a mission to “create a culture of high expectations and continuous improvement in high school and the middle grades” (Southern Regional Education Board, 2005, p. 2). HSTW programs have been implemented in 31 states. Continuous improvement in student achievement is measured by scores obtained through the use of national criterion-referenced standardized tests.
There are many factors that affect student achievement in schools. One focus area of HSTW is to “create an environment that motivates students to make the effort to succeed” (SREB, 2005, p. 1) and there are several ways to provide that environment. One option is to develop a culture where students feel that they are cared for and where they have at least one person somewhere in the school district or building that they can seek feedback, guidance, or advice for both in-school and out-of-school matters. This personal care environment helps the student to connect to the school, especially if new to a school, such as freshman at a high school, and so the hope is that the student responds in this environment in a positive way and the care either becomes or adds to the motivation needed to succeed in high school.

Research by Roderick and Camburn (1999) in urban schools has found that the freshman course work and the transition to high school yield the highest levels of failing courses and dropout rates. The ninth grade year thus becomes a priority area for reaching students and providing the environment and support necessary to adapt to changes freshman are facing. Passing their freshman year and returning for the sophomore year become indicators for whether the student will graduate from high school.

In Ohio, as well as in all other states, the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) demands accountability of schools by requiring progress each year. Each school district is assessed on many measures and one of the key gauges for school improvement is “adequate yearly progress” (AYP). AYP is based on the students in the school who are considered proficient in a subject area, and NCLB requires that proficiency levels increase each year. AYP then becomes a measure of whether proficiency actually increased in a school. For example, if the school had 81% of sophomores scoring
proficient in two consecutive years, then there was no improvement from year to year. Each school district is scored on their improvement status and if not making AYP, then the district faces potential sanctions and direction from the state. It is in the best interest of a school district to focus on improvement to meet AYP goals and avoid state intervention.

School success and achievement is due to more than just the presence of good teachers. Students take the achievement tests and so must actually learn and be able to demonstrate their learning on tests for a district to score well and show improvement. Student learning requires engagement and motivation for schoolwork both during class and outside of school. The school district can provide opportunities for students outside of school, such as sports teams, musical groups, or clubs of special interest. Each of these activities can lead to students being engaged and having a reason for attending school and doing well, since continued participation requires maintenance of grades. For students who either can not or do not participate in extra-curricular activities, then schools need another way to create an environment which motivates students.

One program from the HSTW toolbox is the advisory program, which joins a group of same grade-level students, ranging from 10-25 students, with a single teacher on a regular basis, such as daily or weekly, in a non-typical classroom situation. Instead of preparing for a specific subject, such as social studies or science, the teacher prepares and facilitates group sharing and discussions of issues facing students and provides time for socialization between student peers. The role of the teacher is to become an advisor or mentor to the group of students. As the school year progresses, the students and teacher develop a bond where the student then has a contact within the building that is accessible
for advice and information. The advisory program model has been used in both middle
schools and high schools across the country. In some high schools, senior students serve
as a big brother or sister and are brought into the freshman advisory rooms to help lead
the discussions and give the perspective of someone who has recently been through the
issues that the younger students are now facing.
Statement of the Problem

In the Marietta City Schools District, Marietta High School (MHS) did not meet the AYP goal for the 2007-2008 school year. MHS met all indicators (12 of 12) based on Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) results, attendance, and graduation rates, and with a performance index score of 99.7 (out of 120), it was given the second highest school designation rating of Excellent. Despite that rating, since AYP was not achieved, the district has taken action to improve student scores and implementation of a high school advisory program is one of the actions. The goal of the MHS advisory program is to provide another opportunity for students to become connected to their school.

Purpose and Research Questions

Advisory programs in high schools, particularly with freshman, should provide a wonderful experience for students to get to know each other and their teacher and become connected to the school. Programs from HSTW, which include more than just advisory programs, have been implemented in 1,200 schools in 31 states (Southern Regional Education Board, 1999-2008). Much of the literature showed that advisory programs had been implemented in middle schools since the mid-1990s, but there was not a great deal of available research on the effectiveness of advisory programs in high schools. This study aimed to determine whether the advisory time at MHS was effective in helping freshman students to feel more connected to their school. The study asked: “Did the use of freshman advisory groups at MHS benefit by leading to more connectedness of freshman to high school?”
Research Hypothesis

It was anticipated that results from a survey, including written feedback, would show that participation in an advisory program would allow freshman to feel more connection to MHS.

Null Hypothesis

Freshman students participating in advisory programs at MHS would not have higher connectedness to their school.

Alternate Hypothesis

Freshman students participating in advisory programs at MHS would have higher connectedness to their school.

Central Phenomenon

Did participation in the freshman advisory program have an impact on school connection? What did freshman students say about the advisory program?
Limitations of the Study

Student achievement testing takes place in the spring of each year and school district report cards are not available until the end of August in that year. There are many factors which affect student achievement. The true measure of the value of advisory programs on school connectedness and student motivation, which could translate to student achievement, would require a sustained effort of advisory programs over the course of multiple school years and multiple school district report cards. This study was confined to time within a single school year and could not directly evaluate the affect of advisory programs on student achievement. The results could be a function of how the program was implemented at MHS compared to advisories in other districts. This study was also limited to a single urban city school district in Appalachia with varying levels of socioeconomic status of students and varying levels of community support, so the results from this district might not be comparable to other districts.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Remembering High School

The high school years, from grades 9-12, are fondly remembered by many high school graduates when they recall the friends they made and the enjoyment they received from participating in various activities. Those four years concluded their growing up and establishing an identity before graduating and entering the real world. Notices for high school reunions fill the newspapers as former classmates gather to reminisce about the good old days. Sadly, the fond memories are not a reality for everyone. Some classmates do not participate in reunions, since their high school experience was an unpleasant one. These classmates may not have counted a large number of friends or even participated in any activities, so their connection or sense of belonging to high school was much less than the classmates with fond memories. Even worse, other students failed or did not even graduate from high school.

Transition to High School

Making friends and participating in activities are not guarantees of success in high school, but they can be contributing factors. Ninth grade, or the freshman year, is generally the entry year to high school, and each student encounters a change from being the older, experienced student at the middle school building, to being a new, younger, and inexperienced student among many older students in the high school. Entering high school can be a big transition for a ninth grader. According to Lampert (2005), in some middle schools, the student population is less than that of the high school and a middle school structure of “small teaching teams” (p. 61) gives the appearance of a smaller
school environment which also helps to manage the younger middle school students better. Upon reaching high school, the small environment may be gone and the student is expected to be more responsible and self-sufficient than in middle school. In high school, students may have 5-7 different teachers, a larger number of classmates in the whole freshman class, several more options in their school courses and a variety of extracurricular activities to choose from (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

Moving from a comfortable and somewhat protected middle school environment into a new and overwhelming high school atmosphere can be stressful for freshman students, and the stress can detract from their academic performance and lead to bad behaviors and bad grades. The result is that students finish their first year of high school in a deficit. According to the National High School Center (NHSC) (2007), “… more students fail ninth grade than any other high school grade” (p. 1), and how students perform in ninth grade is an indicator of their achievement in high school and after high school. Wheelock and Miao (2005) state that the ninth grade population in schools is the highest percentage of all grades in high schools, due to the fact that freshman have the highest failing rate and are held back, which NHSC (2007) identifies as a “ninth grade bulge” (p. 1) and is followed by a “tenth grade dip” (p. 1) that accounts for students who drop out after ninth grade and those who are held back in the tenth grade. Across the United States, in the 2004-2005 school year, there were 3.82 million eighth graders, 4.28 million ninth graders, and 3.75 million 10th-graders, 3.37 million 11th-graders, and 3.09 million 12th-graders (Sable, Hill, & Hoffman, 2006). The ninth graders show the highest population at 23.4% versus an expected 20%. It is interesting that the populations for eighth graders and 10th-graders are nearly equal, despite the “tenth grade dip” (NHSC,
phenomena, so this higher number of tenth graders may be also be due to retention after the tenth grade year.

