

Establishing Effective Advising Practices to Influence Student Learning and Success

► **Lynn C. Freeman**, director, academic advising, University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh

Visit any campus in the United States and ask undergraduates what they are unhappy about, and you are likely to get the same three answers: parking, dining hall food, and advising. Academic advisers across the country have to wonder how their dedication to learning and hard work on behalf of students results in being on this auspicious list. In 2002, this was the case at the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh, and the chancellor and provost decided it was time to do something about the state of advising—both structurally and culturally.

The University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh is a rural, regional, comprehensive campus located in northeastern Wisconsin. With approximately 10,000 undergraduates, the campus' two largest populations are first-generation and transfer students. The most common incoming first-year student major is “undecided,” and 50 percent of students declaring a major will change their major before the middle of their sophomore year. This is a population that is especially able to benefit from developmental and intrusive academic advising.

With the help of an outside consultant, UW–Oshkosh came to understand that we suffered from a common plague in higher education—paralysis by analysis. We had been gathering information about advising—students' (dis)satisfaction, lack of participation by faculty, enormous adviser-to-advisee ratios, advising limited to course selection and registration—and making recommendations about how to change it for ten years. However, we never *actually* changed anything.

BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE IN ACADEMIC ADVISING

In 2002, UW–Oshkosh made a commitment to improve advising and other student academic support services, and a rapid transformation took place based on the findings from ten years of study and from the consultant's recommendations. The university hired the first director of advising in thirty years, established an

advising center, adopted a new campus advising model (Total Intake), established the Advisory Council for Comprehensive Academic Advising to advise the provost and director of advising about campus advising issues, and expanded the academic advising staff.

Approved in May 2004, the university's advising program now includes a definition, goals and outcomes, and defined roles of faculty, students, and the advising center. This provides a framework for academic departments, colleges, and the advising center. College and departments are strongly encouraged to structure their advising practices on the campus' advising definition, goals, and outcomes.

Our campus defines advising as the “dynamic relationship between a student and adviser. At the center is a shared responsibility for a coherent education plan that incorporates personal, social, academic, and career considerations. Advising focuses on helping students identify life goals, acquire skills and attitudes that promote intellectual growth, and become academically successful.”

Campuswide intended outcomes of academic advising state that

- Through advising, students will learn to frame questions about the future and seek information needed to formulate answers. As a result, they will practice decision-making strategies and self-leadership skills that they will use throughout their lives.
- Through advising, students will be able to put the college experience into perspective, especially with regard to understanding the value of the learning process, whether it is independent or collaborative.
- Through advising, students will experience stimulation of and support for their quests for an enriched quality of life. They will be encouraged to utilize unique opportunities to structure



their college experiences so as to maximize their abilities to lead their lives as they decide.

Comprehensive academic advising shall follow the developmental advising hierarchy, defined as:

- exploration of life goals, values, abilities, interests, limitations
- exploration of vocational/career goals
- selection and design of academic major or program of study
- selection of courses
- scheduling classes

TRANSFORMING THE UNIVERSITY ADVISING CENTER

Advising at the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh is now quite different from previous practices; course selection is now situated in the broader context of exploration, self-knowledge, goal setting, decision making, and planning for a major, career, and lifelong learning.

At the undergraduate advising resource center (UARC), the campus advising goals and outcomes have been further developed by the advising staff, and they provide the foundation for all of the center’s activities; including hiring, annual personnel and program evaluation, and project prioritization. The center’s goals are to:

- create an atmosphere of support and provide expert information to students
- promote decision making and independent thinking by assisting students in their exploration of personal, academic and career goals
- develop practices that support student success
- establish effective working relationships with faculty, staff and administration in support of the Total Intake Model of advising
- increase campus awareness about advising
- promote ongoing professional development of the UARC staff

The center is structured to support the university’s advising mission and goals. The advising staff is organized by curricular area, with an advising team assigned to each college (Letters and Science, nursing, business, and education and human services). The structure enables the center to support the needs of all undergraduates on the decision-making continuum, from decided to changing to undecided and exploratory. The center also provides support to faculty advisers and departments because each adviser has advising expertise in a curricular area. This structure enables regular communication between the academic departments and the advising staff. A few examples of the benefits of these relationships include an adviser and

The structure enables the center to support the needs of all undergraduates on the decision-making continuum, from decided to changing to undecided and exploratory

department chair providing collaborative group advising to the department’s majors and advisers participate in departmental discussions about the impact of curricula changes. As a participating in departmental discussions about learning outcomes in the major, the adviser is able to articulate how advising practices support those learning outcomes, and consider how advising practices can be adapted to better meet the learning outcomes. The collaboration has benefited students, faculty and academic advisers.

