

Ad Hoc Academic Advising Task Force Report

October 2006

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I. Introduction and Context

The Faculty Forum Executive Committee created the Ad Hoc Academic Advising Task Force in July, 2006 with the following charge: "to assess the freshman/sophomore (pre-major) advising program and make recommendations to the Faculty Forum." The creation of the task force was precipitated by the voluntary early retirement program for staff and administrators that left the Office of Academic Advising vacant. The Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences sought faculty input in how best to structure that office. The structure and organization of the office to some extent depends on larger questions and issues about the role of advising in the student experience and scope of faculty responsibility with regard to advising students prior to the declaration of the major.

To fulfill our charge, we gathered information from various constituencies on campus and familiarized ourselves with the academic advising literature. Information was gathered in a variety of ways. We sent brief e-mail questionnaires to all faculty members. We sent a more focused set of questions to department chairs and to departmental secretaries. We surveyed the student body. We also held open hearings for faculty and students. And we scheduled meetings with specific groups, committees, and offices on campus including the current (interim) personnel in the Office of Academic Advising, previous personnel in the Office of Academic Advising, past and present members of the Assistant Dean's office from Arts and Sciences, the Office of Academic Advising advisory board, New Student Orientation faculty advisors, an ad hoc Academic Support Group including Athletics, Career Services, the Assistant Deans, Multicultural Affairs, and Services for Students with Disabilities, student affairs professionals, and Enrollment Services administrators.

This report, then, includes a summation and synthesis of what we heard throughout this process. Based on all this information we are making recommendations about how to improve the student advising experience, what the role of faculty in that experience should be and what kind of administrative support (in the form of an Office of Academic Advising) is necessary for both. We see all these recommendations as interdependent and interconnected and ask that the Faculty Forum accept our report in its entirety.

II. History of Freshman/Sophomore Advising Program: Its Strengths and Challenges

The current freshman/sophomore advising program has been in existence for over 20 years. While encouraged of faculty members, participation in it has never been required. Approximately 165 faculty members currently participate in the program. Advising loads

vary significantly by faculty member and by department but most advising loads range from five to ten advisees. Advising is considered part of teaching for faculty members and faculty advisors are expected to note how many advisees they have who are freshman/sophomores as well as majors and graduate advisees on their annual self-evaluation as well as reflect on their advising style. In recent years, full-time administrators in the Office of Academic Advising as well as the Assistant Deans in both Arts and Sciences and the Boler School of Business have carried substantial advising loads as well.

Strengths of the Program. The role and involvement of full-time faculty in academic advising is perhaps perceived as the greatest strength of the current program. Full-time faculty members serve as advisors the vast majority of the time. This is understood by many as being part of our institutional identity and mission; accessibility and availability of faculty to students is (and should remain) one of our defining features. To this point, the emphasis on faculty-student meetings is an additional strength of the program and approach used at JCU. Students in the freshman/sophomore years are expected to see their advisor twice each semester. This suggests that the role of advising goes beyond scheduling classes. The significance of faculty-student interaction is also demonstrated in our New Student Orientation program. Faculty advisors have ample time to meet with students and their parents during new student orientation allowing students the opportunity to begin to develop relationships with individual faculty and to learn about core curriculum requirements as well as major programs. If the goal of academic advising is assisting students with their schedules so that they graduate in a timely fashion, then our academic advising system is generally successful and effective.

Issues/Challenges in Freshman/Sophomore Advising. An examination of the freshman/sophomore advising program reveals some significant issues and problems. Some of these speak to the implementation and execution of the advising program but many others illuminate larger issues with regard to faculty role, workload and institutional culture. Our recommendations, then, will speak not only to the optimal structure of the Office of Academic Advising but will also acknowledge steps that need to be taken by the Faculty Forum and the administration, working together to address some of these issues.

Based on the information we have gathered, we suggest that there is no common understanding of the role and purpose of academic advising on campus. Faculty, students, and administrators have differing expectations (and of course, there is variation within these groups as well). In general, students want faculty to be accessible and available often without advance planning and students expect faculty to be well-versed in all academic requirements, especially the core curriculum. Students expect faculty to assist them with their schedules so that they will graduate on time. Some students are also looking for career/internship guidance. Faculty advisors understand the scheduling of classes to be a key part of advising but not the only (or even most meaningful) aspect of the advising experience. Faculty members prefer relationships with advisees that provide effective mentoring and speak to the larger purposes of undergraduate education.

