

An Evaluation of the *Samueli Academy* Advisory Program

Prepared by Devin M. Beliveau
Department of Educational Leadership
Dr. Alicia Butters and Dr. Douglas Fisher
Department of Educational Leadership
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UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The goal of this evaluation is to see if the goals of the Samueli Academy Advisory Program are being achieved. There seems to be general consensus among school administrators that it is beneficial for students to have an extra adult in their academic lives (the advisor) who they work with during their four years of high school. This evaluation tests that assumption, and gathered data to see whether students were gaining the benefits that are stated in the Samueli Academy Student/Parent Handbook. Data was collected through two comprehensive surveys, one for Samueli Academy students and another for Samueli Academy Advisors. The data showed several successes in the Advisory program. Students reported that they were making friends in Advisory, they valued the relationships made in Advisory, they spent a good amount of time reflecting in Advisory, they valued the college prep activities, and that they were focused during Advisory. However, several problems surfaced as well. Several students reported that they had not found a supportive adult in their advisor, they did not benefit from the reflections done during Advisory, they did not value the Advisory activities, and only saw Advisory as a welcome break from regular classes. This evaluation concluded that the stated goals of the Samueli Academy Advisory Program were largely being met, but with room for improvement. Key recommendations going forward include re-emphasizing the building of Advisor-Advisee relationships, and allowing more choice when it comes to Advisory activities.

Introduction

Samueli Academy is a new public charter high school (now in its fourth year) located in Santa Ana, CA. It is a small school (under 500 students), with a science, technology, engineering, arts, and math focused (STEAM) curriculum. Begun by the Orangewood Foundation, Samueli Academy makes a point to enroll foster youth as a special population it seeks to serve. Samueli Academy provides a project-based curriculum, and provides a laptop for every student. The program to be evaluated is the Advisory program. As defined in the Samueli Academy Student/Parent Handbook: “Advisory is a required part of the academic regimen and school culture, providing a time to focus and reflect upon ourselves, our school, our community, and our world. Students develop relationships that transcend the classroom through the guidance of their advisory teacher by remaining with the same advisor and Advisory peers for four years.”

The audience for this program evaluation is the Samueli Academy students and teachers who participate in the Advisory program. As such, this evaluation attempted to include **every** student and teacher in the school, since that is who makes up the entirety of the Advisory program. An evaluation of the Advisory program is necessary to determine the extent to which the stated goals of Advisory are being met. This evaluation also seeks to discover whether or not students value the goals of Advisory, and what they learn when those goals are achieved. The intent is to discover whether the school is actually achieving what the handbook states it has set out to accomplish.

Program Background

Advisory meets twice a week, Tuesday and Thursday, for 45 minutes. Each Advisory is led by a teacher or other staff member (counselor, administrator, etc), and has an average of 20 students. All Samueli Academy students participate in Advisory, and are assigned an Advisor who remains with them during their four years of high school. The Advisor serves as an extra adult, in addition to the student's teachers, who can support and guide the student during his or her high school years. The daily activities of Advisory vary greatly. Over the last two years, Advisory activities have included grade checks, career exploration, reflections, team building, resumes, college exploration, projects, prescribed curriculum, guidance, internships, interview practice, and watching TED Talks. This year a 15-minute SSR (Sustained Silent Reading) component was added to Advisory (reducing Advisory to 30 minutes). But now it's unclear if SSR will be automatic every Advisory, as it was replaced the other day for an activity deemed more important. The daily curriculum of Advisory is suggested to the Advisors by the Student Life Coordinator, but Advisors are generally free to adapt the curriculum to fit the needs of their own Advisory group of students. As such, on one day and across the school, all the Advisories could be doing the exact same activity, and on the next day each Advisory class might be doing something completely different.

As quoted earlier from the Samueli Academy Student/Parent Handbook, the stated goal of Advisory is to provide "...a time to focus and reflect upon ourselves, our school, our community, and our world. Students develop relationships that transcend

the classroom through the guidance of their advisory teacher by remaining with the same advisor and Advisory peers for four years.”

It is the unpredictable and ever-changing nature of the Advisory curriculum that warrants an evaluation of the program. A formal program evaluation will help determine if Samueli Academy students are using Advisory to reflect and build relationships, and also how much value they find in those activities.

Evaluation Questions

The evaluation questions are designed to get to the core of the goals of Advisory program: reflection by students and the building of relationships. And not only to see if the goals are being achieved, but also to discover how much value students place upon these goals.

1. Do students indicate they have made friendships with classmates as a result of Advisory? Have they gained a trusted adult in their Advisor?
2. Do students value the relationships they have formed in Advisory?
3. How much time do students spend reflecting in Advisory? (Reflection activities about grades, goals, college, career, etc)
4. Do students learn from the reflections done in Advisory?
5. How much do students value the time spent in Advisory?

Literature Review

This literature review is organized by three questions regarding advisory:

1. What is advisory?

2. Why do schools have advisories?
3. What do advisories look like in practice?

What is advisory?

