

Academic Program Review of Academic Advising
The University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona 85721

Visit: May 3-4, 2016

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Introduction and General Observations

On May 3 and 4, 2016, a review team consisting of two members external to The University of Arizona (UA) and three internal members, arrived on-site to conduct an academic program review of UA academic advising. Roxie Catts, Director of Advising Resource Center, welcomed the team and Dr. Gail Burd, Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, delivered the charge, to be delivered in a written document approximately four weeks after completing the on-campus review:

1. Identify the strengths of academic advising at UA
2. Identify the challenges facing academic advising at UA
3. Provide a set of recommendations for future development and growth of UA academic advising

Before conducting the on-campus program review interviews, each team member received a number of documents provided by Roxie Catts, the facilitator of the program review. These documents included:

- 2016 Academic Advising Program Review (AAPR) Self-Study
 - Included College Reports for Self-Study
- July 2012 “Overview of Academic Advising at The University of Arizona” report
- April 2008 “External Review of Academic Advising” report
- Current college data on retention and six-year graduation rates

All documents contributed to an understanding of the current decentralized model of academic advising at UA, and College self-study reports included what each of the colleges view as their particular strengths and challenges in regard to advising in their colleges.

During our two-day visit, the team met with representatives from each UA College unit. These representatives included campus administrators as well as Advising Directors and Coordinators. Additionally, the team held an hour-long open meeting with about 40 advisors (each College was invited to send at least one advisor) and a lunch meeting with 10 students. Finally, we met with the Senior Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management & Senior Vice Provost for Academic Initiatives - Student Success and Vice President, for Enrollment Management / Student Affairs Advancement & Dean for Undergraduate Admissions.

Based upon provided materials and the campus visit, the committee pursued the charge of identifying strengths and challenges, which resulted in a set of recommendations. Before the answer to the charge is presented, this document seeks to describe the concept of academic advising and its relevance to the 21st century University through prominent scholars, documents, and professional organizations. The team believes these sources provide a fundamental understanding of academic advising that is key to future developments that positively impact academic advising at UA.

Academic Advising

Arthur Chickering (1994), a key theorist in student development, described academic advising as a *holistic process focused on a relationship with a student*. He said,

The fundamental purpose of academic advising is to help students become effective agents for their own lifelong learning and personal development. Our relationships with students, the questions we raise, the perspectives we share, the resources we suggest, the short-term decisions and long-range plans we help them think through all should aim to increase their capacity to take charge of their own existence. (p. 50)

The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) references three specific documents that describe academic advising:

- NACADA Concept of Academic Advising (2006)
- NACADA Statement of Core Values (2005)
- Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education: Standards and Guidelines for Academic Advising (2014)

The CAS Standards, a recognized national authority on best practice for service and support sectors in higher education, clearly state that the mission of an academic advising program is to focus on the student to encourage persistence in attaining goals. Specifically, “The mission of Academic Advising Programs (AAP) is to assist students as they define, plan, and achieve their educational goals. The AAP must advocate for student success and persistence.” (p. 5).

A review of all these documents identifies the importance of a holistic approach to the student experience as well as the complexity of the advising process (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). These documents clarify the advising curriculum, the varied pedagogies for delivering advising, and the anticipated student learning that occurs through the process.

In summary, academic advising is a process that focuses on a formative relationship between an advisor and a student to empower students to achieve their goals. Therefore, to be successful, advisors need time to:

1. engage in purposeful dialogues with each student to address that student’s educational experiences, needs, and co-curricular or career development goals;
2. receive professional development to learn pedagogical techniques to deliver advising; and,
3. participate in on-going assessment of student learning to continually reinforce contributions to student success and the institutional mission.

Institutions that align academic advising within a student-centered framework, communicate the value placed on student learning and empower students to achieve success.

Based on this understanding of academic advising that emerges from literature, scholarship, and professional organizations, the review team addresses the charge for this

program review starting with the strengths of Academic Advising at The University of Arizona.

