

REPORT OF THE STUDENT ADVISING REVIEW TEAM OCTOBER 28, 2013

Background

The University of Manitoba's *Strategic Planning Framework* promises to enhance and deliver "an exceptional student experience by continuing to offer more opportunities for our students to learn, thrive, grow and be celebrated...". A review of student retention literature in both Canada and the United States identifies academic advising as a key contributor to student retention and success.¹ Success rates improve when students are shown a clear path to timely degree completion and given assistance in avoiding graduation obstacles. It is thus timely, with the development of the SEM Planning Framework and SEM goals, to review student advising at the University.

Student advising for undergraduate and graduate students takes place across the institution and in a variety of venues—in Faculty offices and in academic departments; in University 1; and in a number of student service units (for example, Enrolment Services, Aboriginal Student Services, International Centre for Students, Career Services, Counselling Services, and Student Residences). Yet students are often unclear where to seek the help they need, or whether there is even assistance available. Amongst advisors the "hand-off" and communication between units is unclear and inconsistent; students report that they receive misinformation and miscommunication. In addition, our technology and processes have often been as much a hindrance as help.

In Fall 2011 the Student Advising Review Team, a sub-committee of the Associate Deans Undergraduate group, was struck² to:

- Develop a common institutional understanding of what student advising is and should be at the University of Manitoba;
- Explore and articulate the roles and responsibilities of various contributors to student advising across the institution;
- Assess student, staff and faculty satisfaction with current student advising services;
- Conduct a SWOT analysis of student advising at the University;
- Review best practices in post-secondary student advising services;
- Identify gaps in student advising services that should be addressed; and

¹ See, for example, Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon (2004) *Understanding and reducing college student departure* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Grayson and Grayson (2003) *Research on Retention and Attrition* Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation; Habley & McClanahan (2004) *What Works in Student Retention* Iowa City, IA: ACT, Inc.; Kuh, Kinzie & Buckley (2007) *Piecing Together the Student Success Puzzle* Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley Periodicals, Inc.; and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) *How College Affects Students* San Francisco, Jossey-Bass; and Tinto (1993) *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

² Members of the Review Team included: Susan Gottheil, Vice-Provost (Students) and Chair; Bilan Arte, UMSU (June 2012); Jennifer Black, UMSU (2012/13); Lesley Friesen, Advising Coordinator, University 1; Yvonne Halden, Graduate Advisor, Faculty of Architecture; Bonnie Hallman, Director, University 1 (2012/13); George MacLean, Associate Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies; Neil Marnoch, Registrar; Bruce Martin, Associate Dean, Faculty of Medicine; Peter Nawrot, GSA (2011/12); Michelle Normore-Piercey, Associate Dean, Faculty of Science; Lynn Smith, Executive Director, Student Services; Timi Ojo, GSA (2012/13); Greg Sobie, Advisor Exchange; David Stangland, Associate Dean, Asper School of Business (on leave 2013); Camilla Tapp, UMSU (2011/12); Lori Wilkinson, Associate Dean, Faculty of Arts; Betty Worobec, Director, University 1 (until August 2012).

- Develop recommendations to improve student advising at the University of Manitoba.

The Review Team drew on the expertise of student advisors on campus (through the Advisor Exchange, an ad hoc group of advisors who meet regularly to discuss common issues and concerns) as well as units such as University 1 and the Registrar's Office. Staff, faculty and students were consulted through surveys and focus groups. Collaboration with Information Services & Technology (IST) permitted us to explore technological supports (described later in this report) to enhance the student experience and develop administrative efficiencies that will support advisors in their work. Resources (print, webinar and in-person presentations) from the Education Advisory Board quickly pointed us to advising "best practices" and to further enhancements for advising on campus (see the Recommendations section below). Work on some initiatives has already begun. This Report outlines the discussions and findings of the Review Team and the ideas have led to initiatives over the past two years. The Report also provides further suggestions to enhance student advising at the University.

What is Advising?