Advisory programs at different schools can take many different forms. But there is consensus in the literature regarding at least one central component: overall it is “an effort to ensure that all students have at least one adult who knows them well” (Manning & Saddlemire, 1998). Multiple studies confirm the idea that advisory is an attempt to establish at least one more positive relationship with an adult for students. The advisor is to be an extra adult, aside from the student’s teachers, who can be a positive role model for the student during their school years. The advisor is “an adult to whom the student can turn for help with both school related and personal issues” (Muir, 2000). The literature is clear that practically all advisory programs believe that having an extra adult who knows each student well (usually paired with the student for all four years at the high school level), will be of academic and social benefit to the student. Beyond that widely held belief, however, there are a multitude of varying philosophies, strategies, and approaches to advisory. The variety of foci include academic support, building social skills, current events, and college and career planning. But at their core advisories are about “creating positive relationships between teachers (and) students...while providing open avenues for communication in every direction” (Johnson, 2009).

Why do schools have advisories?

Schools choose to implement advisory programs for a wide variety of reasons. The most cited reason has already been introduced, that of building relationships. “Advisories address an important, basic need that is required for each student to be successful: conditions that lead to the creation of effective relationships” (Sinner, 2004). The focus of these relationships tends to be the one created between the student and his or her advisory, an adult they are paired with for the duration of their time enrolled at the school. “Implementing a school-wide advisory program is a systematic approach to encouraging strong, positive relationships between teachers and students. The advisor becomes a mentor and advocate for his/her students” (Walloff, 2011).

Some school advisory programs have additional goals beyond simply building a positive relationship with an adult on campus. In some advisory programs “educators seek to promote students' social, emotional, and moral growth, while providing personal and academic guidance” (Manning & Saddlemire, 1998). Other programs attempt to “decrease student isolation and alienation” (Sinner, 2004). One model of an ideal advisory program lists twenty-four goals that should be pursued to improve student “relationships, self-esteem and academics” (Muir 2000). Still others focus on building a sense of school community. In one study, “although the advisory program had little impact on citizenship and academics, it greatly impacted the sense of connectedness and school climate” (Walloff, 2011).

Some advisory programs focus less on supporting students' individual goals, and instead tout the holistic benefits for the larger school community. “Advisory program success is a vital promoter of successful completion of high school, therefore

decreasing dropout rates and improving the community in general” (Borgeson, 2009).

Successful advisory programs have the potential to help unite the school community.

“At the end of the day, schools with effective advisories demonstrate greater respect, joy, and civility; superior student performance; and the many aspects of a true community of learners” (Sinner, 2004).

What do advisories look like in practice?

Different advisory programs are designed and implemented in different ways. But “successful advisory programs have a number of things in common across a wide variety of schools. They all divide the student body into small groups, usually of 20 or fewer students, that meet regularly with an adult in the school community” (DiMartino & Clarke, 2008). Most advisory programs meet at least weekly. “In general, at least 30 minutes a week is needed to develop authentic relationships. The most effective group size seems to be between 12 and 15 students per teacher” (Sinner, 2004). Many advisory programs have similar class sizes, meeting frequencies, and a focus on building a relationship with an adult on campus; but that is where the similarities tend to end.

Advisory programs are designed with the goals of the individual school in mind. “Advisories should have a clear focus. Following the Understanding by Design model (Wiggins & McTighe) of planning backwards from outcomes, anyone or any team planning an advisory program should be very clear about what they expect advisories to be in their school culture” (Johnson, 2009). The design and implementation of an advisory program must meet the needs of the individual school, there is not a

one-size-fits-all advisory template. “It is important that the purposes of advisories are mutually acceptable to various stakeholder groups--such as teachers, students, and parents--and be clearly stated in writing” (Sinner, 2004). The makeup of an advisory program can be differentiated within a single school. Individual advisory classes make take a different form from one classroom to the next in the same school. “Some activities are required by all advisories, some should be optional, and some can be designed by the advisories themselves” (Sinner, 2004). As multifaceted as advisories can be, however, there is a central theme running through almost all advisory programs: that of building relationships between students and adults. “Teacher advisors also placed a high priority on developing interpersonal relationships with students” (Manning & Saddlemire, 1998).

Evaluation Methodology

Participants

A major effort was made by Advisors and administrators to engage the entire school in this program evaluation. As a result, 353 out of the 480 students Samueli Academy students completed the student survey, and 19 of the 24 Advisors completed the Advisor survey. The program evaluation team was comprised of the Program Supervisor, two school administrators, two teachers/advisors, and one additional staff member.

Data Sources and Instruments

Data was collected by surveying the two primary stakeholder groups: one survey for the students and a different survey for the Advisors. One Advisory period was dedicated school-wide to the collection of this data. Following the administration of the surveys, a program evaluation team made up of Advisors, administrators, and other staff met on two occasions to analyze and interpret the results.

