

2015 Advising Unconference Summary
Event Date: October 6, 2015
8:00am to 1:00pm
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Fireside Lounge

Event Overview

The Enhancing Advising Committee (EAC) hosted the Unconference once again to allow for continued dialogue regarding advising on our campus. The goal in this second annual event was to host an unconference in its purest form, meaning that there was no pre-determined list of topics to be discussed, no pre-selected facilitators or note takers. The objective was to glean a better understanding of the advising community’s perspectives on progress we have made and where our energy needs to be focused as we move forward.

The day began with the Unconference schedule building through a brainstorming discussion with the group in attendance. Possible topics were arranged in themes that emerged. The schedule and topics were as follows:

	Session 1 9:00-9:50	Session 2 10:00-10:50	Session 3 11:00-11:50
Fireside Lounge	Consistency of Advising	Advising Technology	Career Advising
Union 240	Advising on Campus	UWM Collaboration	Resilience & Persistence
Union 280	Positivity & Change	Advising Special Populations	Advising Styles & Stories

To create a truly interactive experience, the above table was also a live, public document in Google Drive, in which all participants had access. Each of the topics was a link to a document, which holds a summary of the important points and possible next steps/action items (if applicable) taken by the note-takers. This interactive, collaborative document allowed for individuals to follow conversations during and after the Unconference and was the document utilized by the EAC to determine how to implement ideas and disseminate information gathered during this valuable advising professional development opportunity. The EAC findings and recommendations are detailed throughout this document, based on theme. As participants gathered for each session, someone in each group self-selected to facilitate the conversations.

Lunch was generously provided by Academic Affairs, which was greatly appreciated by the participants. The lunch conversations and networking were focused on two questions posed to those in attendance- *What gives you hope for advising at UWM? What is one take-away that you can implement to enhance your advising?*

Emerging Themes

The Unconference structure for this year seemed to create a space for individuals to share and be heard. Some of the conversations circled back around to some topics from last year, which in truth did cause some frustration for a few participants. Some of the topics chosen elicited similar conversations; therefore as we synthesized the notes from the event, the EAC identified overarching themes from the

dialogue, questions and recommendations that emerged from the advising community. *It should be noted that these theme summaries have been developed to ease the process of analyzing the most pertinent concerns the advising community has. There are certainly more ideas and unique aspects that may be understood and accessed by reading the full Unconference notes.*

Theme: Recognition & Dedication

There were several conversations that landed on this theme. UWM is facing difficult times. This conversation happens amidst one of the most challenging times on our campus for all employees. The future is uncertain, and in these times, there is a strong focus on areas on campus that impact retention of students. It is apparent, based on the strategic plan on retention, that advising is of high value on campus. However, there were many conversations on this day, which would indicate the contrary. Not all comments made in these two separate sessions can be applied to all advising offices at UWM, but the fact that these are sentiments experienced on our campus creates the opportunity to create a climate that feels more equitable and increases the chance that great advising staff are retained to do the important work our campus needs in these times.

The two sessions that have been summarized in this section are “Advising on Campus: Moving Forward & Upward” and “Positivity & Change”. There are simultaneous concerns that 1) advising staff do not have opportunities on the UWM campus for career advancement and 2) are not being recognized for the vital, taxing work they do every day. The reality on campus is that we are all doing more with less, but advising, in particular, has felt this burden before the budget crisis began. It was reported that many offices do not feel they have the support of their supervisors and it is clear, when looking at titles and salaries, there are many inconsistencies between school/colleges for advising staff. To be clear, comments were not focused on pay increases for all advisors, as the budget was on the minds of all in attendance, however, there were many ideas suggested to increase the incentives that advising staff could enjoy, which would keep high quality staff on our campus. Possible incentive ideas included:

- Validation and awards/recognition for the great work of advisors
- Retreats with leadership to brainstorm incentive ideas that would not cost little to nothing
- Advancement opportunities to share in “Head of Advising” responsibilities
- Expectation and opportunity to engage in wellness activities
- Free tuition for UWM employees
- Parking passes at reduced or no cost
- Free UWM apparel

One idea that arose in several different ways throughout the sessions was that supervisors of advisors need to be engaged with their staff and looking to their staff as the experts on advising and utilizing their ideas to propel the advising offices forward. It is true that not all offices are facing the same types of struggles, but with more relationship building between advisors and their supervisors and the administration on our campus could have a significant and positive impact. When advisors are happy, content, feeling respected and valued, the quality of their work improves and the likelihood that they will be committed to continuing to work at UWM increases.

Theme: Consistency & Effectiveness of Advising Practices

The first Unconference had a conversation about the Consistency of the Student Experience and the efforts of several groups on campus, including EAC, Academic Services & Advising Leadership Council (ASALC) and the Working Group for Undergraduate Advising (WGUA) have worked to implement ideas shared around this topic over the past year. The theme that arose regarding consistency this year was

about the approach that advisors are taking with their students and what the effectiveness is of certain approaches over others. Because the practice of advising has received more attention on campus, especially in terms of retention, it is not surprising that this theme emerged in three separate sessions. These sessions included “Consistency of Advising”, “Resilience & Persistence” and “Advising Styles & Stories”.

