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DEPARTMENTAL ACADEMIC
ADVISING STUDY AT
WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

(REPORT 2005-01)

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January, 2005

DEPARTMENTAL ACADEMIC ADVISING AT WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Introduction

This report was commissioned by the Office of Survey Research at Western Washington University for two purposes. First, we were interested in determining the extent to which departments incorporated the Departmental Advising Model into their advising practices. Second, we wanted to ascertain whether departments had any unique advising systems in place for new transfer students. Therefore, we designed an interviewing instrument to probe these issues and contacted all departments to seek their participation (see Appendix A for the full text of the instrument). Survey participants included 24 of 34 (71%) WWU departments. Interviews typically lasted for 45 minutes, although several were as short as 30 minutes and others ran close to an hour. This report describes the findings from those interviews, discusses the implications, and provides some recommendations.

Background

With the advent of the accountability movement and state-mandated performance-based funding measures, infrastructure issues such as advising came to the forefront late in the 1990s. Previous surveys had repeatedly found that Western students were relatively dissatisfied with advising at Western, in particular with departmental advising (Report 1993-02). And Western is not alone. Nationally, dissatisfaction with Academic Advising is apparently a problem for most four-year institutions.

At the Provost's directive, a Departmental Advising Work Group was formed late in Winter 1998. Membership included advisors from colleges and departments across campus as well as the directors of Academic Advising Services, Career Services, the Office of Survey Research, and Admissions. Deliberations were informed by findings from a survey of Western departments (Report 1998-01), by research conducted by George Kriz (Report 1999-02), and by the extensive experience accumulated by the Work Group membership. The Work Group developed a Departmental Advising Model, which was instituted in Fall of 1999. This also served as Western's institution-specific accountability measure for the 1999-2001 biennium. The purpose of the model was to enhance student academic advising and performance on several other accountability measures (e.g. retention, student outcomes, and graduation efficiency). It consisted of five specifications:

1. An advising program that has one or more departmental advisors with clearly marked, readily available location and hours, who provide continuity and who perform advising for all majors, pre-majors and potential majors, including transfer advising, at least through declaration of the major (and typically beyond).
2. A departmental advising web page, constructed in coordination with a university-wide effort.
3. Provision of an individualized written plan of study for every major at or before declaration of the major.
4. Sponsorship of at least one event (workshop, open house, etc) per year widely publicized and open to all undergraduate students to help them explore a field as a potential major.
5. Sponsorship (or co-sponsor with Career Services) of an ongoing mechanism to help advanced majors explore career and graduate school options.

Interviewing Instrument

The interviewing instrument used in this study was designed to assess the degree to which departments had instituted these specifications. The instrument was also constructed with the knowledge that departments differ in their advising challenges, as well as the unique solutions they develop to meet the needs of their students, staff, and faculty. (See Appendix A.)

Logistic versus Content Advising

Academic advising encompasses two rather distinct components. The first component consists of the logistics required to be accepted into the major, navigate the course sequencing, offerings, and requirements, as well as the requirements for graduation from the major and the university. Most often, department managers or other staff members handled these aspects of advising. They provide students with course requirement bulletins, course offering information, respond to student questions via email, phone, and in person, and often maintain waiting lists for filled classes.

The second component of academic advising concerns course content, course work, information specific to the field of study, and career and graduate school advising. These aspects are addressed predominantly by faculty. Faculty members provide one-on-one advising to majors as well as to students interested in the major. They often conduct transfer course evaluations and also maintain class waiting lists. While faculty members unquestionably handle some of the logistical aspects of academic advising, their breed of advising is geared more towards academic content. This distinction between logistic and content advising is important to keep in mind when addressing the formal structure of departmental advising practices.

Results

Our findings suggest that overall, most departments had, in fact, implemented the Departmental Advising Model as of Fall 2004, whether they were aware of the model or not (only 13 of 24, or 54% of departments were familiar with the model). Below we discuss each aspect of the advising model and findings from the interviews.