Results

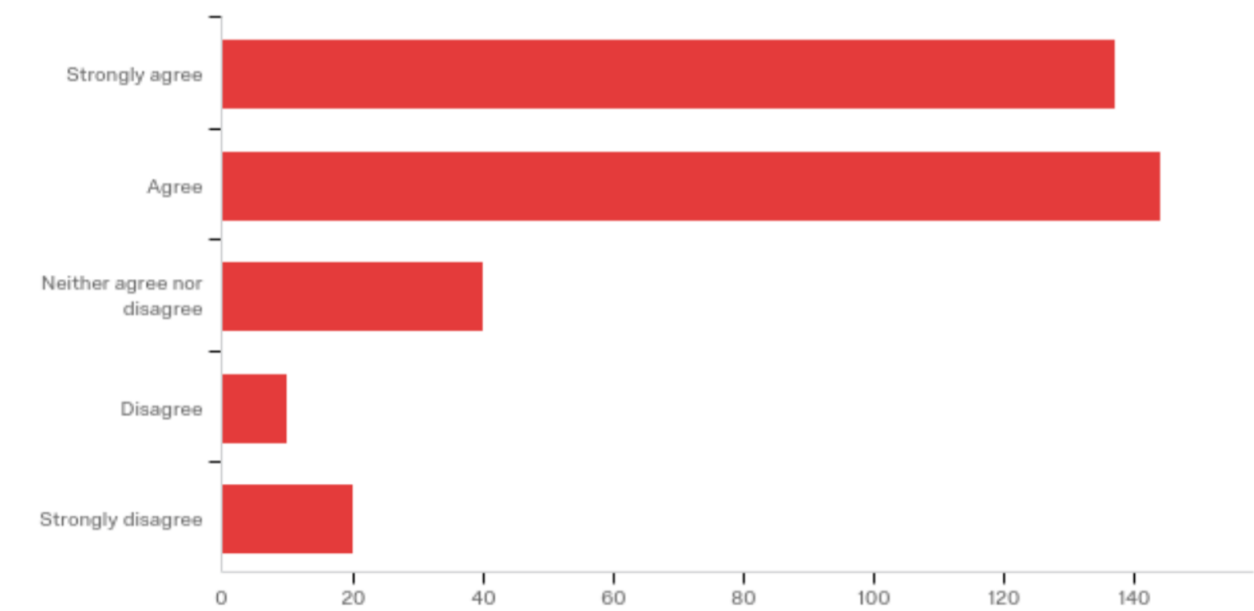
The program evaluation team divided the data into two categories following the administration of the surveys: successes and problems. Presented first are the successes of the program based on the data.

Successes

Students reported that they are making friends in Advisory (figure 1). Over 80% of students reported that they agree or strongly agree with the statement “I have made friends in our Advisory.” This is significant since it connects directly to the handbook’s stated goal of students developing relationships that transcend the classroom in Advisory.

