

ADVISING at UVM: Recommended Actions

Presented by the

Student Experience Task Force
of the
Strategic Enrollment Management Council

Background.

In the fall of 2004, a group of faculty, administrators and students began meeting to discuss the status of undergraduate advising at UVM. We sought to answer three questions: How is advising done across the campus? What are the “best-practices” of these activities? and, 3) How can advising be improved? The so-called “Integrated Advising Group” surveyed all academic and student service/support units, compiling an inventory of advising activities and practices. Student response to these advising resources were solicited and compiled so as to better understand how well these advising initiatives were received. A subset of this group attended an academic advising workshop in order to survey best-practices at other institutions and to better understand how academic advising at UVM fit into the broader picture of our peer and competitor institutions. This advising group was subsequently folded into the bigger “Student Experience” task force (part of the Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) council) and now, as a component of its forthcoming report on advising, presents a series of recommendations for improving advising at UVM.

Two points to consider when assessing these recommendations: 1) a number of the recommendations are duplicative of or based upon recommendations on academic advising passed by the Faculty Senate about 4 years ago that have not been fully implemented, and 2) while advising is rated highly by seniors on the most recent NSSE survey (relative to other schools), first-year students rank advising at UVM on a par with other comparator institutions, most of which dwarf UVM in size. These recommendations, then, address issues that have previously been identified as needing attention as well as focus on the addressing the needs of students early in their UVM careers, when they are most vulnerable to failure (and, thus, most likely to leave UVM) and where students have not indicated as high a level of satisfaction with their advising experience as do those students who stay at UVM to their 4th year.

The recommendations that follow fall into three areas, but one recommendation impacts on all of the others and, so, is presented separately:

Oversight and Commitment: Administrative Office in Charge of Advising

The advising practices and activities across campus represent significant investments of thought and time and personnel, but suffer from a lack of coherent oversight, decreasing their efficacy. Each unit has unique student, faculty and curricular needs and, as such, should be free to implement advising programs that meet those needs. However, the lack of coherent

coordination of resources across the units hinders the ability of each unit to best advise their students.

RECOMMENDATION: *We propose that the administrator with direct responsibility for the coordination and oversight of undergraduate advising across the University (the Vice President for Undergraduate Education) be supported in this mission and supplied with the resources and direction needed to both successfully coordinate and support existing advising activities as well as oversee and implement the recommendations presented in this report.* Oversight and support for advising must ultimately come at the University level and be recognized as an essential component of ensuring the quality of the student experience at UVM. This impacts directly on student retention (especially first-year to second-year retention) and on our students' ability to find the programs at UVM that will make their experience here valuable. Accordingly, *the VP for Undergraduate Education's charge with respect to advising should be enhanced and refocused* so that it is possible to provide the broad oversight and coordination of advising that is needed to ensure a high-quality student experience at UVM.

More specifically, the VP for Undergraduate Education should be charged with:

- Maintaining an inventory of existing advising resources and programs across the UVM campus
- Coordinating advising resources and programs across the UVM campus
- Promoting and providing student/faculty/staff access to advising resources and programs across the UVM campus
- Evaluating advising – both programs and individuals engaged in advising activities
- Overseeing advisor training activities, including evaluating the effectiveness of training programs and implementing new training programs where needed
- Where necessary, establishing programs and/or procedures to provide advising activities not currently available
- Implementing advising enhancement recommendations detailed later in this document
- Serving as a central source for information about or procedures relating to undergraduate advising at UVM
- Coordinating advising of academically at-risk students across the University (e.g., students on academic probation in one unit who

would like to transfer to another UVM unit more appropriate to their interests and abilities)

- Working with the Student Government Association and Orientation Leaders to coordinate peer advising initiatives

The recommendations that follow are grouped according to the area of the intended impact on advising activities – they are presented in no particular order as we feel that all of the recommended actions fill important gaps in our current advising system.

A. Student Advising Resources

Students need to be empowered to take greater responsibility for planning their academic programs, but the tools needed for them to do so are not always appropriate or sufficient to support them. We make three recommendations here that will empower students to play a more significant role in planning their academic future at UVM.

1. Comprehensive University Advising Resources Website

Advising resources on the UVM website are currently distributed such that, unless a student (or advisor) knows what they are looking for, it is often difficult or impossible to find the information sought.

While there currently is an advising website at UVM (see: <http://www.uvm.edu/academics/undergraduate/advising/>), the focus of this site is to *describe and define* advising, but not to provide a practical consolidation of the disparate resources available for advising on campus.

RECOMMENDATION: *Provide a single web location from which students and advisors can access advising resources.* Although this could ultimately become the web presence for a *physical* campus advising center, this can initially be established as a *virtual* advising center and include links to currently available UVM web resources. This site would be established and maintained centrally, through the office of the VP for Undergraduate Education.