**Control of Students**

Understanding how schools function is an important context for investigating the reasons that ninth graders have difficulty in the transition to high school and what can be done to ease the transition. Traditional American schools control students through a system of reward or punishment (Sullo, 2007), which is implemented through either “stimulus-response, behavior modification, or assertive discipline” methods. In such a system, most students seek to avoid punishment and gather rewards. Receiving a reward is based on satisfying someone else, such as the teacher. As students become older and progress through a school system, the degree of punishment options, such as detention or suspension, must become more punitive as a way of deterring bad behaviors. External stimuli are the basis of this system, and Sullo (2007) advises that this basis is “fundamentally anti-educational” (p. 5), since it leads students to believe that they have no control over themselves and negates any acceptance of personal responsibility. Years of reinforcement of this model only serve to confuse a student when he enters the new environment of high school.

**Student Needs – An Adult View**

An opposing model, based on internal stimuli, focuses on “free will and personal responsibility” (Sullo, 2007, p. 7) where the individual can make choices. In most schools, the middle school and high school both operate using the reward or punishment model, but when the student gets to high school; he has to balance the control he is familiar with against new freedoms that require some personal responsibility. The new
balance can be confusing for some students as they push against new boundaries, but find that the limits still have consequences. Students in high school may not have as much supervision by teachers to get their homework done, and so develop a pattern of not completing their work, but find that their homework grades suffer and then their test grades suffer due to incomplete homework.

Becoming intrinsically motivated in school is a method of gaining some control and reducing the cycle of control by others (Sullo, 2007). This motivation drives a student to complete a task to meet his own needs, rather than for just satisfying a teacher or system. The teacher does not have to entice with rewards or deter with punishment. Intrinsic motivation is a control that is exerted from inside the student. The psychology of internal control is choice theory (Glasser, 1998), based in biology, which states that people choose behaviors to satisfy any of five basic needs: survival, belonging or connecting, power, freedom, and fun. In a transition to a new school, ninth graders may only be focused on survival, in terms of adapting to their new environment, and that focus may detract from trying to satisfy any of the other four needs. However, attention to the other four needs may also satisfy the survival need. Some students may never feel belonging or connection during their four years of high school. The intrinsic motivation for belonging may be suppressed by the focus on survival, but a school can help provide the conditions that encourage students to feel connected. Sullo (2007) advises that “building a spirit of connection and community is essential to creating a need-satisfying school characterized by high achievement” (p. 8), so high achievement can be found in schools that provide opportunities for meeting the basic needs of students.
Connection, Trust, Community, Bonding, Engagement, and Achievement

Attending to the biological needs of students is a proactive response to their emotional health. Ignorance of these needs may lead to physical health problems or destructive behaviors (Sullo, 2007), which ultimately will lead to lower achievement in high school. Resnick et al. (1997) found in a longitudinal study of 12,118 students that both “parent-family connectedness and perceived school connectedness were protective against every health risk behavior measure except history of pregnancy” (p. 1). The need for belongingness or connection may be the dominant need of the five needs of a high school student. Connected students are likely to be happier and perform better academically (Sullo, 2007). Connection and belonging also require that trust exists in the school environment. Bryk and Schneider (2003) discuss the “... engaging but elusive idea of social trust as essential for meaningful school improvement” (p. 41), and that in a school, cooperative relations must exist between principals, teachers, and parents. When the expected responsibilities are met by each group, then trust grows in the school environment. In a trusting environment, teachers are more prone to accept reform initiatives and do more to help students achieve (Bryk and Schneider, 2003). Most importantly, the research of Bryk and Schneider (2003) found that when trust was high, then student learning was improved.

When a positive school environment exists to allow students to satisfy their basic psychological needs, then the students will feel a commitment to the school and the “... norms, values, and goals” (Schaps, 2003, p. 31) of the school and this will lead to community-building in the school. Creating a community in the school takes work on the part of everyone. Schaps (2003) found that very few schools have a strong community
and he offered the following four themes for increasing the community in schools: “1) actively cultivate respectful, supportive relationships among students, teachers, and parents; 2) emphasize common purposes and ideals; 3) provide regular opportunities for service and cooperation; and 4) provide developmentally appropriate opportunities for autonomy and influence” (p. 32).

Building community in a school should lead to connectedness or bonding, which is defined by Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) as: “... 1) attachment, characterized by close affective relationships with those at school; and 2) commitment, characterized by an investment in school and doing well in school” (p. 252). Regarding child and adolescent development theory, Catalano et al. (2004) investigated the social development model, which advocates that children learn examples of both good and bad behaviors, which they term “... prosocial and antisocial ...” (p. 252) respectively, from the context of their environment. The socialization of children results from four processes according to Catalano et al. (2004): “... 1) perceived opportunities for involvement in activities and interactions with others; 2) actual involvement; 3) skill for involvement and interaction, and 4) perceived rewards from involvement and interaction” (p. 252). When students are in an environment that requires involvement and interaction, they are developing a social behavior and it can be either prosocial or antisocial depending on the behavior being presented. Catalano et al. (2004) advise that a bond of “... attachment and commitment ...” (p. 252) is created between the student and those presenting the social behavior. An example of an antisocial behavior would be peers exerting pressure on a student to start smoking cigarettes and then the student becomes part of or bonds with the group that encouraged him. An example of a prosocial
behavior would be a student club which requires members to volunteer for 4 hours per week at the local hospital. A student who joins that group and gets joy from volunteering will stay with the group and bond with the members. In both examples, the effect is that the bonding serves to unite the members of each group. The social development model of Catalano et al. (2004) states that after the solid bonds are developed, then conflicting behaviors are eliminated and members conduct themselves so that they conform with the expected “... behaviors, norms, and values ...” (p. 252) of the group. Students can bond in many environments, but certainly, through the influence of teachers, bonding in the school environment can play a powerful role in discouraging antisocial behaviors and reinforcing prosocial behaviors in students (Catalano, et al., 2004). If a strong bond can be developed between the student and the school, then the student will be more likely to subscribe to the standards and ideals of the school. The research from Catalano et al. (2004) found that school bonding contributes to healthy development of students, which results in reduced obstacles to learning, increased academic achievement, and reduced student health and safety issues.

An increase in student bonding to the school should lead to higher student engagement. Klem and Connell (2004) researched the idea of relationships between students and teachers in both the elementary and middle school grades and the effect on student engagement and achievement. The study surveyed both students and teachers and found that students show more engagement when they observe that the teacher is supportive. Low levels of teacher support, which would lead to less student engagement, had a greater impact on elementary students than middle school students. For middle school students, the level of engagement correlated with attendance and academic
achievement. When middle school students had higher engagement, then they scored higher on attendance and achievement indices, and when they had lower achievement, then they scored poorly on these indices (Klem & Connell, 2004).

