An Overview of Academic Advising at the University of Arizona

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Roxie Catts, Director of the Advising Resource Center

This report outlines significant progress made over the last 11 years in strengthening academic advising at the UA, highlights several achievements that has led to these improvements, and provides a series of recommendations that should make the UA a national leader in advising practices and outcomes. This report was drafted by Roxie Catts, Director of the Advising Resource Center following numerous meetings and communications with the advising community during 2011-2012.

Introduction

Since 2001, the University of Arizona has devoted a significant amount of human and financial capital towards strengthening and improving academic advising for all undergraduate students. Given the stature, size and complexity of the UA, the campus has determined that a college-based, decentralized delivery model for advising best serves the interests and needs of students within each college culture. This path was confirmed as the correct one based on a report from a team of consultants from the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) after a campus visit in spring 2007 (Appendix A).

This college-based delivery structure enjoys strong support and leadership from the Office of the Provost. In recent years, there has been an increase in the collaborations between the Office of the Vice Provost of Academic Affairs and the Office of Student Affairs on such critical matters as retention, services for transfer students, technology and so forth. We understand that students think of the institution as one community, and academic advisors and their many campus colleagues have developed programming and services that work effectively across the formal organizational structure (artificial barriers) of the institution.

The most powerful testimony illustrating the unbending commitment to academic advising can be documented by the fact that the institution has resisted turning back on its goal to strengthen and improve academic advising even in the face of two unpredictable and monumental crises, both involving unprecedented budget cuts. The first was after September 11th, 2001 and the second was after the economic crash of 2008. In both instances the institution had no other option than to reduce her work force in addition to a variety of other spending cuts. The funding for academic advising has been maintained not only by central administration, but the colleges have entered into an agreement that essentially protects this critical academic service from the bulk of the budget reductions. With rare exception, this commitment has also been maintained by the colleges which have endured nearly impossible financial difficulties over the past decade or more. Clearly the institution has remained steady in its commitment to students through academic advising.

Progressive Improvements in Academic Advising since 2001:

- After a year of extensive investigation and campus-wide dialog, an Academic Advising Task Force (AATF) released a final comprehensive report in 2002 that included 36 recommendations to strengthen and improve academic advising for undergraduate students. The recommendations were accepted by the Office of the Provost, and an implementation team was named. http://www.gened.arizona.edu/content/academic-advising-task-force

- In conjunction with the AATF, a continuing revenue stream was created by a nominal tuition increase in 2001-2002 to be used for academic advising. These financial resources allowed for:

    1. In support for the recommendation that academic advising would be based within each college under established guidelines, one-time funding was made available to support the development of college advising offices where needed. Over 16,000 students in the Colleges of Science, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Humanities, and undeclared students had been served by an inadequately staffed central advising office (Office of Academic Services).

    2. Funding to add 42 new full-time professional academic advising positions was made available from central administration and assigned to colleges based on census data and an AATF recommended advising caseload (400/declared majors and for 300/undeclared).

    3. The UA Program for Excellence in Academic Advising, a campus-wide recognition program for academic advisors, was established in 2006.   The UA campus award winners are submitted to the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) where our faculty, professional, and emerging professional advisors have captured national recognition each year since we began competing in 2007.

    4. An Advising Resource Center (ARC) was established through the Office of the Provost to serve as a referral center for prospective and new students and to provide training and professional development support to the advising community. The ARC website (http://advising.arizona.edu/) is accessible at the main UA website and provides a directory of all academic advisors as well as information for students and advisors. The ARC supports the University Professional Advising Council (UPAC), a travel grant program for new advisors, and organizes a variety of campus-wide advising events, seminars, workshops, and so forth.

- A second Academic Advising Task Force (AATF II) convened in the 2010-2011 year. It addressed the issue of high turnover in advising positions and recommended to the Office of the Provost that advisors be moved from classified to appointed professional status, that a three-tiered job classification system be adopted, and that the base salary be increased from $29,000 to $35,000. In addition, all academic advisors received a minimum $1,000 raise.

- A central advising note system was developed and has been adopted by most colleges and advisors. A student satisfaction survey is automatically generated and sent to students when a note is entered after an advising appointment. These data, the senior survey, and college surveys, all indicate that students are generally satisfied with academic advising. It should be noted, however, that some students expressed concern about timely access to advising. (Appendix B)

- The culture of academic advising has evolved to one where advising is well represented on campus governing groups (Undergraduate Council, various appeal committees, and so forth) and has established a council of college advising directors, the University Academic Advising Council (UAAC), which is consulted regularly by numerous administrative and Student Affairs partners.

Bright Spots

From a central administration standpoint it can be challenging to fully implement campus-wide initiatives, achieve the desired attendance at professional development workshops, or directly impact the performance of any one individual, be they a professional or a faculty advisor. Another approach might be to identify bright spots, or best practices, around campus and provide incentives for others to emulate. Here, with a little background information, are some best practices worthy of emulation.

- Many majors, indeed colleges, do not allow students to change, or declare, a new major during the period of priority registration. Priority registration is a time when many students actually think of declaring a major, or minor. Instead of eliminating the ability to declare a new major during priority registration, one college increases the number of information workshops they offer during priority registration to meet the demand for students who want to declare during priority registration.

- Success workshops and courses taught by academic advisors for students who are either new to campus or who have been placed on academic probation have proved to be an effective retention strategy. Advisors across campus teach courses designed to introduce students to areas of study, explore career options, develop academic success strategies, and so forth. Advisors as teachers capitalizes on the professional training and experience of many of our professional and faculty advisors and is an effective way to deliver strong academic support services to a significant number of students.

