Preliminary Report and Recommendations on Advising

Introduction

Following is a report by an ad hoc task group assembled to investigate possible means of strengthening academic advisement at TAMUCC. The Group was composed of Dr. Gerry Moreno, Assistant Vice-President for Student Success; Dr. Pat Hill, Director, Transition Center; Dr. Gilda Ramirez, Director of Student Services and College Finances, College of Education; Dr. Bunny Forgione, Associate Dean, College of Nursing; Dr. Adolfo Benavides, Associate Dean, College of Business; Dr. Jennifer Smith-Engle, Associate Dean, College of Science and Technology; Dr. Elizabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, Associate Dean, College of Liberal Arts; and Dr. David Billeaux, Associate Vice-President for Academic Affairs. As part of this investigation Drs. Moreno, Hill and Billeaux visited and toured the SAM Center at Sam Houston State, and all members of the group were involve in extensive conference calls with officials of the AAM Center at UTPA and the STARR Center at West Texas. The group also met with the Senior Advisors from each college to discuss its findings and their implications for advising at TAMUCC. Dr. Billeaux also conducted telephone discussions with officials at NACADA for information relating to this investigation.

Trends in Organizational Models of Advising

The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) uses a schema based on seven general categories to summarize organizational models of advising used in higher education. They generally vary from an approach that is completely de-centralized (the Faculty-Only Model in which all students are assigned to instructional faculty and there is no advising office or professional advisors) to an approach that is entirely centralized (the Self-Contained Model in which all advising for all students is done by professional staff in a centralized unit.) There are several hybrid approaches including the Supplementary Model in which all students are assigned to a faculty member for advising, but there is an advising office that provides general information and referrals for students; the Split Model in which specific groups of students are advised by an advising office, typically undecided, underprepared, or at-risk students; the Dual Model in which each student is assigned two advisors - a member of the instructional faculty for matters related to the major and a professional advisor in an advising office who advises on general requirements and procedures; the Total Intake Model in which professional staff in a centralized unit advise all students for a specified period after which they are assigned a faculty advisor; and the Satellite Model in which each college or academic unit determines its own approach to advising. These general categories are not discrete, however, and schools often have systems that may employ aspects of more than one.

Some version of the Split Model has been the most popular at four-year public institutions for some time and has been gaining popularity. It provides intensive advising interventions for those students deemed most in need of academic guidance, but often in practice takes on aspects of the Dual Model for those students that the central element of the model targets. These students can
become stigmatized in being identified as students in need of special help, as well, leading to resistance on the part of the students in engaging fully in the system. Also gaining popularity, but employed in far fewer institutions, is the Satellite Model. In practice, most institutions adopting this model have also professionalized advising, reducing the role of faculty in advisement, by employing professional staff advisors either at the department level, or in centralized units within the various colleges. It also often has aspects of the Dual Model in the roles assigned the advisors, but is argued to both serve the students with higher quality advisement and relieve the faculty from much of this role in favor of other goals. The major drawback is the effect of creating bureaucratic “silos” in the advising process, hindering important communication among professional advisors in differing academic units.

Few four-year public institutions use the other models and the numbers of those that do are declining with the exception of various versions of the Total Intake Model. Though the most recent data from NACADA (Findings from the ACT Sixth National Survey in 2004) do not reflect this trend, NACADA officials indicate that there has been increased interest in and application of forms of the Total Intake Model in recent years. Indeed, all of the regional institutions that we interviewed for this review and recommendation have moved toward the Total Intake or Self-Contained Models in the past few years. The changes in approach at these universities are novel, significant, and reflect the opportunities and constraints inherent in the structures that preceded them. All, however, grew out of a concern with higher numbers of students struggling academically early in their college careers. All saw the need for a new approach to advising as faculty were more greatly encouraged and rewarded for other aspects of their work, and new cohorts of students seemed less well prepared for college life and academic demands. Indeed, TAMUCC responded to these same pressures with a significant reform of its approach to advising in 2001-2002 and it may be useful to briefly review how we came to our current model for advising.