Regarding the consistency of the students’ experience, there was a question about whether or not students are truly concerned about this. Often times there are assumptions based on anecdotal information from individual offices and there hasn’t been a survey or other means of gathering actual student concerns. In addition, it was recognized that working with this generation of students requires a specific understanding of the issues they are facing regarding persistence and grit. Questions arose around what the role of a success or life coach would be and whether advisors should be equipped to handle those types of student interactions. These discussions led to the theme regarding what advisor skill sets should be and how advisors view their roles and the approaches individual advisors take with their students.

Student learning outcomes and advising syllabi were discussed as possible methods to address the concerns about perceived inconsistency across campus. The idea of learning outcomes has potential, but was met with skepticism about how that would be used in an evaluative manner- it seems the overall climate on campus has had a negative impact on how new ideas are perceived. In other words, many people were concerned that these outcomes would become evaluation devices and fear for their job security, rather than being optimistic about how the learning outcomes would enhance the work of advising across campus. There were several instances when ideas were discussed, but then criticized as new ways to impose stricter job performance evaluation. While it is clear that there are great examples of improvements to offices using some creative ideas, not all participants were willing to engage in the dialogue that would lead to new ways of working and serving students.

Although the climate on campus clearly had its impact on the tone of discussions and the direction these discussions headed, there was a concern that has been long-standing, which surfaced in multiple sessions. This concern is regarding communication on campus. The routes for information sharing seem to be ineffective. Because the notes are general, there are not specific examples on where this could be addressed, but some campus communication issues that have been ongoing are the number of different groups discussing similar topics, yet not communicating with each other; and the lack of centralized information dissemination regarding decisions, policies and discussions that directly impact advising at UWM.

Lastly, there was attention brought to the current campus resources that are offered to support students, namely “Let’s Talk” sessions and the “Academic Coaching” offered through PASS, as ways to support advising on campus, yet clearly distinguishing roles. Advisors are aware of campus resources, but if there was a more cohesive system in place to make referrals and communicate, the effectiveness of utilizing resources would be improved.

Theme: Addressing Unique Student Populations

UWM has many unique aspects to the makeup of the overall student body. Based on how a student is admitted and who the student identifies as an individual or as part of a larger group, has an impact on their student experience. Not all advisors feel equipped to understand these students’ experiences beyond the academic view and the sessions that addressed some of these thoughts were “UWM

Collaboration” and “Advising Special Populations”. Although the original intent of discussing collaborations happening on campus was not focused on students, the conversations were driven by how we collaborate to improve the student experience, which is why it has been analyzed alongside special populations.

Regardless of a student’s unique identity, the first factor that impacts a student is the admission to UWM. There was much discussion about whether or not UWM accepts students that we are not equipped to work with? We have AOC and SSS, but after these students move on to their school/college, what supports are these students afforded to ensure their success? Has there been a history of success for students after transferring out of AOC? Have students who began in AOC or SSS been successful, i.e. graduate from UWM? Students who are admitted as transfers, adult non-traditional, international or otherwise are all unique populations and as the discussions continued, it seemed that many advisors felt there should be more support for these students and for professional development.

In terms of diversity, the idea of creating more targeted campaigns to work with groups of students was suggested, as many of these individual groups have unique needs. There was the overall discussion about what ALL students need on campus and what the “UWM Experience” truly means, but the reality that is that there are some aspects unique to communities on our campus that require an advisor to possess skills in working with people who are diverse and to honor the approaches that are most successful with those student populations.

The bottom line in these discussions were that there should be a wider web of support for students that is collaborative in nature. With improved communications between advising units, between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs and with various groups on campus who have vested interest in advising, the students would be receiving a cohesive and consistent experience to bolster their overall education.

Theme: Improved Use of Technology in Advising

This was a topic of conversation at the 2014 Unconference as well. The topic for this theme was “Advising Technology”. Some similar concerns were raised to last year around how the implementation of different systems can be more efficient. Advisors are hesitant for the most part with new technologies, due to the lack of hard evidence to prove effectiveness. Given that SSC Campus will be rolled out next year, there is hope that there will be a new approach to implementation, as there have been several instances (MAP-Works was cited as one) when new technology was not as effective as was hoped. As SSC Campus would be the preferred tool to be used in place of programs, like Cattrack, it was discussed whether there would be “enforcement” in use of the SSC Campus, as this was identified as one of the factors in the weak implementation of other systems.

Another topic that was broached was about the storage of digital student files. Some offices on campus are exploring going “paperless” and it was determined that the One Drive is not FERPA regulated, so there would need to be further investigation into how the student files would be protected. The one way to do so now is with Pantherfile, but that may soon be obsolete.