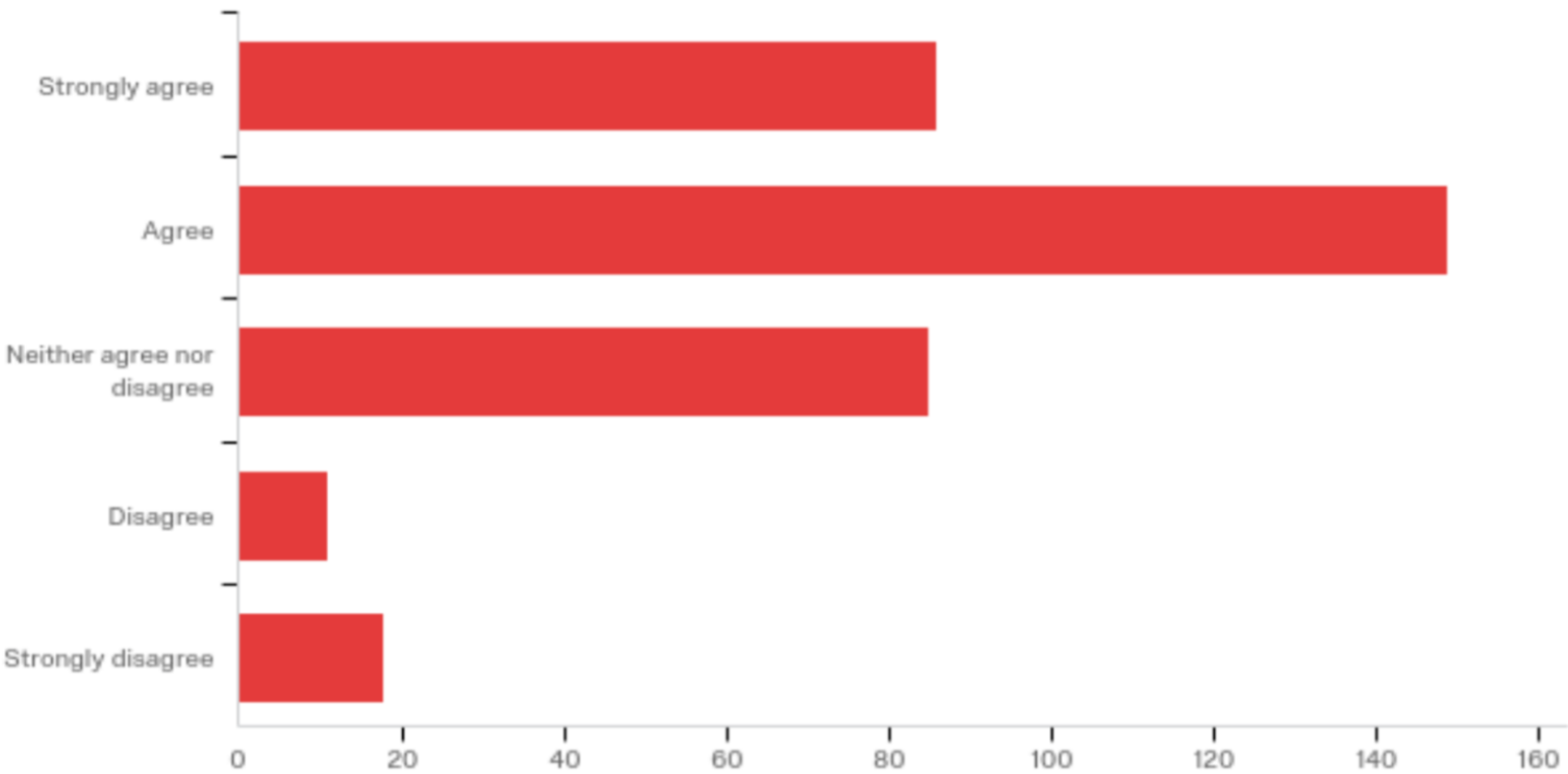
FIGURE 1

Q5 - I have made friends in our Advisory.



Students also indicated that they **value** the relationships they make in Advisory (figure 2). Over 67% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I value the relationships I have made in Advisory.” This is significant since it shows these relationships being made appear to transcend the classroom (as stated in the handbook).

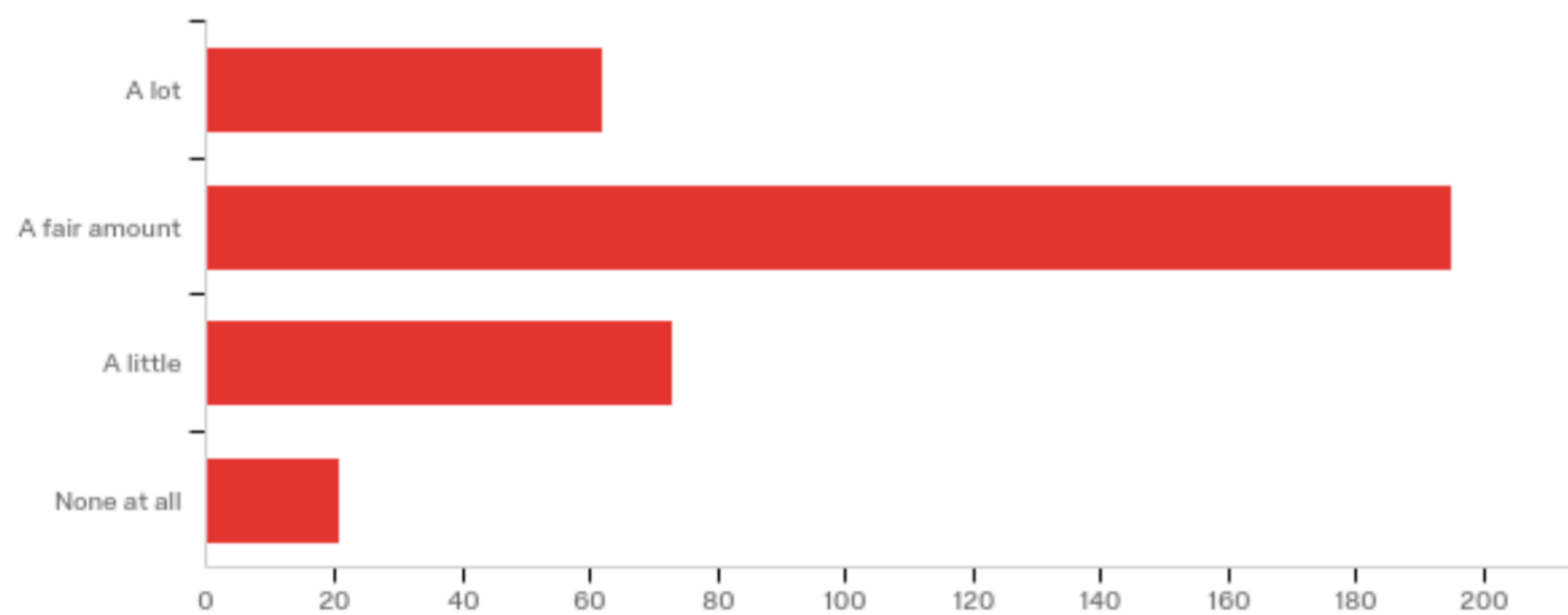
FIGURE 2
Q7 - I value the relationships I have made in Advisory.



The vast majority of students reported spending a decent amount of Advisory time participating in reflection activities (figure 3). This is a success for the Advisory program, since the act of reflecting is one of the goals listed in the Student/Parent Handbook. Over 73% of the students stated they spent “a lot” or “a fair amount” of time reflecting in their Advisory.