Potential Major Advising

To help undeclared students explore their field as a potential major, 17 departments (71%) reported carrying out a department-sponsored event. Moreover, 14 (58%) reported attending a community college or admissions sponsored major fair, 8 (33%) reported attending the fall orientation information fair in Red Square, and 5 (21%) reported attending a residence hall major fair. Departments also reported participating widely in both Summer Start and Transitions days. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Events for Potential Majors

	%	N
Department sponsored event	71	17
CC- or Admissions-sponsored Major Fair	58	14
Fall Orientation Info Fair in Red Square	33	8
Residence hall Major Fair	21	5

The Process of Declaring a Major

Initial entry into a field starts with student exploration. Students who are considering a major (generally new transfers or sophomores) must take the initiative to contact people in the department to learn of the requirements for declaring, as well as clarifying whether the choice is a reasonable path for them to take. In general, departments reported that students interested in their major would initially seek out information from the department manager, another staff member, or a faculty member with whom they are familiar. Students are then advised of the necessary pre-requisites, GPA, portfolio, or other qualifications needed to declare that major. If a department includes a pre-major status (8 departments, or 33% of those interviewed), students are encouraged to register as pre-majors as soon as possible.

Once students declare their major, departments often assign them to a faculty member for advising. This faculty member advises the student for the remainder of their academic program—all the way through the student's senior evaluation and signs, usually in addition to the Department Chair, the graduation evaluation.

There are several variations on these general new-major advising practices. Three departments require students interested in their major to meet one-on-one with the chair of the department. The chair then reviews the student’s academic history and provides information concerning acceptance into the major, degree planning, and career advising. Also, three departments maintain a full-time advising staff member, who handles all logistical advising as well as declaration and senior evaluation procedures.

Advisor Contact Information

All 24 departments reported having a formal major declaration advisor, 20 departments (83%) reported that either a faculty or staff member had formal responsibility for advising potential majors, and 22 departments (92%) reported having a formal major advisor, as well as a formal transfer advisor. These are not distinct positions; rather, any given advisor may have formal responsibility for many or all types of advising.

Although the majority of departments reported having a formal advisor for each of these areas, most department staff and faculty also advised students informally on a drop-in basis. This ‘Open Door’ policy may be the rule rather than the exception in most departments. Yet while an Open Door-type advising practice may be beneficial to students in terms of the frequency and accessibility to one-on-one discussions, it may not promote the desired continuity between a formal advisor and advisee. By using informal channels, students may not get comprehensive or systematic help or information, especially concerning logistics of the program. This, in turn, may affect the timeliness of graduation. Conversely, having several points of contact for advising in the department may lead to students obtaining broader, more complex information about their field. The question is whether the benefit of this information (for students who seek it out) overrides the detrimental effects of lower continuity in their advising. (See Table 2.)

Table 2: Formal Responsibility Assigned to a Specific Faculty or Staff Member

	%	N
Advising potential majors	83%	20
Major declaration	100%	24
Major advisor	92%	22
Transfer student advisor	92%	22

Advising Web Pages

All departments reported having a departmental advising web page, 23 (96%) had advisor contact information and faculty and staff office and email information, 18 (75%) had FAQs and separate web pages for prospective and current students, 10 (42%) had links to other WWU advising services, and 9 (38%) had faculty and staff office hours. (See Table 3.)

Table 3: Advising Web Pages

	%	N
Advisor contact information	96%	23
Faculty and staff office location and email	96%	23
Faculty and staff office hours	38%	9
FAQs	75%	18
Prospective and current advising pages	75%	18
Links to WWU Advising Services	42%	10

Plan of Study

A plan of study is a personalized guide that helps students navigate through the required coursework for their major in the proper sequence. Since there are often several options to fulfill any given requirement, students need to plan which courses they will take to fulfill a requirement while also paying attention to when the courses are offered (e.g. Spring or Fall quarter) what the prerequisites are, and how often a course is taught (every year, every other year, etc.). Taking the time to complete a plan of study ensures that most of the complications that might arise in a student's progress toward a degree are addressed early on. Plans of study are essential to keeping students on track and on time.

