

Advising in the School of General Studies

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Identifying problems and correcting them quickly has always been a goal of advising in the School of General Studies. We have always worked at "Closing the loop."

Let me preface this discussion by explaining how we currently operate and the changes that have taken place over the years to get us where we are today. We now have three full time advisors who supervise our four undergraduate interdisciplinary degree plans in American Studies, Gender Studies, and the Interdisciplinary Studies BA and BS. While not under my immediate supervision we also co-ordinate our advising activities with the Teacher Development Office (TDO). The TDO which is administered by the School of General Studies is under the direct supervision of Associate Dean, Dr. Scherry Johnson. In the School of General Studies, we advise anywhere from 600-700 undergraduate students per year, many of whom transfer from the community colleges and are non-traditional students.

This means that typically students transfer to UTD and graduate from one of our degrees in two or three years. It also means that our advisors have to complete new degree plans, prepare degree audits, and graduation checks more frequently than do schools with a more traditional student base.

When I first arrived in 1994, we were still completing degrees using pen and pencil. This was seen to be the best procedure as there was so much flexibility in our degree plans. We also had only two degrees at the time, and no academic advisors. Faculty members answered student questions concerning careers and my administrative assistant and I answered advising questions. This worked fairly well, but on occasion we had to write letters to the Undergraduate Dean for consideration of problems that were due to advising errors. At that time also, advising for freshmen was being conducted by the Office of the Undergraduate Dean, staffed by faculty advisors spending an allotted number of hours in that office. This did not work well either as the students did not get to know their schools very well, and could be misadvised by a faculty member unfamiliar with the degree requirements of a program differing from his/her own. In fall of 1999, the decision was made to hire full time academic advisors in the University and to lessen the role of faculty advisors to career advising only. This brought the advising for all undergraduate students back to the schools, with the exception of the undeclared students who stayed with newly hired academic advisors in the Undergraduate Deans office. This move was greeted with enthusiasm by the schools that got to advise their students, and to know their students from the first day of classes.

In the School of General Studies, we initially had two full time academic advisors, and students were allowed to see the advisor of their choice. This meant that we often had line ups down the halls for students wishing to see an advisor. To help out, non advisors would step into the breach to help advise. Since advisors were being mentored by a

Director of Advising, this meant that the non-advisors may not have been completely current on all issues, and a few mistakes were made. We were still working with pencil and paper, and had some disgruntled students. Most were happy with their advisor, but did not like the long wait in the halls. The waiting in the halls was due to the fact that our advising took longer than advising in some other schools since we do not have a check list of courses for completion. Instead each degree plan has to be created with the help of the students. We approached our Dean, who approached the Provost and we were given permission to hire a third full time advisor. This corresponds to the time when the Teacher Development Center expanded to include EC-4 and 4-8 certification, and we had an increase in students anxious to attend our school.

With three advisors I decided to assign sections of the alphabet to each advisor, so that the students would get the same advisor and the same advice repeatedly. This move was designed to stop the practice of students shopping for the response they wanted to get. Whether or not it was true, I would hear cases where the student said Advisor A told them ----- and Advisor B told them -----. Usually when I went back to the advisors they had both told the student the same thing, but the student was trying to leverage his/her position. Assigning advisors stopped this problem immediately. Also for degree plan checking and running audits, there is also build in accountability. There is never any question of who will do what. Every advisor is cross-trained on all degree plans and responsibilities are always managed according to the sections of the alphabet

To deal with the problem of line-ups in the hallways, two actions corrected this problem. The Undergraduate Dean's Office assigned weeks devoted to registration for the upcoming semester first by seniors, then by juniors, and then by sophomores and freshmen. We also instituted a new policy at the school level. We set up appointments so that a student could be sure to see an advisor, or if they wished to risk dropping by, the advisors would see them if they had time. This system has worked very well, since the anxious students are guaranteed an appointment time, and the others can usually be worked in.

About five years ago, with the arrival of Janet Collins, the four pen and pencil degree plans became elegant computerized degree plans. Now our degree plan templates can be downloaded, completed, and printed off for the students. This is much faster than the older pencil and paper degree plan which had to be copied for the student.

We listen to our students. The BS in Interdisciplinary Studies degree arose from repeated requests from transfer students for a Bachelor of Science as well as a Bachelor of Arts degree.

We have created an advising handbook to help explain parts of our degree plan which cannot be dealt with in detail in the university catalog. While this is not updated every year, we enclose an "errata sheet" so that the information remains current.

We maintain a web site which gives much of the information found in the hand book in a more easily accessed manner.

To facilitate access to students and to our files, we now have the offices of the advisors clustered together, rather than spread out over the department. This way if one advisor is away or busy and a student has an urgent question, he/she can usually find another advisor free. Also it is easier for the advisors to consult if a problem arises and easier for them to access forms and degree plans.

After meetings with the other associate deans in the CUE (Committee for Undergraduate Education), I inform our advisors of changes to anticipate, so we are rarely caught off guard when a catalog change is implemented.

We have meetings to exchange information as needed. Some months there can be several meetings, and other months, we may only need a “formal meeting” once a semester. Flexibility, accuracy and immediate action seem to be the adjectives which best describe the advising in General Studies.

Recently, following the move of the Teacher Development Office to another building, the exchange of information between Teacher Development and the General Studies advisors has not been so immediate. There are fewer students in the new office than in the old simply because there is no longer close proximity between the offices. Also the advisors in the two areas cannot simply run across the hall to resolve any issues. Students mentioned this on the last advising survey conducted in December 2006 as a problem to address. We have had two meetings since then to address issues, and will be directing students to Teacher Development earlier than we did in the past.

In January 2007, all of the members of the advising team in General Studies became members of NACADA, the National Academic Advising Association, so that we can stay current with all of the latest information and research in the field of academic advising. We will continue to refine our “Survey Monkey” questionnaire on academic advising so that we can more definitely reveal any problems in academic advising and respond to them.

As an external measure of our advising competence, in the student surveys of advising satisfaction conducted by the Undergraduate Dean’s Office over the past seven years, the School of General Studies has always scored in the top place or in second place among the schools at the university. This is due I think to our quick attention to problems as they arise. As soon as a potential problem is spotted in Course Look up or the listings of the core courses, the advisors or I try to find out what the correct answer is? This information is then passed around to benefit the advisors as a group.

In the School of General Studies, we will continue to address issues as they arise (also known as “Closing the Loop”), and to look for new and innovative ways to meet the advising needs of our students.

