



Re-envisioning Academic Advising at the University of South Carolina

April 29, 2015

Advising Coordinating Taskforce (ACT)

- Mr. Clay Armstrong, Secretary of Academics, Student Government Association
- Ms. Stacey Bradley, Associate Vice President, Student Affairs and Academic Support
- Dr. Helen Doeringhaus, ACT Co-Chair, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Studies
- Dr. Yvonne Ivory, Associate Professor, German Graduate Adviser, Dean’s Freshmen Adviser, Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures
- Dr. Jed Lyons, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, College of Engineering & Computing
- Dr. Dennis Pruitt, ACT Co-Chair, Vice President for Student Affairs and Academic Support, Vice Provost and Dean of Students
- Dr. Claire Robinson, Associate Director, Student Success Center

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Executive Summary

Re-envisioning Academic Advising at the University of South Carolina

The Office of the Provost charged the Advising Coordinating Taskforce (ACT) to review advising practices at the University of South Carolina and to make recommendations for improvement. ACT reviewed information from USC's University Advisers Network, the Student Government Association, survey data collected from December 2014 to February 2015 from Carolina students and advisers, and solicited responses on advisement practices from each college and school. At Carolina, some programs use professional staff advisers, others use faculty members, and some have a blend of both. Adviser-to-student ratios vary widely across colleges as does the use of technological resources to support advising.

ACT also reviewed research literature on advising. Academic advising includes guidance on curriculum choices, co-curricular opportunities, academic and career planning, and personal development. With national, state and local attention focused on the persistent rise in the cost of higher education, an array of changes to the curriculum, and expectations for timely degree completion, academic advising at Carolina has never been more important.

ACT presents the following recommendations for the University of South Carolina Columbia:

1. Establish a USC Advising Center and First-Year Advisers to facilitate consistent student advising of all undergraduates, with attention to first-year and other students in transition.
2. Establish expectations and processes for the advising of freshman, transfer, and continuing students within their respective colleges and schools.
3. Provide training and certification programs for First-Year Advisers and others who advise that incorporate USC academic requirements and national best practices.
4. Provide technology and online resources that enable efficient and effective advising.
5. Offer faculty-led student programs to assist first-year and continuing students to explore and connect with their fields of study and career opportunities.
6. Develop a culture of student responsibility for academic and career planning.

This proposal includes the hiring of 25 First-Year Advisers. The Advising Center will allocate First-Year Adviser positions to colleges and schools to achieve target caseloads. Colleges and schools will recruit, hire, supervise, and evaluate First-Year Advisers in accordance with Advising Center policies and guidelines. Annually, caseloads will be reviewed and positions may be reallocated to accommodate changes in student demographics.

Overall, this initiative will improve student retention, academic progression, and time to graduation, and reduce incidence of changes of major and graduation with hours in excess of degree requirements. It will result in greater efficiency in the use of our advising resources, given improved student preparation for advising, adviser education, clarification of expectations for each session, and assessment of advising with feedback for continuous improvement. This initiative will result in improved academic decision making based on data tracking and data analytics. Advising has been identified by our students as their top priority for institutional improvement and national best practices indicate an advising model with training, expectations, consistent standards, accountability, and assessment is one of the best mechanisms to influence the positive outcomes noted above.

Goals and Action Plans

GOAL 1. Establish a USC Advising Center and First-Year Advisers to facilitate consistent student advising of all undergraduates, with attention to first-year and other students in transition.

Context

Advising research consistently demonstrates that first-year students are in a state of academic transition and exploration. The Chronicle of Higher Education reported on Feb 10, 2015, “A quarter of all freshmen change their major by the end of their first year” and “half of first-year students say they plan to switch their field of study.” Kuh and Kinzie’s commissioned report suggests that well-planned academic advisement is critical in this context. They explain, “The quality of academic advising is the single most powerful predictor of satisfaction with the campus environment for students at four-year schools.” A USC Advising Center, overseeing First-Year Advisers that are located in the colleges and schools and that are skilled in both academic and non-academic advisement of first-year students, is expected to tremendously benefit both students and the University.