FIGURE 3

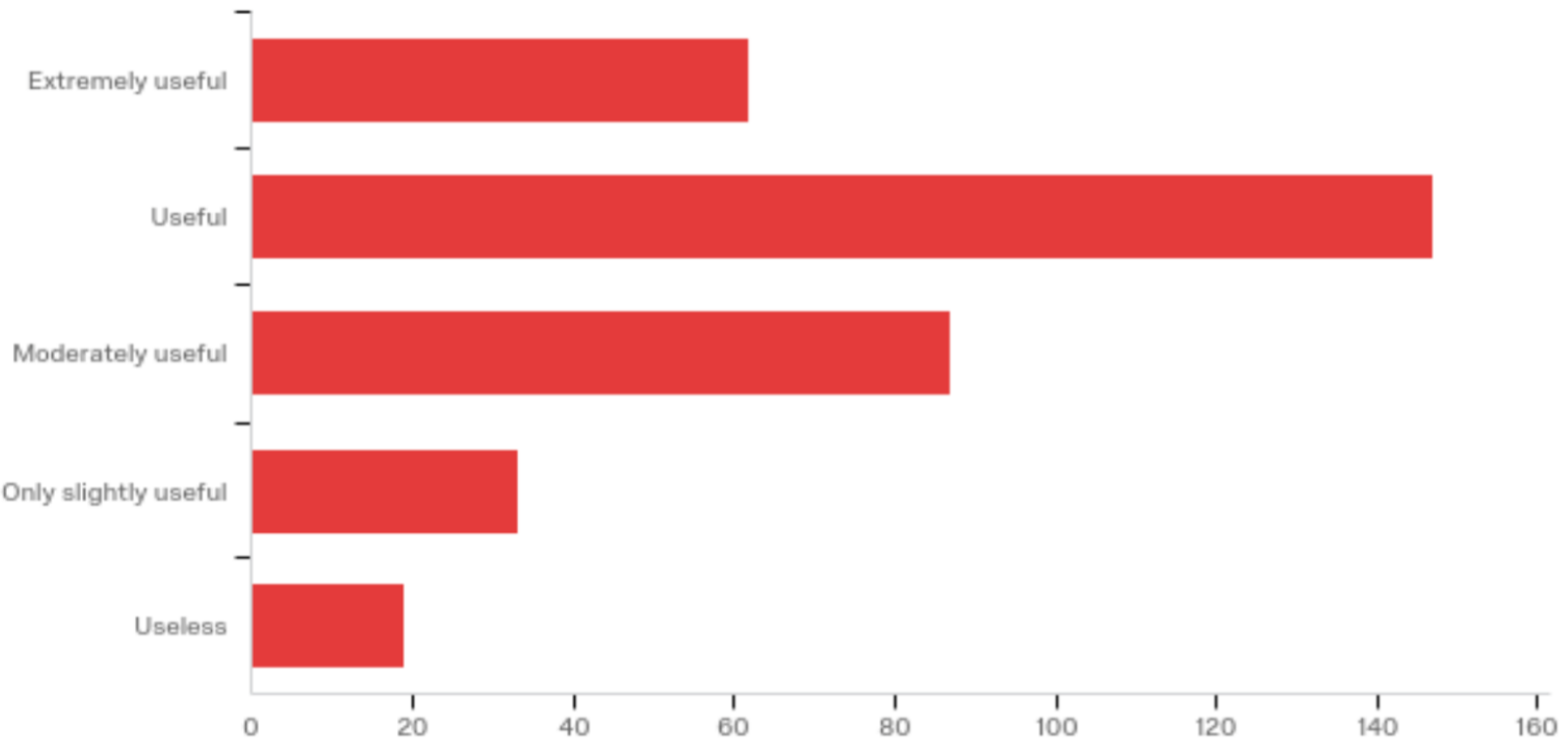
Q12 - How much time do you spend on reflection activities in Advisory? (Examples: reflecting on your grades, classes, goals, college, career, etc)



Most students indicated that the college prep activities in Advisory have proven to be useful (figure 4). Over 60% of students reported that the college prep activities were either “useful” or “extremely useful.” While this topic strays from the focus of this program evaluation (the goals of Advisory as stated in the Student/Parent Handbook), the committee decided this was still positive news worth noting.

FIGURE 4

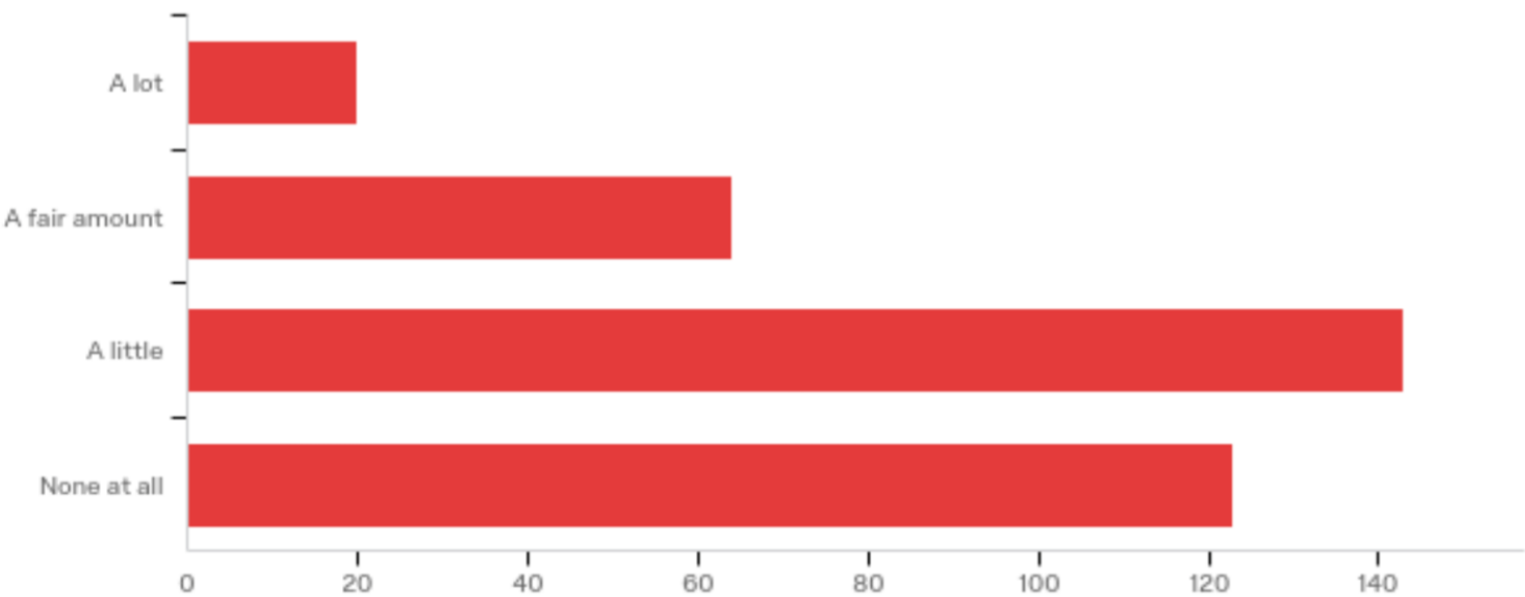
Q24 - How useful are the activities in Advisory about planning for college?