- An increasing number of programs utilize student peer advisors, or mentors. Students helping other students can be an effective way to increase accessibility to advising; especially in terms of the routine and general information new students need to know. Allowing well-trained student advisors to assist busy advising offices with routine matters, allows more time for the professional or faculty advisor to address issues requiring decision-making authority.

- All of the advisors in one college consistently use the central advising note system. If there is an issue that arises with a student from that college within another academic unit, the new advisor has the advantage of knowing the student's academic history from the note system. This creates an informed, professional community, essential to students receiving optimal advising, and should be a practice of all advisors, whether professional or faculty.

- The performance of our academic advising community is generally outstanding. Our advisors are good listeners, excellent guides, and strong student advocates. They express empathy, tough love, and *more,* and they do so on a daily basis, appointment after appointment. They champion students and their success. There is, however, always opportunity for improvements in practice and performance.

Factors Affecting Student Access to Advising and
Complexity of the Academic Advisor Caseload

During the 2011-2012 academic year, advising leaders in the University Academic Advising Council (UAAC) discussed change contextual factors in advising over the last five years (2008-2012) which have prompted an increase in the roles and responsibilities of the academic advisor, the introduction of new technology, and an advising caseload that has grown in size and complexity. The following is a summary of factors that may be best described as adding a new level of both the scope and complexity to the academic advisor's caseload which in turn, impacts the speed which students are able to gain access to advising.

- Advisor responsibilities have evolved to include increased recruiting/outreach activities, managing admission to professional programs, and teaching. In addition, the economic circumstances of the country have contributed to an environment in which students and their families are much more concerned about post-graduation plans coupled with the cost of higher education, and advisors have helped to meet the competitive challenges students face when considering employment or graduate and professional programs. Advisors are thus spending considerably more time on career advising, life planning, and helping students to add essential elements to their portfolios beginning with the freshman year.

- Changes in federally funded financial aid and the requirements for Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) in July 2011 have required that advisors become much more knowledgeable and involved in helping students meet SAP.

- New transfer student initiatives (UA@PCC, AZTAPS, and others) have created an increase in the number of transfer students who desire and deserve academic advising services *while* they are attending an Arizona community college. A Transfer Student Task Force began working in January of this year to identify ways the institution can provide improved services to transfer students from the time of recruitment and through the admissions and matriculation process. We need to be able to ensure that transfer students can gain timely access to advising services on a consistent basis across campus; especially for those students participating in one of the institution's transfer initiatives. Anecdotal evidence would suggest there is room for strengthening this aspect of our advising services by providing more advising to prospective transfer students who have not yet applied or been accepted to the UA.

- The interface between academic advising and technology has presented the most significant environmental change in advising since the launch of UAccess PeopleSoft in 2008-2009. Any comments about the system captured on paper become obsolete almost

instantly given the ongoing and continued modifications and enhancements to the system. The power of the new student information system results in a much more complex, sometimes time consuming system to use, and the training required for new advisors is substantial. A new product called Degree Tracker will launch in the fall semester and will provide a much more user-friendly interface for advisors and students to use to monitor students' progress towards graduation. The Smart Planner will provide students with critical, prescriptive advising information and should allow for more time during the advising appointment to be spent discussing higher level planning and goal setting matters.

- Turnover in the advising community is a complicated issue. Given the extensive amount of time and human capital required for training new advisors, a turnover rate of any significance is costly to the institution. Even more important, it can create inconsistent advising services for students impacted due to multiple staffing changes. It is estimated that the turnover rate in advising institution-wide is approximately 25% since 2008. The significant improvement in the employment status and base salaries of advisors has been successful in helping to recruit a more talented applicant pool for current position openings, but retention continues to be a problem. Leaders in the advising community indicate a need to make improvements in the retention of the most talented professionals so that to 'move up' to the next step on the ladder an advisor doesn't need to 'move out'.

Next Steps to Continue Strengthening and Improving Academic Advising at the UA

Collaborations and initiatives developed by the college associate deans and advising directors with the support of the Vice Provost of Academic Affairs should be more fully developed. The Vice Provost of Academic Affairs should convene a working group of college associate deans and advising directors to:

- Identify bright spots and good practices and recommend ways to promote and champion strengths. For example, support from the Offices of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs could provide the spark to ignite and incentivize a college to implement a student peer advising program or alter business practices to provide greater access for students to advising services.

  Creating a culture of creativity enables us to do more with less. It is also about looking to our strengths as a way to elevate the environment as a whole. Seed funding in the form of grants is one way the institution can impact practices and programs. The institution has done a remarkable job of supporting the academic advising enterprise, and nominal monetary support to help colleges develop and launch identified good practices is an initiative that merits exploration.

- Develop "Standards of Excellence" for academic advising which could be used as a foundation for developing a career progression program designed to reward longer-term consistent outstanding performance of academic advisors. This potentially transformative program could positively affect practices and performance within the

advising community. The working group would develop a proposal that directly associates a career progression program, centrally administered and available to all academic advisors, with reaching a series of steps related to standards of excellence. Advisors who have effective performance appraisals and achieve a specific set of standards of excellence in measurable performance and practice over a sustained period of time would also achieve a defined step increase in professional level and compensation.

As an example, a standard of excellence could be a requirement that the advisor consistently utilize the central note taking system which creates a central repository of advisor/student interactions and generates a student satisfaction survey after each individual advising appointment. Meeting a standard such as this would be easy to document.

There is a strong history of successful outcomes when faculty, staff and students work together to elevate the practices and services of this great institution. Continued investment in the academic advising enterprise is in alignment with the spirit and mission that define the U of A. We are well positioned to address any challenges described in this report and feel confident in our ability as an institution to continue, with success, our goal to strengthen and improve academic advising for all undergraduate students.

Appendix A: NACADA External Review Report

Appendix B: Student Satisfaction Survey