Most departments, 21(88%), reported using a plan of study to aid students in advising, with 17 departments (71%) keeping a copy of that plan on file. In two departments, the decision to keep a student's written plan of study on file was based on faculty advisor discretion. Most often, departmental plans of study were designed as a tool for students to plan their course schedule and note their progress, not as a contractual agreement between the student and the department. In cases where the plan was used as a contract, the advisor employed it to designate accepted transfer courses, make course substitutions, and for senior evaluation.

Career and Graduate School Advising

Understanding how an academic major may feed into different occupations or graduate school options is one key to planning how students use their time at Western. Western's Career Services Center can provide some resources, but departments also can provide information,

insights and contacts for students. To best prepare for work opportunities after graduating, experience working in a related field is ideal. Internships and field experiences provide such an opportunity for students to earn college credit while working in a field related to their major.

Nearly all departments, 22 (92%), reported providing either internship opportunities or field experiences to students in their major. In addition, 8 departments (33%) reported sponsoring career exploration workshops and 2 departments (8%) reported conducting a career exploration workshop co-sponsored by the Career Center. All departments encouraged students to participate in campus career exploration activities and many maintained a listserv, bulletin board, or made class announcements in regards to career or graduate school activities. Finally, although only 7 departments (29%) reported having a staff or faculty member formally responsible for career advising, departments considered this an informal responsibility of all faculty members. Additionally, many departments had associated clubs that sometimes held career and graduate school information workshops and presentations. (See Table 4.)

Table 4: Career and Graduate School Exploration Opportunities

	%	N
Internships or field experiences	92	22
Department-sponsored career exploration workshops	33	8
Career exploration workshops co-sponsored with Career Center	8	2

Transfer Advising

Transfer students comprise roughly 40% of Western's graduates, yet little is done that recognizes the unique needs of this group. About half of them attend the new student program for transfer students called "Transitions," which provides an orientation to the campus and opportunities to meet with departmental advisors prior to the start of classes. However, new transfers are the last allowed to register for classes, even after Freshmen. A large portion of transfer students often arrives on the first day of the quarter, hoping to complete the complex process of transfer credit evaluation to declare their major so they can register for courses that are restricted to declared major students. This combination of processes tends to produce setbacks for transfer students, delaying their entry into the major, their completion of their degree, and dissatisfaction with their initial experience at Western.

Because the first point of contact for many new transfer students is the academic department in which they plan to major, the second component of this research project addressed departmental practices geared explicitly towards transfer students. Specifically, we were

interested in determining whether departments utilized any unique procedures when advising transfer students compared to those who started at Western as Freshmen. Although 22 departments (92%) reported that either a staff or faculty member was responsible for advising transfer students, this was frequently the only formal support afforded transfer students.

According to qualitative studies in several units on campus, a chief concern of transfer students is class access. This is an issue because most departments (19 or 79%) restricted course access to pre-majors or majors. In departments where class spaces were reserved, the number reserved was determined in large part by past experience with students seeking class admittance. Departments who did not reserve class space for non-majors or transfer students left class admittance decisions up to the faculty member.

Best Practices

While all departments employed unique solutions and considerable time to meet the challenges of student advising, several departments excelled in their advising practices. For example, the Sociology Departments as well as the College of Business and Economics have developed a web-based waiting list. Students interested in a class which has filled can go to the department's web page and list themselves for the course. Students provide information concerning their number of credits, time to graduation, and need for class access. This information is then used by faculty to make admittance decisions and provide course registration overrides. Although not a distinct component of academic advising per se, using the web-based waiting list significantly reduces staff and faculty time demands, allowing them to focus on other issues. The benefit to students is clear: they enjoy remote access to waiting lists rather than requiring them to come to the department to sign up. This is especially beneficial to transfer students who are most likely to need courses that have already filled and are also likely to reside off campus.