*Student Needs – The View from Students*

Thus far, the review has shown that the transition from middle school to high school can be difficult for many students, and when the freshman year is not a success, the lack of success often continues through high school and after high school. Students have basic needs which must be met, with survival being very important, but connectedness or belonging also ranking very high. Many inter-related factors contribute to connectedness, which may form through environments that encourage trust, community, and bonding. Such environments can lead to student engagement and then achievement, which is the mission of the school. All of these concepts come from the theories and reasoning of adults and are generally based on some research in schools. An interesting consideration would be to hear from the students and what they feel is necessary to improve the transition to high school. Cushman (2006) investigated the thoughts of 16 students who were getting ready to start high school. The students saw the need to be proactive in addressing transition issues as well as providing support through the year, with the belief that student “... confidence and performance” (p. 48) would increase (Cushman, 2006). After completing one month of high school, the same group of students presented four ways that teachers could help students with the transition: “1) Connect us up regularly with high school students; 2) support us in developing skills and strategies for high school success; 3) help us make strong and mutually respectful connections with adults; and 4) provide bridge experiences in the summer after eighth
grade” (Cushman, 2006, pp. 49-50). The students used the word “connect” in two of their four ideas, since they saw the need to connect with the older students in the building and with their teachers. The students saw the need for connection to develop community, bonding, and trust. After just one month, the students provided 10 specific ideas that they saw as necessary for success in school. Cushman (2006) reports that one of those student ideas stated, “build advisory groups into our schedule” (p. 51). What is an advisory group? How would an advisory group contribute to student success?

Advisory Defined

Goldberg (1998) defines an advisory system as “… a simple method that ensures no secondary school (middle school, junior high school, or high school) student becomes anonymous” (p. 1). Cole (1992) provides an array of names for advisory, including classroom guidance, home base, advisor/advisee, or teacher advisory, which is to “ensure that every middle level student is known well by at least one adult in the building” (p. 3). By removing anonymity of students, then the students become part of the school community and connect with the school. Advisory is not a new idea in the realm of school reform initiatives, as Goldberg (1998) notes the idea existed and was implemented in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a way of “promoting personalization in schools” (p. viii). Cole (1992) references sources from 1986 and 1991 that provide information from several successful advisory programs in schools.

Advisory programs serve to regularly join a group of students with an adult in the school, generally a teacher. The amount of time for the meeting and the frequency of the meetings vary from school to school, since individual schools are adapting advisories to fit their own needs. Goldberg (1998) suggests that the groups meet daily for 10 minutes
and 4-10 individual meetings occur between advisors and advisees. Cole (1992) discusses a similar, short daily meeting, but also recommends longer meetings, such as 30-40 minutes once or twice a week, or even 20-30 minutes daily. In a study of schools across the United States, Cushman (1990) found advisory time periods ranged from 15-60 minutes, as well as special full day arrangements for some aspects of advisory, and meetings ranged from daily to weekly. The amount of time used for advisory is often dependent on the specific expectations and is balanced with other priorities within the school. At Marietta (Ohio) High School, the frequency is weekly and class periods are shortened on most Wednesdays to create a mid-morning advisory period lasting 40 minutes. There are no specified individual meetings between a student and their advisor.

Starting an Advisory System

Initial support for implementation of an advisory program can come from any level within a school system: principals, teachers, or the district central office (MacLaury, 1995). Since advisories are mature processes and have been successful in many schools, the initial support is generated from learning about the successes in other school districts. When initiated at the teacher level, or the bottom of the school organization, an advisory may have a better chance at success than one which has been initiated from the top of the organization, such as the district central office (MacLaury, 1995). Once the decision is made to proceed with planning and implementation, then the program planning should involve a leadership team that requires cooperation from people at all levels of the school organization, including “... administrators, teachers, parents, and students ...” (MacLaury, 1995, p. 45). Goldberg (1998) defines the leadership team as an “advisory committee” (p. 8) that consists of 5-7 members, including several
teachers, an administrator, a guidance counselor, and a non-professional staff member, so that the committee can implement a “teacher-based system” (p. 8). According to Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox (1997), the advisory program leadership team will have to make important strategic decisions in five major areas:

... (a) the needs to be served by the program, (b) the goals or conceptual focus of the program, (c) teachers’ predisposition toward the advising role and the extent to which they possess necessary advisory skills, (d) the amount of extra time/preparation which teachers have to devote to the program, and (e) the general type of advisory program to be offered. (p. 35)

For many schools, a major decision is whether the focus of the advisory will be on affective skills, cognitive skills, or a combination of both. The expectations for advisory should align with the mission statement or the overall goals for the school. Agreement by the leadership team on the many necessary decisions during planning should contribute to a successful implementation. As is typical with most projects, the more time that is spent in the planning stage will generally correspond to a successful implementation. James (1986) urges that a minimum of “one academic year” (p. 46) is spent in planning and training before the advisory program is implemented, while Cole (1994) recommends a year or possibly longer to get all planning and training done.

Implementation of Advisory

Since the majority of available adults in schools are teachers, the classroom advisory sessions are usually led by teachers, but some schools may supplement their advisors by also using counselors, administrators, or non-professional staff as advisory leaders (Cole, 1992). Many of these advisory leaders will question whether they have the
training and background to lead an advisory. Cole (1992) states “appropriate training for caring teachers is the keystone of a successful teacher advisory program” (p. 14), while Goldberg (1998) agrees by saying “training is crucial if an advisory system is to succeed” (p. 3). Most teachers do very well at teaching content, but may have some apprehension in a non-content classroom situation. Galassi et al. (1997) list several skills that are required of teachers leading advisories, such as “... active listening and basic counseling skills including group management techniques and an ability to engage in affective education” (p. 38). Most teachers do not have specific training in these skills, but they do enjoy the daily interaction with students or else they would not continue in the profession. Some teachers may see a conflict in taking on another responsibility, such as advisory, which has good intentions, but which they are not specifically trained for.

MacLaury (1995) documented that a 15 hour training course in group facilitation was given to new advisory leaders at New York City’s Community School District #1 (CSD #1) and felt it was the bare minimum needed for preparation, while doubling the training to 30 hours would allow time for practice of the skills. The training sessions had three main goals:

... (a) To train teachers in the basic group facilitation skills; (b) to enable teachers to recall their own early adolescence and to use this subjective experience to help them understand their students’ reactions, both in the classroom and in the advisory group; and (c) to teach teachers about the implications of stages of group development for student behaviors and advisor interpretations. (p. 47)
Through a combination of training methods, including role playing exercises and group discussion, MacLaury (1995) reported that the teachers responded favorably to their training. The only item ranking low was that teachers felt the training should have been longer. Cole (1992) stated that the preparation should include training of teachers to use questioning methods, just as they would in a content classroom, that encourage student responses and cause “... open-ended thinking” (p. 17). The methods of open versus closed questions, waiting for answers, and reflection of student answers and feelings can be used to create dialogue with students.