Brief History of Advising Approaches at TAMUCC

Prior to the expansion to four-year status in 1994, TAMUCC employed essentially a dual model with each college having one or two professional degree counselors responsible for advising on matters outside the major and assuring completion of degree requirements, and a faculty advisor in the major advising on matters relating to the major. In addition, intervention specialists worked with TASP-liable students. With the downward expansion an additional advising process for first-year students was created and administered by the Core Curriculum Program Office. This process involved faculty volunteers that were trained in first-year advising and registration of students. Students were assigned to faculty volunteer advisors in their chosen discipline to the extent possible. All undecided students were reassigned to another faculty advisor when they chose a major, and many that had been assigned a first-year faculty advisor in their chosen major were reassigned to a new faculty advisor when they reached 30 hours. Students were also assigned a professional advisor in their colleges at upon completion of 30 hours or, if still undecided, continued to be advised by professional advisors in the Core Program.

During the period from 1994 to 2001 the advising system at TAMUCC had elements of the Dual Model (with both professional degree program advisors and faculty advising in the major), the Split Model (with intervention specialists working with at-risk and TASP-liable students) and the Total Intake Model (with the Core Curriculum Program providing trained volunteer faculty
advisors for all first-year students.) After a Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory conducted in 1998 showed that advising was one of just three areas to score below the national average at TAMUCC, specific questions were added to the survey concerning advising at TAMUCC for the inventory in 2000. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the complexity of the advising process in place, that assessment revealed that students felt that the university did not do a very good job of informing them of who their academic advisor was, and that the method of obtaining academic advising was not clear and understandable. Students were unclear about when to go to their faculty advisor, the Core Curriculum Office, or see a professional degree counselor. The data further suggested that this was particularly true for transfer students, especially those in their sophomore and junior years. Students that had started as first-term Freshmen reported much less confusion and a generally more satisfying experience with advising.

As part of an effort to respond to these findings, an outside consultant was brought to campus to review the advising program. In addition to confirming the problem with transfer students, the consultant also noted that the Degree Counselors were carrying extremely high caseloads and that the extreme decentralization, in addition to contributing to student confusion, robbed the process of any common understanding of what academic advising should be. The consultant observed that there was little consistency, even within the colleges, in how advising was delivered, and no clear responsibility for the process.

After considerable study the Academic Advising Council in response proposed a set of structural changes to the university’s approach to advising that has evolved into the current model. These changes focused on the creation of college based advising centers staffed by professional academic advisors and a central advising office that would advise undecided students and provide coordination for professional advising staff and other entities providing services for academic success within the university. The plan recommended hiring additional professional advisors in each college to bring the caseload closer to the NACADA recommended 250:1 student/advisor ratio. The staffing increases were to be funded by a new $20 advising fee.

As a result of the restructuring, advising focused specifically on first-year students was discontinued, though programs for new students continued. The name and the role of the central advising office has changed some over the years, and as the current Transition Center focuses primarily on transfer and undecided student advising. Professional advising was augmented and centralized within the colleges. The number of new advisors added to this effort was about 2/3s of what the proposal suggested, and increases in this staff have not kept pace with the growth in the university since that time.

The outcomes of these changes have been positive in many regards. The attention to transfer students has increased satisfaction with advising for this group. The creation of college based professional advising centers has improved the communication among advisors and consistency of advising within colleges, and freed faculty to be mentors to majors and from the minutia of degree plan advising. Overall student satisfaction, while not dramatically changed, has improved despite the fact that overall caseloads for professional advisors have again become unwieldy.

The current system, however, may not be doing enough for first-year students that are in various ways underprepared for the college experience. In addition, the problem of inadequate communication and coordination of the advising function among the colleges and with the various entities providing services for academic success within the university has never been adequately addressed. While we have a wide-variety of services designed to provide help for
special populations and academically at-risk students on campus that are recognized as effective, they are not well integrated with academic advising. Moreover, the increasing and pressing problem of retention of first-year students is one that our current advising structure is not specifically designed to address.

Regional Models

To address these problems we have researched the recent successful reform of advising structures at several regional schools and consulted with experts at NACADA concerning promising approaches to these problems. Below are brief descriptions of the approaches at each of these institutions.