Responsibilities

The USC Advising Center will provide centralized support services that result in consistent, quality advisement of undergraduates. The USC Advising Center will:

- Establish expectations for First-Year Advisers, professional staff members that provide each new student with consistent advisement during the transition to USC from Orientation through their second semester.
- Provide training and certification programs for all undergraduate advisers, which incorporate USC academic requirements and national best practices for advising.
- Facilitate access to and use of technology and online resources that enable efficient and effective advising.
- Incorporate services currently provided by USC’s Cross College Advising Center to facilitate the process of change of major.
- Develop a culture of student responsibility for academic and career planning.

First-Year Advisers

As discussed herein, this proposal includes the hiring of 25 First-Year Advisers, each responsible for advising approximately 300 first-year students. First-Year Advisers are professional staff members that are recruited, hired, supervised, and evaluated by the colleges and schools. The Advising Center will establish expectations for First-Year Advisers through policies for, participation in, and monitoring of their recruitment, hiring, supervision and evaluation. However, each First-Year Adviser will be employed by the academic student services office of a college or school. The Advising Center will allocate First-Year Adviser positions in collaboration with colleges and schools to achieve target caseloads. Annually, caseloads will be reviewed and positions may be reallocated to accommodate changes in student demographics. Colleges and schools are expected to provide space, equipment, and supplies for these and additional advisers to achieve target caseloads. Thus, maximizing the benefit of the First-Year Advisers program requires the shared responsibility of the Advising Center and academic colleges and schools.

GOAL 2. Establish expectations and processes for the advising of freshman, transfer, and continuing students within their respective colleges and schools.

Context

Comprehensive Standard 3.9.3 of the Principles of Accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools requires that “The institution provides a sufficient number of qualified staff - with appropriate education or experience in the student affairs area - to accomplish the mission of the institution.”

First-Year Advisers

Each new freshman and transfer student will be assigned to a First-Year Adviser that will:

- Advise first-year students from a specific academic discipline or appropriate group of disciplines.
- Advise approximately 300 students each year. This ratio enables advisers to spend approximately four hours per year advising, monitoring and, when needed, intervening with each student.
- Meet and advise new students during Orientation. Advise students during their first year (two semesters) at USC on academic and non-academic issues.
- Focus on degree requirements and course selection, Carolina Core, major exploration, academic policies, USC Connect, and transition to USC.
- Monitor students and identify when they are off-track or in need of additional support.
- Readvise students that need it after each first semester.
- Assist with student service operations including registration, petitions, withdrawals, military and athletic certification paperwork, etc.
- Provide each new student with consistent advisement during the transition to USC from Orientation through their second semester.

Continuing Student Advisers

Every continuing student will also be assigned to an adviser. Regardless of the advising model employed by a college (professional staff advising, faculty advising, or a combination), academic advising services must help students to:

- Make informed choices (courses and/or majors) to make satisfactory progress towards a degree.
- Identify when students are off-track or in need of additional support.
- Engage in career planning early (not postpone it until they are close to graduation).

College Undergraduate Advisement Plan

Each college will develop, publish, and follow an “Undergraduate Advisement Plan.” This plan should include:

- Expected dates for advisement in fall and spring semesters.
- Who will advise students, how advisers are assigned, and how students will schedule advisement appointments.
- Advisement ratios and workload management.
- Adviser training requirements and availability.
- How advisement is assessed and evaluated.
- For staff advisers, how and when referrals to faculty and other academic program experts are made.
- For faculty advisers, how and when referrals to staff and other university policy and procedure experts are made, and how advisement fits within teaching, research, and service expectations.

GOAL 3. Provide training and certification programs for First-Year Advisers and others who advise that incorporate USC academic requirements and national best practices.

All First-Year Advisers will be required to complete a four-level training program. This program will also be available for all academic advisers at the university. Training outcomes of advising practice will be informational (institutional programs, policies, and procedures), technological (advising-based technology), relational (interpersonal skills and communication with student; understanding of self as adviser) and conceptual (advising theory and framework). Levels of the training program will be:

- **Adviser I: Adviser Quick Start**
Quick Start is a 20-minute online module designed for any faculty or staff member at USC who works with students in an advisement capacity, whether formal or informal. This module may be updated on a semester basis, as needed. Material includes: purposes of academic advising, how to access advisement technology and other academic information resources, essential policies and procedures, Carolina Core overview, FERPA dos and don'ts, and essential campus resources for referral. This module will include a self-assessment component on material included.
- **Adviser II: Adviser Essentials**
Prior to advising, each First-Year Adviser is required to complete an essentials training. This entails a 15-hour in-person training on advising at USC. Material includes: how to begin and end an advisement session, communication expectation with students, Carolina Core requirements, detailed understanding of program/major degree requirements in primary areas of responsibilities, common academic policies and procedures (e.g., forms, FERPA, transfer credit, change of major, grade forgiveness), knowledge of university structures, colleges and majors available at USC, knowledge of campus academic and non-academic support resources, and basic mastery of advising technology.
- **Adviser III: Carolinian Advisers**
This level involves in-person and online training offered each semester. Material includes in-depth coverage of: USC Connect and Graduation with Leadership Distinction, beyond-the-classroom recommendations in the program major area, academic policies and procedures, campus academic and behavioral support resources, interpersonal and communication techniques in greater depth. It also includes intermediate familiarity with degree/major requirements of all majors and colleges, mastery of advising technology, and assessing the advising experience.
- **Adviser IV: National Best Practices**
This level also involves in-person and online training, and is built upon resources from NACADA, national best practices, publications and conferences. Material includes: Appreciative Advising and theory and framework for advising.

Certification

An adviser will receive certification after completion of Adviser I and II training, six months of advising experience, and subsequent completion of Adviser III and IV training. Once certified, all First-Year Advisers must successfully complete an annual online continuing education module which will provide a quick review of curricular requirements, policies and procedures, yearly updates, etc.

GOAL 4. Provide technology and online resources that enable efficient and effective advising.

Context

Easily accessible advisement tools are essential to foster a culture of student responsibility. Online display of academic planning tools, transparent practice, and clear processes will maximize effectiveness and efficiency of academic advising and registration.

Sample Schedules

The USC Advising Center should facilitate the development of sample first-semester schedules for each degree (with options to address considerations such as AP credits, ROTC participation, Honors College, etc.), to guide and facilitate advisement at New Student Orientation.

DegreeWorks Deployment

Colleges, the Office of the Registrar, and the USC Advising Center should collaborate to deploy DegreeWorks for all undergraduate programs and provide students and advisors with real-time degree audit information. Software validation is the responsibility of the colleges as it requires curricula content experts. To advance DegreeWorks deployment:

- Assess current usage of DegreeWorks within each college.
- Validate results of degree audits performed by DegreeWorks.
- Identify and resolve impediments to DegreeWorks implementation.
- Support colleges and the Registrar in managing and updating DegreeWorks to ensure DegreeWorks is accurate and reliable.

Advisement Web-portal

All existing software (including Self-Service Carolina, SARS, DegreeWorks, etc.) should be available through a user-friendly web portal for adviser and student use. In addition, the following online components should be developed and included:

- Major Maps, i.e., degree flowcharts that show prerequisites and other course sequencing constraints for all baccalaureate degrees.
- Syllabi Bank, i.e., typical syllabi from Carolina Core, major courses, and electives.

Student Data

Many new students change majors or leave due to poor academic performance. Advisement processes for such students can be improved by:

- Examining institutional data sets to identify student major-changing patterns.
- Utilizing EAB Student Success Collaborative software to predict student performance through success markers, degree completion statistics, and change of major success rates.

Advising Technology Audit

Needed is an ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement of advising technology, including existing Self-Service Carolina, DegreeWorks, SARS-Grid, and EAB Student Success Collaborative tools. The evaluation should:

- Determine when to use which products for greatest effectiveness.
- Evaluate any need gaps and determine if existing resources can be leveraged to meet those needs.
- Upgrade advising software and/or user interfaces based on evaluation of existing technology and any remaining unmet needs.

GOAL 5. Offer faculty-led student programs to assist first-year and continuing students to explore and connect with their fields of study and career opportunities.

Context

Faculty play a critical role in college student success. Students who have frequent contact with faculty members are more satisfied with their educational experiences, are less likely to drop out, and perceive themselves as having learned more than students who have less faculty contact. Kim and Sax note, “College impact research has continually demonstrated a positive relationship between student-faculty interaction and a broad range of student educational outcomes, including academic achievement, educational aspirations, intellectual growth, and academic satisfaction.”

Expectations

Academic units will provide opportunities for first-year students to interact with faculty outside of the classroom. The purposes are to provide first-year students an opportunity to:

- Meet faculty from and connect to their degree programs.
- Learn more about their field of study and related career opportunities.
- Provide information to students that are exploring a change of major.