Traditionally, academic advisors at post-secondary institutions have helped students select courses to fulfil academic program requirements and to provide guidance on academic policies and procedures. This type of advising is referred to as *prescriptive advising* and provides information on academic regulations, program requirements, and course offerings in order to help students take a specific course of action (for example, course registration). Over the past couple of decades prescriptive advising has been subsumed by *developmental advising* which sees academic advising as a shared and interactive educational process through which a student is encouraged to take responsibility for crafting "a coherent educational plan based on assessment of abilities, aspirations, interests, and values, using complex information from various sources to set goals, reach decisions, and achieve these goals".³ Developmental advising incorporates elements of what may be considered 'counselling' or 'coaching' and requires advisors to be highly knowledgeable of the other services on campus that support student success (e.g., Student Counselling, Career Services, Accessibility Services, Academic Learning Centre, and so on). The developmental advising model results in a more self-aware and (hopefully) successful student.

Most recently, a more proactive approach has been implemented by many advising professionals that builds on prescriptive and developmental advising. *Intrusive advising* intentionally seeks out students who may need advice and additional supports (such as personal counselling, peer tutoring, career advising, or financial aid) to keep them engaged with their academic pursuits by guiding and assisting them to reach their educational goals. In some cases students may not be aware that they are in academic jeopardy; the literature often refers to these students as being "at-risk" or "off-track" due to a lack of motivation, inadequate academic preparation, career goal indecision, and/or other life factors that distract them from their studies.

The Education Advisory Board (2012, p. xiii) notes that there are challenges to achieving student success that developmental and particularly intrusive academic advising are suited to addressing. These challenges include students who:

- Make poorly informed choices (of courses and/or majors or degree programs) that delay progress toward degree completion

³ National Academic Advising Association (2006), "Concept of Academic Advising", <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/Concept-advising-introduction.htm>

- Do not realize that they are off-track or in need of additional supports to be successful
- Postpone career planning until they are close to graduation

Surveys and Focus Groups

Staff and Faculty

The Advising Review Team agreed that it was important to survey staff and faculty across campus to gather information on who does student advising, what sorts of advising are being offered, and to identify those issues that should be addressed by the Review. The survey was followed by two focus groups conducted in June 2012. Participants were grouped into two categories--primary advisors (whose main job and training is to advise students on academic and/or career goals) and secondary advisors (support staff, associate department heads, department heads and professors who do not describe themselves as advisors, who do not have student advising as their primary job function, but who provide advisement to students 'on the side').

The survey and focus groups highlighted the diversity of advising practices across the University. Both professional staff advisors and faculty provide student academic advising and there are many variations on how academic advising is conducted and defined. The types of advising offered differ for those students who are entering university for the first time, for upper year undergraduate students, for students in professional faculties, and for those students enrolled in graduate studies. More specialized advising may be required for students enrolled in access programs, or living in residence, and for those students of international or indigenous backgrounds. These are just a few of the groups of students who may have particular needs and campus experiences that necessitate focused advising supports. Adding to this variability, there is considerable divergence in resources, structures and approaches to student academic advising across faculties as well.

Advising in some faculties, particularly professional faculties, is done centrally. In these units, academic and career advising takes place in the same office. Advising in other faculties is more diverse. For instance, in the Faculty of Arts students inquiring about their major may see the department head in one department but may be advised by support staff in another.

It was also evident that there is a high degree of variability among primary advisors across faculty offices with respect to job duties, advising expectations, skills and abilities. Although it may be difficult to develop a single common advisor job description due to the different needs and organizational structures that exist in individual faculties, *a common description of advising duties and expectations and minimum core competencies should be developed and included in all primary advisor job descriptions--along with specific duties that may vary across units.*

Focus group participants discussed their approach to academic advising. All approaches to advising (prescriptive, developmental and intrusive) are practiced on campus—and many advisors practice all three forms depending on the students' year in program and the needs/issues the student presents to them. For example, students in first year programs are more likely to receive prescriptive advising (e.g., advice on how to register, how to select courses, and so on) whereas students in later years are more likely to receive developmental or intrusive advising. With a high student-to-advisor ratio in every unit the *need for additional resources* was a prominent concern, particularly *if we wish to move toward more developmental and intrusive approaches to advising and impact the institutional SEM goals of improving persistence and graduation.* Advisors indicated that they are often forced into prescriptive approaches to advising when they want to, and should, work more closely with the individual student.

