

## Academic Advising Task Force Recommendations

[Draft for Review by Deans Council, 26 January 2004]

### Background Information:

The Provost invited in August a university task force to review and analyze academic advising at Utah State and make recommendations for improvements. In his invitation, he pointed out that a national survey on student retention noted, "Academic advising is the #1 priority for students." Academic advising moves to a high priority for Utah State, as it is key to the success of the university's recruitment, retention, and graduation goals. Students have called attention to systemic problems in advising on campus. (Source: Surveys administered by AAA.)

Utah State has made a number of strides in advising in the past year:

- ? Established intent-to-transfer programs and Graduate Guarantee to improve time to graduation;
- ? Hosted the first USU Advising Conference;
- ? Developed new leave of absence and exit policies to help track students;
- ? Received an endowed scholarship focused on retaining good students;
- ? Created a *New Student Guide* that explains advising and orientation process to newly-admitted students;
- ? Expanded articulation agreements;
- ? Evaluated transfer transcripts and posted them on-line for easy accessibility for new students;
- ? Enhanced on-line orientation for students unable to attend SOAR;
- ? Through better communication, increased the numbers of students participation in SOAR and decreased the number of students purged for non-payment;
- ? Created a new on-line advisor evaluation for formative feedback.

We now need to make some critical decisions about next steps in improving academic advising. With that in mind, we have set aside some resources from Tier II Tuition to help move us forward. Among the issues we would like to address are the following:

- I. Inadequate human resources in advising
- II. Inadequate technical support
- III. Lack of centralized oversight and silo-based advising
- IV. Common standards
- V. Common resources
- VI. Lack of one-stop advising for students exploring majors and prospective majors—including prospective students—not just those on campus already
- VII. Lack of cross-training among advisors regarding; various college options, career exploration
- VIII. Packaging of advising so it's transparent to students
- IX. Accountability/assessment

John Mortensen, Director of Advising and Transition Services served as a resource person on this committee, providing expertise on what other campuses are doing.

The following questions were used as a basis in the committee's deliberation:

- ? Should USU set standardized advisor to student ratios and what should they be? Should they vary by type of admission?
- ? What should the centralized advising center look like? How should it function? What should be its structure? (e.g., first year advising center; University College as the University of Utah has).
- ? Who is the audience for centralized advising? (new freshman, new transfer; undeclared/exploratory majors; "parked" students waiting for entry into degree programs).

- ? Should we invest in a Transfer Center that focuses on the special needs of this student population?
- ? How can we improve formative and summative assessment of advising? To whom should advisors be accountable?

The task force, chaired by Richard Mueller, submitted the following report. Work still to be done includes the issues of space—where to house a centralized advising center—and operating. A compact plan initiative to fund the operations of an advising center has been submitted by John Mortensen and is under review by the Selective Investment Committee. Our goal is to make incremental progress on improving advising at Utah State.

## USU Academic Advising Task Force Recommendations

The USU Academic Advising Task Force makes the following recommendations pertaining to: 1) new advising positions funded through Tier II Tuition and 2) the overall advising process and organization at USU.

### Centralized Advising

1) The new tier-two advising positions should be directed to a centralized advising center to be called the Undergraduate Studies Program. Its main missions will be: 1) the advising of undeclared students and 2) acting as a university-wide advising information resource center for students and advisors. Advising in this center should focus on a combination of career exploration and course selection designed to help the student find an appropriate major while making progress toward completing University Studies and lower-division or prerequisite requirements for their potential major(s). The resource function can best be served by integrating Advising and Transition Services into this center. Many of the potential advantages of such a unit were in John Mortensen's memo of July 21, 2003 and will not be repeated here. We considered using the name University College (making us consistent with the U of U), but rejected it due to the concern that it might suggest that this program had the authority to confer degrees.

There are currently approximately 2700 undeclared students assigned to the Science/HASS Advising Center. Now that the College of Business has eliminated its pre-business status this could send an additional 1000 students to undeclared. Therefore the Undergraduate Studies Program would require a staff of approximately 12 full-time, 12 month, professional advisors (300 students/professional advisor). We see value in writing the advertisements in such away to value previous experience with USU advising procedures. In addition to professional advisors the (~25-30) A-team members (or other upper-classmen) could be a peer advising resource if support was budgeted for the entire academic year. Currently they are well trained but only used during SOAR.

