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# Best Practices in Departmental Advising

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Best Practices in  
Departmental Advising

(Report 1999-02)

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## INTRODUCTION

This report was commissioned by the office of the Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs in September 1998. The charge for this report directed to the author was to develop a manual of “best practices” in departmental advising of majors. This report fulfills that charge, and it also goes beyond the original charge to include some recommendations intended to strengthen current advisement practices.

## BACKGROUND

With the advent of the accountability movement and state-mandated, performance-based funding measures, an examination of a variety of issues regarding student retention and progress toward graduation has been taking place on Western’s campus. Among them, an examination of the state of academic advising has been in progress. Clearly, helping students make wise decisions about course selection and clear plans of study also helps them make more efficient use of the faculty resources that Western can provide.

In this light, the Provost’s Accountability Work Group recommended to Provost DeLorme that a subgroup be established to formulate recommendations of ways in which departmental advising at Western could be improved, as well as to recommend ways to improve Western’s accountability measures of advising services. At the Provost’s directive, the Departmental Advising Work Group was formed during Winter Quarter 1998. Membership included advisors from colleges and departments across campus, as well as the Registrar and the directors of the Academic Advising Center, the Career Services Center, and the Office of Admissions.

The final report of the Departmental Advising Work Group contains many recommendations, including implementation of a Departmental Advising Model. This model includes three progress check points:

- 1 All students must apply for an *intended major* (or declare a major) by the time they have earned 60 credits or at the time of admission, whichever comes later.
- 2 All students must declare a major by the time they have earned 120 credits.
- 3 All students must maintain satisfactory progress in their major, with satisfactory progress to be monitored by each department.
- 4 All students must submit a Degree Application (“Senior Evaluation”) no later than two quarters before graduation.

Another recommendation included in the report of the Departmental Advising Work Group is that a faculty member be funded to interview all Western departments and colleges and to produce a “best practices advising handbook,” along with an assess-

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ment of the resource implications of moving to the departmental advising model proposed by the Work Group. The faculty member preparing this report would be expected to:

- 1 Prepare a report describing “best practices” in department advising. These could include exemplary practices demonstrated to be particularly useful or effective and also ideas that seem interesting but are less proven. The goal is to share information and stimulate enhancements by Western’s departments.
- 2 Include a review of how close Western’s departments and colleges are to the proposed advising model. This review would include how many programs now cover each element, how many are very close to complying with all elements, and how many face major changes in order to comply.
- 3 Prepare an assessment of new resources, if any, needed by Western’s departments and colleges in order to comply with the proposed advising model.

The Work Group recommended that the study should be completed during the summer of 1998, so that it could be a part of advising policy discussions by the Academic Coordinating Commission and other panels.

I was appointed as the faculty member who would be responsible for developing the “best practices” report. Owing to delays in setting up the accounting system necessary to implement funding, the project was not begun until Fall Quarter 1998. During Fall Quarter, I interviewed representatives of each academic department that dealt with undergraduate students, as well as other individuals and officials who have important roles to play in the advising of undergraduates. The results of my interviews of nearly 40 faculty or staff members and university officials and my analysis of the information I have gleaned have now been assembled and are included here.

As I began interviewing departments, it quickly became apparent that I should not strictly confine myself to the narrow charge of developing a “best practices” manual alone. Rather, I believe that a complete report on my survey should include additional recommendations about departmental advising and about the advising model proposed by the Departmental Advising Work Group.

## **BEST PRACTICES IN DEPARTMENTAL ADVISEMENT**

It would be tempting to identify one or two clever and innovative methods of presenting advisement information to students and thereby solve the advisement problem. Unfortunately, a workable solution is not likely to be that simple. A solution is not likely to come without some attached costs, either.

On a campus with more than 12,000 students, it is no longer possible or desirable to establish a system of pre-registration signature control for each student. Students must

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always understand that it is *their* responsibility to seek out appropriate advisement, as needed. The University has the obligation to provide good advisement, but the students must also seek it out themselves.

Owing to different learning styles and different means by which students absorb information, the best means of delivering advisement information is to do it in multiple formats. Some students will always seek out personal advisement, some students will prefer to obtain their information *via* the Internet, and some students are more likely to collect advisement information by attending meetings or gathering information hand-outs. For this reason, this report contains many interesting methods of getting information to students. All of these methods should be considered and evaluated as an academic program develops its own implementation of advising services.

## FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT WITH AN ADVISOR

Clearly, there is no substitute for individual, personal contact between an advisor and a student. Many departments and programs have gone to considerable lengths to ensure that such contact will be possible and that the advisors will be readily available to consult with students.

The form of this individual advisement varies from program to program. In some departments, nearly every faculty member is expected to play an advisement role, and students are assigned to faculty to keep the workload approximately equal for each faculty member. Wherever possible, students may be assigned to advisors whom they know from classes or who teach in the student's particular interest area.

