

**AQIP Academic Advising Action Project Report, Part 1:
First Year Students
March 1, 2010.**

Committee Members: Sr. Susan Rieke, Chair of the Languages Department and Advising Coordinator; Rick Silvey, Chair of the Math and Science Department; James Zimmerman, Sports Management Program Director; Brandon Johnson, Admissions Director; Lisa Beckenbaugh, Dean of Students; Wanda Owen, Registrar; Michelle Johnson, Nursing Advisor; Kay Kolb, ARC Director; Bryan Le Beau, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the College.

Project Background and Goals:

The AQIP Academic Advising Action Project was initiated in July 2008 with an initial target completion date of May 2009. Due to the pressure of completing the AQIP Systems Portfolio, and the demands that project made on faculty and staff time, Dr. Le Beau asked the Higher Learning Commission to move the completion date to May 2010. HLC approved the change. Dr. Le Beau also reported to HLC that: 1) the Academic Advising Project would be divided into two parts, both of which would be completed in the given time frame: (a) first year students; and (b) transfer students; and (2) that this project would be followed by an Action Project on the larger issue of retention. This report addresses improved academic advising for first year students.

As proposed in July 2008, the goal of the AQIP Academic Advising Action Project (AC) was to design a system for advising and mentoring that would enhance student learning and retention. The system would (1) ensure that all new students would be linked with a team of well-trained faculty and student services advisors for optimum academic and career advising; (2) support all students in investigating academic and career options while allowing early effective contact with programs of choice; and (3) assure strong mentoring relationships for all students through their course of study.

This project originated from a convergence of three issues: (1) decreasing accessibility to academic advising for students because of changing student profiles, especially the significant increase in transfer students and other students who live and work off campus; (2) campus satisfaction surveys that indicated inadequate communication of information leading students to feel overlooked and uninformed; (3) an increase in the number of students on academic probation requiring creative ways to use existing resources to address their academic, advising, and mentoring needs with more immediacy.

Recently gathered data on graduation rates and retention enforce the need to address these matters. These data show that USM six-year graduation rates over the past ten years have been lower than average as measured against USM's peer group of schools (KICA schools). USM's ten year average has been about 41%, versus a KICA average of approximately 47%. These same data also show that USM has lost about 40% of its first year students by the start of what would have been their second year (a first to second year retention rate of 60% versus a KICA average of 66%).

The goals originally set for this project were that after two semesters of implementation:

- (1) 95% of all students will have met or communicated with an advisor for key advising meetings, either individually or in a group, or via electronics, as the plan requires each semester;
- (2) 95% of new students will complete curricular graduation plans with their advisors (4-year plans for freshmen, 3 or 2 year plans for transfers);
- (3) Retention percentages for freshman to sophomore years and sophomore to junior year will increase by 5%;
- (4) All faculty advisors will receive special training in advising and mentoring with emphasis on first year and transfer students;
- (5) Semester data on academic probation numbers will indicate a decrease in the percentage of probationary students (AC suggests 5%).
- (6) Student satisfaction surveys will indicate an improvement in advising (AC suggests 5%).

It should be noted that in its AQIP Systems Portfolio, USM committed to increasing its six-year graduation rate to 45% and its first to second year retention rate to 65% by 2011.

Overview of process and considerations:

At the conclusion of its first year of study, the AC had reviewed existing data on retention and graduation and completed a review of the entire academic advising structure as it currently exists, from first contact of prospective students through graduation. The AC created a list of issues which it found important to address before recommending any changes in the academic advising system. In general, the AC concluded that where personal contact exists between faculty and staff and students, advising appears to be working well. Unfortunately, such contact is neither uniform nor inclusive of all, or perhaps even most, students, especially during their first year at USM. Exit interviews with students leaving the university, especially during their first year indicate that often they have not established any relationship with their advisors; many cannot even name their advisor. In sum, the “system” needs to be “tightened up” – to be more structured and inclusive.

