Academic Advising Improvement Proposal

"Academic advising programs must be structured purposefully and organized effectively."
(CAS, 2012)

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Utah Valley University (UVU) recognizes academic advising is critical to the success of students; therefore, much has been invested in creating a professional advising model. However, the structure which has developed over time has also become problematic in some areas, most notably in specific advising behaviors and outcomes. While we are confident that advisors at UVU largely perform well in their positions, a concerning pattern of student and parent reports and direct observations regarding advisor practices and outcomes has been consistent over time and intensifying of late.

These items seem principally related to the substantial variance in the reporting structure for academic advisors at UVU. Depending on the college/school/department, advisors report to individuals with varying titles, roles, and levels of advising experience or understanding. For example, Department Chairs often serve as advisor supervisors, yet they are very busy with many other duties within their departments not related to advising, and may change regularly as new individuals are appointed to be chairs.

Additionally, because they have no professional experience in advising, many supervisors of academic advisors at UVU have limited understanding of the field and pedagogies of advising and the role advisors should/could play in the advancement of student success initiatives, in addition to providing curricular information. Student success initiatives and best practices cannot be fully effective without the widespread and intentional support of advisors. The direct involvement of supervisors is critical.

There is great value when the relationship advisors are positioned to have with students is leveraged to champion institutional and individual student success. The mentioned reporting variance among supervisors appears to contribute to varying expectations and requirements of academic advisors thus inadvertently affecting their consistency of message, priorities, and perhaps even their accessibility. Of the seven organizational models for advising that have been outlined by ACT’s Wes Habley (1987), UVU appears to be moving in the direction of what is known as a Satellite Model, which a 1998 study has shown to be the least desirable and least effective model. The Satellite Model is defined as “each school, college, or division within the institution has established its own approach to advising” (Habley & Morales, 1998). As noted by the University of Texas, San Antonio (2013), the relative autonomy of department-based advisors and advising centers, gives rise to local customs and practices that make the adoption of institution-wide advising tools and programs difficult to implement.

This document proposes solutions that will address the mentioned concerns and provide a framework in which advising can flourish and become more effective and satisfying for both students and advisors.
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

UVU supports students in achieving their educational, professional, and personal goals through its commitment to student success. The depiction of institutional core values puts student success at the center of the other core values of inclusion, engagement, and serious education. All rhetorical claims of mission, values, imperatives, and priorities lose meaning without their translation into active practices that foster quality educational experiences and support successful attainment of goals for students. Meaningful, timely, and student-centered academic advising is a key element among the factors that influence and contribute to student success.

The education of students is our business; their retention and completion has been identified as one of the highest priorities for improvement in UVU’s four-year Strategic Plan. The institution’s Personalized, Seamless, and Intentional (PSI) approach to advisement can effectively impact retention and completion rates for students when appropriately executed. Important to successful execution of this approach are the elements of mission alignment, effective supervision, accountability, consistency, and opportunity for advisor support and development. Specific guiding principles for this proposal are outlined below.

A. Aligned with UVU’s mission, Core Themes, and Administrative Imperatives
- Support students’ preparation and achievement of academic success (SS1)
- Develop and retain high-achieving students (S3)
- Attract, develop, and retain highly-qualified faculty, staff, and administrators (S3)
- Foster a culture of planning, assessment, improvement, and accountability (OE1)
- Strategically allocate resources to achieve institutional objectives (OE2)

B. Consistency, Supervision, and Accountability
- Establish a personnel structure that provides senior-level oversight to ensure accuracy and consistency for the student advising experience across colleges/schools
- Establish a personnel structure that ensures that supervisors are advisors who understand the advising field, can reinforce general training, and facilitate department-specific training
- Establish a personnel structure that provides administrative support for advisors
- Establish an advising space structure and system that is both student and advisor friendly
- Develop a comprehensive assessment plan taking into account both student learning outcomes and student attitudes/perceptions of their advising experience