Advantages of this approach, besides giving students the impression that there are people at the University who know them and care about their progress, include the ability to customize programs for students. For example, transfer students may arrive on campus with some, but not all of their basic course requirements for their major completed. Individual advisement allows the advisor and the student to develop a plan of study that allows the student to take the missing basic courses while still being able to take a reasonable selection of more advanced courses. This approach ensures that the student makes good progress toward the completion of his or her degree.

Some programs designate specific individuals, generally faculty members, who fulfill the advisement role for the academic unit. Faculty members who are advisors receive compensation in the form of a reduced teaching assignment or are relieved of other administrative obligations (*e.g.*, committee assignments) in exchange for this service. A few areas rely on a specific classified staff person to act as departmental advisor.

The success of individualized advisement depends on several factors, but the most important is availability. In the most successful examples, advisors post frequent office hours for advisement or hold "open" office hours, and they try very hard to work with

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the student to set up an advisement appointment. The advisors also maintain records on each student and update these records with each student contact.

There is a difference of opinion about whether advisement should be accomplished by faculty members or whether a classified staff person is equally (or better) qualified to act as an advisor. Many faculty feel that advisement is an important part of a faculty member's role. Furthermore, it is felt that having a faculty member as an advisor sets a better, more professional tone for the students and for the students' parents. On the other hand, a few programs, notably Theater Arts, Music, Sociology, and the Huxley College of Environmental Studies, have very successful advisement programs that are handled by classified staff. A staff person is able to devote full time to advisement, thereby improving student access to advisement while freeing faculty to pursue teaching and scholarship duties. Often, when a staff person is the advisor, faculty members also participate in advisement, but in a different role. In these cases, faculty may take on the special role of career advisor or pre-professional mentor. In my interviews with departments, I have seen advantages and disadvantages in each system. Therefore, I am unwilling to recommend whether or not the advisor should be a faculty member. It is better to allow each program to develop its advisement system in the manner that best suits its students.

In one academic unit on campus, a major role in advisement is assumed by an elite group of undergraduate students. The students, who act as peer advisors, are selected very carefully based on their academic record. While that unit is proud of this group and the work that they do, I do not feel that this is a model that I would recommend as something that other programs should emulate. In general, undergraduate students lack the expertise to carry the main burden of advising. Furthermore, surveys of student opinion reflect a generally lower level of satisfaction with peer advising for majors.<sup>1</sup>

## TRAINING OF DEPARTMENTAL ADVISORS

Clearly, the success of an advisement program will depend upon how much training the advisors, either faculty or staff, receive. A "best practice," therefore, is providing advisors with thorough training to prepare them for the task. This training should be comprehensive, and it should include frequent updates to acquaint advisors with changes in requirements in related programs. Ideally, this training includes presentations from outside the particular academic unit so that advisors can keep abreast of changes in related programs that provide supporting courses.

One form of training that could be established is the development of a web page or a list serve for departmental advisors. Postings dealing with updated course or major

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Simpson, Department of Sociology, personal communication.

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requirements, prerequisites, and announcements of training opportunities could be made, and advisors could take advantage of these without having to devote a great deal of time.

Currently, no academic unit in which faculty act as advisors provides extensive advisor training. The current state of communication among related departments is often so poor that information about course and scheduling changes is very difficult for advisors to obtain. In some areas where classified staff are designated advisors, there is some support for these people to participate in workshops and to join NACADA, the professional organization for academic advisors. Much more needs to be done in this area.

## EXIT INTERVIEWS

Some departments use exit interviews as a means of evaluating the success of their program, identifying problem areas, and learning about the perspective of the students as they pass through the program. In fact, the use of exit interviews has been proposed as a useful means of providing meaningful, systematic assessment data.<sup>2</sup>

In the form used by the Department of Chemistry, students participate in the exit interview by completing an anonymous questionnaire, which is returned to the department by mail. Before being given the questionnaire (and stamped, self-addressed envelope), the student is interviewed, and the purpose of the exit interview is explained. For the chemistry department, approximately 75% of students return their questionnaires. Many of the student responses are quite lengthy; it is clear that students take their responsibility very seriously. The results of the questionnaires are summarized and kept on file for review by the department chair and the departmental curriculum committees. The results are also used as supporting information for accreditation reviews by professional societies (e.g., American Chemical Society). A similar questionnaire is also mailed to alumni of the department five years after graduation, to obtain their perspective on the department's programs after being out in the professional world.

## WEB PAGES

Many departments have developed attractive and informative web pages that can be accessed *via* links from Western's home page. These web pages include information for students about which basic required courses to take, how to make an application for the major, how to make contact with a major advisor, how to prepare for the department's "portfolio" requirement, which areas of specialization are offered by the academic unit, what undergraduate research opportunities are available, how to apply for undergraduate instructional assistantships or work study positions, how to investigate career opportunities, how to join the department's professional organization or student club, and so on.