The issues which the AC identified as needing further study included:

1. With what areas of advising should USM be concerned and which university groups (faculty, student life, etc.) should be responsible for those areas?

2. Should USM have an advising director to monitor academic advising and assure its continuous improvement?
3. Should all faculty be required to be involved in academic advising in one form or other (e.g. general academic advising, major advising)? Or should there be a select team of advisors (faculty and/or staff) specially trained for particular areas of advising – such as first year students, transfers, undeclared, etc.?
4. How do we assure the availability of advisors during the summer to meet with, and advise, incoming students? (The AC recognized that this is a more pressing matter for transfers than first year students.) The two June advising dates seem most problematic.
5. Should all students be required to meet with their advisors before being allowed to register? Where are lines of responsibility for students and the university to be drawn?
6. How do we strike a balance between USM's need for students and our wish to find students who are a "good fit" for the university and likely to benefit most from being at USM? Can we identify admissions criteria likely to lead to success at USM?
7. Should we build in a set of "early warning" signs that identify "at risk" students and provide special advising for them upon arrival, as well as intervention after the students are enrolled?
8. As class attendance is a key indicator of student failure, should all faculty be required to take and record attendance and a better absence alarm system created, including an effective follow-up/intervention system?
9. Should students be encouraged and provided with assistance in choosing majors and careers? As declaration of majors is another key indicator of student engagement and success, should students be required to declare a major and receive an advisor in that academic area, and if so, at what point?
10. Currently, incoming students meet with someone to advise them when they visit USM. They are then assigned an advisor when they register, usually someone different and that they do not know. And, often times, they wish to change advisors during their first years at USM, whether or not they have decided on, or changed, their major. How can we smooth out this process and assure a higher level of continuity?
11. How can we speed up the process of putting information on incoming students into the "system" so that advisors have accurate and current information from which to advise students and so that students can register online with the necessary information (e.g. prerequisites) available?
12. Are there ways by which Academic Affairs and Student Life can work more closely together on advising in its various forms (e.g. as part of an intervention process)?

13. As the number of students failing to meet the minimum requirement for math and composition is increasing (yet another key indicator of “at risk” students), do we need to do more with math and composition remediation to assure student success? (This has been sent to a separate committee for further consideration.)

14. Can we develop shared electronic files with advisor notes on students? (The committee was advised that this would likely lead to FERPA complications.)

15. What is the best way to identify students with learning disabilities and to provide appropriate support programs? (It was determined that this was mostly a matter of improved communication between Kay Kolb and the faculty as to the process involved, something Kay and Dr. Le Beau will address.)

16. How do we provide the information to advisors – faculty and staff – that they need to do their jobs?

A summary of the AC’s deliberations (obviously not including every conversation that took place over the course of three semesters):

The committee discussed all 16 issues, which in turn led to other considerations. As previously noted, members agreed that it was best to focus on academic advising at this point and on first year students in particular, to defer consideration of academic advising of transfer students until that was completed, and to recommend all other retention matters to a subsequent committee. It recognized that there were related areas that impact academic advising, but that they had to wait in order to recommend changes that could be implemented by fall 2010.

The AC discussed whether a director of academic advising was necessary. Sr. Susan Rieke has assumed this role over the past few years and spoke to the matter. The committee thought that having an academic advising director was a good idea. One suggestion was that a single individual might be tasked with being both retention and advising director, as the two are closely aligned.

The AC addressed the question of whether it might be advisable to create a cadre of trained staff advisors (not faculty) – creating an “advising office” – for “undeclared” students (not yet assigned to faculty in departments elected by the students). The committee did not reject the idea, but for cost and philosophical reasons (i.e. academic advising should be a faculty responsibility) found the idea of hiring non-faculty advisors neither feasible nor warranted at this time.