**Sam Houston State University**

Sam Houston State University created the Student Advising and Mentoring (SAM) Center for academic advising in 2005 which has received wide recognition and praise. The Center is a central touch point for all incoming first time (zero hours at Sam Houston) students. The Center is available for students in all majors, but several disciplines prefer to retain their own advisors – most notably the large Criminal Justice Program. Students in such programs are directed to those programs’ advisors after an initial consultation with SAM Center staff.

The Center is staffed with five full-time professional advisors and fifteen part-time faculty advisors. The full-time advisors include the Director (also a member of the faculty), an Assistant Director, an advisor that also handles administrative assistant duties, and two advisors that also serve off-campus locations (transfer students). The fifteen faculty advisors are made up largely of active full-time members of the faculty, but some may be adjunct faculty or retired faculty as well. All are cross-trained for advising students regardless of major area of study. In choosing Faculty Advisors efforts are made to recruit senior faculty with appropriate interest in student success and good “people skills.” Candidates are recommended by Department Chairs and Deans.

While encouraged to take full advantage of the advising center and its services, most students are not required to see an advisor again until late in their academic careers. Texas Success Initiative (TSI) students, those that are undecided on a major, and any student that falls into probationary status or is suspended have advising holds placed on their records and are required to meet with an advisor each semester. TSI students are also channeled into a basic skills developmental education course. Part of a broader Monitored Academic Progress (MAP) program for at risk and probationary students, this course consists of six one-hour sessions with the curriculum built around the skills tested in the LASSI.

**University of Texas – Pan American**

The new academic advisement plan at UTPA grew out of the functional expansion of a unit with a narrower focus on TSI students and was first implemented in the fall of 2005. Under the plan there are two centralized advisement locations – the Learning Assistance Center (LAC) in the University Center that advises all TSI students, and the Academic Advisement and Mentoring
(AAM) Center in Southwick Hall. The AAM Center handles general advisement and has as its central mission to transition first-year students into the university. The advising program also includes decentralized advisement in each college done by Professional Guidance Counselors (PGCs) employed by the AAM Center but housed in each college as well as faculty advisors in the majors. The plan also includes the University Retention Advisement Program (URAP) which focuses on special retention advisement for students on probation or suspension, or that have financial aid or enrollment cap appeals. While the new plan called for the incorporation and coordination of several existing elements, three new professional advisors were hired for the establishment of the AAM Center, as well as the six PGCs located in the colleges.

At UTPA contacting advisors regularly each semester is mandatory for all undergraduate students. The AAM Center provides orientation advisement for entering first-year students and transfer students during the summer prior to registration. All students are required to see an advisor for next term registration. First-year TSI clear students go to the AAM Center for advisement. In their second year they are assigned to an AAM Center PGC located in the college of their major. These Masters level professional counselors do career guidance and exploration advising as well as registration advising. In their junior and senior year they are assigned to faculty advisors in their major. They can continue to see their college PGC or advisors in the central AAM office if they wish as well. TSI students go to the LAC until such time as they are TSI clear.

In addition to general first year advising the AAM Center collaborates with and provides coordination for several other elements of the advising process. These include working with the University Retention Advisement Program to conduct an Early Warning System to identify and provide extra advising sessions with students on probation or suspension; collaborating with academic departments and advisors to maintain and distribute up-to-date degree plans and “four-year road maps” for students in the various disciplines; and taking part in UNIV 1301, the university’s basic skills class. Required of all first year students in the past, this is a full three hour developmental education class built around learning theory. In the fall 2009 it will not be required of students with scores of 19 or higher on the ACT and who also rank in the top 25 percent of their high school class.

West Texas A&M University

The Student Advising, Registration and Retention (STARR) Center at West Texas has been in existence for a shorter period of time, is modeled generally on the SAM Center at Sam Houston State, and like the AAM Center at UTPA has grown out of an earlier office focused on TASP (now TSI) students. Like the UTPA model it has retained the TSI role. It has distinct characteristics, however, reflecting the unique character of the history and culture of the campus.