Academic advising, while expected of faculty, is not valued, rewarded or evaluated in any meaningful way. As mentioned above, faculty members reflect on advising in their annual self-evaluation. It isn't clear how much weight, if any, that information is given in compensation discussions. Faculty advisors almost universally assume that advising is not a meaningful factor in faculty evaluations. The lack of criteria for judging effective advising is worth mentioning in this context as well. Because advising loads vary as do faculty interest and comfort with freshman/sophomore advising, the amount of time and

effort devoted to pre-major advising varies considerably as well. Inadequate support and resource material is provided to faculty advisors as well, further compounding this issue. Many faculty lamented the difficulty in finding resources on the web while others noted that they wanted information and faculty development opportunities that spoke to larger issues like the purposes and benefits of liberal arts education.

Not all faculty are well-suited to advise first and second year students, or students whose interests are outside the department of the faculty member. We heard repeatedly from various constituencies that first year students in particular are in the midst of significant transition and often need advice and counsel beyond the narrow conception of advising that speaks to course schedules and requirements. Many first and second year students may not know the right questions to ask and need faculty advisors who can elicit challenges and problems. First and second year students may not also understand the implications of various choices and how to meet various requirements. They depend on faculty advisors to help them plan ahead. We also heard from some faculty that while they are well-equipped to mentor majors and likely majors, they are less comfortable advising students in other area, especially if that role is reduced to scheduling. Faculty expressed varying levels of comfort in helping students attend to core requirements and the requirements of some programs that do not have a great deal of flexibility (e.g. education, business, the sciences).

There is a lack of coordination among the entities and experiences where students receive academic advice including Admissions, New Student Orientation, freshman/sophomore advising, major program, and mixed messages are being communicated to students. They are encouraged to list likely majors when they apply. They are purportedly assigned summer advisors based on those stated areas of interest. (It's also worth noting that students can list an infinite number of likely majors, which are not prioritized in any way.) Yet they do not declare until the end of their sophomore year and then lament that they do not understand or value the core curriculum. (Many faculty advisors also don't seem to understand or value the core curriculum contributing to the mixed messages.)

The method of assigning advisors once students arrive on campus may not serve faculty and students as well as it could. Beyond matching students to a department that is their likely major, no consideration is given to what will best meet a student's needs and what will best utilize faculty time and interest. Undecided students and "at-risk" students are in particular poorly served by this model. And many faculty advisors would prefer have a student in class, or some relationship outside the advising one, with their advisees.

Our advising system may not work to aid retention. In particular, students usually don't have the same advisor in fall that they met in summer orientation. Moreover, they aren't expected to meet their academic advisor until the 5th week of the semester. This may lead to an over-reliance on the Assistant Dean's office for changing schedules, etc.

There is perhaps some overlap of effort, or at least a lack of coordination, between the Office of Academic Advising and the Assistant Deans of the College of Arts and Sciences. In the recent past, the Assistant Deans had a substantial number of advisees further complicating this relationship. Not many faculty were clear about what the Assistant Deans did relative to the Office of Academic Advising.

III. Assumptions/Recommendations

The Student Experience. We start from the premise that the optimal student experience should organize our assumptions and recommendations about the freshman/sophomore advising program. We think the goal should be a seamless advising experience for students that begins when they apply to John Carroll and ends with their graduation. (If one considers the career center, it could be said that some of the advising issues could extend to alumni as well.) While different institutional entities will remain responsible for aspects of the advising experience (e.g. Admissions will continue to provide advice during recruitment and Student Activities will work with Academic Advising to organize New Student Orientation), there should be greater intentionality in connecting these offices, experiences and programs.

Higher education literature makes clear that students are more likely to succeed when they develop a relationship with one or more faculty members early in their academic career. The student/ academic advisor relationship should be structured in a way to encourage these connections. In other words, advisors and advisees should become acquainted early in the academic year to facilitate an ongoing conversation. We recommend that students meet their advisor well before the 5th week of the semester (the current practice) – perhaps during fall orientation or the first week of classes (First Year Seminar could be suspended one day that week to allow first year students to meet their advisor for lunch or on the quad.) A group meeting of advisees with their advisor might help the quieter students establish a rapport that is less awkward than the first visit to the faculty member’s office.