Strengths of The University of Arizona Academic Advising Enterprise

It was clear in interviews with members of the UA community that there were readily identifiable strengths in academic advising at the University. They are:

1. Academic advisors

Through reading the self-study and meeting various members of the advising community, campus administration, and students, the team concludes that the UA has created a well-qualified cadre of people in a various advising roles. AAPR documents indicate that many advising professionals have graduate degrees, all of those we heard from during campus interviews care about the student experience, and the vast majority communicate loyalty to the institution.

One sign of their commitment to advising and the student experience is that advisors attempt to take on all activities asked of them to support their students, departments, colleges and the University as a whole, even when those activities are outside the normal purview of advising.

Additionally, at different levels appropriate to their positions, members of the advising community engage in collaborative activities such as the New Advisor Orientation, University Academic Advising Council (UAAC) and University Professional Advising Council (UPAC) meetings, and special seminars and trainings to address continued professional development needs. These collaborative activities have helped develop professional networks that positively impact academic advising and, ultimately, the student experience.

2. The Advising Resource Center (ARC)

The ARC is highly respected across the campus. The work and activities of Roxie Catts and Nicole Gonzalez are recognized as invaluable and viewed as campus-wide resources for developing competent, professional, well-informed academic advisors. The Advising Orientation provided by ARC is a staple for introducing new advisors to the campus, best-practices, and the advising community; the website provides valuable advising resources for advisors, faculty, staff, and students; and voluntary regular professional development seminars address policy, advising delivery and best practices, and self-care. In addition to delivering services that meet the ARC mission, the ARC staff are proposing new positions and activities, such as advising facilitator positions and an Advisor Certificate Program, to address UA future needs and growth for academic advising.

3. Technology tools to complement the academic advising experience

The campus has a variety of technology tools that have varied use. Online appointment scheduling through WiseAdvising or The Eller College of Management homegrown ESMS system eliminates this administrative task. UAccess, the student-management information system, provides student data for accurate advising and includes the degree audit.

Additionally, a well-trained advisor and advising coordinators can utilize UAnalytics to track student migration, GPAs, and probationary status, among other things, to reach out to students in need. Finally, an Advisor Notes system allows advisors to see notes from prior appointments with students, regardless of which advisor that student saw. (The exception to this shared data is that the Eller system does not currently speak to the rest of the UA Advisor Notes system; the Review Committee was told this situation is being rectified.) There is training for these tools from a variety of entities.

Challenges for the UA Academic Advising Enterprise

As was true with interviews identifying strengths in advising, discussions revealed a number of challenges facing UA in regard to advancing academic advising to the next level. The challenges we identified are:

1. Inconsistency in advising practice, training and professional development

Open-ended questions about training for new academic advisors and professional development and mentoring of continuing and advanced advisors revealed that training and professional development requirements vary – sometimes greatly – across the campus. This direction on training and development has led to wide variance in advising practices that are not supporting a consistent and engaging academic advising experience for students. New and continuing advisors are not all required to attend training or development activities to guarantee a common student experience across the campus and the training is inconsistent in its focus and intensity at the College and department level. Not all experienced advisors are required to engage in professional development or institution-specific training. Additionally, the type of interaction with advisors (walk-in or appointment), communication of academic policy, curricular changes, resources, advising delivery, and use of technology tools are inconsistent across the campus.

This means that students are not guaranteed a common experience that builds a relationship with academic advisor(s). The lack of consistency is especially problematic for students who move from one College to another, and these students are frequently the students most in need of a consistent, cohesive advising experience to allow them to persist as well as achieve a timely graduation. Training for technology comes from a variety of entities, but without a consistent advisor-focus.

Furthermore, the use of technology tools – including the use of Advisor Notes – was inconsistent. The student experience could be significantly different between Colleges and departments due to these inconsistencies in advising practice, delivery, training, and professional development. The ARC New Advisor Orientation and professional development seminars are a good start, but just touch the tip of the iceberg.