The STARR Center has a professional staff of six, including the Director, an Assistant Director, two full-time advisors, a Transfer Coordinator and an Academic Advising Coordinator. The STARR Center also employs ten “Faculty Fellows” modeled after the faculty advisors at the SAM Center. The Faculty Fellows are selected from volunteer faculty nominated by department chairs and chosen on the basis of interest in student advising and interpersonal skills. Experienced tenured faculty members are preferred, but non-tenured faculty and adjuncts can be hired. Like the Sam Houston model, the Faculty Fellows are paid $15,000 per year, but at West Texas they are required to sign up for at least two years and commit to advising in the summers.
They are expected to advise for 10 hours a week and be cross-trained to advise students in all majors.

The STARR Center advises all students through their first 60 hours as well as initial advisement of transfer students. All lower-division students and first time transfer students must be given a “green light” by the STARR Center in order to register each semester. (Some professional programs have their own advisors for lower-division students, but most are advised by STARR Center advisors after receiving training from the pre-professional program coordinators to provide appropriate advice.) Upper-division students are advised by department faculty advisors except for those that fall into probationary status or that are suspended. Probationary or suspended students are sent to the STARR Center for intensive advisement and monitoring.

The STARR Center also maintains a cadre of Student Peer Leaders. Currently numbering 25, these students play an important role in delivering the orientation program, helping with the College Success Class, mentoring general students, and providing guidance for TSI and probationary students. The STARR Center regards the students as an invaluable asset in effectively reaching many students. The Student Peer Leader positions are structured as paid internships, and often draw the participation of students in social work and counseling programs. Students have come to regard it as a valuable learning experience and professional asset.

Guiding Values

Based on our discussions with these schools, information gained from contacts with NACADA, and the primary problems and needs perceived at TAMUCC the task group arrived at consensus on several general values or principles that should underlie or guide recommendations for reform of the advising system. These include:

- A new advising mission statement, the promotion of a common understanding of what advising should be, and the provision of a central point for communication, coordination and integration of advising and advising related student services.

- A centrally located common initial advising point of contact for all new students (any student with zero hours at TAMUCC) to have advisors immediately available and easily accessible and to establish a welcoming, supportive, and personal connection with the university.

- Involve faculty as first advising contact for new students along the lines of the SAM Center and STARR Center. These programs have reported that such contact with faculty is important to students and this has been our experience in orientations as well.

- Intrusive advisement for at risk students and students on probation or suspension.

- Coordination and Integration of student services resources, including social and academic services and special populations services.

- Advising programs that are student centered and student involved, including extensive use of students as workers, mentors and facilitators.
• Use of advising holds to assure student participation in initial advising and early academic career advising as well as intrusive advisement for at risk and probationary students.

Preliminary Recommendations

Based on these general principles, the task group puts forth the following recommendations for revising the advising process at TAMUCC and maximizing the effectiveness of existing advising and student support services.

1. **Reconstitute the Academic Advising Council.** The Academic Advising Council has been inactive for several years. It should be reactivated and perhaps renamed with a broader purpose to help integrate not only direct advising functions on campus, but also advising related student support services such as Career Services, Disabilities Services, Veterans’ Affairs, Student Affairs, Athletic Academic Services, CASA, Title V, Enrollment Management, Student Affairs, First-Year Learn Communities Program, International Student Advising, etc. Current membership of the Council reflects an earlier and different approach to the advising function.
   a. It is recommended that the reconstituted Advising Council should be charged with formulating a new mission statement, promoting a common understanding of what advising should be, and the providing a central point for communication, coordination and integration of advising and advising related student services.
   b. It is recommended that the Advising Council be charged with design and oversight of implementation of assessment instruments to measure the success of the advising program. Mission appropriate outcomes should be identified and assessed.