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph J. Dreisbach, Thomas P. Hogan, Anne Marie Stamford, and John W. Grerro. "Focus Groups and Exit Interviews are Components of Chemistry Department Program Assessment." *Journal of Chemical Education*, 75 (October 1998): pp. 1330-1332.

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Particular web pages that may serve as useful models include those developed by the Departments of Communication, Elementary Education, and Finance, Marketing, and Decision Sciences. Many other departments also have informative web pages that can serve as models.

The development of web pages requires a certain expertise that is not generally available in every department. It would seem appropriate that the Deans of the various colleges provide departments with assistance as needed.

It seems that there are two types of people in this world: those that feel that computers hold the answers to most problems and those that distrust computers as devices that get in the way of true interpersonal communication. I do not wish to suggest here that departments should devote large resources of time and energy toward the development of attractive web pages without first considering putting into a place a strong system of individual advisement of students. Web pages can be a useful *tool* to use in the advisement process, and many students may find that they provide easy access to information. Web pages, however, should never be considered as *replacements* for one-on-one advisement.

## ADVISEMENT SHEETS AND HANDBOOKS

Many departments have developed advisement sheets that are available as handouts for students interested in preparing to declare a major. Some departments have expanded these handouts into attractive and well-written handbooks. The development of these advisement materials should be encouraged. Particularly well prepared examples include materials developed by the Departments of Anthropology, Sociology, and units within the Woodring College of Education.

In departments that have a highly sequential curricular structure, advisement sheets often contain an outline of the recommended order of courses, showing which courses should be taken in each quarter. Sometimes, this outline may be described in the form of a flow diagram; sometimes it is in the form of a table. Check-lists may be included to help students monitor their progress. Information in this form can be very helpful to the student. Useful examples have been developed by the Departments of Chemistry and Biology.

There is a temptation, however, to include too much information in one of these flow diagrams. I was shown one flow diagram that was as complex as the circuit diagram for a modern electronic device; it would be difficult to understand how a student new to the department could possibly understand it. Departments should consider reviewing the information they provide with an eye toward simplifying it and making it more clearly understood, particularly by persons unfamiliar with the program.

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## PLANS OF STUDY

Many departments require students to develop plans of study for the completion of their majors. These plans of study are developed by the student and the advisor, working together. In most cases, the plan of study is kept on file in the department office. As the student progresses through the program, changes in the plan of study are inevitable. Adjustments to the plan of study can be made by asking the student to make frequent contact with the advisor.

The advantage of having the student develop a plan of study is that it obliges the student to make clear, focused plans for the completion of the degree. A disadvantage is that it may discourage a student from taking a variety of elective courses to develop a secondary interest outside the major.

## REQUIRED ADVISEMENT MEETINGS

The nature of today's university and its student body make mandatory advisement each quarter an unworkable procedure. To some extent this is unfortunate and may be considered part of the "down side" of becoming a large, more complex institution with a more diverse, independent-minded student body. Some departments, however, require their students to make regular contact with their advisors. The frequency of this contact varies, with some departments asking students to contact their advisor each quarter and other departments requiring student to meet their advisors once a year (generally toward the end of Spring Quarter).

For those programs where the curricular structure is sequential in nature and where many of the classes required for the major are rigidly prescribed, a program of required contact between the student and his or her advisor is a very important practice.

## DEPARTMENTAL ADVISING WORKSHOPS

Some academic units schedule advising workshops for students. These workshops explain the unit's program to the students, outline the courses that must be taken before the student can be admitted to the major, and help the student negotiate required course sequences. At the same time, these workshops can also be used to inform students about interesting opportunities such as undergraduate research, teaching practica, and work-study. The availability of departmental scholarships may be announced at these meetings. When a department chooses to hold a series of workshops, additional topics that may be presented are resumé-writing, the job application process, how to apply to graduate school, etc.

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## NEWSLETTERS

Some departments have found success with quarterly newsletters to students. The Department of Sociology has previously used this device to good effect. It is an efficient means of disseminating information to a large number of students. The newsletter can include information about course changes, important dates, opportunities for research, etc.

Some departments go beyond this relatively basic form to develop comprehensive newsletters that are distributed to students and alumni. In this form, newsletters will include feature articles about specific faculty or research programs and updates on the activities of faculty and former students. The newsletter can also be used as a means of encouraging alumni to contribute financially to support the activities of the department. Funding agencies often encourage departments to develop regular, informative newsletters to maintain contact and encourage support from alumni. It must be recognized, however, that the production of a well-designed newsletter can be a very time-consuming process.

## PROFESSIONAL CLUBS AND SOCIETIES

Some academic units have professional clubs or student chapters of professional societies available for students. These groups can also play an important role in the advisement of students. They can act as sponsors of the advisement workshops mentioned above. They can also provide a source of tutoring services in the department. Contacts with alumni, who share their perspective on the profession with students, can be arranged through these groups. Most important, these clubs and societies provide students with a sense of belonging within the unit and a place where students can share their views on courses and requirements. Units should be encouraged to get their clubs or student chapters more actively involved in the advisement process.