While students who are clear about their academic program should be matched with an advisor from that program, other students might benefit from a different method of matching students and advisors. We recommend that during New Student Orientation, student preferences for their advising experience (directive, hands off, from the likely major, from FYS or another 1st semester class) be gathered and used to make the advisor-advisee match. Even within departments, approaches to advising vary. Ideally, all students would have advisors who complement their learning style and temperament. It should remain the responsibility to match entering students with a suitable academic advisor based on as much as information as possible.

Undecided students should be embraced in a more intentional way. According to Enrollment Services, nearly half of our entering students are not yet committed to a field of study when they arrive. They should have advisors who are well-suited to allow them to explore a variety of possibilities (in terms of majors, minors, interdisciplinary concentrations, the possibility of studying abroad, etc.) while attending to various requirements. A pool of advisors willing to work closely with undecided students should be cultivated and supported as advising undecided students can often take more, or at least a different, kind of energy, knowledge and temperament. It should be the responsibility of the Office of Academic Advising to identify faculty advisors well-suited to support undecided students and to afford them adequate faculty development opportunities.

“At-risk” students (financially, academically, socially) also require an advisor well-suited to assist and support them. Various support offices on campus including as appropriate Services for Students with Disabilities, Office of Multicultural Affairs, the Writing Center, the Counseling Center, Career Services, and Athletics can play a role in helping these students succeed. Advisors too often aren’t aware of the challenges their advisees are

facing; information, when appropriate (high school transcripts, college grades, freshman/transfer evaluations) needs to be shared with advisors. The Office of Academic Advising should work to identify and support faculty members well-suited to advise students with various challenges.

Students should be provided with a "job description" of their responsibilities as advisees – how and where to find pertinent information, what they should and shouldn't expect of their advisors, etc. Students should be encouraged to assume more responsibility for their schedules and meeting their requirements. The Office of Academic Advising should facilitate the creation of the job description but should include student affairs professionals, student representatives and faculty members in that process.

Our recommendations are:

- Advisors and incoming students meet earlier than the 5th week;
- Solicit student preferences before matching them with an advisor;
- Embrace undecided students
- Recognize and respond to the special needs of at-risk students
- Provide students with a job description of their responsibilities as advisees

The Office of Academic Advising. As the previous discussion makes clear, an Office of Academic Advising should continue to exist as a resource and administrative structure to support faculty and students throughout the advising process. The Office should be charged to articulate a vision for academic advising and should provide programming to encourage faculty and student success as it relates to academic advising. This office could be collapsed with the office of the Assistant Deans of the College of Arts and Science into a more general Academic Support office. Besides the closely linked operations of those offices, the title of Assistant Dean for advising might send a stronger message of the importance of advising, in contrast with a director of advising.

We recommend the responsibilities of the office should include:

- Matching advisors and advisees to maximize student success as well as faculty efforts. In addition to intended areas of study, the match should also be sensitive to undecided students, "at-risk" students, the advising style of faculty and the preferred advising style of students.
- Writing a "job description" for students in their roles as advisees. This should make clear that students have the responsibility to know and understand various requirements and to ask questions. It should also indicate what is appropriate to expect from advisors (internship advice, planning a course of study, where to find answers to questions) and what is not appropriate (psychological counseling and support).
- Providing faculty development opportunities to enhance the faculty advising experience. Educating interested faculty members about who our students are, how they learn, what they expect, the kind of support they need in addition to organizing programming that speaks to why we value a liberal arts education and how to articulate that to students should strengthen the advising experience. A "job description" for advisors is probably worthwhile as well. Faculty advisors should be required to participate in several programs each academic year.
- Creating an easily accessible and useful advising manual for faculty. This manual should provide resource and contact information for other

offices on campus. It should also provide program and schedule information in a user-friendly manner (e.g. templates for students anticipating majors in highly structured programs).

- Planning New Student Orientation and Transfer Orientation in collaboration with Student Affairs.
- Working collaboratively and intentionally with other offices on campus relevant to the freshman/sophomore academic experience (e.g. the Core Curriculum, First Year Seminar) to ensure students understand core requirements and their intended purpose.

Organization and Staffing of the Office of Academic Advising

The office should be directed at the least by someone who understands faculty culture and enjoys the respect of the faculty. Ideally, it would be someone who holds faculty rank. This person would have executive responsibilities – implementing the vision and providing the programming. A full time faculty member could be provided a reduced load to do this work (using the model of the Honors Program or the Core Curriculum) if full-time administrative status isn't of interest to the successful candidate.