2. **The Creation of a Central Advising Center.** It is recommended that when space is available adequate to house it, a Central Advising Center (CAC for the purposes of this report) be established to provide an initial advising point of contact for all new students (any student with zero hours at TAMUCC).
   a. It is recommended that this center be staffed with professional staff currently in the Transition Center, with the addition of a full-time Director (perhaps drawn from the faculty as in the Sam Houston model) and four or five part-time faculty advisors. This center would be charged with providing an easily accessible initial advising contact with students and establishing a welcoming, supportive and personal connection with the university. The advisors in the CAC would help new students better understand the nature and purpose of higher education, assist students in identifying and understanding potential interests, abilities, needs and goals, provide academic advice on beginning Core course work, guide students to needed university support services, and where appropriate guide students to professional college advising staff.
   b. It is recommended that the CAC would also employ students in adequate numbers to provide initial student-to-student contact for incoming students, and perform such functions as providing general advice on student life on campus and escorting students to the site of support services or college advising staff.
c. It is recommended that the CAC advise all incoming students, including TSI liable students, transfer students, and undecided students.
   i. For students declaring majors in programs that retain responsibility for first year advising, the CAC will make arrangements for them to see an advisor in the appropriate college and follow up to see that the contact is made.
   ii. TSI liable students will be advised about and registered for appropriate developmental courses and basic skills sections of learning communities, as well as referred to CASA for intrusive advising, peer mentoring and supplemental instruction.
   iii. Students with declared majors that are progressing satisfactorily will be referred to professional advisors in their colleges with the completion of 30 hours or earlier in their second semester at the discretion of the CAC’s advising staff.
   iv. Undecided students would continue to be advised in the Center until they have chosen a major.

3. An Advisor Training and Professional Development Program. To assure that the new system functions well, it is recommended that a training and professional development program be implemented for all staff and faculty advisors.
   a. It is recommended that this program include:
      i. Such conceptual elements concerning the mission, philosophy, definition and/or role of advising as determined by the Advising Council.
      ii. Informational elements to assure familiarity and accurate information about student support programs, university policies, and academic programs
      iii. Relational skills development for interview skills, communication skills, rapport building, etc.
      iv. Support for professional travel to regional and national advising conferences and contacts with advising professionals on other campuses
      v. Formal certification in academic advising for key advising personnel to serve as trainers for other advising personnel on campus
   b. It is further recommended that a career ladder be instituted for professional advisors for recognition of professional development and excellence.

4. Spatial Consolidation of Central Advising and Student Support Services. Ideally (to the extent possible given future opportunities for space allocation), in the interest of service integration and student convenience it is recommended that as many fundamental advising and student support services be located in or contiguous to the CAC as is possible. Officials at each of the schools investigated stressed both the importance and advantages of having these functions centrally located in a nice physical space and easily accessible to one another.
   a. It is recommended that highest priority be given to (eventually) providing common space for the Advising Center and the support services for at-risk students (CASA on our campus).
      i. Housing these advising and developmental mentoring functions together has worked to great advantage at Sam Houston. West Texas is currently making arrangements to house the STARR Center with a number of other academic, social, and special populations support services in a large,
centrally located and remodeled facility. Officials at both institutions stressed the importance of convenience, immediacy of contact, and frequency of communication of such arrangements to seamless identification and processing of at-risk cases.

b. The importance of both the centrality and quality of facilities were also stressed by officials at all three institutions. A center with a high profile in a nice environment was deemed to be vital to communicating to students both the high priority and institutional support given the center, as well as the legitimacy of the process itself.

5. Retention of College Based Professional Advising Centers. It is recommended that the college based professional advising centers be retained in their current form. Shifting much of the first-year advising involving initial Core courses to the CAC should lift some of the case load from the college professional staff and allow them to better serve the needs of more senior college majors in pursuing distinct degree plans.

a. It is recommended that the function of graduation checks remain with the professional advisors in the colleges.

6. Advising Holds to Control and Assure Vital Advising Contacts. To effectively assure the provision of appropriate advising and guidance to needed academic and other support services, it is recommended that advising holds be used to channel students to the CAC for initial advising and guidance. Registration controls have been an essential part of the advising plans at each of the three institutions with which we’ve interviewed.

a. It is recommended that holds continue for each semester for TSI students that are deemed by CAC staff to remain at-risk, students that fall into probationary status, and all students that are undeclared until they choose a major.

b. It is recommended that an advising hold be placed on all students completing 90 hours to assure a graduation progress check with their college professional advisor to help assure timely graduation.