2. Turnover

A variety of UA community members identified advisor turnover as a challenge. The amount of training and development that an individual needs to be a competent academic advisor comes at a high cost of time and money. Moreover, students are unable to build a relationship with one person over the life of their undergraduate experience if advisor turnover is common. Various parties participating in the academic program review

process indicated that turnover occurs due to low compensation, inconsistent compensation across the campus units, increasing workload beyond academic advising responsibilities, a lack of career ladder, a campus culture that does not communicate value for academic advising, insufficient mentoring and professional development, and, in some cases, micro-management or lack of advisor autonomy. Students interviewed said having the same advisor throughout their undergraduate experience was very important to them.

3. Position creep and lack of defined duties for advisors

The self-study and interviews reveal that previous budget reductions resulted in administrative support positions being eliminated at the department level but responsibilities assigned to personnel in eliminated positions were still mission essential. Thus, the responsibilities once done by program coordinators, administrative assistants, or secretaries were divided among remaining employees in departments and Colleges, including academic advisors. Depending on the department and College, advisors may be asked to generate business analytics reports, set up for and serve at events, give tours of their department or College, and serve on transfer evaluation committees among other non-advising duties.

Also, the Responsibility Centered Management (RCM) budget model has increased interest in recruiting new majors and minors to each College and also increased pressure to recruit new students to UA. Many times, advisors are asked to help with these recruitment activities, possibly conflicting with key advising periods. Advisors reported finding it difficult to prioritize activities and are working additional hours to attempt to cover all these responsibilities.

As mentioned in the strengths section above, advisors are highly committed to the institution in general and students in particular. Thus, they will go above and beyond to meet these needs, but the outcome is frustration and resentment, especially when the extra responsibilities are not accompanied by extra compensation.

4. A campus culture that appears to not understand or respect advising

The advising community continuously shared stories and situations that evidenced the lack of understanding the campus has about academic advising and the lack of respect for academic advisors. The perception of the academic advising community is that the general campus community does not seem to connect good advising to student success, retention, and timely degree completion. Advisors seem to be viewed, in a number of cases, as something akin to an administrative assistant rather than someone in a teaching and mentoring role.

5. Lack of “voice”

Tied to a culture that doesn't understand advising is an advising community that feels unheard. Advisors from across the campus communicated a lack of voice on policy, curriculum, and the purchase and development of technology tools. As one advisor said, “We're the go-to person when something needs to be done in our department but we're never consulted when changes that will affect students are considered.”

Academic advisors have a dual role of student advocate and policy enforcer. These roles are a tricky balance in the best of situations. Not understanding why a policy is changed, given little time for input on proposed changes, or being requested to use tools that hinder advising defeats the goals of the advising appointment.

Advisors brought up the adoption of Smart Planner as an example of technology that looks good on paper – or perhaps to a computer systems professional – but doesn't work well in the real-world of time-crunched advising and situations such as double majors and dual degree programs. Advisors understand that change is critical in the 21st century research university and believe strongly that advisors should be actively incorporated into decision making processes through UPAC or other relevant venues as appropriate.

6. Lack of advisor-usage data

In the self-study every College reported advisor-student ratios to the review team, but said they do not systematically keep track of actual advising usage data (types of appointments, reason for appointments, length of appointments, etc.). Even though a ratio offers some understanding of potential work load, it does not address the actual utilization of advising services across the colleges and departments. It appears that the inconsistent usage of the Advisor Notes contributes to this lack of data.

7. Complex and inconsistent reporting structure

Confusion over reporting structure was reported during interviews. The reporting structure varied based on College and it was not clear that the supervisor understood the role of an academic advisor in every situation, as evidenced by #3 above. Some deans and department heads reported frustration at not having input into yearly evaluation of advisors and interviews revealed that not all advising coordinators solicited input.