*Advisory Curriculums*

The development of specific lesson topics is very important in the planning of advisory programs and also needs alignment with program goals. The lessons may be directed more toward affective needs, cognitive needs, or a combination of both (Gallasi et al., 1997). Cole (1992) emphasizes lessons and activities that support relationship building. There are several options for development of advisory lesson plans. Some schools purchase a set of lessons, some schools develop an outline or topic list for their teachers to follow and generate lessons from, and some teachers develop their own independent advisory lessons. In schools where teachers are not in favor of the advisory system and thus are unwilling to build lesson plans for advisory, a school should strongly consider purchasing lesson plans or using ones similar to other successful schools. When teachers are permitted to develop their own lessons, strong advisories can be the result. Deitte (2002) endured advisories for 2 years before receiving approval from the principal to develop his own lessons. The students in the advisory of Deitte (2002) were in most need of affective skills, which he grouped as “... character education” (p. 22) and
consisted of 10 traits: “... respect, perseverance, integrity, citizenship, trustworthiness, responsibility, compassion, honesty, self-discipline, and fairness” (p. 23). Rather than through a lecture format, Deitte (2002) used discovery learning and role playing in real examples to facilitate the concepts in meaningful ways. With this format through the whole year, Deitte (2002) felt that his third year of advisory was a success and he would not return to the style used in his prior two years. A teacher who is empowered can truly make a difference in the lives of the students in his advisory.

Another feature to use in advisory programs is completing service projects, since the projects usually require several or many students to work together for a common cause (Kurth, 1995). When facilitated properly by the teacher, the students learn teamwork skills by analyzing issues, generating project ideas and choosing a project, and then deciding which type of service to use: “direct service, indirect service, or advocacy” (Kurth, 1995, p. 36). The type of service may depend on the type of project chosen and Kurth (1995) found that most advisories in the sixth grade picked indirect service projects, such as raising funds and then donating to worthy causes. In the seventh grade, all of the advisories chose direct service projects and some advisories worked on multiple projects, such as cleaning up beaches and visiting nursing homes (Kurth, 1995). Eighth graders combined their resources and had five advisories work together on a nursing home Valentine’s Day party. In some cases, the projects chosen were related to topics studied in the regular classroom (Kurth, 1995). In these projects, the students took ownership to plan and execute the project. An important component after the project was to do a reflection on the project, including their own contributions and the “best and worst” things that occurred, followed by sharing. Kurth (1995) found that these school
service projects led to other service projects and that the work of the students led to improved relations with the community.

MacLaury (2000) found that incorporating health education topics into advisory lessons can supplement formal health classes. In an advisory where students feel safe after developing a trust with their peers and with the teacher, it may be more comfortable for them to talk about health issues during advisory than with their own parents. Examples of topics are: “... sexuality, AIDS, violence prevention, nutrition, emotional wellness, and substance use” (MacLaury, 2000, p. 53). An advisory that includes senior mentors or other older students can be helpful in discussing these topics, since the experiences of older students will identify ways of dealing with these issues.

### Outcomes of Advisories

As described previously, there can be many academic and behavioral benefits from implementing advisory programs in schools, although the specific benefits depend on the overall mission and goals chosen for the program. Since advisories have been in place at many schools for many years, there are both positive and negative anecdotes from the viewpoint of teachers and students. Cushman (1990) reports on one teacher who said, “I’ve seen drastic changes in students because someone cares about them as an adviser .... Attendance goes up; the kids work harder; study skills and academic performance improve” (para. 36). At another school, Cushman (1990) learned that students and advisors know each other well enough that the advisor gave a short speech about the student at graduation and a teacher commented: “For many students it is the highlight of their school career, to be publicly recognized for what is special about them. And it’s only possible because we know them” (para. 38). Esposito and Curcio (2002)
found five middle schools in the southeastern United States that had successful programs and each school was different in how it scheduled and ran the advisory program. Comments from teachers to Esposito and Curcio (2002) included, “it helps the kids with a sense of belonging (p. 30) .... Its success depends on the teachers in each teacher advisory and how committed they are” (p. 32). Esposito and Curcio (2002) received negative comments that stated, “We have too many students in our teacher advisories for any real advisement activities to take place” (p. 32), and “We’re asked to do things we’re not trained for” (p. 34).

There is very little research that considers the viewpoint of the students who participate in advisory groups. Esposito and Curcio (2002) found in five middle schools from different states that students were generally positive about what they got out of advisory time, given that they got to know other students and the teacher better, and it sometimes gave them time for extra help or time to complete assignments. Students generally wanted more social time and one comment to Esposito and Curcio (2002) was: “It gives us a reason to come to school, to be with and talk with our friends” (p. 30). Hagborg (1995) investigated the responses from a quantitative survey of students in a single high school which eventually eliminated the program due to “... considerable teacher protest as well as student dissatisfaction ...” (p. 50). Hagborg (1995) found females had higher satisfaction than males and that overall student satisfaction with the program was mixed, partially because “... students often found the discussions superficial, felt bored, and, at times, found their classmates to be disruptive” (p. 50) and because it was “... only somewhat meeting their needs ...” (p. 50). Hagborg (1995)
claims that the program was not given a fair chance to succeed, since it started out with little to no planning and not enough training of teachers to lead the program.

In a survey of the research on advisories, Makkonen (2004) reports that “few quantitative, systemic studies have been conducted on advisory, and there is little comprehensive data on its outcomes” (para. 5). Because school systems can put different time priorities on advisories, such as daily or weekly, as well as have different goals for their advisories, such as affective or cognitive, it is virtually impossible to compare one advisory to another. Much of the literature contains narrative accounts and comes more from the ranks of middle schools, where it was mainly implemented in the 1980s and 1990s, than from high schools. Makkonen (2004) also notes “... that there is no one correct way to measure an advisory’s results” (para. 12), but recommends that surveys take place several times during the year. Those results may be used to compare against short-term goals and provide information for adapting the curriculum or the focus instead of waiting until the following year. Makkonen (2004) summarizes by stating “... the best advisory evaluations consider participants’ subjective impressions in conjunction with objective indexes” (para. 21) and “As lone measures, data and opinion may be limited, but when considered together, they provide a more accurate assessment of a program’s effectiveness” (para. 21).

Conclusion

Adolescents starting the ninth grade year of high school are in a year of transition and the success in that first year can have significant consequences on their future. These students, like all people, have basic biological needs, which when met, contribute to their well-being and success. The review of literature has found that student achievement in
school is affected by the inter-related constructs of connection, trust, community, bonding, and engagement in the school setting. Any lack of these items can result in lower student achievement. Placing focus on these constructs should lead to improved student achievement. The concept of a freshman advisory program, where students lose their anonymity and become known well by at least one adult, has been shown increased student connection to school and leads to a community atmosphere in the school building. A successful advisory program does not occur without hard work in the planning and the implementation stages. Many schools have tried advisory programs to focus on affective and/or cognitive skills, with some programs being sustained successes, while others failed and were eliminated. Since program goals and implementation may vary from school to school, comparisons of programs are difficult and most programs have only been evaluated individually. There was very little broad quantitative research available, especially from the viewpoint of students. The best measure of the effectiveness of the freshman advisory program at Marietta High School can only occur after the program has existed for several years. This mixed method study occurred during the first year of implementation and sought the voices of students to determine how the students felt about the program and what benefits had been received to that time.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Study Design

The evaluation and exploration of the freshman advisory program at Marietta High School was done by using a quantitative-qualitative or mixed method research design. The study was based solely on the responses of the freshman who were participating in this new program at the school. At the midpoint of the first year of the program, the researcher distributed a survey to freshman students using questions that were answered on a Likert scale and quantitative analysis was performed on the survey data. The researcher also asked the question “why?” after each survey item and provided an answer space to allow students to write in additional comments and this information was analyzed qualitatively for themes. The mixed method approach allowed for ease of quickly gathering a large amount of quantitative data, while the collection of comments provided two benefits: it aided in the interpretation of numerical results and allowed a broader analysis than could done with just numerical results.