Although not central to academic advising, several departments have instituted ways of improving the student-department relationship. For example, the Economics Department puts together booklets containing a short bio and picture of each of the students who are declared majors and then gives them to faculty. The Physics and Astronomy Department posts pictures of all its majors on a bulletin board. These efforts may promote a more collegial, community like atmosphere in the departments, facilitating faculty and staff communication with students as well as advising practices. Other excellent advising practices include (but are certainly not limited to) the following:

- Huxley College maintains updated electronic records of all its majors.
- The Chemistry Department sends its majors a mailer each spring which includes updated class information and encouragement for students to see their advisors.
- The Chemistry Department also does extensive tracking of its alumni and facilitates student-alumni contact.
- Fairhaven College has an initial 5-credit orientation course which covers advising practices and general orientation to their program.

- Several departments maintain a listserv, which is used to distribute career and graduate school information to majors (including, but not limited to the Geology, Communications, History, Journalism, Physics and Astronomy, and Sociology Departments).
- Advisors in the Theatre Arts Departments use a standardized form to record each time a student visits, the topic of conversation, and any resulting action decisions, which students must then sign and date. The form is kept along with other student records by the advisor, providing strong continuity in the discussions students have with their advisors.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that most WWU departments are in compliance with the Departmental Advising Model, whether intentionally or inadvertently. Although this gives the impression that most departments have a highly-structured advising practice, our results suggest that most academic advising is relatively informal, based primarily on an “Open Door” type policy, and without strong, uniform protocols in place or documentation occurring beyond the plan of study and the submission of required forms.

Although there are some benefits to having an informal system in terms of time demand for faculty advisors and the richness of the information provided to students who seek out several sources of information, the lack of structure may also account for the relatively high levels of dissatisfaction alumni express in surveys when asked about departmental advising.

Since advising is not mandatory, some students only contact advisors when logistical issues arise that require signatures. As a result, many students may graduate having only spoken to a staff member or advisor twice – once to declare their major and once to complete their graduation evaluation.

Students typically seek out this kind of logistical advising from department managers or other staff while they get most of their content advising from faculty. This division, while not always formal, appears to be the result of faculty members’ general lack of knowledge about frequently changing requirements, procedures and policies, which managers and staff typically handle on a daily basis. Thus, staff members are often in a better position to address departmental and university logistical issues than faculty.

Students transferring from other universities face many challenges, including course and major access and time to graduation. Our findings suggest that although nearly all departments have a formal transfer advisor, few other resources are afforded these students. Class space is rarely reserved for transfer students, which affects major access, time to graduation and retention. This issue is complex, however, because the potential for class reservation is influenced by the number of course offerings, course sequencing, major prerequisites, and the need to give class access priority to majors and pre-majors. Therefore, transfer student course and major access remains a topic of study, which will be addressed by the Western Education Longitudinal Study (WELS) of 2005.

Each department faces its own unique advising challenges and each department develops its own unique solutions to these challenges. Furthermore, not all factors influencing advising practices are under departmental control. For example, departments may have a high student-faculty ratio (such as the Psychology Department), no staff employees or no staff engaged in academic advising, or they may not have the resources available to attend community college information fairs.

Recommendations

There are certain methods departments could employ which may contribute to better advising practices and cost little in the way of resources. Departments may consider instituting web-based waiting lists, a listserv to distribute graduate school and career information to majors, maintaining an alumni data base which students could use for career planning purposes, and updating web pages to include faculty and staff contact information and quarterly office hours as well as links to Western Advising Offices.

In addition to departmental level change, colleges might consider instituting a modicum of uniform practices to provide continuity and clarity to students seeking departmental advising. By having at least some standardization, students could more easily learn what is required to declare, progress and graduate, and a certain extent of their learning could be transferable from one department's system to another.