ASSESSING ADVISING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The university has made a substantial commitment to the improvement of advising, and we need to know if what we are doing is having the impact that we intend. The National Academic Advising

Association (NACADA) recognizes this challenge across institutions and advocates and supports the development of learning outcomes and advising assessment through annual workshops and advising-related research (www.nacada.ksu.edu).

Within the UARC, we use Maki’s assessment cycle (Maki 2004). In an ongoing process, we:

- identify outcomes
- gather evidence
- interpret the evidence
- implement change

Our established learning outcomes for students and for advisers are based on the advising mission and objectives. The UARC learning outcomes for students include understanding and taking responsibility for their role in

the advising relationship; having the ability to read and understand their degree audit; understanding how policies and requirements affect their plans; understanding and articulating their major and career options based on their interests, skills and abilities; and being able to make effective decisions. Our learning outcomes for advisers include understanding and applying student development and learning theory; using feedback to understand students’ needs and to improve their advising practices; initiating and maintaining contact with faculty in their advising areas; and staying current on curricula.

The advising program gathers evidence from a broad constituency (faculty, nonadvising staff and administration, students) in order to understand how well the program’s activities achieve the outcomes. Prior to the campus changes in



advising, advising evaluation was limited to student satisfaction, and assessment did not exist. Now, the focus is on outcomes and learning. We collect information using the annual Educational Benchmarking, Inc., survey through a partnership with residence life; we conducted the first 360-degree program evaluation this year, and last year we conducted a campuswide survey asking students about their usage of, perceived importance of, and satisfaction with advising. Because we asked the satisfaction questions in the context of how often students had met with an adviser and how important they thought advising was to their academic progress, success and learning, we had a better understanding of what students' satisfactions ratings meant. We learned that:

- our outreach to and communication with departments has the effect we intend, and we need to continue to increase outreach efforts
- first- and second-year students' use of and satisfaction with academic advising has increased significantly
- upper-division student usage and satisfaction with advising has increased, however, compared to first and second year students, there is room for improvement for both faculty advisers and the advising center.

Annually, we process the results of the evaluations and determine how we can better support the advising mission and learning objectives. For example, we restructured appointments for first- and second-year students to provide more time with the adviser for major and career exploration; we created an advising syllabus and incorporated it into new student (first-year and transfer) orientation; and we are implementing adviser peer observation and evaluation. As we focus on how advising supports campus initiatives, we have identified three priorities this year: advising's contributions

to retention and first-year experience and engagement, and how advising can best support liberal education.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Five years after the campus committed to changes in advising, student satisfaction and usage has increased annually, the adviser-to-advisee ratio has been reduced by 30 percent (putting it closer to national norms), faculty involvement in the professional colleges and across Letters and Science has increased, and we have expanded our focus from course selection to developmental and exploratory advising. While we have tackled every weakness with aggressive strategies, we are not done. There are still opportunities to align and improve our advising practices.

It's clear that students are learning to make decisions from a variety of their college experiences, being able to attribute them to particular experiences is nearly impossible

The campus is closely examining the liberal education outcomes of a UW–Oshkosh education. We do not have a framework for our general education program, nor have we publicly articulated our liberal education outcomes. While the campus advising program supports AAC&U's LEAP principles of decision making, communicating, and problem solving, as the campus moves forward with a clearer vision of a general education framework and learning outcomes, advising will incorporate them more intentionally into its outcomes and assessment.

It is also a challenge to measure some of the learning outcomes that we have defined, like student decision making. It's clear that students are learning to make decisions from a variety of their college experiences, being able to attribute

them to particular experiences is nearly impossible.

Another challenge to all developmental and intrusive advising programs is that students often want to be told what to do and when to do it. As a result, they don't always enjoy the advising experience or think that it has helped them. Students also continue to confuse advising with registration issues such as course availability or how well the online registration system works. Therefore we need to continue to educate them about the purpose and practice of advising as a teaching/learning experience rather than a simple task (e.g. registering for classes).

Finally, evaluating faculty advising as part of the campus advising assessment process is a challenge. The Advisory

Council is focusing on this as part of their work this year, and hopes to learn more about the junior and senior year advising experience, and to be able to address the gaps between the lower- and upper-division students' experiences with advising.

While the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh's advising program has made impressive and rapid progress over the past five years, there remains much work to do, particularly with regard to examining how and if our practices achieve what we hope they achieve. If our incremental improvements continue, we will have the opportunity to increasingly influence our students' learning and success. ■

REFERENCE

Maki, P. L. 2004. *Assessing for learning: Building a sustainable commitment across the institution*. Sterling, VA: Stylus