## ALUMNI REUNIONS

A few departments, generally those in the College of Business and Economics, maintain very close ties with their alumni and invite alumni to campus on a regular basis. At these reunions, students are able to meet with alumni and hear their views on the nature of their profession, which courses are the ones that are the most important to take, how to prepare for professional examinations, and how to prepare for the job market. Alumni participation of this type can be a useful adjunct to the advisement process. When alumni become actively involved in the affairs of the academic unit, they may also become more inclined to provide financial support to the unit!

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## WORKSHOPS AND ADVISEMENT FAIRS

While there are many initiatives under consideration to improve the advisement of students who are already declared as majors within a department, attention must also be paid to students who have not yet chosen a major. To this end, departments should be encouraged to participate in the advisement “fairs” and workshops that are held periodically on campus. These fairs are generally held in the Viking Union or in one of the dormitories.

During Summerstart and Transitions, a few departments maintain information tables during the picnic lunches on the lawn in front of Old Main. The Departments of Biology, Physical Education, Health and Recreation, and Theater Arts are frequently participants at these events. The information dispensed during these events can be helpful to students who are still undecided about which program to pursue.

## ARTICULATION WITH COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Students who are currently attending community colleges represent a large block of students who are still in the exploration stages regarding the selection of a major. In most cases, these students have been focusing on taking the required GUR courses, and they may not have given a great deal of thought to preparation for a specific major. Some programs, particularly Anthropology, Engineering Technology, and Environmental Studies, make an effort to visit community colleges and help advise potential transfer students. In many cases, information provided at the community college can help a student choose which courses to take before transferring to Western (or which quarter in which to transfer). By having taken the correct preparation courses, they may be able to avoid having to spend extra time once they have transferred to Western. This activity should be encouraged.

In some cases there may be a professional association that holds regular meetings that bring community college and university faculty together. A notable example is the Washington College Chemistry Teachers Association. The WCCTA meets annually, and a regular part of its program is a series of round-table discussions where two-year and four-year faculty sit down to discuss matters of articulation and matching of course requirements. This activity is very valuable, and Western faculty should be encouraged to stimulate the development of such meetings.

## CAREER ADVISEMENT

Besides helping our students select the appropriate courses and earning their baccalaureate degrees, advisors have the additional responsibility of helping students

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choose a suitable career path. This path may take the student to graduate or professional school, or it may involve stepping into the industrial or business world. To this end, department programs that help students make the correct decisions about their futures after graduation are very important.

Some departments regularly schedule meetings with representatives of graduate programs, pre-professional advisors, and representatives of industry. Frequently, these meetings are scheduled in conjunction with a department presentation; an open meeting for students to meet the presenter is announced for some time earlier in the day of the presentation. An individual who is working in the industrial/business environment can often share a perspective with students that faculty, many of whom have never worked outside the academic system, cannot easily provide.

## STUDENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS

The advisement process can benefit if the advisor has current information about the progress of a particular student, whether the student has completed required course sequences, whether the student is performing well, or whether the student is on the verge of academic difficulty. This information should be very helpful to the advisor as he or she attempts to counsel the student. With the advent of the new degree audit system, it is hoped that this information will be easily obtained in a useable format. Currently, access to such useful information can be had only with difficulty.

An exception is in the College of Business and Economics, where the Proton system has been operating for several years. The Proton system can serve as a good working model as the campus-wide degree audit system is developed.

## ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT TO ADVISING

Western Washington University must make a commitment to academic advising. A model for this commitment could be “intrusive advising,” advocated by Glennen.<sup>3</sup> This model is based on the philosophy that institutions should not wait for students to get into trouble before they begin to offer advising services. This system uses faculty as advisors. Faculty receive reduced time from their normal teaching to assist in the advising program. Advisors disseminate information, give advice, and provide services to students, generally from a centralized advising center. Advisors meet with high school and community college students who are prospective applicants, give orientation talks on admissions procedures, assist students in selecting courses, inform students about requirements for specific majors, verify graduation requirements, provide

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<sup>3</sup> Robert E. Glennen. “Obtaining Presidential Support for Advising.” *NACADA Monograph Series No. 2* (1995): pp. 11-14.

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information on possible advanced study or professional opportunities, assist students in setting goals and being responsible in attaining them, and assist students in graduating and obtaining their degrees.

When faculty advise, the institution must provide in-service preparation for those involved since they often have no formal education in the field of student advisement. This approach provides for regular meetings of advisors in which they learn about the curriculum and graduation requirements. They also learn about methods of improving their counseling techniques. Advisors are encouraged to attend advisement meetings and workshops and to belong to NACADA, the professional organization for advisors.