Advisors should be cross-trained in all academic disciplines (with the assistance of college and departmental liaisons). These liaisons may work with one or two advisors in the Undergraduate Studies Program who will in turn train the other Program advisors in that area (e.g. natural sciences or social science). We consider it critical that every advisor is capable of exploring the full range of degree options with their advisees. In order to expose the advisees to the broad range of career and degree possibilities these categories will cross college lines (e.g. Science, Agriculture and Natural Resources in the broad category of natural science). For the Undergraduate Studies Program to successfully advise students, two-way communication with the degree granting programs is critical.

It is useful to recognize that advising consists of two different functions: 1) course scheduling and fulfilling graduation requirements and 2) educational and career planning. Faculty mentors and advisors will continue to be the best source of discipline specific guidance once students are in a major. However, we envision the Undergraduate Studies Program acting as both a model and campus wide resource to help students choose a major that is compatible with their talents and career interests. Although some training of academic advisors in the area of career exploration (as opposed to placement) is possible, the Undergraduate Studies Program should have a minimum of two staff in this area. We recommend that the existing resources for career

exploration be moved to this new program. Major exploration seminars, forums, fairs and online interactive tools can be a valuable resource and should be developed.

#### Caveats

2) There should be no diminution of advising quality in any existing units due to the creation of this Program.

3) New students who declare and are admitted to a major will be sent directly to the appropriate college or departmental advisor for both major and University Studies advising.

#### Pre-Majors

4) USU currently has a number of “limited enrollment programs” where advancement to full matriculation requires students to meet specific requirements and/or be selected from an applicant pool. Currently some programs use a “pre-“ status while others use a review of major status. We recommend that the university develop a consistent policy and terminology to deal with this type of approach. Formulating a uniform policy will require the active participation of their representatives (e.g. Elementary Ed., Interior Design, Computer Science). Departments or colleges who retain the use of a “not fully matriculated” status (e.g. pre-Computer Science) will be responsible, not the Undergraduate Studies Program, for the advising of those students and must take responsibility for counseling them out in a timely manner if they are unlikely to achieve major status. We would like to see them be proactive in tracking the progress of these students and provide written exit strategies indicating how accumulated credits would apply to likely alternative majors. We hope that this approach along with university wide advising and career exploration in the Undergraduate Studies Program will help decrease the number of stranded pre-majors by counseling them out of programs that they are unlikely to succeed in and making them aware of alternatives.

#### Undeclared Students and Tracks

5) Students admitted to the Undergraduate Studies Program should be tracked in one of the following six categories: undeclared track, life science track, physical science track, creative arts track, humanities track, and social science track. This tracking will facilitate University Studies advising (which uses the same system) and will allow units that wish to recruit majors from these groups to more accurately define a target audience. It will also alleviate the potential negative connotation of undeclared status for students who have some direction or are taking prerequisite classes but fully intend to enter a major when they meet the requirements (e.g. Business). Undergraduate Studies Program advisors will develop advising materials defining clusters of courses that will work for multiple majors within a track but also point out differences. For example, Public Health and Biology majors may require the same first year biology and chemistry courses, but a Business major will need a more rigorous math preparation than a Social Work major. This approach will allow students to keep some options open, but also make progress in potential majors.

The University Studies breadth courses can play a valuable role in the career/major exploration process. Instructors of breadth courses should be encouraged to devote some time to broadly defining and describing their discipline (e.g. Humanities) and its career opportunities.