Research Site and Subjects

The researcher studied all freshman advisory groups at Marietta High School, a rural, city school district. There were approximately 250 freshman students assigned to one of ten advisory rooms during the school year. The students, aged 14-15, were in their first year at Marietta High School and were in transition at the high school after having completed three years at Marietta Middle School. Both male and female students were
surveyed. All freshman students were given the opportunity to participate in the study, but were not required to complete the survey. There was no compensation or other benefits for the participants.

*Procedures*

The researcher had contacted the principal at Marietta High School and received preliminary approval to distribute a survey. The principal reviewed the survey before giving final approval. The researcher also contacted the two teachers who have led the implementation of the advisory program to solicit their input for the survey questions. The researcher personally contacted each of the ten advisory room teachers and explained the reason for the survey and the study, and answered any questions. Prior to the day of the survey, February 11, teachers were given a script to read to the students along with the survey and were asked to review it ahead in case there were questions for the researcher. The script included general instructions for the purpose of the study, the type of study questions, and the choice of whether or not to participate, and a statement of thanks on behalf of the researcher. Students answered a Likert scale survey and had the chance to enter additional comments to supplement their answers. No student names were collected, so that anonymity was preserved. The researcher gathered the completed surveys and removed them from the school.

*Instruments*

The study was conducted through the use of a Likert scale survey with 8 questions to determine whether the partial-year advisory program had been beneficial to freshman students. Each survey item was accompanied with the question “why?”, which allowed students to provide additional information or the reason for their answer and allowed the
researcher to determine any themes among the students or any of the advisory rooms. A ninth question sought qualitative information only.

*Reliability*

Due to the short duration of this project, the survey was not administered more than once. To ensure internal reliability, the researcher had the survey questions reviewed beforehand for freshman grade-level appropriateness and clarity by two English teachers at Marietta High School, including those who were responsible for leading the advisory implementation, and by Marietta College Education Department personnel. Administration of the survey was consistent through common instructions to the advisory room teachers.

*Validity*

Several types of validity were considered: internal, content, criterion-related, and construct. Taking the participation in freshman advisory to be the treatment, then since there were nine advisory rooms for freshman, each with different teachers and senior mentors, the consistency across all nine rooms was intended to be the same, but due to variations, it might have been invalid to compare all nine rooms together. Each of the freshman advisory teachers and mentors had been given the same lesson plan, so each room should have been doing the same basic things in their advisory period. The surveys contained advisory room identification to help understand that affect on internal validity. Content validity was addressed by ensuring that the questions were representative of the types of questions that could be asked about students and advisories, and the questions were reviewed by Marietta College Education Department personnel. Criterion-related validity was checked to see if the scores correlated by predicting the null hypothesis or
the alternate hypothesis. One threat to criterion-related validity was that the results varied among the classrooms, due to the possibility of inconsistent implementation of advisory by the teachers and the senior mentors. The application of statistical measures was used to judge construct validity and whether the scores showed enough significance to confirm the hypothesis. From a qualitative standpoint, a threat to validity would happen only if there were not enough common answers from the write-in responses to generate many themes.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

The survey responses containing the Likert scale data was entered in the statistical program Excel and manipulated for determination of trends and significance of the data. The large quantity of write-in responses were be reviewed manually and categorized for analysis by grouping similar comments together to aid in generation of themes.

**Preliminary Results**

The researcher expected to prove that the alternate hypothesis was correct, based on the ideals of the advisory program. Since this school year was the first year of the advisory implementation and the survey was being administered mid-way through the year, and since most teachers were in agreement with the program, the researcher expected some varying results from classroom to classroom. A concern was that the students would not take the survey seriously and/or choose not to participate.

**Potential Ethical Issues**

Before the survey was administered, the researcher received approval from the Marietta College Human Subjects Review Board. The researcher also received final approval from the Marietta High School principal and that approval made parental and
student approval unnecessary. Student anonymity was extremely important for the
survey, so that it would not be a reason for students to choose not to participate. The
surveys did not collect names of the students. The individual advisory rooms were
identified only to the researcher for determining trends and/or themes between advisory
rooms. The identity of the rooms were kept confidential to the researcher.
CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

Interpretation of Findings

A nine question survey was distributed to each freshman advisory classroom for completion during the advisory period on February 11, 2009, which was the second advisory meeting after the holiday break and the thirteenth advisory meeting since implementation of the program at the beginning of the current school year. It was noted earlier that the survey timing occurred very early in the program and more study would be necessary as the program matured. Approximately 250 freshman students were requested to participate and 217 completed surveys were returned for analysis, so the return rate was ~86.8%. Students were requested to mark their gender on the survey. The respondents were 45% male and 51% female with gender not marked on 4% of the surveys.

The survey generated a large amount of both quantitative and qualitative information. For the first eight questions, the survey used a five point Likert scale with the following designations: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral/no feeling; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree. In addition to the Likert scale, students were given space after each question for an extended response of any reasons why they had answered in that way. The ninth item was solely a request for qualitative information. Some students made more than one comment for a question, so throughout the data analysis, the number of comments can not be interpreted as the number of students who provided qualitative
information. Table 1 summarizes the raw Likert scale responses for each question and the overall mean for each question.

Table 1.

Raw Survey Data and Overall Means by Question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>1=SD</th>
<th>2=D</th>
<th>3=N</th>
<th>4=A</th>
<th>5=SA</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The advisory program has made it easier for me to transition from the middle school &amp; adapt to the high school.</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I have made new friends with people in my advisory room.</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I feel comfortable about participating in my advisory group.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The discussion topics have been helpful to me.</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Participation in the advisory program has made me feel more connected to Marietta High School.</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I would feel comfortable going to my advisory room teacher or my senior mentors about a problem.</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The advisory program has had a positive impact on my freshman year experience.</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I believe the Thanksgiving service project and the Christmas service project helped my advisory to bond together.</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each question, there were significantly large numbers of students who responded in the neutral/no feeling group, so the quantity in that group affected the value of the mean and the interpretation of the overall mean value. For some analysis of this
data, it was decided to group the neutral with the strongly disagree and disagree categories, since the student was not satisfied or impressed enough to answer with agree or strongly agree. Each question was analyzed individually for its quantitative and qualitative value.

**Results of Question 1**

Question 1 asked for a response to the statement: The advisory program has made it easier for me to transition from the middle school and adapt to the high school. The 217 student responses were graphed by percentage on a bar chart in Figure 1. The two types of disagree responses and the two types of agree responses were put into common columns. Figure 1 shows that the students were split into approximate thirds (at or near to 33%) between disagreement, neutrality, and agreement. Just 31% of the students were in agreement that the advisory program had assisted in their transition to the high school.

![Figure 1](image)

*Figure 1. Student Responses for Question 1.*
Figure 2 shows the individual means from Question 1 for each of the ten classrooms. The overall mean was 2.86 or just slightly on the disagree side, and close to a neutral response. Compared to a neutral response of 3.0, four classrooms were in the agreeable range and the other six were in the disagreeable range, so there may have been positive influences from four of the classrooms that caused students to feel were helpful in their transition to Marietta High School.