C. Intentionally consider and address advisor support and development
- Put in place progressive levels of advisement positions giving advisors a potential to advance in their careers as opportunities arise
- Include Professional Development Funds in the operating budget to facilitate growth opportunities for advisors
PROPOSED SOLUTION

Due to the critical need for consistency, availability, and a unified focus among academic advisors, it is proposed that a more central reporting structure be implemented that includes the designation of a Senior Director of Advisement for the institution, an Advising Director within each college/school, and provision for potential advisor advancement. With the implementation of the recommendations that follow, best practices will be better reinforced in the daily work of advisors, and a more student-centered organization and culture can be maintained as advisors are held to common standards in terms of practice and emphasis.

Supervision - Senior Director of Advisement

In June 2011, Dr. Charlie Nutt, the Executive Director of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), was our guest for the annual UVU Advisement Conference. In addition to providing the conference keynote address, Dr. Nutt met with the academic Deans (or their designees) where he was able to share his insight and answer questions. In this meeting, Dr. Nutt emphasized NACADA’s position, which has been articulated well by Celeste Pardee (2004), that there should be “clear reporting lines” and “a high level administrator who oversees the institutional advising system, someone to whom all college advisors are accountable,” variations of which is a long-held best practice (Crocket, 1985; Frank, 1988; Kramer, 1981).

According to the increasing growth and complexity of academic advising at UVU, it is proposed that a Senior Director of Advisement be designated to oversee the university-wide advising program full-time. This individual would report to the Associate Vice President of Academic Programs in Academic Affairs and to the Assistant Vice President of Student Success & Retention in Student Affairs. Under the proposed structure the Senior Director would have responsibilities that include the following:

- supervise and evaluate advising directors within each school/college, consulting with the deans on performance evaluations;
- serve as chair of the Advisement Council and oversee cooperative advising efforts across colleges/schools;
- work closely with directors, advisors, deans, department chairs, Student Affairs, and other key stakeholders to establish and maintain a standard that ensures an advisement program that is of the highest quality, and that meets the needs of both students and advisors;
- nurture a culture of assessment and improvement within the advisement community;
- promote personalized, seamless, and intentional advising practices;
- represent advising concerns on university committees;
- recognize members of the advisement community for their success;
- oversee advisor training and development efforts including advisor certification; and
- oversee advising technology initiatives.
Supervision – School/College Advising Directors

In this proposed structure, academic advisors report to a college/school Advising Director (who reports to the Senior Director of Advising) in terms of personnel and the advising function, yet remain connected to the academic departments for which they advise in terms of curriculum and planning. Advisors would be required to attend department meetings and consult with department chairs on all curricular issues.

Advising Directors would be advisors with a reduced student load in order to accommodate their administrative responsibilities that include the following:

- supervise and evaluate the advisors within their school/college, consulting with department chairs on performance evaluations;
- represent the advisement concerns of their college/school as a member of the Advisement Council;
- complete appropriate assessment of the advising within their college to determine effectiveness;
- identify student advising needs and behaviors;
- recognize their advisors for their success; and
- attend college/school Department Chair meetings to stay abreast of important initiatives that affect academic advising.

When there are a large number of advisors in a college/school (i.e. more than ten), an Assistant Director may be warranted to assist with leadership duties.

Advising Centers

It is proposed that advisors be co-located into advising centers within each college/school where it makes sense to do so, with a full-time administrative assistant. Having advisors located within a “comprehensively apportioned academic advising office to serve the academic and developmental needs of students” (Jones, 2009) in each college/school is a student-friendly practice. In addition to advisors being easy to locate, students would benefit from the presence of an administrative assistant and other advisors who could be of basic service even when the student’s advisor may be unavailable. Accessibility of advising would be increased.

Advisors would benefit from being a part of an advising center because there would be administrative support to assist with appointment scheduling, quick questions, and general student communication. Additionally, advisors would be able to feel more comfortable being out of the office when needed, knowing that their colleagues are available to assist their students with basic questions and in making appointments.