More training was identified as a significant issue for all advisors across all faculties. The growing number of disruptive students and those with mental health problems was raised as a particular concern for advisors who indicated the *need for more counseling resources* as well as *training and support* in this area. Advisors also indicated that there is a need for *better communication between advisors and Career Services in order to better provide guidance on academic program choices and career goals*. Finally, many advisors, especially secondary advisors, indicated that they feel ill-prepared to provide academic advising as they are not provided with *up-to-date information on changes to very complex program and curricular requirements*.

Students

The 2013 Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC) First-Year University Student Survey asked students to rate their success in adjusting to academic aspects of the university. University of Manitoba students had most success at *understanding content and information presented in courses* (93%) whereas just over two-thirds of the students (67%) reported success *getting academic advice* (the lowest ranked factor in the list).

The Working Group agreed that focus groups with students were important to gather more information on advising effectiveness from a diversity of undergraduate and graduate students at the Fort Garry and Bannatyne campuses. Focus groups of graduate students (including domestic and international students) from both campuses were held; 52% of the students had also received their undergraduate education at the University of Manitoba. Unfortunately the planned focus groups with undergraduate students did not take place.

Graduate Students

Graduate students require unique support services. Those registered in a thesis or practicum program have a faculty advisor assigned to them. Professional staff advisors and graduate secretaries may also be available to keep students informed of departmental resources, including career development and research opportunities. Other sources of academic advising, according to the graduate student focus groups, include websites, departmental orientations and word-of-mouth information from peers. Students feel that there is an overall lack of coordination on procedural matters between the Faculty of Graduate Studies, departments and faculties resulting in contradictory advice. The size and structure of a departmental graduate program, and variable staff and faculty knowledge of program requirements has a significant impact on graduate student experiences. Some students noted that there is a lack of clarity on departmental websites which has sometimes led them to take more courses than necessary.

The graduate advisor-student relationship involves mentoring and support, as well as academic supervision and oversight of the student's graduate program. Due to their frequent interaction with students, *graduate advisors may often be the first to recognize signs of distress in students although the students are often reluctant to confide in individuals so closely linked to their academic success*. Graduate students have expressed concern that some students have had problems with their advisors and have felt helpless when the relationship has gone astray. It is anticipated that the development of Advisor-Student Guidelines (approved by Senate in June 2013) will be helpful in outlining the responsibilities of each party in ensuring accountability and open communication and therefore will help students with the timely completion of their research and graduate program requirements.

Technology Support Projects

Three technological projects (early alert, degree audit and e-files) were identified during the course of the Review Team's deliberations. It was agreed that they would:

- Enhance the student experience,
- Improve information available to both students and advisors to help academic decision-making and course-planning,
- Streamline academic advising processes,
- Support intrusive advising, and
- Improve administrative efficiencies for advisors so they could focus on helping students.

A single RFP is being prepared to ascertain if there is a common software support solution for the three initiatives. The Office of Continuous Improvement (OCI) is providing project management support. Information Services & Technology (IST) is a key partner in identifying appropriate technological supports for advising across campus.

Electronic Files

There is no uniform system of advising documentation, or case notes, used by advisors across the campus. Such a system could provide an ongoing record of the advice students have received and help mitigate the provision of conflicting or inaccurate advice. Establishing a record management system that is digital rather than paper-based would offer many benefits for students, staff and the environment, including the:

- Creation of templates that permit advisors to quickly and easily document advising encounters and interactions;
- Assurance that pertinent information about a student follows the student through their degree program and is available in a single location for sharing and reviewing notes across multiple advisors; and
- Coordination of intervention efforts and faster resolution of issues.

It is recognized that any electronic advising system would need to protect students' privacy and confidentiality.