133 extended response comments were provided along with the numerical answers to Question 1 and the responses contained both positive and negative observations. The comments that generated three positive themes about the transition were: students learned things about the high school, students learned about things in general, and students met new people. The negative comments generated two themes regarding the transition: students didn’t need advisory & advisory does not work.
Students learned things about the high school

We learned about the high school and got used to it.
I could ask questions to upperclassmen.
It helped me know what people wore to homecoming.

Students learned about things in general

Our leaders helped explain things.
We talked about things I wanted to know.
It is helpful to talk to someone.

Students met new people

It let me socialize and make friends and meet people.
I now know some of the older students.

Students didn’t need advisory

There is nothing that I learned that I didn’t know beforehand.
I didn’t really have any problems that I needed help with.
I was already adapted.
I’ve switched schools before.
This has not helped my transition. Other things like sports and friends did that.
High school is almost exactly like middle school.

Advisory doesn’t work

We don’t do anything.
It’s a waste of time.
We just get yelled at.
The teacher is mean.
We never talk about things that might help us.
No one takes it seriously.
My advisory leaders are not very helpful.

Results of Question 2

Question 2 listed the following statement: I have made new friends with people in my advisory room. Prior to their freshman year, the students had attended school together for three years in a single building, the Marietta Middle School (MMS). The students were assigned to their advisory classrooms by alphabetical order of the entire
freshman class divided into groups of 25 students. The student responses to Question 2 were graphed on a bar chart in Figure 3. The two degrees of agree and disagree were again grouped together. The responses showed that 31% of the students said they had made new friends within the first half of the year, but 47% of the students claimed they had not made new friends and 22% of the students had no opinion on this question.

![Bar chart showing student responses to Question 2](image)

**Figure 3.** Student Responses for Question 2.

The mean for Question 2 was 2.65, so as a total group, the students tended to disagree that they had made new friends from the advisory process. Figure 4 shows the individual means from all advisory classrooms. There were seven classrooms with means below 3.0 and just three classrooms with means higher than 3.0, so overall, in some classrooms, students felt they had made some new friends, but not in most cases.
130 extended response answers were received for Question 2, which resulted in the generation of positive, neutral and negative themes. There were approximately equal numbers of positive, neutral, and negative comments from the students and that equality of comment type was surprising when compared to the dominance of disagreement in Figure 3. The positive theme was that students made friends. The neutral theme was that students already knew everyone. The negative theme indicated students did not make friends.

**Students made friends**

*I connected with more people.*  
*I know more people.*  
*The seniors are my friends.*  
*We are around each other every Wednesday so we grow a closer bond.*

**Students already knew everyone**

*I know everybody in my advisory room.*  
*I’m already friends with most of them.*  
*I already knew everyone in the class.*

*Figure 4. Mean Response by Individual Classroom for Question 2.*
Students did not make friends

We have nothing in common.
I don’t want to be friends with them.
I don’t talk to people in advisory.
I already have friends.
We can’t talk & sit with friends.
Everybody is mean.
I can make friends without advisory.

Results of Question 3

Question 3 had the following statement: I feel comfortable about participating in my advisory group. A purpose for advisory was to provide an environment in each classroom that was open and safe for everyone to participate. While 33% of the students were neutral on this question, 43% of the students agreed, while only 24% disagreed. A graph which shows the comparison of student responses is shown in Figure 5.

![Graph showing student responses for Question 3.]

Figure 5. Student Responses for Question 3.

The overall mean response for Question 3 is 3.25 or slightly in the agree region.

The individual classroom means showed large variation from classroom to classroom,
ranging from a low of 1.9 to a high of 4.1. Figure 6 shows the individual classroom means. As each classroom grew and developed its own personality from the contributions of the 25 freshman, the senior mentors, and the teacher, there was bound to more and less openness or resistance to speak within their group or classroom.

Comparing classroom means, there were six of ten classrooms that had means greater than 3.0, indicating that most classrooms had an environment which made students feel safe in participating.

\[ Q3: \text{Overall Mean} = 3.25 \]

*Figure 6. Mean Response by Individual Classroom for Question 3.*

112 comments provided positive, neutral, and negative qualitative information about Question 3, which resulted in some common themes. For those who chose to write, the majority of the responses were positive, which backs up the statistical data for this question. The positive theme gave reasons for comfort in participation. The neutral theme was problems with participation. The negative theme gave reasons for not participating.
Reasons for comfort in participation

People I know are in it.
I’m around nice people.
They are easy to talk to.
They are cool.
Our advisors are very open-minded.
There’s no pressure.
They can relate to us because they’ve been through the same thing.

Problems with participation

I’m shy with talking out in a group.
I would if my class had people I get along with.

Reasons for not participating

People are obnoxious.
People get made fun of.
I have nothing to talk about.
Everything is boring.
I’m not friends with anyone in my advisory group.
My advisors do not let us have group discussions to talk about our feelings.
Our seniors don’t make us comfortable.
There is nothing to participate in.

Results of Question 4

Question 4 stated: The discussion topics have been helpful to me. Discussion topics were used to draw on the current experiences of the freshman students as well as past experiences of the senior mentors and the teachers. Discussion topics ranged from examinations of certain school rules to peer pressure issues to homecoming traditions, and often were directed by the needs of the students in the particular classroom on that day. Nearly one-third or 30% of the freshman were neutral on this question. The majority of students, 39%, disagreed with this question, leaving 31% in agreement. The student responses are shown in Figure 7.
The overall mean for the 217 responses was 2.82, or slightly below neutral, so the students as a group slightly disagreed with the question. The variation among classrooms was significant, ranging from 1.6 to 3.7, so students felt that some classrooms provided better discussion topics than others. The individual classroom means are shown in Figure 8.
115 extended response answers were written along with the numerical responses. The student observations were related to how helpful the discussion topics were, and the responses resulted in the following themes: discussion topics are helpful, discussion topics are somewhat helpful, and discussion topics are not helpful.

**Discussion topics are helpful**

*It helps me know what’s going on in school.*
*They help us out.*
*They are interesting.*
*I learned from other’s mistakes.*
*They discussed how to study and take the mid-terms, which helped a lot.*

**Discussion topics are somewhat helpful**

*Some of them don’t really help.*
*Some were helpful but others were dumb.*
*Some of them are silly, such as school rules everyone already knows.*

**Discussion topics are not helpful**

*I don’t really learn much.*
*They are obvious.*
They are boring.
Nothing I need to know.
I haven’t had any problems.
They made me dislike school even more.

Results of Question 5

Question 5 read: Participation in the advisory program has made me feel more connected to Marietta High School. The hope was that if students felt more connection to their school, then they would be inclined to work harder and do better in school. As with responses to the previous questions, about one-third or 32% responded with a neutral answer. For the rest, 46% disagreed with the question and only 22% agreed with it, so overall, a half year of the advisory program has not caused students to feel connected to the high school. All of the student responses are shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Student Responses for Question 5.

The overall mean for this question was 2.55, showing that students as a group disagreed with this question. The individual classroom means showed that eight of the
ten classrooms were below the neutral mark of 3.0, ranging from 1.6 to 2.8. Only two classrooms had means that corresponded with agreement to this question. The individual classroom means are shown in Figure 10.