Lastly, there was discussion about how to advising students via online means. The appropriateness and effectiveness of using social media was discussed, with one advisor strongly advocating that having a social media presence has created advising relationships with his students that allows for a more personal connection, while others felt that was crossing a boundary. Using online programs like Skype or Google Hangout can be a useful way to connect with online students, but not all advisors will be comfortable using these outlets. It came down to personal work styles, however, the sentiment in the

group was that advisors should be open to trying new things to see if that can meet the needs of students and allow for connection with the students.

Theme: Career Advising

In this discussion topic, it was determined that there needs to be a closer relationship between the Career Planning and Resource Center and Advising offices. Many advisors felt that career advising is intertwined with advising, that it is difficult to distinguish separate roles. What would be useful for advisors is to better understand what types of resources CPRC can offer that supplement what advisors are doing with students. There were a lot of great ideas generated that would have a positive impact on students, but it was not clear to the participants what was reasonable to expect from CPRC, in terms of new initiatives. The information shared in this session was beneficial to the participants to gain more insight into how other advisors are performing the aspect of their position related to career advising, but also highlighted the need for a bigger discussion with the CPRC staff so that we can develop ideas on how to be more collaborative.

Recommendations

As the EAC took time to understand the comments, discussions and suggestions from our campus colleagues, it is clear that there are priorities that should be addressed in the future. Below are recommendations that have stemmed from the emerging themes and from the ongoing work being carried out by EAC, ASALC and other groups at UWM. As this summary is being shared after several months have passed, there have been other activities which have had impacts on the recommendations below. When necessary, there is an update about such activities.

Create Structure for Advising Professional Development

Throughout many discussions and across themes, there is a common desire being voiced from the advising community- there needs to be a coordinated effort to provide the training and professional development that is relevant. In the past and currently, professional development has been a grassroots effort, almost completely funding by large group professional development grants, or been home-grown trainings presented by UWM staff. The amount of attention that advising receives for being a critical retention tool means that there should be a stronger infrastructure for providing our advising professionals with the necessary knowledge and skills to perform their jobs at the level expected to provide high quality advising to their advisees. The unconference participants have made it clear during both years' discussions that this is of value and a priority for their career success. The same recommendation was included in the WGUA final recommendations. Therefore, it is critical that there be time and effort dedicated to creating a solid structure to train our advising staff to best serve UWM students.

As next steps are concerned, the EAC Sub-Committee for Professional Development will continue to provide opportunities through the same means as has been demonstrated for the past two years. In addition, the EAC and ASALC should begin to outline more clearly the needs for professional development on campus. For efficiency and consistency, it is suggested to use the WGUA recommendation about training as a springboard for this discussion.

Examine Communication on Campus

As the WGUA Recommendations have been accepted as proposed, the most convenient way to improve communication with advising professionals on campus would be through a central, coordinated effort, as suggested in the WGUA document. The idea was to have an individual lead the coordination of

advising at UWM and this has yet to be a reality, given budget constraints. Regardless, the concern that communication is not happening, or that communication happens, but there is no resulting action is still an issue. In response, it is a topic that should be discussed within EAC and ASALC and the Provost's office. Before a structure is created, there should be an inventory of the various ways in which information is shared and find the inefficiencies, so that communication can become more transparent and current efforts more widely recognized.

Efforts in Progress

As there has been incredible work happening on our campus over the past year, since the 2014 Unconference, it is imperative to recognize the important work that has been carried over and is related to suggestions proposed in the 2014 Unconference Report.

Student Success Collaborative (SSC) Leadership

The SSC administrative leadership team and SWAT team have been working on the implementation and training for the launching of SSC campus in June 2016. Both teams have been meeting together regularly with the Education Advisory Board (EAB). The groups discuss the use of campus-wide SSC campaigns, troubleshoot technical issues, discuss how to build the new platform as an effective multidisciplinary tool to aid in the retention of students, and how to effectively and efficiently train the campus on the tool. The SWAT team has representation from almost all schools and colleges on campus, in addition to representation from Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, Panther Academic Support Services (PASS), Student Support Services (SSS), Financial Aid, Housing, University Information Technology Services (UITS), Academic Opportunity Center (AOC), and Athletics.

Student Learning Outcomes

A group consisting of ASALC members, EAC members and other advisors have worked to create a draft of Advising Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) that is currently being vetted through campus. These SLOs will drive advising initiatives in offices across campus and function as a starting point for conversations around consistency in advising at UWM. From these SLOs, an Advising Syllabus can be developed, or advising workshops and trainings could be created. This document can be the impetus for some meaningful conversations and activities in the advising profession on campus.

WGUA Recommendations

As stated above, the WGUA Recommendations were approved by the Chancellor as proposed. The group who developed the recommendations did so being informed by current best practices and research briefs, as well as seeking out the input and insights of advisors on campus. The implementation of these recommendations has yet to begin, although the Provost did attend an Advisors & Counselors Network (ACN) meeting in March to seek feedback from that group on the next steps in selecting an individual to coordinate advising efforts on campus. This was emphasized as a critical step in the forward momentum of seeing the changes happen in advising that were suggested by WGUA.