Leaving advising to students' discretion may also hamper some students' progress, particularly those who are unfamiliar with university systems (e.g. first-generation college attendees, who make up a large portion of Western's student body). Mandatory initial and periodic visits with an advisor to discuss progress toward a degree may help make students' experiences of departmental advising more positive and more uniform. Furthermore, to insure class access, transfer students need additional assistance making contact with their advisor prior to class registration. For example, it may facilitate earlier major declaration to include a "request to contact your major advisor" form in a transfer's admittance letter. With major or pre-major status established, greater course access is allowed. We also recommend that, based on total number of credits, transfer students be allowed to register along with currently registered students.

APPENDIX A:
DEPARTMENTAL ADVISING SURVEY FORM

Fall 2004 Departmental Advising Survey

Accessibility to Information

1. To begin with, can you tell me how students can find an advisor in your department?
For example, how would a potential student find someone to talk with about their interest?

Probes:

- a. Does that include information about how or when they can be reached? (Are advisors available by office hours, or by appointment? Email? What about online?)
- b. What about signage in hallways or on doors?
- c. Is there any other way students find out about how to get advising in your Department?

Plan of Study

2. Does your advising program include working with a student on a written plan of study before they declare their major, or at the time of declaration?
 1. YES – before they declare the major
 2. Yes – at the time of declaration
 3. NO
 4. UNSURE

3. Is there a standard form used to record students' plans of study?

Probe: Get a copy of any documents they use to help students devise a plan of study/ or forms they fill out to record their decisions.

- 3a. Is a copy kept on file in the department?
 1. YES
 2. NO
 3. UNSURE

Advising Web Page

4. Do you have a department web page specifically designated for advising, for example one that includes contact information for advisors in your department, information for prospective students, procedures for declaring, and so on?
 1. YES
 2. NO
 3. UNSURE

Exploration of the Major

5. There are a number of ways departments provide information and advising to students who are undeclared. I'd like to read you a short list of them, and would you let me know what your department has done, if anything, in the last two to three years?

	YES	NO	UNSURE
a. A department-sponsored event to help undeclared students explore your field as a potential major (Describe)?	1	2	3
b. Community college or admissions-sponsored major fairs?	1	2	3
c. The fall orientation info fair in Red Square?	1	2	3
d. WWU residence hall major fairs?	1	2	3
e. Are there any other events your department provides for undeclared students? (Please describe)	1	2	3

Undeclared student advising

6. Does anyone in your department have formal responsibility for advising students who are interested in a major but not yet declared?

1. YES
2. NO
3. UNSURE

Probes:

- a. How are responsibilities for advising potential majors handled by your department?
- b. How many faculty/staff?
- c. Is the chair formally involved?
- d. Are there student/peer advisors (how many?)

PreMajor/PreMajor Student Advising

7a. Does your department have a formal pre-major declaration that precedes full major access?

1. YES
2. NO –skip to 8.
3. UNSURE

7b. If yes, does anyone in your department have formal responsibility for advising pre-majors?

1. YES
2. NO
3. UNSURE

Probes:

- a. How are responsibilities for advising pre-majors handled by your department?
- b. How many faculty/staff?
- c. Is the chair formally involved?
- d. Are there student/peer advisors (how many?)

Major Declaration/Major Advising/Major Evaluation

8. Does anyone in your department have formal responsibility for doing Major Declarations?

1. YES
2. NO
3. UNSURE

Probes:

- a. How are responsibilities for doing major declarations handled by your department?
- b. How many faculty/staff?
- c. Is the chair formally involved?
- d. Are there student/peer advisors (how many?)

9. Does anyone in your department have formal responsibility for doing Major advising?

1. YES
2. NO
3. UNSURE

Probes:

- a. How are responsibilities for advising majors handled by your department?
- b. How many faculty/staff?
- c. Is the chair formally involved?
- d. Are there student/peer advisors (how many?)

10. Does anyone in your department have formal responsibility for conducting major evaluations for graduation in your department?