Advising of prospective first-year students up to the point at which they enroll is handled by Admissions. That seems to be going well, as most incoming first year students are scheduled for general education courses. The committee thought it imperative, however, that at least one faculty member from each department be available over the summer if needed to carry out this advising process. Further, where incoming students identify a likely major or at least a field of interest, they should meet with a faculty advisor in that

department. If that match can be made during the initial advising contact, even before officially enrolling, all the better.

The committee took up the matter of whether all faculty should be required to be involved in academic advising. The committee agreed that all faculty should be expected to participate in advising, and that they should in some manner – either in general advising of “undeclared” students or of majors. At this point, given the number of students and full-time faculty and with a process of equitable distribution (i.e. all faculty should “pull their own load”), this should be possible without overtaxing individual faculty. But as our numbers grow and when faculty take on disproportionately large advising loads, some form of compensation (e.g. time or money) may be warranted.

As the system currently operates, the following first year students are assigned to faculty who serve as “general” academic advisors:

- a. Students who have no particular major preference upon admission.
- b. Students who express interest in departments which do not accept majors upon initial enrollment.

Issue: Such faculty need to be prepared to advise students in academic matters outside their departments, mostly in general education, and kept current with any changes therein.

Issue: Students are often confused by the terms declared and undeclared, when applied to majors, especially when they have expressed an interest in a particular field, but continue to be listed as undeclared or assigned to faculty in other departments.

The AC recognized the important role the ARC and Career Planning could play in the academic advising process (e.g. choosing a major, exploring career options, completing a four-year plan, etc.) The committee agreed that both offices should be involved in the academic advising process in those areas.

After considerable conversation concerning the proper balance of personal responsibility on the part of students and the responsibility of the university to support student success, the AC agreed that students should have to visit with their advisors before being allowed to register for up to their first two years at USM. Thereafter, it is expected that most, if not all, students would have completed most of their general education requirements, declared a major, and been assigned a departmental advisor, with whom it is hoped they would have “bonded.” Thereafter, students would take personal responsibility in this matter, including the consequences of their actions.

It was further agreed, that if the previously noted advising requirement were to be adopted, the requirement would be limited to the student having visited with his or her advisor, at which point the advisor would make note of his or her recommendations and unblock the student’s registration. If the student chooses not to follow his or her

advisor's recommendations, s/he may register, but the student will take responsibility for his or her actions – which could result in delayed graduation and/or increased cost to the student.

The committee recognizes that logistical issues in online registration may have to be addressed to enforce the advisor rule noted above --- perhaps implementing a registration code or some other password sensitive “blocking” system.

A later observation was that early registration should be highly encouraged – perhaps an incentive provided. As the university continues to grow, and as scheduling is increasingly automated, students may find themselves closed out of classes they want, or even need, if not identified in the early registration process.

During the course of its deliberations, USM adopted a new First Year Experience program, which presented some promising options for academic advising – options which have been identified in the literature as “best practices” and as highly effective processes in improving retention, graduation, and student satisfaction.

One option is that the instructors of First Year Experience Classes could serve as general advisors for their students. Those students who determine what they want to declare as a major could be assigned to a faculty member in that department to serve as a co-advisor for the first year, at the end of which the departmental advisor would take full responsibility for that student. In the meantime, advising (including preparation for registration, assistance in choosing a major, preparing a four year plan, etc.) would be incorporated into the two course First Year Experience sequence.

The benefit of this arrangement is that first year students would not only be familiar with their advisors, but also that they would have regular contact with their advisors and programmed advising within the context of the First Year Experience. This has been highly successful at other colleges without placing any undue burden on faculty.

Issue: How would this work with a two course sequence where two different instructors might be involved? The First-Year Experience Committee has recommended that the same team of instructors be used for both semesters. Further, as early registration and advising for the second semester occurs during the first semester, the same instructor/advisor would be involved.