The University administration has the responsibility for implementing appropriate organizational structures to enhance academic advisement. Administrative support is crucial for success in an academic advisement program. The administration is responsible for ensuring that the University—which has as its stated mission a focus on “the quality of co-curricular programs, integrated student support services...” and “to strengthen counseling and academic advising,”<sup>4</sup>—continues to emphasize the academic and personal development of students and facilitates educational growth through the implementation of advising and programming activities that are designed to be responsive to the needs of the students. A formal policy statement should be developed and published in the General Catalogue. This statement should make it clear that the University is committed to assisting students to achieve their potential through, among other functions, a focused concern on the students’ individual needs and through special attention to individualized advisement and counseling services.

The administration of the University must be visibly supportive of campus academic advising efforts. The administration must articulate the importance of advising to the faculty and must likewise assure the faculty that retention efforts are not synonymous with diminished academic standards.

Finally, the administration must provide appropriate reward and recognition systems to improve involvement and effectiveness in advising. This can be accomplished through promotion, tenure, salary supplements, merit pay, professional development funds, and reassigned time from teaching or committee work.

The administration must also play a leading role in changing the general culture of the University so that faculty will begin to understand that advisement of students is an important facet of the role of a member of the faculty. Currently, at least in some departments, faculty avoid or de-emphasize a commitment to advising on the grounds that the role of a faculty member is to teach classes and conduct research and that time used to advise students is time which is taken away from other duties that more obviously fit into the University’s rewards system.

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<sup>4</sup> Western Washington University. “Role and Mission Statement and Strategic Action Guidelines.” (1997).

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An important element in implementation of an advisement program is the assessment of the success of advising efforts. Faculty advisors must be evaluated to determine whether student and institutional expectations are being met and for professional recognition (promotion, tenure, merit pay, etc.). Criteria that might be used in such an assessment include quality of advisement services, student utilization of services, and attitudes of all personnel working in the program. Data collected from these assessment efforts can be helpful in improvement of services, as well as helping to build justification and support for the program.

In these times of fiscal restraint, it is tempting for the central administration to reduce student support services, including academic advising. Before such reductions are considered, the administration should also consider that nothing does more damage to the image of an institution than disgruntled, frustrated, or unhappy students who view the institution as a cold, uncaring, or unconcerned place. Short-term savings achieved by budgetary reductions may be too costly in the long term if the reputation of the University is harmed in the process.

## FINANCIAL ISSUES

It is very clear that any enhancements in the quality of academic advisement are going to come with a price tag attached. Any notion by the University administration or state government that the installation of a few novel ideas, such as cleverly designed web pages or advisement handouts, will provide an inexpensive way of solving the time-to-degree problem should be quickly dispelled. As has been seen in the outline of best practices, the single most effective means of helping students along their way toward their degree is having well trained and dedicated academic advisors who are prepared to give each student the time necessary to answer their questions and to dispense worthwhile and current advice. If state government is truly interested in providing students with the advisement services that are necessary to help students achieve their academic goals in a timely manner, government must also be prepared to provide adequate funding for these initiatives. To fail to do so would represent placing an “unfunded mandate” on the University.

The University administration must continue to make it clear to the Legislature that any attempts to impose new requirements on the University intended to decrease the average time that students take to complete their degree must be accompanied by adequate funding to permit these new goals to be accomplished.

## FACULTY WORKLOAD AND ADVANCEMENT ISSUES

As the University turns toward an advisement model that provides for increased involvement by faculty or staff in the advisement process, provisions must also be made to ensure that these advisors are not suddenly made to carry an unfair workload bur-

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den or are not placed at a disadvantage with respect to advancement, tenure, promotion, or merit increases. In some academic departments, where teaching loads are already very high and where faculty staffing is inadequate, the suggestion that some faculty would also be asked to devote additional time toward academic advisement meets with strong opposition on the grounds that this would place an undue teaching burden on all faculty within that department. If advisors are expected to teach a full load along with their advisement duties, the total workload will become too large to manage effectively and both teaching and advisement will suffer. If the teaching loads of some faculty are reduced to allow them to work as advisors, the teaching loads of the remaining faculty in the academic unit must correspondingly increase.

Furthermore, it is necessary for an advisor to devote large blocks of time to advisement; these blocks of time are no longer available for research or for meeting large numbers of students in classes. The current expectations of faculty participation in teaching and service will have to be modified to allow for the fair consideration of advisement work. Furthermore, the expectations of faculty participation in creative and scholarly endeavor will also have to be adjusted accordingly.