Review Team Recommendations

Discussions throughout our two-day review were animated, dynamic, and, in most cases, bracingly honest. It was clear that most deans and College advising coordinators understand that academic advising is key to student success and want to support advising and advisors. In reviewing the 2008 external review, we noted that inconsistency in the delivery, assessment, and evaluation of advising was listed as a challenge and our interviews with administrators and advising leaders showed inconsistency is still an issue. In listening to the challenges and wish-lists of each College, as well as considering our experience with best-practices and academic advising research, we were able to codify a list of four recommendations (with sub-recommendations) for the UA to consider. They are:

1. Expand the Advising Resource Center (ARC)

The ARC is viewed as very effective in educating the advising community, and one consistent refrain in interviews with College administrators was that the ARC needs to be expanded. Through advising literature, best practices, and additional resources, the ARC is ready to be reimaged with enhanced offerings to focus on academic advising delivery,

theory, and models to enable the training of all advisors on campus to be consistent, comprehensive, and compelling in regard to the needs of students. Expanding the scope of responsibilities of the ARC from a well-respected resource to include mandatory and new advisor training and on-going advisor development informed through a comprehensive assessment process would be an opportunity to ensure students are receiving an academic advising experience that is supportive, holistic, and consistent across the institution. As mentioned in the *Strengths Section* of this document, the ARC team is proposing strategies that support student success through academic advising.

Additionally:

- a. Advisor notes cannot be optional if the goal is to build a relationship with the student and offer a consistent advising experience. Additionally, use of tools such as an academic advising syllabus should not be optional once a consistent practice is identified by UA.
- b. Technology training specific to advising should be delivered through the ARC and not Campus IT. Advisors who use tools as “Super Users” would empower the advising community to effectively use these tools. Advisors reported that getting clearance to use various tools in UAccess often got stuck in a red-tape process, holding up their ability to start meeting with students. Consider streamlining the approval system for permissions with development of an “**advisor role**” for UAccess that identifies a standard package of tools for all advisors and then supplement with specific permissions for particular colleges and departments added as appropriate.
- c. Varied modes of training should be considered. A variety of professional development could be available through video, common readings, or webinars. The Learning Management System (LMS) could be employed to house video and training guides to offer greater convenience in use. The “Discussion” component of the LMS offers a place for asking questions about practice or policy. Advisors could also be quizzed through LMS to confirm content knowledge that could potentially be used towards advisor certification.

2. Reduce advisor turnover and increase satisfaction with targeted changes

A common topic throughout the review was the amount of advisor turnover. Advisors talked about the impact on workloads and students discussed the number of times they had to begin a new advisor relationship due to turnover. To address this issue, the UA should consider:

- a. *A pay scale that is a living wage.* Upon raising the base salary, care must be taken to address wage compression for more experienced advisors.
- b. *A consistent description that clarifies the role of an advising professional.* A consistent description will also help the development of a consistent “role” for on-boarding and requesting access to university systems.
- c. *A consistent method of performance management and evaluation.* In interviewing both advisors and departmental leadership, it was clear that many advisors do not get consistent feedback or mentoring during the evaluation cycle. While a

- few reported an organized process for evaluation and others indicated no formal evaluation, most submitted a self-evaluation at the end of the review cycle. A formative process that evaluates advising practice and establishes clear goals for on-going professional development is highly recommended to continually build the academic advising experience for advisors and students. Data drawn from a robust assessment process should be included in the process.
- d. Merit increases and/or financial resources tied to specific performance and professional development goals. For example, an advising professional completing the proposed Academic Advising Certificate Program, which was communicated in the UA Academic Advising Program Review – Self-Study (2016, p. 23), would have a specific reward attached.
 - e. An expanded career ladder. The advising career ladder needs to be expanded vertically and horizontally to offer new opportunities and possibilities for advancement. One opportunity for advancing could be offered through completion of the proposed Advising Certificate program.
 - f. Create a campus marketing campaign to promote academic advising. This campaign should increase utilization of advising and describe to the campus community the role of academic advising in supporting students as they develop a comprehensive undergraduate experience, which includes setting and achieving academic goals.
 - g. Explore new methods to increase consultation with advisors. The current UAAC process of engaging advisor feedback through an e-mail to College coordinators for advisor input does not seem to be working. A new process that invites more advisors to be involved early in policy construction, reconstruction, and student-centered technology purchases should be considered.