Degree Audit

Advisors in many academic units spend a great deal of time manually auditing student files to assess progression and graduation requirements, and to advise students on the transferability of credits when seeking to change, or apply to, an alternative academic program. This is a time-consuming process. Degree audit system supports are now available that can provide students and advisors with up-to-date information, enable dynamic querying of program requirements, help in course planning and selection by identifying unfulfilled degree requirements, and outline a student's progression towards degree completion. Some degree audit tools also have automated course suggestion or early alert capabilities (see Early Alert below). A degree audit tool can also enable student self-advising for information on program requirements and course selection. Time with the academic advisor can then be spent on developmental advising tasks such as defining academic and career goals and problem-solving to address any obstacles with which a student may be dealing.

A degree audit module (CAPP) was acquired when the University implemented the Banner SIS system (Aurora). Over the past 5 years the Registrar's Office has worked incrementally to implement this functionality in some faculties, although this has been slow and difficult due to the complexity of the academic programs offered at the University. The user-experience needs to be improved and students do not have access to the system. Ellucian (the company that acquired Banner) has been reluctant to provide support and advice on enhancements. In July 2013 IST and Student Affairs agreed to explore other degree audit systems through a formal RFP process. As there are frequent degree program changes, any new system will require regular updates and monitoring. Implementation of a degree audit system will also require advisors across campus to change their work processes and there are inherent challenges in that.

Early Alert

While there are numerous strategies for addressing student retention issues, those that intentionally connect students with campus resources that support their academic progress can be the most impactful. There is a need for reliable early detection and warning systems to identify and direct students requiring timely assistance and effective intervention. Early alert technology tools track student performance indicators (such as GPA, attendance, and course enrolments) and alert advisors of students who may need additional support. The role of academic staff is also critical as early alert systems rely upon faculty members to 'flag' students who they believe are exhibiting poor academic behaviours or who have poor academic performance. Academic staff can engage in conversations with students about academic concerns and make referrals to advisors and other student services professionals to intervene in a timely manner. It should be noted that implementing such a system will require significant training and "buy-in" from faculty members and department heads.

Self-Advising Tools

The University should support the creation and use of self-advising tools to enhance accessibility to relevant, accurate and cohesive information related to academic advising. Self-advising tools allow students to help themselves through the use of physical and online resources that supplement face-to-face advising. Examples of such tools include the use of checklists or online calendar prompts reminding students to take action, frequently asked questions or resolution to common concerns and guidance about academic requirements and student life opportunities. The use of self-advising tools benefits students by providing access to information and resources in a timely fashion, an avenue for self-reflection and engagement and helps focus future academic advising sessions on purposeful actions as much of the exploratory work can be completed by the student before they meet with their academic advisor.

Degree Maps

Some faculties have begun to provide students with suggestions on course selection to help "map" an efficient path to major or degree program attainment. For example, Science provides a Pre-Med Planner for students interested in Medicine. Degree maps may be used for on-line self-advising and for building student awareness of experiential, co-op and co-curricular opportunities. Degree maps also serve as a helpful guide for advisors, reminding them of issues to discuss with students such as critical major requirements, as well as other study or research opportunities. The Review Team agrees that degree maps are an excellent self-advising tool for students. However, *ensuring that degree maps exist for all programs and majors* is a large project. *Information on co-curricular activities, work-integrated*

learning and research opportunities, and career planning resources should also be integrated into career maps.

Enhancing Communication to Students

The Review Team noted early on in its work that the University did not have a single, “one-stop” website for student advising. This is not surprising given that there is *no single office or senior administrative authority responsible for coordinating and/or overseeing advising* on campus. Working in collaboration with the MCO, an advising website was created in Spring 2012 that explains the University’s registration process (including on-line tutorials for the Aurora system) and provides office contact information for advisors in the University 1 First Year Centre and every School and Faculty. It is important that *the advising website be regularly updated* and that *additional advising communication strategies* should be developed.