Issue: What if a student has not declared a major and been given a new advisor by the end of the first year? The committee agreed that every effort should be made to move students to declare majors by the end of the first year, not to limit their exploration of possibilities, but rather to find them a “home,” as the literature suggests that declaring a major positively impacts retention. This would also relieve the First Year Experience instructor of the need to carry forward such students as advisees.

Members of the committee pointed to practices at other universities, where students and advisors were given an electronic cumulative degree audit summary at each registration

period, which would list all required courses – gen. ed and major – with “check marks” indicating what had been accomplished, making clear what remains to be taken for graduation. Committee members who have experience with this system noted how much this simplified the advising system and lessened the chance for error. This also made it easier for students and advisors to plan ahead in anticipation of course rotations and to develop a four year graduation plan. Wanda Owen noted that this would be possible after the Advising Module is fully operational.

The committee agreed that developing a set of “risk indicators” would be highly beneficial, and that such indicators might be considered for prospective students and those already enrolled at USM. An initial scanning of the literature indicates that a list of “risk indicators” is readily available and easily compiled, but the reliability of such indicators for USM students would have to be refined over time. Among those factors that might be considered would be ACT scores, high school class rank, high school GPA, family income levels, first generation college students, etc. Brandon Johnson has begun to compile and test such a list.

The committee was insistent that such indicators should be treated carefully, so as not to “label” students in any way that might embarrass or stigmatize them. And further, that if students perform well during their first year at USM, less attention should be paid to such factors. It also agreed that identifying students with significant risk factors and proper attention to those students by the advisors and other appropriate support services (e.g. ARC, Student Life) is crucial.

The AC recognized the importance of having in place an “early warning” system for all students. Such indicators might include attendance, grades, classroom behavior, student/social life, etc. The details of just how this would work needs to be worked out, but a few of the ideas that came forward were that all faculty should use eSpire at least for attendance purposes, and that the system should be set up to report any high level of absence (to be determined) to a person (e.g. Retention Director, advisor), who would be responsible for intervening at the earliest possible date.

Another consideration was that grade checks be made of all first year students at the “20th Day” mark and that students appearing to be at risk (level yet to be determined) be identified and his or her advisor and Retention Director notified of the situation, with the expectation that the advisor would follow up and take appropriate action.

It was agreed that past practice suggests that neither of the above should be left to the discretion of individual faculty members, as too often such early signs either go unreported or are reported too late to allow for effective intervention. As one faculty added, this might require an “extra step” for instructors in the recording process, but that the automated system of recognizing and reporting at risk signals would eliminate an extra step on “the other end.”

Recommendations:

NOTE: The AC recognizes that there are consequences to nearly every recommendation it might make, commonly in a trade off of freedom of choice on the part of the student versus improved chances of success. It has tried to avoid recommending too rigid an academic advising system, as well as adding significantly to faculty “load.” But at the same time, it realizes that improvements must be made in retention and graduation, and that although improvements in academic advising will not be the only answer, they should improve the situation. Continued monitoring of retention and graduation rates, as well as the advising system will tell if these recommendations are effective and likely lead to continuous improvement, which is our goal. In many cases, the specifics and logistics of implementation remain to be developed.

1. The university should appoint a Director of Advising, whose responsibility shall be the monitoring of continuous improvement of academic advising. This position should be merged with that of Director of Retention.
2. The university should make clear that advising is a collaborative effort involving faculty and staff, including, but not limited to, admissions, student life, ARC, and Career Planning. (Consideration of the role of student mentors was postponed until the Retention Action Project Committee is formed.)
3. Advising of first-year students up to the point at which they are enrolled at USM should remain in the Admissions Office in consultation with academic departments. Academic departments should designate at least one individual to be available to Admissions for consultation in advising of incoming students. The department chairperson shall be this person unless s/he designates another faculty member to act on his or her behalf. Availability shall include summers on an as needed/call basis, and where chairs are not already being compensated for this summer work (e.g. 12 month contract, summer stipend, etc.) appropriate compensation should be offered.