### Transfer Students

6) Transfers and readmitted (good standing) students should be assisted and directed as follows:

- ? Those with fewer than 60 credits may enter the Undergraduate Studies Program or be placed directly in a major.
- ? Those with 45 or more credits must have a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.5 to enter the Undergraduate Studies Program as undeclared or “track” students to ensure that they are likely to meet the admissions requirements for a reasonable number of majors. This appears to be consistent with Regent’s policy R 461.
- ? Ideally all students with 60 or more credits would be admitted only if they meet the admissions criteria for their intended major. We are concerned about accepting transfer students with 60 or more credits who are undeclared or unable to meet major admissions requirements. If such students must be admitted they should be directed to a specialized “transfer advisor” within the Undergraduate Studies Program for intensive directed advising and supervision.
- ? Note: while we are not specifically recommending a separate transfer advising center, if a specialized center is created from an initiative in the compact planning process it should be integrated into the Undergraduate Studies Program. If not, a special “transfer advisor” should be trained from the Undergraduate Studies Program staff. The whole transfer process will benefit from the continuation of centralized articulation of courses mentioned below.
- ? In addition to the very useful online transfer articulation guide, the university should continue to provide for centralized evaluation of transfer credits and the input of their equivalents onto student’s transcripts prior to their matriculation. This is extremely valuable in both advising and recruitment. It is important that all advisors be able to access this information from the transcript prior to meeting with their advisees.
- ? The Undergraduate Studies Program should make an outreach effort to schools providing concurrent enrollment classes to inform instructors, students and advisors about articulation and the implications of transfer of these courses to USU. This information should be clearly stated in the syllabus.

### Mandatory Advising

7) Intrusive and exploratory advising in the Undergraduate Studies Program should reduce the problem of stranded students who are unable to enter a major. However, Undergraduate Studies Program advisors should monitor their student’s GPA each term to make sure they are making acceptable progress and have a reasonable chance of full matriculation into a major. If their GPA falls below 2.5, after 15 or more USU credits, they should receive a registration hold and mandatory advising. Ideally the university should develop a mechanism to prevent the current one term lag in enforcement of registration holds.

#### Degree Programs with 2.0 GPA Minimum

8) We recommend that Academic Standards look at the following issues: 1) the value of raising the minimum GPA for Undergraduate Studies Program students to remain in good standing. This reflects the fact that a majority of majors require a minimum GPA of at least 2.25-2.5; 2) consider the creation of a “stepped” GPA requirement, raising the GPA with accumulated credits to remain in good standing in the Undergraduate Studies Program (recognizing how difficult it is to raise a GPA after the accumulation of 30-60 credits); 3) consider imposing a credit limit after which a student must be matriculated in a major; 4) the awarding of a “University (or General) Studies” associates degree to students who have met University Studies requirements but have been unable to choose and matriculate into a major. The last suggestion would provide a positive “exit strategy” for students who, for various reasons, are unable to progress to the end of a baccalaureate program. The existing Interdisciplinary Studies major should not be viewed as a “fall back” for students who are unsuccessful in the pursuit of their first choice major; it was actually created for motivated students to “design a unique individualized academic program”.

#### Readmitted Students

9) Readmitted suspended students and general registration students require specialized mandatory advising. This should be done following the Student Support Services model and should be separate from the regular advising in the Undergraduate Studies Program. Perhaps one specially trained advisor within the Undergraduate Studies Program should be assigned to this clientele. An individualized contract outlining expectations should be written and signed by the student and advisor prior to the beginning of each term. Failure to meet these expectations may result in suspension.

#### Student Responsibility, Technology, and Self-Advising

10) The Undergraduate Studies Program and the academic college or department web sites and other information resources should work to develop self-advising tools. Both the Science/HASS Advising Center and the Department of English are doing some of this currently. Tools could include: FAQ sections; a virtual advisor link; how to prepare for your advising session links; progress reports (DARS or other) generated prior to appointments; a suggestion box; specific course placements tests; activities, test or other evaluation tools to help determine your suitability for and likely chance of matriculation in a specific major. As part of this effort, a template for online scheduling, pre-appointment preparation and immediate post-meeting advisor evaluation should be developed centrally and made available to individual units. Until such a system can be implemented advisors should be required to hand advisees the existing “Online Advisor Evaluations” card that directs them to the ATS website where they can submit an evaluation. New resources and a technical staff position (that will also contribute to assessment data collection) should be devoted to this effort. The technology should be in place before the Undergraduate Studies Program opens. An advisory board of students and faculty and staff advisors should be created as an information resource. Off-campus advisors should be included in this effort. They will benefit from the Undergraduate Studies Program as a resource but may have unique issues and concerns. Web portals could be a powerful tool for self-advising and their development should be made a high priority.