The Advisor Exchange

Primary advisors have developed a wide communication network through their informal referral system(s) and the ad hoc Advisor Exchange group. The goal of the Advisor Exchange is to provide opportunities to develop the personal and professional skills of the student advisors. Although common issues and challenges advisors encounter are also discussed, the group has felt that it has had little ability to influence or exact change. In 2007 Rosalyn Howard of Learning and Development Services (LDS) provided support to the Advisor Exchange (webinars on campus, dissemination of professional development information, and plans for an Advisor’s Toolkit). Although some advisors are now supported by their academic or administrative units to attend NACADA conferences and institutes, training is uneven and professional development is not consistently provided to all advisors on campus. Consideration should be given to *assigning central responsibility for the coordination of advising* at the University, including the *provision of up-to-date, accurate and reliable information about all programs and academic requirements*. As well, *an institution-wide Advising Council should be established to provide ongoing leadership in the development and implementation of an improved advising system*.

Recommendations

Given the centrality of advising to student success, the importance of advising on campus should be affirmed by including it in the University’s Strategic Planning Framework.

Recognizing that there are--and will continue to be-- differences in academic programs, regulations and curricula between and within faculties, a decentralized approach to advising on campus should be maintained.

An institution-wide Advising Council should be established to provide ongoing leadership in the development and implementation of an improved advising system. The Advising Council should be tasked with developing a common set of University advising principles, goals and policies (e.g., consistency on acceptance of doctors’ notes, the approval of deferred exams, and so on).

A position of Coordinator of Advising should be created to provide support for both professional and faculty advisors (e.g., training and professional development, information on Senate-approved curriculum and policy changes, maintenance of an advising website, and so on).

An advising handbook (print and/or electronic) for University advisors should be created that provides up-to-date information on policies, programs and services.

The Advisor Exchange network should be formalized. Oversight of the Advisor Exchange should be provided by the Office of the Provost.

The University should move toward adopting a developmental and intrusive advising model to ensure that all students have the academic and support service information they require to successfully complete their credential.

Mandatory advising should be implemented for all first year students who have not declared a major to help them explore program choices.

The University should support the creation and use of self-advising tools to enhance accessibility to relevant, accurate and cohesive information related to academic advising.

A degree mapping project should be implemented for all undergraduate programs and majors that clearly communicates degree requirements to students and guides students on semester-by-semester course selection. Information on co-curricular activities, work-integrated learning and research opportunities, and career planning resources should be integrated into the degree maps.

A hybrid advisor model should be explored to provide integrated curricular, career and co-curricular advice to students who are undecided about their program and/or major.

A plan should be developed and implemented to reach those students who are at-risk of attrition and would benefit from intrusive advising and connection to support services.

Students on probation, academic warning or deemed to be at risk of exceeding the limits on F grades should be required to meet with an advisor before registration each semester.

Technology supports (for example--degree audit, web "one-stop", electronic file system) should be implemented for advisors and students that are accurate and easy-to-use, and protect students' privacy and confidentiality.

An on-going training and professional development program should be established for all professional and faculty advisors that includes information on campus services, advising best practices, relevant University policies, dealing with inappropriate student behaviour, and career development/planning.

A system for ongoing and systematic assessment of advising effectiveness should be developed.

A common description of academic advising duties and responsibilities should be developed to be included in job descriptions of those whose primary duties include academic advising. As well, a specific professional job classification for primary advisors across the University should be developed that defines expected core competencies, knowledge, and skills for advisors.

Resources

Education Advisory Board, 2009 *Meeting Student Demand for High-Touch Advising: Strategies and Implementation Tools for Elevating the Student Experience* (Washington: The Advisory Board Company)

Education Advisory Board, 2009 *Hardwiring Student Success: Building Disciplines for Retention and Timely Graduation* (Washington: The Advisory Board Company)

Education Advisory Board, 2012 *Next-Generation Advising: Elevating Practice for Degree Completion and Career Success* (Washington: The Advisory Board Company)

Education Advisory Board, 2013 *Undergraduate Academic Advising Structure: Trends at Large Public Research Institutions* Custom Research Brief (Washington: The Advisory Board Company)

Matt Pellish, Education Advisory Board, "Student Retention & Academic Advising: Elevating the Student Experience for Academic and Career Success", October 25, 2012, University of Manitoba

Richard Wiggers, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, February 8, 2013, "Student Services and Student Success", University of Manitoba