Example Opportunities

Academic units may address these expectations in a number of ways, as well as the extent to which student attendance is required or not. The choice and implementation strategy will be made at the college level. Example opportunities could include:

- Hold a “Majors Meeting” every semester to highlight significant developments in the field of study.
- Conduct “Change of Major” workshops every semester prior to scheduled advisement periods.
- Assign Faculty Mentors to students and offer drop-in mentoring sessions (outside of class-related office hours).
- Offer monthly informal coffee chats for student/faculty interaction.
- Assist with the advisement of students who are prepared for specialization within their programs of study.

GOAL 6. Develop a culture of student responsibility for academic and career planning.

Context

Students share responsibility for successful advising. Students should come prepared to their advising sessions with a plan for course selection, co-curricular engagement, and professional and personal development.

New Student Orientation

New Student Orientation is intended to facilitate the transition and engagement of new undergraduates to the intellectual, cultural, and social environment at the University of South Carolina. As such, it will include:

- Clear expectations for students' responsibilities and engagement in the advising process.
- How university advisors are different from high school guidance counselors.
- An opportunity to meet and/or be advised by a First-Year Adviser.

Online Modules

A series of short online modules will be created to help educate students on advisement at USC. In addition, existing online modules for using Self-Service Carolina to register for classes will be evaluated and revised where appropriate. Content will include:

- Understanding degree requirements and the Carolina Core.
- Preparing for advisement.
- Calculating GPA.
- Understanding scholarship and financial aid requirements.

Student Checklists

All students will be required to prepare for advisement by completing an Advising Checklist. The checklist is intended to reinforce expectations that students:

- Review the Undergraduate Bulletin, student handbooks, Major Maps, and other advising resources regarding degree requirements and key academic policies and procedures (e.g., grade forgiveness, transfer credit, etc.).
- Review their own academic records for degree progress and applicability of credits earned.
- Review course descriptions and the list of Carolina Core approved courses.
- Bring to their advisement session a proposed schedule (i.e., a list of possible classes to take in subsequent semester).
- Prepare to discuss topics of interest such as study abroad, internships, research, service learning, leadership or other beyond-the-classroom learning opportunities.
- Review academic performance and consider strengths, challenges and commitment to major.

Draft University & College Partnership Plan

First-Year Advising Program

April 29, 2015

Partners: University Advising Center
Academic Colleges and Schools

Purpose:

Undergraduate advising has been identified as a top priority for institutional improvement. National best practices indicate an advising model with training, expectations, consistent standards, and accountability is one of the best and most efficient mechanisms to improve student retention, academic progression, and time to graduation. The First-Year Advisers Program requires shared responsibility for accomplishing these goals with a University Advising Center and academic colleges and schools.

First-Year Advisers are professional staff members that will:

- Provide each new student with consistent advisement during the transition to USC from Orientation through their second semester.
- Advise first-year students from a specific academic discipline or appropriate group of disciplines.
- Advise approximately 300 students each year. This ratio provides approximately four hours per year for advising, monitoring and, when needed, intervening with each student.
- Focus on degree requirements and course selection, Carolina Core, major exploration, academic policies, USC Connect, and transition to USC.
- Monitor students and identify when they are off-track or in need of additional support.
- Readvise students that need it after each semester.

The College or School will:

- Recruit, hire, supervise, and evaluate First-Year Advisers in accordance with Advising Center policies and guidelines.
- Develop and implement an Undergraduate Advisement Plan that addresses advisement of both first-year students and continuing students, including the transition between.

The University Advising Center will:

- Allocate First-Year Adviser positions in collaboration with colleges and schools to achieve target caseloads. Annually review caseloads and reallocate positions to accommodate changes in student demographics.
- Establish expectations for First-Year Advisers through policies for, participation in, and monitoring of their recruitment, hiring, supervision and evaluation.
- Provide adviser training and certification programs that incorporate USC academic requirements and national best practices for advising.
- Provide technology and online resources that enable efficient and effective advising.
- Assess and evaluate student satisfaction with and outcomes of advising.
- Incorporate services currently provided by USC's Cross College Advising Center to facilitate the process of change of major.
- Develop a culture of student responsibility for academic and career planning.