A final success related to students staying on task and focused during Advisory (figure 5). When asked “How much time do you spend surfing the internet and/or playing on your phone in Advisory?,” 76% of students reported “a little” or “none at all.”

FIGURE 5

Q15 - How much time do you spend surfing the internet and/or playing on your phone in Advisory?

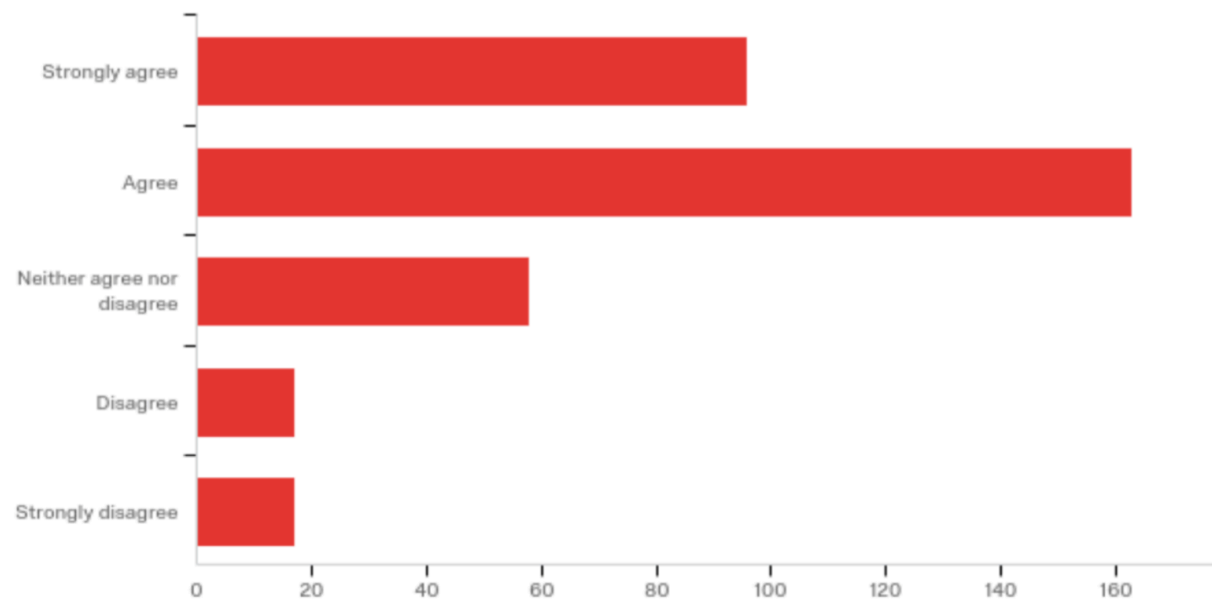


Problems

Since one of the stated goals of advisory is to build relationships, the program evaluation team found it problematic that over 25% of students did not agree that they “gained a supportive adult I trust” through the Advisory program (figure 6). While it is a positive development that almost three quarters of the school had indeed found a supportive adult through Advisory, it remained a concern that almost one hundred other students did not feel likewise.

