Undergraduate Academic Advising Structure

Trends at Large Public Research Institutions
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1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

Institutions house program and department-specific advising within individual academic colleges and student sub-population advising within institution-level units. Academic administrators should separate discipline-specific advising from general procedural advising by maintaining college- and institution-level advisors who specialize within a designated discipline. College-level faculty and professional advisors address student concerns about research opportunities, elective course selection, and post-graduation plans. Institution-level professional advisors address student concerns regarding major choice, academic policies and procedures, and general education requirements.

Students receive academic advisor assignments upon entry to the institution; however major declaration, addition of a pre-professional track, or academic progression may result in advisor reassignments. For example, some college-level administrators assign students to college-level professional staff for their first and second year; administrators then assign students in their third and fourth years to a faculty advisor within their college to provide content-based advising as students take on more rigorous coursework.

Most colleges employ professional advisors to aid or replace faculty advisors and provide uniform guidance on academic policies and procedures. Although some disciplines retain only faculty members as advisors, students request meetings more frequently with professional advisors. Professional advisors provide guidance on topics outside of a student's academic discipline, such as add/drop procedures and complex academic and institutional procedures. Professional advisors typically possess a master's degree and at least two years of relevant prior work experience.

Professional advisors seek early alert technology tools that can track student performance indicators (i.e., GPA, attendance, and course enrollments) and alert advisors of marginal declines in performance. Only University A uses early alert systems which anticipate and help prevent significant declines in student performance rather than help students react to existing concerns. Tools that share notes across multiple advisors and demonstrate a student's degree progress (i.e., degree audit tool) streamline communication across multiple advisors and with students. Although faculty members also use degree audit tools, they use fewer types of advising tools than their professional counterparts.

Faculty advisors report smaller caseloads than professional advisors. Colleges that delegate advising exclusively to faculty members maintain the lowest ratios of students to advisors. Faculty maintain small case loads because they also bear teaching and scholarship responsibilities. Advising duties constitute a larger workload percentage for professional advisors; therefore, professional advisors in central college offices or institution-level advising have more capacity to undertake larger caseloads.

Definition of Terms

College: Refers to a college or school within an institution (e.g., College of Engineering, School of Letters and Science, etc.)
2) Advising Models

Overview

Over 80 Percent of Colleges Employ Professional Advisors

All institutions offer academic advising at the college or department level. Contacts at University F note that advising structures vary by college to meet different student concerns and challenges. College-level advisors specialize in individual academic programs or majors, whereas institution-level advisors specialize in common concerns, such as major declaration and general education requirements. Departments that prioritize career and curricular advising employ faculty as academic advisors. In contrast, departments that prefer advisors who can discuss alternative majors and courses outside of the department employ professional advisors. Secondary research reveals that the most common advising model is professional advising. Most science-focused colleges (i.e., Human Environmental Sciences, Agricultural Sciences, and Biological Sciences) exclusively offer faculty advising; most other colleges employ professional advisors.

Frequency of Advising Duty Allocation at Colleges within Profiled Institutions

| Professional Advisors | 36 |
| Faculty Advisors     | 11 |
| Both (Faculty and Professional Advisors) | 9 |
| Peer Advisors and Professional or Academic Advisors | 4 |
| Peer Advisors        | 1 |

n = 65 colleges (i.e., total colleges and schools with undergraduate degree programs at profiled institutions)

Source: Institution Web sites

Institution-level Advising

Institution-level Advising Serves Students of Special Concern and Pre-professional Students

All institutions except for University C house institution-level advising centers within student affairs to supplement college-sponsored advising services. Institution-level advising services serve the unique needs of student subpopulations, such as multicultural, pre-law, undeclared, or transfer students. Some institutions offer supplemental pre-law, pre-health, exploratory, and first-year advising through professional advisors in the College of Letters and Sciences. Institution-level advising units possess the following names:

- Academic Advising Center
- Academic Exploration and Advising Services
- Student Academic Success Center
Professional Advisors Operate at the College Level and Faculty Advisors Operate at the Department Level

The majority of colleges at profiled institutions employ professional advisors either alone or in conjunction with faculty advisors, as shown in figures 2 and 3 below. In contrast, four of 29 survey respondents indicate they require only faculty to fulfill advising duties and do not employ only professional advisors, as shown in figure 1. Academic administrators may prefer professional advisors to allow faculty more time to dedicate to tasks that professional advisors cannot fulfill such as oversight of student research.