1. YES
2. NO
3. UNSURE

Probes:

- a. How are responsibilities for conducting major evaluations handled by your department?
- b. How many faculty/staff?
- c. Is the chair formally involved?
- d. Are there student/peer advisors (how many?)?

Transfer Advising

11. Does anyone in your department have formal responsibility for advising transfer students?

1. YES
2. NO
3. UNSURE

Probes:

- a. How are responsibilities for advising transfer students handled by your department?
- b. How many faculty/staff?
- c. Is the chair formally involved?
- d. Are there student/peer advisors (how many?)?

12. Do you have any unique systems in place for transfer students?

1. YES
2. NO
3. UNSURE

If yes, please describe.

13. Are there any other differences between the handling of transfer students and non-transfer students that you are aware of?

Career Advising

14. Does anyone in your department have formal responsibility for Career Advising?

1. YES
2. NO
3. UNSURE

Probes:

- a. How are responsibilities for career advising handled by your department?
- b. How many faculty/staff?
- c. Is the chair formally involved?
- d. Are there student/peer advisors (how many?)?

15. I'd like to read you a list of some of the kinds of activities departments might provide for majors to explore career and graduate school options. Please let me know if your department has provided any of them in the past 2-3 years. Does your department provide:

	YES	NO	UNSURE
a. Opportunities for internships/field experiences?	1	2	3
b. Department sponsored career exploration workshops? If yes, how many and what kind?	1	2	3
c. Career exploration workshops co-sponsored with the Career Center?	1	2	3
d. Required courses, which include career exploration?	1	2	3
e. Encouragement for students to participate in campus- sponsored career exploration activities? Please describe: (Class announcements, listserv?)	1	2	3
f. Please describe any other career or graduate school exploration activities provided by your department?	1	2	3

16. Is there any other kind of advising your department does, (that we haven't covered)?

Major Access and course access

17. Do you have a cap on the number of students you admit into your major?
1. YES
 2. NO
 3. UNSURE

If yes, how many?

18. Do you have course, GPA, or other requirements for entry into your major?
1. YES – continue with 17a
 2. NO
 3. UNSURE

17a. If yes, how long have these restrictions been in place?

17b. If these were recently changed, can you recall the parameters from prior years?

19. Do you restrict courses for declared majors only?
1. YES – continue with 19a
 2. NO
 3. UNSURE

19a. If yes, is there a process for students to gain entry to classes if they are not a declared major? Please describe.

20. Are course restrictions lifted anytime during the registration process?
1. YES If yes, please describe:
 2. NO
 3. UNSURE

21. Do you reserve space in your classes for students who have not yet declared their major or transfer students?
1. YES – continue with 18a
 2. NO
 3. UNSURE

18a. If so, how is the number of spaces reserved determined?

22. When students want to get into a class that is full, does your department have a process students follow, for example an override system or waiting lists? Please describe.

23. How well do you feel your system for course and major access works for faculty and advisors in your department?

24. How well do you feel your system for course and major access works for the students?

Advising Model

25. In 1999 an advisors' task force created a departmental advising model. The model was designed to help colleges and universities respond to some of the challenges of advising. Are you familiar with the model?
- A. YES
 - B. NO – skip to 25
 - C. UNSURE
26. To what extent, if at all, do you feel that your department has implemented this model?
27. Are there aspects of the Departmental Advising Model that you feel are particularly beneficial to students?

Final Items

I have just four more questions to ask you.

28. First, Does your department use any advising strategies that you think are unique to the campus?
29. Are there advising practices that you'd like to be doing, but are unable to? (Why?)
30. How successful do you think your department is in advising students into and through the major?
- A. Extremely
 - B. Very
 - C. Somewhat
 - D. Not Very
 - E. Not at All
 - F. Don't Know
31. (If not extremely) What obstacles do you feel your department must overcome in order to achieve a successful advising practice?

Department _____
Contact _____
Title _____
Appointment Date/Time _____