Training, Certification and Accountability

It is proposed that advisors be required to complete certification requirements to stay in good standing in their position. UVU has a very thorough and in-depth training for new advisors as well as on-going training forseasoned advisors. These training efforts are designed to work in concert with a certification program developed for UVU advisors that also includes feedback observations, and exams. The academic advisor job description includes becoming certified as an expectation but some advisors do not become certified, largely with little consequence.
There is evidence that advisor training curriculum is not reinforced in the departments once advisors have completed it, and that departmental training is very limited or nonexistent. It is further proposed that college/school Advising Directors be held accountable to provide needed departmental/college training in concert with current certification training.

**Advisement Council**

The current structure of the Advisement Council includes a total of 25 members which represent both Academic and Student Affairs. The areas currently represented are those who should be included but the size of the group is prohibitive.

In addition, several of the college/school administrative representatives appear to have other important duties that may not allow them to attend the meetings regularly. Others have designated an advisor as the administrative representative, who then attends on their behalf. In relation to the proposed change to the academic advisor reporting structure, a change to the structure of the Advisement Council is also warranted. It is proposed that the Advising Directors represent each college/school on the Advisement Council rather than having two representatives from each. Since directors would be both advisors and administrators, they would be able to effectively represent both interests, and the size of the council would be reduced by a third to a much more manageable group.

Under this new structure, the chairperson would be the Senior Director of Advisement. The University College Dean would remain on the Advisement Council, representing the deans as outlined in the UEM White Paper dated March 2011. Additional council members are identified in the adjacent diagram.

**Advisor Compensation/Career Path**

The impetus for changes in compensation and job equity for academic advisors came after several academic advisors had pointed out differences in grade and pay levels between departmental academic advisor positions and advisor/counselor positions in the more centralized Academic Counseling Center that served students without a declared major for a specific degree.

A sub-committee of the Advisement Council was formed to look into the situation and to make a proposal. In collaboration with the Director of Human Resources, a Career Path document was created which would slot advisors into one of four (later changed to three) levels, according to their credentials, experience, and job expectations. There was some controversy over whether the job performance expectations were truly the same for all types of advisors and whether all advisors had the training and
credentials to perform at the same levels. The career path recommendation went forward, but became stalled at administrative levels due to unresolved questions.

Elements of the draft have been integrated into this proposal. In effect, the current proposal recommends that advisors/counselors be slotted into one of three basic categories: bachelor’s degree with advising/counseling responsibilities, master’s degree with advising/counseling responsibilities, or master’s degree with directorship responsibilities.

Additionally, this proposal recommends a structure that would provide greater opportunity for advisors with master’s degrees to move up to positions involving supervision and direction of advisor operations within the school or college, along with a reduced advising/counseling load. It supports and enhances the recommendations in the Advisor Compensation/Career Path Proposal by providing better structure for supervision and greater opportunity for advancement to leadership positions for advisors/counselors.

To increase equity and opportunity for UVU academic advisors, and to improve the level and quality of service provided to students, the recommended salary levels are as follows:

- 48 Senior Director of Advisement
- 43 College/School Advising Director
- 40 College/School Assistant Advising Director
- 38 Advisor with master’s degree
- 35 Advisor with bachelor’s degree

For existing academic advisors who choose to complete a master’s degree, their positions should be reclassified to a level 38. As turnover may occur over time, advising positions should be posted at a level 38 and require a master’s degree.

All academic advisors, regardless of degree status, should be trained to provide assessments such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and Strong Interest Inventory (SII) to support decision-making and decision-refinement for their students.

**CONCLUSION**

This is a bold and comprehensive proposal designed to reshape the advising culture at UVU. Considering the large body of research regarding the impact of academic advising in higher education, it is our belief that implementation of this proposal will improve the UVU student experience and increase completion rates, while providing opportunities for advisor growth and development and the retention of quality advisors.
References