The Academic Leadership Council recommends a \$500 stipend.

4. Regular information sessions should be offered to all faculty on changes in matters related to advising, especially in general education.
5. The Academic Leadership Council and the Registrar should address and clarify the matter of declared versus undeclared major status in student records.

In addition, the Academic Leadership Council recommends that a pre-major status be created, which would facilitate the assignment of departmental advisors in a timely manner.

6. All incoming students should be required to complete a four-year graduation plan and revisit that plan every registration period with their advisors. The ARC and the Career Planning Office should be actively involved in this process.

The Academic Leadership Council recommends that this be done in the First Year Experience classes with the assistance of the ARC and Career Planning Office.

7. During their first and second years, USM students should be required to visit with their advisors before being allowed to register for the subsequent semester. Thereafter, it would be strongly suggested but not required. This requirement would not insist that students be limited to what their advisors recommend, but rather that their advisors “sign off” that the student has consulted them and that a record has been completed and entered into the student’s file of what the advisor recommended. If the student chooses not to follow his or her advisor’s guidance s/he does so at his or her own risk. An appropriate “blocking system” should be put in place to enforce this requirement.

8. Once admitted USM students should be highly encouraged to avail themselves of early registration, perhaps even provided with an incentive to do so (or disincentive if not) unless they notify their advisors and receive their advisor’s approval of their reasons for not doing so.

9. The First Year Experience should become the main platform for academic advising for first year students.

a. Instructors would be the primary advisors for the students in their sections, although when those students decide on a major a faculty member from that department would be assigned to that student and assist in advising until the end of the first year, at which point that departmental faculty member would become the sole academic advisor.

b. First Year Experience instructors would build into their class meetings advising, four-year plan writing, and career planning, availing themselves of the support services the university provides in these areas.

10. Two alternatives on declaring a major:

Of the alternatives posed, the Academic Leadership Council favors b.

a. Every first year student should be required to declare a major and be assigned to a departmental advisor by the end of their first year. Where students are uncertain as to their major, they would be required to work with their First Year Experience instructors to choose a “most likely” major department.

b. First year students should be highly encouraged to declare a major and be assigned a departmental advisor by the end of their first year. Those who fail to do so would be assigned to one of a pool of general advisors with whom the student would remain for no longer than the end of their second year, at which point the student would be required to declare a major and be reassigned.

The reassignment of advisors would be necessary in order for the First Year Experience faculty member to take on another group of students/advisees during the next year. If

that faculty member is rotating off of the First Year Experience team, s/he could continue advising the undeclared student for the second year.

11. The Retention Director should develop, and continually refine, a set of “risk indicators” whereby “at risk” students would be identified and every effort made to provide assistance that will enhance the possibility of student success. “At risk” students would be identified to their advisors, and the Retention Director would work with those students and advisors to provide appropriate support.

Implementation has already begun.

12. Recognizing the importance of recognizing “early warning” signs of student failure and of the need for prompt intervention in such cases, faculty should be required to record attendance on eSpire. The notification system built into eSpire should be programmed to report excessive absences to the Retention Director, who would pursue each case in such manner as to best “rescue” the student from that situation. The Retention Director should work with the ALC to develop an appropriate response system.

The Academic Leadership Council had two recommendations:

1. The university should move toward providing laptops in classrooms in order to facilitate the taking and recording of attendance in eSpire. This would eliminate the extra step of taking attendance in class and recording attendance in eSpire after class.
 2. eSpire “alarms” should be set at four unexcused absences for students in classes that meet three times per week, and at three unexcused absences for classes that meet twice a week. These absences would not have to be consecutive. For any other class meeting schedule, a general rule would be unexcused absences in excess of one week.
13. Similarly, faculty teaching first year students should report the academic progress of those students (e.g. grades, possibly other forms of observable classroom behavior) for those students at the 20th Day mark, so that the advisors and Retention Director can intervene with those students showing signs of failure. The specifics of this reporting system remain to be developed.
14. The Registrar should proceed with all due speed to develop an electronic degree/academic audit program, whereby current advising reports would be provided to add advisors prior to every early registration period.