Some examples from other Universities:

University of Florida:

<http://www.advising.ufl.edu/>

University of Arizona:

<http://advising.arizona.edu/>

UNH:

<http://www.unh.edu/uacc/index.html>

Brown University:

http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Dean_of_the_College/advising/

2. Bring Back the Print(able) Catalog

The most significant advising tool used at any academic institution is the catalog, a listing of officially-approved courses, programs, majors, minors, concentrations, degrees and degree options offered by the school. UVM's switch to an online-only catalog has made advising more difficult (it requires a computer connected to the web in order to be accessed, making the advising process more clumsy at best and, often, impossible). The need for a printed catalog is highlighted by the introduction and steady yearly growth of the so-called "Advising Handbook," which is simply a more cheaply printed subset of what used to be the catalog. This printed handbook has grown to such a point that it now duplicates much of what is available online and, oddly enough, is itself now available online (as a pdf file). This duplication of effort now requires departments and units to compose and proof copy for ***TWO*** different "catalogs," sometimes resulting in information on the same program that differs from one "catalog" to the other in the same year.

Furthermore, while initially there were pdf versions of the online catalog that could be downloaded and used off-line (and locally archived digitally or on paper), beginning with the 2003-2004 catalog, the catalog is only available as "html-only" and so *cannot be archived at all off-line or printed as a reference.*

While there are obvious benefits to a "hypertext" catalog format, they accrue only when online and can be a hindrance when advising, especially when access to a computer or an internet connection is not possible. As an historical reference for advising purposes, the online catalog has proved to be unreliable, with some entries changing within and after the academic year as new curricular changes are implemented in newer versions of the catalog (example: try finding a Women's Studies course by browsing the "course by subject" listing in the 2003-2004 online catalog – the Women's Studies entry vanished when the program name changed last year).

RECOMMENDATIONS: *At the very least, a downloadable and printable version of the catalog (pdf would be an appropriate format) should be made available for each "html-only" version of the online catalog so that curricular information from each academic year can be easily accessed for advising purposes both online and offline. We strongly urge that a printed version of the catalog (similar in print format to what preceded the online catalog) be made available at least on an every-other-year basis and, preferably, every year. There should be sufficient numbers of the catalog printed so that each incoming student and every advising faculty and staff member can be provided with a copy.*

3. Integration of CATSweb into Advising Programs

The introduction of the CATSweb degree audit system this year should be recognized as an opportunity to rethink the ways in which students and their advisors interact. This is an enormously powerful system that has been designed and implemented with great care so that accurate information is available to students and their advisors, automating the course “bookkeeping” process.

One possible danger accompanying the introduction of this system is that it could lead to *greater disengagement* of students and advisors if both parties view CATSweb availability as decreasing the need for students to meet with their advisors when planning their course schedules. Instead, CATSweb should be positioned and promoted as a schedule-planning tool that students and their advisors use when engaged in schedule-planning discussions. This tool should decrease the need for them to spend time on the more mundane planning tasks, allowing them to focus on more substantive issues (choosing a major, timing of courses, career and research opportunities, etc.).

RECOMMENDATION: *With the rollout of CATSweb this fall, units should receive guidance on training their faculty and students to access and use the CATSweb degree audit system; in addition, advisors should receive direction and training on how to incorporate this system into their advising activities.* As with the other advising training and assessment activities we’ve recommended (see below), we think that this is best accomplished with coordination and direction from the VP for Undergraduate Education. At the very least, there should be information and support for training made available for faculty in all units (from central administration) and promotion of CATSweb within the university community as a powerful new advising tool designed to enhance and facilitate student/faculty-advisor interactions.

We have an unusual opportunity to utilize the introduction of CATSweb as a vehicle for building and improving advising relationships between students and faculty; it would be a shame if we did not capitalize on this opportunity and maximize the benefit from the introduction of our new degree audit system.

B. University Advising Infrastructure

The culture of advising at UVM is reflected in the infrastructure in place to support advising activities. We make four recommendations here that directly address infrastructure limitations that have, thus far, limited support for student success. Development, initiation, implementation and on-going management of these initiatives would be the purview of the VP for Undergraduate Education.

1. University Student Advising Center

Currently, students need to visit several different offices, often dispersed across campus, either to get advising information or to accomplish an advising task. While there are many times when it is most appropriate and necessary for a student to visit their unit's Dean's Office or the office of a department or program, often the dispersion of offices serving students is due to administrative convenience and hinders the ability of students to receive the advice and services they need.