#### Advisor to Student Ratios

11) We recommend that the university adopt the following as *target* student-to-advisor ratios: 20-25 students for major advising /faculty member as a 5% time effort; 400

students for major advising /professional advisor; 300 undeclared students /professional advisor; 750 students needing only University Studies advising/professional advisor. These ratios assume that the person has no other assignments such as graduation close outs. It should be recognized that advisors cannot meet with students 40 hours a week. They need time to prepare for appointments and receive training.

#### Advisor Development

12) We feel that the current efforts by ATS to provide advisor workshops and the Advisor Handbook are valuable and should be continued. However more resources need to be devoted to ongoing training including: travel support for professional development; workshops or panel discussions devoted to keeping advisors abreast of changes in procedures; and most importantly searchable online information resources. Advisors jobs are getting more complex and ready access to information is critical. This information needs to be available both for immediate access (during an appointment) and for more thorough study. It should include not just details of policies and procedures but also contacts and referrals for specific problems or issues. A flowchart format may be useful. Much of the online information could be available to students to assist with self-advicing. A hard copy "Who to call?" cheat sheet with most frequently needed contacts and referrals should be prepared and frequently updated with feedback from advisors. In offices where front desk, receptionist or peer advisor personnel are present, they can be trained to answer many queries that don't require the attention of a professional advisor. Non-advisor staff are often the first contact for students and an effort should be made to provide them with referral and basic procedure information.

We recommend the creation of a program modeled on the "Advisor U" of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Minnesota State University –Mankato. This program maintains a transcript for advisors to document their participation in specialized training courses provided by the university. Topics could include; FERPA, Degree Audit, advising special needs students, etc. This would provide incentive to advisors and have value in evaluation and assessment efforts.

13) NACADA is currently creating an advisor certification and career ladder plan. USU should evaluate this plan and consider using it as a foundation for one of our own. The director of the Undergraduate Studies Program should lead this effort but the plan should be flexible enough to be able to evaluate and reward advisors across the university, not just those in the Undergraduate Studies Program. It should be consistent with the existing USU advising mission statement.

Both faculty and professional advisors should have a role statement that describes their assignment and expectations. This will provide the basis for yearly evaluation by their immediate supervisor. Advising should also be part of periodic department or unit reviews. We suggest that the Undergraduate Studies Program advisory board work with personnel to create a template that describes the necessary background, skills and performance objectives for all staff with advising assignments. Different units will need to modify this template to suit their particular circumstances, but it will provide a useful common ground for creating advertisements, role statements and evaluation criteria across campus. The university should decide on a consistent policy with regard to the role of faculty advising. Should it count in the teaching or service load and what weight should it be given (see recommendation #11)?

All advisors, across campus should be provided with the necessary resources to excel at their jobs and held to the same high standards.

14) As an adjunct to implementing university wide standards for advisors, the university should strive to provide all advisors with the following minimum resources: private office space; adequate computer equipment to access advising data and resources; fax access; appointment scheduling and secretarial help.

#### Assessment

15) All advising assessment activities should be planned by the director and advisory board of the Undergraduate Studies Program and coordinated with the Office of Analysis, Assessment and Accreditation. The technical staff person mentioned in #10 should compile the advising assessment data generated by the Undergraduate Studies Program, assist the director in its analysis and act as a liaison with AAA. Assessment of advising should be used to promote a positive message - we measure it because we value it and want to improve it. Since conventional wisdom states that surveys should not be created by committee, we will not attempt to devise specific survey instruments. John Mortenson will attend the NACADA conference on assessment in February to gather ideas. However we will suggest possible methods and some guiding principles. Several of these are outlined in a listserve message posted by Joseph B. Cuseo at (<http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/listserv/remarks/cuseo2.htm>).