Clearly, for individualized advisement to be successful, faculty have to be interested in student advisement and they have to be motivated to spend time in this activity. This means that the advisors must be selected carefully for this role. It also means that the system of rewards, both financial and non-monetary, that faculty rely upon must reflect the importance of doing advisement and, especially, the importance of doing advisement *well*. To encourage faculty to take on the role of advisor, the University must provide recognition of the importance and the difficulty of this role by means that may include:

- ◆ Reassigned duties to provide advisors with the extra time that advisement entails. This may take the form of a reduced teaching assignment or it may mean that advisors will not assume other service responsibilities.
- ◆ Recognition by the faculty in the academic unit, by the members of the appropriate college tenure and promotion committees, and by the administration that advisement is a very important role and should be weighted equally with teaching and research when questions of tenure, promotion, or general or special merit are being considered. It would be a shame to identify a faculty member as an advisor, expect that person to perform well in the role, and then not allow him or her a fair chance to gain tenure or earn promotion because he or she had not achieved the same standards of scholarship or had not taught as many classes as a faculty member who was able to play a minimum role in advisement.

The University administration, working with the Faculty Senate, must develop means of assigning faculty positions equitably to allow for increased faculty involvement in the advisement of departmental majors. For those programs where classified staff are

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assigned to function as departmental advisors, a parallel means of assigning staff positions for advisement must be developed.

## TRAINING OF ACADEMIC ADVISORS

The information that academic advisors dispense to their students is only as good as the knowledge base that each advisor possesses. Requirements in departments change with each annual general catalogue, and it is very difficult for advisors to stay abreast of all these changes. In my own department (Chemistry), any change that we make in our service courses is bound to affect students in several related academic units (e.g., Biology or Environmental Sciences). Every department shares similar experiences, and yet the means by which these changes are communicated to other programs on this campus are very poor. It is critical that academic advisors be informed of changes in related disciplines and how these changes are likely to affect that person's advisees.

The Academic Advisement Center should sponsor *annual* workshops for all departmental advisors. These workshops should be grouped by general academic area (humanities, social sciences, natural and physical sciences, fine arts, etc.) and should be focused on bringing important changes in curricular structure, requirements, course changes, and scheduling changes to departmental advisors.

## PROPOSED ADVISEMENT MODEL

Some of the recommendations contained within the report of the Department Advising Work Group have already been implemented. In the proposed advising model, the recommendations that students be required to declare a major by the time they reach the 120-credit level and that Degree Application be accomplished no later than two quarters prior to the expected date of graduation are already in place.

A new recommendation is that students be required to apply for an intended major by the time they have earned 60 credits or at the time of admission, whichever comes later. The goal of this recommendation is to ensure that students receive appropriate advisement early in their academic careers, before any problems that could complicate plans toward timely graduation might arise. Problems arising from students choosing the wrong courses or taking courses in the wrong sequence could be intercepted before the student has progressed very far in his or her program.

Imposition of this 60-credit "check point" introduces some new problems for students. In some areas (e.g., Philosophy, Anthropology, Sociology, or Political Science), students do not receive exposure to the discipline until they have progressed well into their General University Requirements. It is only through courses taken as part of the GUR package that students first become introduced to these fields.

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Furthermore, many students come to Western without a very clear idea of what they want from their university education. While many students may come to Western with a definite aim of majoring in some specific area, many students have not made their plans as meticulously. Not all students come to campus with equal degrees of maturity. Students need time to consider carefully the area in which they might be interested, and four academic quarters may not be sufficient time.

Rushing students toward a declaration of intent to major in a program also tends to discourage them from taking part in an important aspect of a university education, the opportunity and freedom to explore. While allowing students the freedom to explore several curricular avenues may cost time and is not efficient, we must recognize that this freedom is one of the valuable hallmarks of higher education. It would be a shame to sacrifice this traditional aspect of a liberal education in the name of “efficiency.”

It is possible that there will be debate as to the most appropriate level at which to place this early check-point. Some programs will request that the level be placed earlier, some will want it later. My recommendation would be to place this check-point *no earlier* than 60 credits. I would also like to see some discussion of how this check-point might be applied flexibly, to account for those students who have not had an opportunity to set their intentions sufficiently for any sort of formal declaration of intent.

A second, new recommendation from the Departmental Advising Work Group is that departments will be asked to monitor each student’s academic progress to ensure that he or she is on track and progressing satisfactorily. To implement this recommendation, progress must be made toward developing a workable degree-audit system that allows advisors ready access to information about each student. To date, it is not clear whether such a system will be available very soon.

## HOW CLOSE ARE WESTERN’S DEPARTMENTS TO THE PROPOSED ADVISING MODEL?

One of the expectations placed on the person preparing this report by the Departmental Advising Work Group was that the report should “include a review of how close Western’s departments and colleges are to the proposed advising model.” This section attempts to respond to that requirement.

In my survey of departments, I found that implementation of the proposed advising model would require very little change from the way those units are already operating. Granted, there are different advising models in operation, but most of them accomplish the desired objectives. In some programs (Environmental Studies, Music, Sociology, and Theater Arts), the advising duties are handled principally by a designated classified staff person. A few departments (Anthropology, English, and Speech Pathology and Audiology) assign advisement duties to a specific faculty member. The most commonly used model has all (or most) department faculty acting as advisors. Often, the student makes initial contact with the office staff in the academic unit. The staff person

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performs a *triage* function, deciding which faculty member will be assigned as that particular student's advisor. In all of these programs, regardless of the advising model that they use, students are assigned a specific advisor who works with each student individually to develop a plan of study. Implementing the proposed advisement model should not require a drastic change in the way these programs already operate.