RECOMMENDATION: *Where possible and desirable, consolidate advising or advising-related student service offices into a single location, centrally-located, on campus. We see the genesis of such a facility with the student services desk on the first floor of Waterman. We envision students walking up to such a receiving desk and asking questions relating to course registration, academic advising, career planning, summer internships, tutoring, financial aid, scholarships, workshops, etc. This should be a "one-stop" location for student services with the front desk providing general support and direction to the appropriate offices, all located within the building or nearby. While not all such offices could be (or should be) located in a single place, common major services should be available, including functions provided by, for example, the Registrar's Office, Financial Aid/Scholarship Aid, Career Services, ACCESS, the Learning Coop, Study Abroad, the Counseling Center, as well as general academic advising services.*

Academic advising might be available on a walk-in basis for students who are not able to reach their assigned faculty advisor or who have unique problems that go beyond the expertise of their faculty advisor – much as is done in some units' Dean's Offices currently. These advising services would not necessarily *replace* those currently offered, but would serve as another location where units can offer those services (either via assigned specially-trained faculty or by providing advising staff at designated times at this central facility).

2. Evaluation of Advising

Although advising is now a component of faculty annual and RPT review processes, advising as a whole and in particular is evaluated only sporadically and inconsistently across the University. Some departments and units across

campus have developed and implemented evaluation surveys to assess their advising systems. Much of what is presented, however, serves either to detail advising *efforts* or to evaluate advising that is inconsistently accessed by students. Often the survey results serve more to evaluate *whether* advising was sought, rather than the value of the advising activities themselves.

Meaningful assessment of advising is difficult and deserves attention by those well-versed in designing and implementing advising evaluation tools. Assessment methods should be consistent across units, if possible, so that the efficacy of the different approaches towards advising can be fairly measured and compared.

RECOMMENDATION: *Advising assessment should be coordinated and directed centrally* (ultimately by the office of the VP for Undergraduate Education) and departments and units should be provided with assistance and direction in constructing and delivering assessment tools for the meaningful evaluation of advising. Initial work should involve pilot evaluation programs to ensure that the needs of the individual programs and faculty advisors are met. Ultimately, the results of these assessments should be utilized in faculty and program review processes and form the basis for ongoing improvements to existing advising programs and advising policies.

3. Orientation and 1st-Year Advising Schedule

If advising relationships are to be successful once students declare their majors and enter into the academic community of their major department or program, both students and faculty need to establish those relationships early in a student's UVM career. From the first UVM advising experiences at June Orientation through the first year, a schedule of student/faculty advising opportunities should be established. Some units do this explicitly while others may or may not, depending upon the academic circumstances of their students.

RECOMMENDATION: *The VP for Undergraduate Education, in consultation with individual units, should be responsible for establishing a schedule of student/advisor meetings* in which students and their advisors are prompted to meet (or communicate) at appropriate times between June Orientation and the end of the student's first year. For many units, this will involve a codification of already existing practices – but for all, it will involve establishing and publicizing a mutual commitment between students and their advisors (a commitment that will form the basis of the advising expectations for both students and faculty across all of the undergraduate years).

4. Mid-Term Warning Letter

The mid-term warning letter (MTWL) is an important mechanism for identifying students who show potential for academic failure. Implemented over the years by some units, last year (2004-2005 AY) it was made available for all units via an online system incorporated into the BANNER student information system, as a result of the efforts of the now-defunct First-Year Experience committee. This online MTWL system interfaces directly into the advising system so that when a MTWL is generated, a copy is emailed not only to the student, but also to the student's academic advisor and the Dean's Office of the college or school in which the student is enrolled.

RECOMMENDATION: *Management and integration of the MTWL system into the advising infrastructure at UVM should be the responsibility of the VP for Undergraduate Education.* We make this recommendation based on two concerns: the group that implemented the MTWL system during the previous academic year no longer exists, leaving the system without any responsible party charged with its administration and, the value of this system as an advising tool is currently limited to the voluntary use of the system by units and faculty. We are pleased to see that the MTWL system has been updated and its availability advertised for the current academic year (2005-2006 AY), but we wish to ensure that it will continue to be updated and promoted (without our prompting) and, possibly more importantly, its use promoted and standardized across units so that students and faculty have a consistent expectation for the academic circumstances under which the MTWL will be sent by faculty and received by students and their advisors.

C. Student-Faculty Connections

Students and their advisors are more likely to meet and develop meaningful relationships when there is institutional support ensuring that advisors are trained and available for targeted advising interactions. The following four recommendations, then, address programs that can be put into place to enhance these connections between students and their advisors. These recommendations should be implemented by the office of the VP for Undergraduate Education.

1. Faculty Advising Certificate Program/Faculty and Staff Training

Faculty are expected to provide accurate information on issues as far reaching as curriculum, campus activities, pre-professional and graduate schools, major/minor/degree choice, careers and career paths in addition to being a personal contact and mentor to students. In addition, informal advising occurs in such places as ACCESS, the ALANA Student Center, Athletics, Career Services, the Center for Health and Wellbeing, Orientation, TRiO, etc. Training for these tasks is, however, subject to great variation across the units and staff learn what they can on their own. While there is

much information that is unit-based and should be presented at that level, there is much that can be presented to faculty advisors across *all of the units* that would be of value.