We strongly recommend an office of three people:

- An executive director, with a title equivalent of Assistant Dean. Too often, students assume Assistant Deans have greater authority than a Director of Academic Advising. Alternatively, the executive responsibility could be added to the responsibilities of a faculty member serving in another administrative capacity (perhaps an Assistant or Associate Dean). A third possibility, although a less attractive one in our judgment, would be sharing the executive responsibility across various offices who report to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.
- A fulltime administrative staff member whose responsibility is to attend to the various operational details including working with all the other offices on campus related to advising. This would include playing a key role in New Student Orientation, Fall Orientation and working with all the entities on campus that provide academic support. It might be possible to combine aspects of the current Assistant Deans' jobs with this job.
- A fulltime administrative assistant is also necessary. In addition to maintaining all data about who the freshman/sophomore advisor is and facilitating the transfer of the information to the major department, the staff person would also have the responsibility for attending to students who visit the office (often without appointments) and the myriad daily details involved with a service function such as Academic Advising. In addition, the logistical support to allow for the programming described above including faculty development and student support would be expected of the staff person.

Role of Faculty. All students should be advised by full-time faculty. While this idea is not universally supported by faculty (a few faculty argued that professional advisors should be hired for the freshman/sophomore advising program), the vast majority of faculty and administrators thought because faculty-student interaction and faculty availability to students is part of our institutional culture and identity, that we should insist that all students have faculty advisors. We agree with this view and recommend that each student have an advisor who is a full-time faculty member.

We also recommend that:

- Not all faculty advise students before the major is declared. We recognize that not all faculty are interested in, or may not have the time, skills and energy necessary to attend to pre-major student advising. While all not faculty agree with this, most everyone who participated in our process indicated that it's important that students have advisors with whom they have a rapport and from whom they can receive useful advice. In other words, the student academic experience must be the foremost consideration. As noted above, some faculty are better equipped to work with students new to college while other faculty are more effective as advisors to students in their major programs. We aren't prepared to recommend a mechanism for determining which faculty will participate in pre-major advising. It could be determined at the departmental level, by the academic deans or by the Office of Academic Advising, or some combination of these.
- Faculty advisors receive ongoing professional development. Faculty need the tools, resources and support to be effective advisors. They need professional development and meaningful information regarding who our students are and how they learn. They also need some information about the requirements of various programs to provide effective advice. The advising manual described above would help with this. (It is not essential, then, that advisors come from the department of the anticipated major but faculty advisors need to be conscientious in understanding the requirements of programs and should also know a bit about the coursework and what it entails. Faculty advisors not inclined to familiarize themselves with all this might be better matched with students likely to pursue more flexible programs – e.g. the humanities and social sciences. Again, as described elsewhere, we believe a better job matching advisors and advisees could be done, and student input here would be invaluable
- Advising be recognized and rewarded. This is especially true if not all faculty are expected to participate in the freshman/sophomore advising program. While it's beyond the scope of this committee to recommend how best to recognize advising, we would recommend that the Faculty Forum undertake a study of faculty workload and faculty role, and that advising be considered seriously in that conversation. Perhaps advising should be understood as service instead of teaching making it easier to separate the two and to recognize good advising (and allow faculty to opt in and out of advising at different points in their career).

Conclusions

In sum, we would reiterate that effective academic advising is important to the undergraduate experience. To accomplish this, a viable Office of Academic Advising that provides students and faculty with the necessary support and information must exist. That office needs appropriate resources (human and financial) to accomplish this charge. In this report, we have offered suggestions on how to structure and organize that office and we have also identified tasks and responsibilities that we think should be undertaken by that office.

However, we recognize that effective advising is a campus wide responsibility. We also make recommendations as to the roles and responsibilities of faculty and of students. Much of what we recommend, though, will require additional time and energy from

faculty who participate in freshman/sophomore advising. For that reason, we urge the Faculty Forum to initiate a conversation about faculty workload, faculty role and the reward/incentive structure at JCU.

Because we see the student experience, the role of faculty and the organization/structure of the Office of Academic Advising to be interconnected, we present these recommendations as a package and we ask the Faculty Forum to accept the report.