FIGURE 6

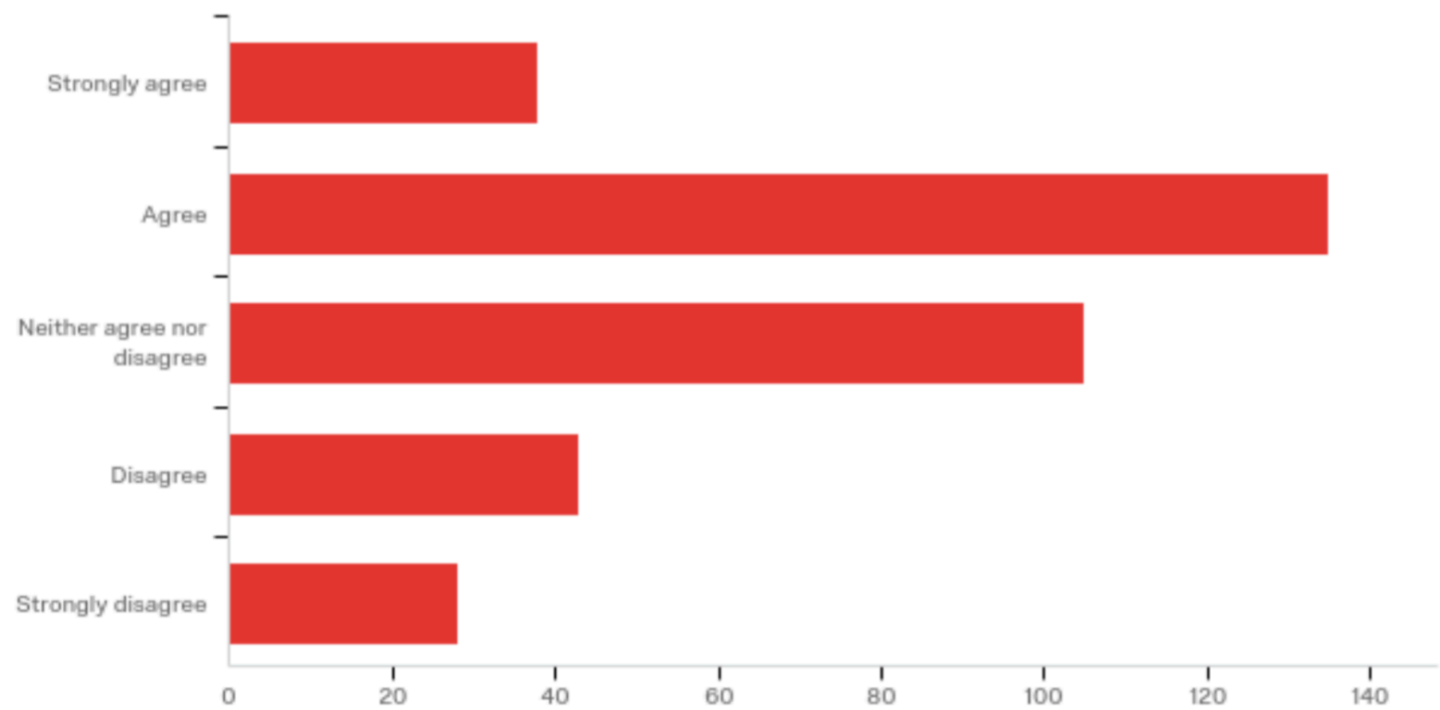
Q6 - In my Advisor, I have gained a supportive adult I trust on campus.



Another problem was found in student responses regarding the Advisory reflection activities (figure 7). Over 50% of students did not agree that “reflection activities in Advisory help me grow as a student.” This is a problem since the act of reflecting is one of the stated goals of Advisory.