![Figure 10. Mean Response by Individual Classroom for Question 5.](image)

81 comments were provided to back up the numerical answers and those comments resulted in the following two themes: advisory has helped my connectedness and I don’t need advisory.

**Advisory has helped my connectedness**

- It’s helping me see how things go.
- It’s helping me learn about the school.
- I’ve learned things.
- We did things to help out and do good at school.
- You are part of something special.

**I don’t need advisory**

- I don’t need to be connected to my school.
- I hate the high school.
- I was already connected.
- We haven’t really done anything, it’s mostly a free period.
We don’t really do anything that connects us to the whole school. I’d rather have assemblies or something more spirited.

Results of Question 6

Question 6 listed the following statement: I would feel comfortable going to my advisory room teacher or my senior mentors about a problem. One purpose of advisory was to provide at least one person somewhere in the school from which the student could seek advice or counseling. The hope was that the relationship would build where the student could trust this one person, whether a teacher or a senior mentor. The majority of students were in disagreement with this statement. Possible reasons could be due to only knowing the teacher & mentors for one semester, or due to the large group size (25 students per classroom) not allowing time for one-on-one discussion. 45% of the students disagreed with the statement, while 31% were in agreement and 24% were neutral or had no opinion. The student responses are shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Student Responses for Question 6.
The mean for the students as whole group was 2.70, so the overall consensus was that the students slightly disagreed with the statement. The variation from classroom to classroom was significant for this statement. Only two classrooms had means above 3.0, which showed that those two classrooms had built up some trust between the students and the teachers & mentors. The other eight classrooms were all in disagreement, ranging from means that showed slight disagreement in a few classrooms to two classrooms that showed strong disagreement with means of 1.7 & 1.8. The individual classroom means are shown in Figure 12.

![Graph](Figure 12. Mean Response by Individual Classroom for Question 6.)

A total of 131 comments were written for Question 6. The majority of the comments were written by the students who had agreed with Question 6. The student responses generated the following five themes: I feel comfortable with them, I feel somewhat comfortable, I’m not comfortable with the advisors, I don’t need any help, and I have other support.
I feel comfortable with them

They are easy to talk to.
I trust them.
They can relate.
They help me.
They know a lot of stuff.

I feel somewhat comfortable

I know one senior advisor.
Yes, I know the teacher.
Not the teacher, but maybe the students (seniors).
Yes, but I probably never would.
Yes, but not a personal problem.

I’m not comfortable with the advisors

I’m not really comfortable about going to people I barely know.
I don’t like my advisors.
There is no mentoring going on.
They are not friendly.
The advisors are mean and nasty to us.
I have nothing in common with them and I don’t think they care.

I don’t need any help

I don’t like telling people my problems.
It’s none of their business.
I never have any problems.

I have other support

I have other family and friends that I go to.
I have better senior friends.

Results of Question 7

Question 7 asked for a response to the statement: The advisory program has had a positive impact on my freshman year experience. Out of the 217 students who answered, over one-third, or 37%, of the students were neutral or had no feeling on this question. Among the rest of the students, the responses were close to even with 34% in
disagreement and 29% in agreement. The student responses to Question 7 are shown in Figure 13.

![Bar Chart](image)

**Figure 13.** Student Responses for Question 7.

The relative equality of responses across all categories created an overall group mean of 2.85, or just slightly on the disagree side. There was a wide variation in the means from the individual classrooms, ranging from a low of 1.9 to a high of 3.8. Out of the ten classrooms, only two were in the significantly agree range, while four were in the disagree range and four were at or very near the neutral point. The individual classroom means are shown in Figure 14.
Figure 14. Mean Response by Individual Classroom for Question 7.

Question 7 had the lowest amount of write-in comments out of all questions, as just 62 observations were made in addition to the numerical responses. The comments were nearly evenly split between two themes: advisory is good and advisory is bad.

Advisory is good

- It made every Wednesday more fun and enjoyable.
- I’ve gotten to know the high school and teachers.
- I made more friends.
- It has helped me understand about the future years.
- They should do it every year.
- It shows I’m not alone.
- Less time in class.

Advisory is bad

- It was a waste of time.
- We don’t do anything.
- It took time from my classes.
- The teacher made it a negative experience.
- I didn’t learn anything new.
Results of Question 8

Question 8 asked for a response to the statement: I believe the Thanksgiving service project and the Christmas service project helped my advisory to bond together. A purpose of these projects was to let the students work together as a team to support worthy causes and put some focus on someone beside themselves. For the two projects, classrooms adopted a soldier in the Thanksgiving project and a local family in the Christmas project, and gathered materials that were useful and needed by the soldiers and the families. In many classrooms, only a few students actually brought in items, so participation was not as high as it potentially could have been and so there was less team-building in the classroom. Accordingly, the responses to this question tended to the disagree side. 43% of students disagreed with the question, while 26% were in agreement, and 31% were neutral. In some classrooms, the senior mentors rewarded the students who brought in items with candy. One factor that can not be discounted for this question is that some of the students, or their families, did not have the means to support the project and purchase any items to bring into school for participation in these projects. The student responses to Question 8 are shown in Figure 15.
The mean of the entire group for Question 8 was 2.62, so the whole group tended to disagree with the statement. There were three classrooms that did get some bonding out of the experience, based on their classroom means above 3.0. Three other classrooms had significant disagreement, since their classroom means were all below 2.0, and the remaining four classrooms followed the overall group in being just on the disagreeable side. Figure 16 shows the variation of mean by the individual classroom.
108 comments provided feedback to support the numerical responses to Question 8. The largest part of the feedback was negative, which was expected based on the overall mean for the group. The write-in comments generated the following themes: the service project was good, the service project was somewhat good, and the service project was not good.

**The service project was good**

*We had to work together.*

*It helped others which is good.*

*Making boxes was fun.*

**The service project was somewhat good**

*We didn’t really do anything together. We just brought stuff in separately.*

*A lot of people didn’t even bring stuff in.*

**The service project was not good**

*No one brought anything.*

*No one participated.*

*No one cares.*
It didn’t help bonding.
No one likes each other.
Our box of food got stolen.
It was a waste of time.
We got yelled at and everyone was mad.
The advisors did all of the work and did not let me help.
It wasn’t at all hands-on – it was just “donate this”.
The service project is just a scam to con you out of your money.

Results of Question 9

Question 9 did not ask for any numerical response and was a completely open-ended question. The purpose was to use the experience of the freshman through one semester to let them offer suggestions for the program. Students were asked to respond to the following statement: How I would improve the advisory program for the rest of the year and for next year’s freshman class. 198 comments, the most highest total for any survey question, offered varying amounts of positive and negative feedback. Some students provided multiple comments. With the amount of neutrality and disagreement that had been observed in Questions 1-8, it was a surprise to see for Question 9 that the majority of the comments were applicable to improvements and not just complaints. The positive comments resulted in the following themes: activities, topics, leadership & participants, frequency, and organization. The negative comments generated the following themes: value, leadership, and time.

Activities

Have more fun activities.
Play games.
Have more food.
We could have holiday parties.
We could have team-building or leadership games.
More music.
Have more productive activities.
Topics

Make it less boring.
Make it more interesting.
Have relevant topics.
Don’t talk about dumb stuff we learn in health class.
Let students do more of the talking.
Talk about stuff that has been going on and how you can fix it.