Next Steps:

These revised recommendations will be reported back to the faculty, to President, and to the Board of Trustees. They will also be included in the university’s final Action Project Report to the Higher Learning Commission.

Report of the AQIP Academic Advising Committee Report
Part 2: Transfer Students
March 1, 2010

In January 2010 the AQIP Academic Advising Committee issued Part 1 of its report on advising. That report focused on first year students. Part 2 of the committee's report addresses transfer students. The committee believes that the advising of transfer students is just as important and in many ways more challenging than advising first year students. In that spirit, and after reviewing the current advising process, the committee offers the following recommendations. Several recommendations made in Part 1 of the committee's report, which are relevant to transfer students as well, are assumed and, with a few exceptions, are not repeated in this report:

1. Faculty should be on call to advise transfer students interested in a particular major during the summer. The committee briefly discussed training someone in Admissions as a "generalist" advisor, but the committee decided it would be better to assure the availability of faculty. The committee recommended that department chairs be available for advising during the summer. Some chairs are already on a twelve-month contract. If they are not, they should receive a summer stipend for this assignment, or they may appoint another member of the department to do the job and receive the stipend.
2. EN 310 – the Transfer CORE -- should be modified to include some of the advising elements included in the First Year Experience – as is appropriate to that course for transfer students. Sr. Susan will look into this.
3. All transfer students should be required to complete a graduation plan with their advisor as soon as possible, but no later than the end of second semester following their first enrollment. That plan should be revisited and revised, as necessary, every semester. Forms can be found on the USM homepage by clicking on the Academics tab at the top of the screen and dropping down to the ARC. The program worksheet is in the middle of the ARC page on the right hand side; it is in the form of an Excel file, which totals credits as they are added.
4. Transfer students should be required to visit with their advisors before being allowed to register for the first two semesters of their enrollment. Thereafter, it would be strongly suggested but not required. This requirement would not insist that students be limited to what their advisors recommend, but rather that their advisors "sign off" that the student has consulted them and that a record has been completed and entered into the student's file of what the advisor recommended. If the student chooses not to follow his or her advisor's guidance s/he does so at his or her own risk. An appropriate "blocking system" should be put in place to enforce this requirement.
5. First year transfer students should be required to declare a major and be assigned to a departmental advisor by the end of their second year. Transfer students who enroll at the second year level or above should declare a major and be assigned to a departmental advisor within two semester of their first enrollment. Undeclared transfer students should

be assigned to a pool of general advisors (faculty and/or staff), who will work with them both to select courses and to decide on a major.

6. A special pool of general advisors should be identified to handle undeclared transfer students.
7. The Retention Director should develop, and continually refine, a set of “risk indicators” for transfer students, whereby “at risk” students would be identified and every effort made to provide assistance that will enhance the possibility of student success. “At risk” students would be identified to their advisors, and the Retention Director would work with those students and advisors to provide appropriate support.
8. Recognizing the importance of recognizing “early warning” signs of student failure and of the need for prompt intervention in such cases, faculty should be required to record attendance on eSpire. The notification system built into eSpire should be programmed to report excessive absences to the Retention Director, who would pursue each case in such manner as to best “rescue” the student from that situation. The Retention Director should work with the ALC to develop an appropriate response system.
9. Similarly, faculty should report on the potential failure of transfer students (i.e. failing grades and/or excessive absences) at the 20th Day mark, so that the advisors and Retention Director can intervene with those students. The specifics of this reporting system remain to be developed.
10. The Registrar should proceed with all due speed to develop an electronic degree/academic audit program for all students, whereby current advising reports would be provided to add advisors prior to every early registration period.