Currently there is no oversight of the training faculty receive as advisors, nor is there a university-wide training program for faculty advisors. This not only leaves many of our faculty (especially new faculty) without the training necessary to be an effective advisor, but also sends a message to faculty that their advising efforts are not valued or supported.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1) All new faculty should be required to attend and participate in a University-wide "Introduction to Advising" workshop during their 1st semester at UVM,

2) All new faculty should receive additional advisor training in their home units during their 1st semester at UVM – this can be accomplished either via workshop and/or via faculty mentor assigned to work with the new faculty member,

3) All faculty, and staff who informally advise students, should be encouraged to attend advising workshops offered regularly at the university level and at the college/school level – these workshops can vary in topic area from "curriculum/requirements refreshers" to special topics (such as FERPA and student privacy laws, student mental health issues, advising undecided students, career advising, advising challenges, advising non-traditional students, first-year student advising, etc.). Staff who do informal advising might be invited to attend general advising workshops (and in some cases they might be the presenters).

4) Faculty participation in these advising "professional development" workshops should be encouraged and recognized by establishing a faculty advising certificate program. In this program, faculty participation in a specified number and level of advising workshops would be officially recognized through an advising program "certificate." A "master advisor" program for more senior accomplished advisors would encourage and recognize our very best faculty advisors and engage them in leading advising workshops and in mentoring junior faculty. Incentives (financial and other) should be considered as a means of encouraging and rewarding faculty who participate in these activities.

2. First-Year Seminar/Advising Programs

The first-year experience is critical to establishing effective advising relationships and habits and a successful start to a student's UVM education.

Some courses (e.g., EDHI 55, PSYC 15) have been designed and offered specifically to address skills often lacking in first-year students. In response to this obvious need for engaging students with faculty advisors during the first semester of their first year, many first-year programs have been developed across the University – the Teacher Advisor Program (TAP) offered by the College of Arts and Sciences is one successful example, but there are also other examples across the units. Some have been extremely successful in engaging students in an academic discipline as well as ensuring students have significant interaction with their faculty advisor at a time when they are making the critical transition to being a UVM student. Currently, these programs vary considerably from unit to unit with respect to both their availability and their efficacy.

RECOMMENDATION: *The VP for Undergraduate Education should be responsible for working with each of the units to develop, revise and refine, and implement 1st-year seminar/advising programs that serve both the academic and advising needs of their students. Resource issues must be addressed centrally if these programs are to be made available to at least all first-semester first-year students.*

3. Required Pre-Registration Advising Meeting

Prior to the introduction of online registration at UVM, students were required to obtain their advisor's signature on a pre-registration form, ensuring that they had met with their advisor. At that time, there was an expectation that both students and faculty were responsible for ensuring that advising meetings took place – over the years, this expectation has vanished, resulting in a situation where students often seek out their advisors only in order to obtain information or required signatures relating to academic difficulties (e.g., course withdrawal forms). Faculty spend too much of their time trying to convince students to see them regularly (and in documenting those attempts) and not enough time actually interacting with students. Advising is a shared responsibility between students and faculty, but our current system does not encourage and support that relationship.

RECOMMENDATION: *We should require students to meet with their advisors prior to being allowed to register for courses – an electronic version of the old “pre-registration advisor signature.” We suggest that this be implemented initially for first-year students only as it will take some time to rebuild the advising expectations of faculty and students and because advising is such a critical component of the 1st-year experience. Expanding the program to the sophomore and later years should be explored based on the experiences of students and faculty to the 1st-year advising experience.*

(NOTE: this program is being piloted by the College of Arts and Sciences beginning in the Fall 2005 semester for all of their first-time first-year students. The results of this pilot program should be evaluated and considered when determining whether to expand this requirement to other school/colleges and to students other than first-years.)

4. Faculty/Advisor Accessibility

The accessibility of faculty for advising purposes should not be a limitation for students seeking to meet with their advisors. While many faculty advisors have clearly posted office hours and make themselves available for appointments outside of those hours, there are no uniform expectations for either the number of hours/week that faculty should be available for meeting outside of class with students or for the mechanism of publicizing those hours.

RECOMMENDATION: *Guidelines for faculty regarding both the number of office hours/week they should offer and how they should be posted/publicized should be established.* This impacts on faculty workload issues, and so must be coordinated by the VP for Undergraduate Education with the Provost, but every student should be able to easily determine when their faculty advisor is available for consultation and to be able, if necessary, to contact them to have advising questions answered.