College-level Advising Models

1. Faculty Advisors

2. Professional Advisors

3. Faculty and Professional Advisors
Assign Students to Institution-level Advisors Upon Admission and Reassign Students to Departmental Advisors Upon Major Declaration

Students must meet with assigned professional advisors once per semester during their first year. After this, professional advisors are more likely than faculty members to require mandatory advising appointments, and these must usually occur once per semester. At-risk students or students on academic probation must also meet with faculty or professional before registration each semester. Academic advisors place an enrollment hold on accounts of students who do not participate in required advising appointments. After students declare a major, administrators reassign them to advisors in their colleges. Academic advisors at University D and University I encourage students to consult institution-level professional advisors throughout their academic careers for additional support.

Common Reasons Students Seek Academic Advising
- Academic performance or progress updates and concerns
- Academic procedures (i.e., late course withdrawal, registration hold)
- Course selection
- Major change and selection

Advising Responsibilities and Areas of Expertise at University D¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assigned Advisor</th>
<th>Advising Strengths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Professional Advisor | - Academic planning  
|                    | - Degree requirements  
|                    | - General education requirements  
|                    | - Enrollment petitions  
|                    | - Strategies to improve low academic performance |
| Faculty Advisor   | - Career goals  
|                    | - Major selection  
|                    | - Field of specialization  
|                    | - Elective courses  
|                    | - Research opportunities and topics |

¹ University D Institution Web site.
Appoint College-level Administrators to Oversee Small Teams of Advisors

Of 29 survey respondents who serve as directors of advising, 76 percent oversee small teams of one to ten academic advisors. Only 14 percent oversee teams of at least 25 advisors that comprise either only professional faculty or a mix of both faculty and professional advisors.

Advising Staff Size for All Advising Models

**Only Professional Advisors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 to 5 Advisors</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10 Advisors</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 15 Advisors</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to 20 Advisors</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 25 Advisors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26+ Advisors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Faculty and Professional Advisors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 to 5 Advisors</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10 Advisors</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 15 Advisors</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to 20 Advisors</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 25 Advisors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26+ Advisors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Only Faculty Advisors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 to 5 Advisors</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10 Advisors</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 15 Advisors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to 20 Advisors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 25 Advisors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26+ Advisors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ n = 29 \text{ survey respondents} \]
3) Professional Advisors

Experience and Educational Backgrounds

Professional Advisors Possess Two Years of Work Experience in Advising and a Master's Degree in Counseling or Administration

Colleges and institution-level units that employ professional advisors seek applicants with at least two years and often more than four years of work experience. Most advisors must possess a master's degree in higher education administration or a field related to the discipline of the college in which they work. Contacts note that administrators prefer to hire professional advisors with advanced degrees, although the degree may not be required.

Number of Years of Work Experience and Educational Background of Professional Advisors Possess

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>PhD</th>
<th>M.A.</th>
<th>B.A.</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4+ Years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 Years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-2 Years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 15 survey respondents
n = 23 survey respondents

Professional Advisors Undergo Evaluations Based on Student Contact and Learning Outcomes

Few administrators conduct robust evaluations of professional advisors. However, survey respondents from University A, University C, University E, and University I indicate that professional advisors undergo regular evaluations based on defined performance metrics.

Performance Metrics Considered in Professional Advisor Assessment

- **Student satisfaction**: quality of survey responses
- **Caseload contact**: the number of interactions (i.e., appointments, emails) advisors have with each student in their caseload
- **Mandatory meeting completion**: the number of mandatory meetings completed with each student
- **Student learning outcomes indicators**: for example, the percentage of students on-track for degree completion, or the number of students on academic probation
- **The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) Guidelines for Assessment of Academic Advising**: a widely accepted academic advising resource

Professional advisors at University I must reach out to undeclared students at the beginning and end of each semester and at least once during the semester. Contacts note that the

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number of undeclared first-year students on academic probation at the end of the first semester has decreased since the implementation of this requirement. Similarly, professional advisors in the College of Nursing at University A must conduct outreach to prospective pre-nursing students, prospective high school students, and admitted nursing majors.

**Assign 200 to 600 Students to Each Professional Advisor**

Most colleges that employ professional advisors maintain a ratio of students to advisors below 600 to 1. College-level advising centers with a core professional advising staff experience significantly higher or lower student to advisor ratios depending on the population they serve (i.e., all students or student sub-populations).

**Student to Advisor Ratio in Faculty and Professional Advising Models**

![Bar chart showing student to advisor ratio]

- Professional Advisors Only
- Faculty and Professional Advisors

n = 25 survey respondents
4) Faculty Advisors

Compensation

*Faculty Members Rarely Receive Additional Compensation for Academic Advising*

Survey respondents at University B, University C, and University I oversee divisions in which only faculty serve as academic advisors. These administrators primarily oversee science-related colleges, such as agricultural or environmental science. College administrators determine which faculty should serve as academic advisors, as well as what levels of compensation, if any, faculty should receive.