As might be expected, programs with highly structured curricula, such as the natural and physical sciences, already have in place a relatively well developed advising model. Programs with less structured curricula, such as the humanities, allow students a great deal more freedom regarding preparation of plans of study, required advising contacts, and course selection. Nevertheless, I do not see that much inconvenience will be raised by implementing the specific requirements of the advising model.

For a few programs, the state of advising is much less well developed, and considerable effort will have to be devoted to establishing a formal advising structure and implementing a system of required check-points and plans of study. An even more formidable task for these units is having to change the "culture" of the department faculty. Faculty must be made to understand that advising is important and that they have a proper and necessary role to play in the advising of students. From the results of my survey, I foresee difficulties in the Departments of Art, Computer Science, Mathematics, and Physics. While the chairs of some of these units are attempting to install a more rigorous system of major advising, much more needs to be done.

One department, Communications, presents a unique problem. In this department most of the major advising is handled by undergraduate peer advisors. While the quality of the advice that is dispensed is high, I do not believe that this system fits very well with the proposed advising model, which assumes that the advising will be the responsibility of faculty or designated classified staff.

## UNDECIDED/UNDECLARED STUDENTS

Under the current system, students who begin their academic careers at Western go through the Summerstart program, where they meet their freshman advisors and begin the process of planning their programs of study. While the strongly motivated and well-prepared students are able to move from the Summerstart program directly to a specific academic department to declare a major, the majority of students are not prepared to make such an important step. Between Summerstart and the new 60-credit level, by which time students must make an initial declaration of interest, it is not clear what advising services are available to these undeclared or undecided students.

There is a real need to have some advising structure established that focuses on these students and assists them as they prepare to declare a major or file an expression of interest in a major. Strictly speaking, the advisor assigned to a student during Summerstart is capable of serving as that student's advisor as long as the student

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needs the advisor's help. While that may be true, the vast majority of undecided students do not understand this, and they tend to receive their advice from a variety of unstructured and non-professional sources (friends, room-mates, etc.).

Frequently this advice is of low quality, and it may consist of advice to take nothing but GUR courses during the first two years or to concentrate on easy courses to keep the grade-point average as high as possible. Often, it is a serious disservice to students to encourage them to take nothing but easy courses or to focus on GUR courses alone. Many programs, not only the sciences but also structured programs in the humanities and social sciences, expect students to have take certain core, supporting, or required courses before declaring a major. Many departments have a stringent selection process that must be passed before a student can declare a major, and this selection process may include certain required preparation courses, a portfolio or writing requirement, and a specific grade-point average threshold.

There is a critical need for advisors to help these students prepare for the transition to a declared major. Advisors who specialize in assisting undecided students must understand the requirements of a large number of programs and must know how to help students prepare for any of them. Advisors who are recruited for this duty should be selected from within the broad interest areas of the university. In this way, a student who thinks that he or she might be interested in the social sciences, for example, but is not certain *which* social science program to choose, would go to the general social sciences advisor for help. Within this group some advisors should be responsible for helping students who are not prepared to refine their academic focus even to this extent.

It is hoped that if a student is assigned an advisor at the outset of his or her academic career and then *keeps the same advisor* until the transition to a departmental advisor, that student will be less likely to feel that advising was not available. If such a group of advisors is formed, however, clearly there must be funding, and arrangements must be made to ensure that these advisors are able to share in the professional rewards and advancement systems of the University.

To provide advising services for these undecided and undeclared students, a cadre of advisors should be recruited to serve as area advisors. These advisors would be selected from and be responsible for the principal subject areas of the University (humanities, social sciences, natural and physical sciences, fine arts, applied sciences, etc.). Some advisors should be selected to focus on helping those students who are truly undecided. These advisors would work out of a specific advisement center, operated under the auspices of the Academic Advising Center.

## THE "60% PROBLEM"

There is a frequently cited statistic (which may, in fact, actually be nothing more than a myth) that something on the order of 60% of students at Western claim that they have

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received little or no academic advisement. There is considerable disagreement on campus, however, as to what this statistic (or perception) means. In my interviews of departments and programs in preparation for this report, I asked department chairs and advisors what they thought of this perception. The responses were varied, but they tended toward the following conclusion: when students come to the University, they come as a very diverse group of learners. While some students are self-motivated and can assimilate information from impersonal sources such as Internet postings or printed handouts, other students absorb information most effectively by listening to oral presentations. Some students can obtain their information by attending workshops; others need one-on-one contact with an advisor.