- ? All assessment should mirror the advising mission statement and be used primarily to improve the process rather than evaluate individual performance.
- ? It should be an iterative process informed by data that is used to improve the advising system.
- ? The process of choosing what to assess will force the institution to determine what it values and provide advisors with guidance on what behaviors and outcomes are being promoted. Content should include measures of availability, knowledge of institutional policies and degree programs (as a resource and liaison to other resources), interpersonal skills, mentoring, and developmental and intrusive advising ability.
- ? Immediate post appointment evaluations (see recommendation #10) should be returned to advisors and their supervisors and used to provide feedback but not used for statistical analysis.
- ? The existing exit survey advising component should be shortened to avoid survey fatigue. AAA should continue to plan some level of commonality between the exit and freshman/sophomore surveys.
- ? The total program should include the following components:
  - o Student exit and "midcourse" surveys and written comments that measure both the need/ importance and the level of satisfaction with various items.
  - o Student self-assessment of their own effort and expectations as advisees.
  - o A measure of advisors evaluation of the administrative support for advising. This could provide useful feedback for needed improvements.
  - o Advisor self-assessment and portfolio development (including Advisor U. transcripts).
  - o Peer assessment by teams of advisors structured as a collegial dialogue rather than evaluation by supervisors.
  - o Program assessment by the Undergraduate Studies Program director and academic deans

- Targeted focus groups or interviews with students who fit certain profiles (e.g. quickly moved out of undeclared or remained undeclared for a long time)
  - Feedback from ASUSU sponsored roundtables of advisors and students
- ? Expected outcomes of the implementation of the Undergraduate Studies Program and improved advising resources are:
- Improvements in student survey data and interview comments
  - Improved retention and decrease in time to degree
  - Students spending less time in undeclared status
  - Improvements in advisor skills and knowledge base – “professionalization”
  - Increase in advisor job satisfaction
  - Decrease in student-to-advisor ratios
  - More consistent information to students and fewer steps required to obtain answers

#### Orientation and First-Year Experience: Student Retention

16) With ATS made part of the Undergraduate Studies Program it should be possible to make SOAR advising more seamless with academic term advising. Undeclared students would work with the Program advisors during SOAR and be able to continue that relationship when they arrive on campus. Since students now have their @cc.usu.edu email addresses before they meet with the advisors, the Program advisors could use these to remain in touch with the students they work with during SOAR.

17) We recognize that the Connections course and other 1<sup>st</sup> year experiences could play an important role in the academic success of the undeclared students in the Undergraduate Studies Program. We are aware that separate committees are currently examining these programs and upgrading their academic expectations (making it difficult for us to make recommendations). However we urge them to consider their relationship to this new program.

We make the following specific recommendation for a [Undergraduate Studies Program - Connections model](#). In conjunction with the two credit Connections course, students in the Undergraduate Studies Program would also be required to complete an additional credit of Connections focused on career exploration. These career exploration components could be targeted toward truly undeclared students (i.e. very general) or more specifically to students in one of the “tracks” within the Undergraduate Studies Program (e.g. Life Science or Humanities). The three credit Connection model would include additional developmentally appropriate workshops, offered during the semester, designed to aid undeclared students in their quest to answer vital career planning questions and should be mandatory. In these workshops, students could learn about the various options in Social Sciences, Arts, Sciences, etc. This model would allow departments or colleges to present majors available in their respective areas to these students. Undergraduate Studies Program advisors would participate but would not necessarily teach all sections.

18) There continues to be a problem with students knowing whom their advisor is. In addition to the current notification in their admissions letter and at SOAR, we suggest that email reminders be sent and front page links from the Undergraduate Studies Program and QUAD websites provide ready access to advisor names and contact information. Use of non- @cc.usu.edu email addresses makes it difficult to contact

some students. A penalty (registration hold?) should be imposed on students who do not activate and use these accounts.

19) Survey data has shown that many students need to be encouraged to begin or maintain a relationship with their advisor. Therefore, all advisors across campus should be required to maintain an email address book of their advisees (the Undergraduate Studies Program can provide technical support). This will allow them to remain in frequent contact and remind them of deadlines. Advisors should also be encouraged to monitor student progress and contact them at certain milestones (e.g. nearing graduation) or if they appear to be headed for trouble (e.g. falling below the graduation GPA requirement). Ideally the Undergraduate Studies Program will develop methods to mine the student information database to find this information and provide it to advisors. The Undergraduate Studies Program will also coordinate messages to advisors (as ATS does currently). Advisors can then forward this information to students when appropriate.

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