Faculty Academic Advising Compensation Models

- **Stipend**: Faculty advisors in the College of Arts and Sciences at University I receive a $2,000 stipend annually.

- **Course Release**: Faculty in the College of Science at University C are eligible to receive a course release for assuming extra advising duties.

- **Service Contribution**: Faculty members at University E do not receive any extra compensation for academic advising, but academic administrators consider academic advising as a component of the service requirement in faculty workload.

Advisor to Student Ratio

*Faculty Advisors Maintain Small Caseloads*

Three of the four colleges that employ only faculty advisors maintain a 1 to 200 advisor to student ratio. Contacts attribute this low ratio to students' frequent consultations with professional advisors in institution-level units before consulting faculty. Many institutions also maintain a designated faculty advisor for individual academic programs, and therefore the case load of advisors depends more on program enrollment than the control of caseloads by academic administrators.
5) Technology Tools

Overview

**Degree Audit Tools Experience Highest Demand by Faculty and Professional Advisors**

All survey respondents indicate that advisors use one or more technology tools on a daily basis. Professional advisors are more likely to use technology tools with shared advising notes and appointment scheduling capabilities than their faculty counterparts who host mainly drop-in advising meetings. Advisors most widely use degree audit tools, which demonstrate a student's degree progress. Few academic advisors use tools that have automated course suggestion or early alert capabilities.

**Percent of Survey Respondents that Use Technology Tools**

![Bar chart showing the percentage of survey respondents using various technology tools.]

- **Degree Audit Tool**: 93%
- **Shared Advising Notes**: 75%
- **Appointment Scheduling Tool**: 70%
- **Degree Planning Tool**: 60%
- **Early Alert System**: 70%
- **Student Engagement Survey**: 25%
- **Automated Course Suggestion Tool**: 20%
- **Central academic administrators instead of administrators within individual colleges or schools often conduct student engagement surveys.**

- Professional Advisors Only
- Faculty Advisors Only
- Faculty and Professional Advisors
Degree Audit Tool

Degree Audit Tools Provide Access to Student Degree Completion Progress

Advisors at all institutions except for University B use degree audit tools, which administrators develop internally and sync with their institution's learning management system, such as Blackboard. Some contracts contract with third-party vendors, such as Elucian's Degree Works. Advisors use degree audit more frequently than any other technology tool and rate them the highest for perceived effectiveness.

Frequency of Use of Degree Audit Tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multiple Times Per Day</th>
<th>18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely or Never</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 26 survey respondents

Course Suggestion Tool

Advisors Require Familiarity with Course Suggestion Tools for Effective Use

Administrators in the College of Business at University I and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at University C are the only survey respondents to report using course suggestion tools such as Degree Compass. Although advisors at University I use the tool multiple times per day, advisors at University C use the tool rarely or never. Contacts note that the use of uncommon technology tools such as course suggestion tools largely depends on training and implementation of the tool, as advisors may struggle to implement complex tools into their busy workflow. Consequently, administrators who use the tool rarely at University C rate the tool as somewhat useful, whereas administrators at University I who use the tool often report high satisfaction with the tool.

Early Alert System

All Users of Early Alert Systems Report Satisfaction with the Tool

Only administrators at University A indicate that advisors under their purview use an early alert system, such as the Student Success Collaborative or Starfish. Each college uses an early alert system alongside degree audit tools, shared advising notes, and at least one other tool. This indicates that advisors with experience managing multiple information streams and tools are the most likely to use an early alert system. Advisors do not reference early alert systems more than once per week, and advisors in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs use the tool rarely or never.
6) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- How and when are students assigned to an advisor?
- What is the staffing or organizational structure of advising departments?
- Who serves as advisors to undergraduate students?
- For which student populations do administrators provide special advising programs?
- For which student populations do administrators require advising?
- What is the ratio of students to advisors?
- What tools do academic advisors use?
- How do administrators rate the effectiveness of technology tools?

Project Sources

The Academic Affairs Forum profiled academic advising structures and processes through research interviews, an online survey, and institution advising Web sites. The survey targeted administrators who supervise advising at the institution-wide and college levels at large public research institutions. Thirty administrators at eight institutions responded to the survey, and the Forum conducted one research interview with administrators at University F.

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

The Forum surveyed and interviewed directors of institution and college-level academic advising at large public institutions.

### A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total)</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>32,500 / 42,700</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>14,000 / 20,900</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>39,800 / 50,200</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>Pacific West</td>
<td>25,000 / 31,700</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>32,600 / 49,600</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University F</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>32,300 / 44,400</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University G</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>21,500 / 29,800</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University H</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>26,000 / 33,700</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University I</td>
<td>Pacific West</td>
<td>20,600 / 24,400</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Center for Education Statistics