3. Develop consistent advising utilization data reports

The 2008 report discussed the importance of collecting data to understand student utilization of academic advising. Our team noticed something similar: People quickly identify student to advisor ratios in their department or College, but actual utilization reports (e.g. how often a student engages with an advisor, how they engage, and the amount of time for various engagements) are not a common or consistent practice at the UA. These data are key to knowing if advising staff needs to be increased or advising delivery methods changed.

For example, if an advising unit only offers brief walk-ins, are students coming back repeatedly to get the information they need? Are fundamental challenges for student progress being identified through these brief walk-ins? A reserved appointment may allow the student to get all of their needs met and ultimately use less of the advisor's time because the advisor is well prepared for the appointment and have the appropriate resources at hand.

Without data on utilization there is no way to determine the advising model that best meets the needs of both advisors and students. People talked about "shadow databases" but it was not clear what these databases were used for at this time. Thus, we suggest UAAC establish a sub-committee to develop a utilization report that will be consistent across the campus with specific leaders receiving and analyzing these data. This type of

process will quickly identify advising trends, resource needs, and potential at-risk (high-opportunity) students.

4. Expand the assessment of advising and develop consistent assessment method

The Advisor Notes System currently offers students an opportunity to provide satisfaction feedback on an advising appointment. There was not a consistent practice in the use of Advisor Notes, it was recognized that a low-percentage of students use the feedback system even when a Note is entered after an appointment, and there was inconsistent use of this feedback in annual reviews. Supervisors did indicate that they address issues quickly when submitted through this process. This system offers only one measurement tool for advising assessment.

Assessment plans often focus on satisfaction, need, and student learning. As educators, student-learning outcomes (SLO) pinpoint the skill and information students should know, do, or value after engaging with an advisor. Development and communication of SLO's engage advisors in reflecting on what they teach, delivery of learning, and professional development activities. UAAC should engage advisors in the development of SLO's as well as tools to communicate these to students such as an academic advising syllabus. This syllabus is more than a division of advisor and advisee responsibilities. It clearly communicates what is learned through the academic advising relationship. Once SLOs have been developed and communicated, the student should then be surveyed on how their advisor is supporting them in achieving these outcomes.

A comprehensive assessment process is different than just measuring "satisfaction" which can lead advisors to focus on being liked, rather than focusing on student development or core advising competencies. Assessment must be expected, consistent, on-going, and tied to continually enhancing academic advising on behalf of student success. This assessment process could also be tied to financial rewards for advisors as metrics are met.

Conclusion

The 2016 Academic Program Review Committee for Academic Advising believes this is a watershed moment for UA advising. This review presents an opportunity to advance a clear understanding of a campus-wide service that directly impacts student success as well as addresses organizational issues that continue to hinder the power of academic advising within the UA community. We recognize there is pressure from the RCM funding model to recruit more students. These types of institutional goals require a cadre of UA academic advisors to provide intrusive and holistic academic advising to ensure that student access translates to degree attainment.

There is also strong effort to improve retention and graduation rates, and an increased parental emphasis on a faster time to degree. The UA faces a number of goals it is being asked to meet, and to meet them, it is imperative that academic advising is seen as what it is: A key and essential element to retaining students and supporting persistence to a timely graduation. It is a front-line resource that appears to be underfunded and inconsistently delivered, which negatively impacts student success and the institutional mission.

We concur with the 2008 external review committee, which contended that very few activities in higher education can claim to have as much impact on students and be as student-focused as academic advising. We also believe, based on campus interviews and documents, that there is no end to the intellectual and creative brain-power available to meet the challenges currently facing academic advising as well as the opportunities embedded in solutions to these challenges.

We are grateful to have served on the 2016 Academic Program Review Committee for Academic Advising, and thank you for this opportunity.

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