Leadership and participants

We need better senior advisors/teachers who actually want to help.
Let us pick the teachers and students we are with.
Don’t have senior mentors.
Let the mentors do the teaching and NOT the teacher.

Frequency

Make it longer.
Have it more frequently.
Have it every other week.

Organization

It needs to be more organized.
Topics need to be more organized.
Each week we could decide what we would talk about the next week.
Keep students on task.

Value

I don’t think we should have advisory.
It’s a waste of time.
It’s fine as it is.
It was fun, but probably unnecessary for the most part.

Leadership

Fire teacher X.
The teachers don’t like it.
The leaders don’t have anything for us to do.

Time

Advisory shortens our classes where we actually learn things.
It’s just a free period.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Summary

Through an eight question Likert scale survey and including written comments, 217 freshman students at Marietta High School (MHS) have spoken their thoughts and feelings after one semester of implementation of the new advisory program, which aimed to help transition, adapt, and connect these new students to the high school. Throughout their responses, approximately one-third of the respondents had no feelings or was neutral about the benefits of the program to them. Even though they were neutral, their neutral responses almost have to be considered as not agreeable and then combined with the disagreeable responses when looking at the overall impact of the first semester of the advisory program. Arguably, the neutral responses could have been discarded from the analysis and then comparisons only made between the agreeable and disagreeable responses. However, since teachers should be trying to reach all students in their classrooms, it would be invalid to discard the neutral responses.

Throughout the survey responses, there was nearly always a response of around 33% for the neutral or no feeling category. This might have indicated that the same one-third of the students just made answers of “3” all through their responses, but this was not the case. While a few students answered with all “3”s, most individual students gave answers that varied from “1” to 5”, as they evidently had varying feelings about different aspects of advisory. Due to this variation of responses, the overall strong of number of
responses, 217, and the large amount of qualitative comments, the diversity of data combines to give validity to the collected data.

Question 5 of the survey addressed the research hypothesis for this project and directly asked whether the advisory program made the student feel more connected to MHS. Just 22% of the students marked agree/strongly agree with this statement, so 78% did not feel that advisory connected them to their school. Therefore, the null hypothesis of “Freshman students participating in advisory programs at MHS will not have higher connectedness to their school” was confirmed for this data.

The other questions of the survey pertained to potential goals of an advisory program and were related to the confirmation of the null hypothesis. Note that the literature review found that from school to school, the purpose and goals of the advisory program were likely to be different from one school to the next, which affected how each school planned and implemented their advisory program. For the MHS freshman responses, it was interesting to look at the survey questions which addressed sub-categories of advisory program goals: transition, making friends, relevance of discussion topics, mentor relationships, program impact, and group bonding, which were Questions 1-2, 4, and 6-8. By combining the neutral responses with disagree responses for these questions, the percent of agree responses was consistently in the range of 26-31%. It was clear that the advisory program has benefited at least one-fourth of the students. It was also clear that there was a future opportunity to reach many other students through the advisory program. It was surprising that more students did not make friends in advisory. However, the opportunity to make more friends may have already happened in sixth through eighth grades when the students were merged at Marietta Middle School from
various elementary schools. Another factor was that the assignment of students to advisory classrooms by alphabetical order may have caused them to be assigned with people they had already been assigned with in homerooms from earlier grades.

Question 3 addressed the comfort level of participating in the advisory group. The responses, at 43% agreeable, had the highest level of agreeable responses of any question and were from the only question to have an overall group mean greater than 3.0. In addition, six classrooms out of ten had individual means greater than 3.0 for Question 3, so the majority of teachers and senior mentors were providing conditions that students felt were open and safe for their involvement. It was also evident that there was opportunity for improvement in this area.

From this summary of research data, the reader may be tempted to conclude that the MHS advisory program has not succeeded, but it has had some successes and has shown areas for both focus and improvement. In a separate survey of all MHS teachers by the building’s Professional Learning Committee (PLC) in February 2009 regarding the advisory program, teachers expressed the need for assistance in developing plans and help in administering the program. This information was consistent with the literature review where schools needed time, including in some cases more than a single year before implementation, to develop, modify and optimize their advisory program for their school.

Since the program was for the students, teachers and administrators should consider the student voice in plans for improvement. Some of the same thematic information was found in the responses to more than one of the survey questions. Many students wanted more out of their advisory program. They needed more relevant topics
for learning and discussing. They needed to have the advisory time slot as useful time, rather than being idle in some cases. They needed more teachers and senior mentors who would care about them. They have requested more activities.

Implications

The freshman year of high school has been found critical to a student’s success in school and that success was important in whether the student would eventually graduate from high school. Without a high school degree, a person is significantly more likely to face a life of poverty. Any program, such as advisory, which can contribute to a freshman student’s success is valuable and should be optimized for the maximum benefit. A strong advisory program has the ability to create and sustain a positive learning environment in the school, which over time, ought to lead to higher individual student achievement and higher overall school achievement as measured by the state on school report cards. The results of this research showed that the advisory program at MHS has become established and made some successes with some students. This report may be read by some and interpreted that the advisory system for freshman has failed. Rather, based on the voices of the freshman participants, it has provided an in-depth look at what was good and what could be improved.

Further Research

This research project was limited by being able to collect data after only one semester of implementation. The whole process of advisory can be seen as a set of interrelated series and parallel operations which play out over a longer period of time. Some of the gains, such as bonding and transition, can be more immediate. The switch into connection and individual effort for grades, and ultimately into higher school
achievement is a much more complex and time-dependent venture. Advisory can set the structure for higher level processes to take place within a school. While school test scores and report cards are the final arbiters on whether advisory is successful, it would be important to continually evaluate the advisory program to ensure that the purpose and goals remain aligned with overall school goals. This study in no way tried to evaluate the subtle differences between individual classroom teachers. Just as teachers collaborate for academic classes, collaboration for advisory should occur to attempt to minimize differences from advisory classroom to classroom. Though different schools operate advisory in different ways, it would be beneficial to stay current with the literature and monitor what other schools have done to help their freshman and/or make their advisory programs successful and sustainable.
APPENDIX

Title: Marietta High School Freshman Class Advisory Survey
Marietta High School Freshman Class Advisory Survey  Male ___  Female ____

Using the key below, please respond to the following statements by circling the number which best represents how you feel. In addition, please provide feedback for your numerical response by answering “Why?” for each statement. Use the back of the page if more space is needed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral/No Feeling</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. The advisory program has made it easier for me to transition from the middle school and adapt to the high school.

   5  4  3  2  1

   Why?

2. I have made new friends with people in my advisory room.

   5  4  3  2  1

   Why?

3. I feel comfortable about participating in my advisory group.

   5  4  3  2  1

   Why?

4. The discussion topics have been helpful to me.

   5  4  3  2  1

   Why?

5. Participation in the advisory program has made me feel more connected to Marietta High School.

   5  4  3  2  1

   Why?
6. I would feel comfortable going to my advisory room teacher or my senior mentors about a problem.
   
   5  4  3  2  1

   Why?

7. The advisory program has had a positive impact on my freshman year experience.
   
   5  4  3  2  1

   Why?

8. I believe the Thanksgiving service project and the Christmas service project helped my advisory to bond together.
   
   5  4  3  2  1

   Why?

9. Please list any comments about how you think the advisory program for freshman could be improved for the rest of the school year and for next year’s freshman class.
REFERENCES


Southern Regional Education Board. (2005). *High Schools That Work: An Enhanced*
