Enhancing Undergraduate Advising

In 1989, the Future Directions Committee identified a series of areas for improvement in undergraduate education at UW-Madison. In recent years we have addressed nearly all of them. We have dramatically improved class access, eased registration, increased opportunities for undergraduates to do research with faculty, developed new programs for honors students, and created freshman seminars and capstone seminars in the major. One important area that still needs improvement is the system of academic advising.

Efforts to improve undergraduate advising have occurred in several colleges, and advising was the subject of study by the Committee on Undergraduate Education from 1989-92, resulting in a request to the legislature for new funds for advising. New funds for academic staff advisors were in fact allocated for use beginning this spring. Meanwhile, there was growing anecdotal evidence that a significant number of students felt under-served in advising. A spring 1993 survey of undergraduates provided solid data to show that students wanted more help in creating a fit between their educational and career goals and their choice of majors. Freshmen, especially, felt unguided and asked for better access to advising that would help them choose courses and prepare for majors wisely.

In March 1993, Interim Vice Chancellor Richard Barrows appointed a Committee on Academic Advising and charged it to identify opportunities to improve academic advising through inter-college cooperation. The committee has now proposed a plan for strategic improvements in advising, with special attention to groups that the committee identified as most in need of improved service:

- first-year students;
- students who have not selected a major;
- students considering a change of major; and
- students seeking better understanding about the intersection of their interests, available majors, and career options.

The committee’s report, written by faculty and academic staff representatives of all the schools and colleges, maps out a new system of inter-college cooperation in the project of better serving the advising needs of such students. The principal innovations of the new system will be:

- A Cross-College Advising Service, supported by new funds provided by the state legislature. A team of 10 academic staff advisors, working cooperatively with faculty and staff advisors in each school and college, will provide general advising to the target groups identified above. Four of the 10 advisors will have expertise in specific cross-college areas of academic inquiry, such as biological sciences, business, international studies, or physical sciences/engineering. As a cross-college responsibility separate and distinct from those of his college, the Dean of the College of Letters & Science will supervise this new advising service.

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• **A Council on Academic Advising**, with faculty and staff representatives from all the schools and colleges. The proposed purposes of this Council are to provide focus and visibility to the university’s efforts to improve academic service; to advise the Director of the Cross-College Advising Service; to assess the academic advising needs of students and the success of the academic advising system in satisfying those needs; to encourage continuous improvement in academic advising; and to develop programs of professional development and systems of recognition for academic staff and faculty who provide academic advising. The Provost will appoint and charge this new committee after consultation with the University Committee and the Academic Staff Assembly Executive Committee.

• **Assignment of every entering student to a specific academic advisor.** Each student who identifies an intended major will be assigned an advisor in the appropriate school or college. A student who does not indicate an intended major at the time of admission will be assigned an advisor in the Cross-College Advising Service.

• **An expectation of students that they will seek advising at least three times in the first year:** in summer at SOAR, in fall before registering for spring semester; and in spring before registering for the second year. First-year students will also be encouraged to seek advising between weeks 4 and 10 of the semester to discuss any problems in course progress.

• **An expectation of cross-college academic advisors that they will provide:**

  1. "Developmental advising"--advising that helps students develop educational and career goals;

  2. "Cross-college advising"--information on academic programs in all relevant schools and colleges, or referral to those schools and colleges;

  3. Advising at times and in places convenient for students--e.g., evening hours and weekends, in dormitories and student unions.

The advising initiative upon which we are embarking has great potential for improving the academic experience of undergraduate students at UW-Madison. Thanks are due to the faculty and staff who planned the new initiative, as well as to those who will make it a success.