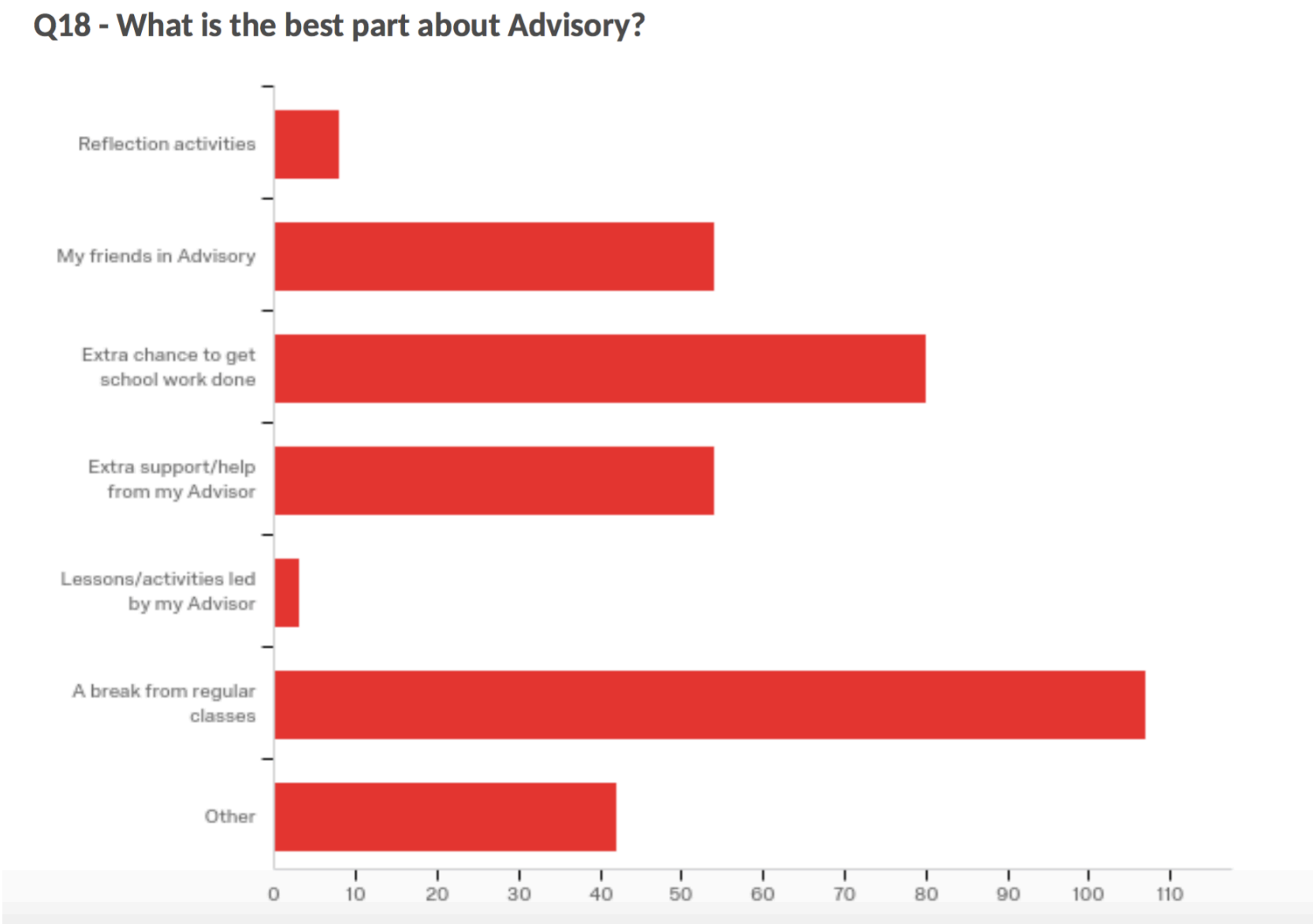
FIGURE 7

Q16 - Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement:
The reflection activities in Advisory help me grow as a student.



A final problem emerged when students were asked about the best part of Advisory (figure 8). Only 1% cited lessons/activities led the Advisor as the best part of Advisory, and over 30% of students reported that the best part of Advisory was that it served as a “break from regular classes.” This is an obvious concern since the goal of Advisory is to build relationships, not just get a break from regular classes.

FIGURE 8



Limitations

The primary limitation of this program evaluation stems from the missed opportunity to fully extrapolate and analyze the data from the Advisor survey. The program evaluation

team spent so much time and energy reviewing, analyzing and interpreting data from the *student* survey, that there was not enough time left to fully analyze the data from the *Advisor* survey. The program evaluation team certainly read and reflected upon the Advisor survey, but the results of that survey could have certainly been better integrated into the overall program evaluation.

Overall Program Analysis

As shown in the data, the program evaluation of the Samueli Academy Advisory Program unearthed both successes and problems within the program as they relate to the goals of the program that are stated in the Student/Parent Handbook. Success stories included students making friends in Advisory, valuing the relationships made in Advisory, spending a good amount of time reflecting in Advisory, valuing the college prep activities, and staying focused during Advisory. Problem areas included data that showed many students had not found a supportive adult in their Advisor, many students did not benefit from the reflections done during Advisory, and the vast majority of students did not value the Advisory activities, and many only saw Advisory as a welcome break from regular classes.

What follows are succinct analyses broken down by individual evaluation question:

- 1. Do students indicate they have made friendships with classmates as a result of Advisory? Have they gained a trusted adult in their Advisor?**

Yes. The data showed that the vast majority of students are indeed making friendships in Advisory. Most (but not all) students also reported gaining a trusted adult in their Advisor.

2. Do students value the relationships they have formed in Advisory?

Yes. The data showed that most students do indeed value the relationships that they have made in Advisory.

3. How much time do students spend reflecting in Advisory? (Reflection activities about grades, goals, college, career, etc)

The vast majority of students reported spending either “a lot” or “a fair amount” of Advisory time on reflection activities.

4. Do students learn from the reflections done in Advisory?

Only half of the student body believed they were benefitting from the Advisory reflection activities.

5. How much do students value the time spent in Advisory?

How much value students gained from Advisory varied widely across the student body. Almost half indicated they indeed valued Advisory, about a third indicated indifference toward the value of Advisory, and the remaining 15% disagreed that Advisory was valuable.

Recommendations

Given the variety of people, personalities, and priorities on the program evaluation team; lengthy discussion ensued over what should be done moving forward to improve the Advisory program. Different team members disagreed over what were

(and what were not) major problems indicated by the data. For example, some team members saw the fact that three quarters of the student body indicated they had found a supportive adult in their Advisor as a success. While other team members saw the fact that a quarter of the student body still had not found a supportive adult in their Advisor as a problem. Through extended discussion and dialogue, these varying perspectives were eventually able to come to consensus regarding two recommendations moving forward:

- 1. Re-emphasize the building of Advisor-Advisee relationships to the faculty and staff.**
- 2. Allow some choice when it comes to Advisory activities, lessons, and projects.**

The first recommendation will help to address the concern that over a quarter of the student body still has not found a supportive adult in their Advisor. The second recommendation will help to address several concerns. It will provide different activity options for students who have not found the Advisor-led activities useful. It will re-engage students who have only seen Advisory as a break from regular classes. By providing choice, it could increase the number of students who value time spent in Advisory. Finally, for students who have felt they do not benefit from the reflection activities, this could now provide them with more options.

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Appendix

Definition of the Advisory Program from the 2016/2017 Samueli Academy Student/Parent Handbook:

Advisory

Advisory is a required part of the academic regimen and school culture, providing a time to focus and reflect upon ourselves, our school, our community, and our world. Students develop relationships that transcend the classroom through the

guidance of their advisory teacher by remaining with the same advisor and Advisory peers for four years.

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