Another important factor that must be recognized is that many students choose not to take advantage of advisement services that are already in place. The Academic Advisement Center is available to all students, and students are strongly encouraged to establish contact with an academic program during their introductory orientation and advisement sessions when they arrive on campus as new students, through the Summerstart or Transitions programs. Information about advising services is presented in a highly readable format in such publications as *Viking Tips*, and this information is posted prominently in the General Catalogue. Nevertheless, students forget what they have been told or fail to read the many sources of information that they should have at hand.

There is no easy solution to this problem, and it is not clear whether or not it is, in fact, a real problem. The “60% Problem” may be one of perception, rather than something that can be addressed by the installation of specific services or procedures. My best suggestion in this area is to try to make advisement information available to students through a variety of formats simultaneously. Advisement information should be presented orally, through meetings and workshops; in electronic form, through web pages and E-mail groups; through written publications, such as advisement handbooks and advisement sheets; and through official publications, such as the General Catalogue and publications from the Academic Advising Center. Directing students to departments by requiring them to declare expressions of interest in a major and providing undecided students with general area advisors should also help.

Even then, there will always be students who will not pay attention to these sources of assistance. In a public institution at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where *in loco parentis* is outmoded and cannot function, it simply is not possible to force every student to make frequent, meaningful contact with advisors. Ultimately, students must be asked to show some level of responsibility for their own progress.

## TRANSFER STUDENT ADVISEMENT

To a large extent, many of the problems that are faced by student who enter as new freshman students are also faced by new transfer students. While many students

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entering from a community college are well prepared for the transition to Western and are clearly focused on a specific major, there remains a large body of transfer students who really are not sure about what they want to study when they arrive here. For transfer students, the transition to Western is made more complicated when one factors in such obstacles as departmental entrance requirements, “gateway” courses, and highly sequential course sequences.

The Transfer Experience Task Force is preparing recommendations to ameliorate the problems experienced by new transfer students, and it is not necessary for me to dwell on this issue at any length. However, there are some important areas where the University needs to focus:

- ◆ There must be a continuing effort to work with advisors and faculty at the community colleges to ensure that they understand what Western’s requirements are and what courses students ought to take to facilitate the transition to academic programs at Western. Clearly, the work of developing and improving articulation between Western and the community colleges has been going on for many years. It appears, however, that as emphasis on efficiency measures intensifies, the role of the Admissions Office and its Community College Relations representatives will become increasingly important.
- ◆ Departments should be encouraged to initiate and cultivate direct contacts with faculty in the community colleges. The goal of these contacts would be to provide a better exchange of information on requirements and course selection. The example of the Washington College Chemistry Teachers Association<sup>5</sup> has been cited to illustrate one means of establishing such a channel of communication.
- ◆ The Transfer Experience Task Force has learned that when there is a designated advisor (faculty or staff) in a department, students are more successful in making the transition to Western. The reason for this improved success is that there is a consistent contact person who provides consistent and accurate information to prospective students. The development of this type of structure should be encouraged.
- ◆ Academic programs at Western should be encouraged to make clear statements to new students to make them aware that there may be certain quarters when students should not transfer to Western. For example, for programs with a highly structured course sequence, it may be better for students to wait until Fall Quarter to transfer to Western, since transferring during Winter or Spring may leave the student with no classes in the major that he or she is eligible to take.
- ◆ Students should be made aware at the community college that there may be certain “gateway” courses that must be taken before the student transfers to Western. Having taken these courses, the transition to Western ought to be smoother.

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<sup>5</sup> see Page 11.

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- ◆ Efforts at developing transfer agreements that contain alternatives to the completion of the Associate in Arts degree should be encouraged. For the science programs, some success has been achieved with the advent of the Associate in Science degree program, negotiated between Western and Whatcom Community College. A similar agreement between Western and Skagit Valley College is also being developed.
  - ◆ Western's Summer Session could be used to offer courses that will ease transition impacts for community college students.

## CAREER ADVISEMENT

A very important part of a complete advisement program is the advisement of students as they prepare for their careers after graduation. Whether they assist students as they apply for graduate or professional school, help students as they search for a suitable professional position in the industrial or business world, or provide critical and aesthetic counseling as students prepare to enter the world of performance and presentation, faculty are playing a key advisement role. As Western grows larger, faculty members find themselves being asked to prepare multiple letters of recommendation. It is not unusual for a faculty member to devote several hours per week simply in preparing letters of recommendation.

The Career Services Center provides a valuable service to the students as they prepare their resumés and portfolios and as they begin the search for an appropriate professional opportunity. Faculty advisors also play a very significant role as career and professional advisors. As part of the training offered to departmental advisors, preparation for these people to advise students about careers and opportunities should occupy a prominent position.

Faculty advisors should also obtain recognition for the large blocks of time that are necessary to provide meaningful professional and career advisement and to prepare letters of recommendation. Institutional measures of faculty workload should be modified to reflect the time spent by faculty in this type of effort.

## ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Among the recommendations of various bodies on campus interested in establishing accountability measures, there has been some discussion of methods to measure the effectiveness of academic advising. It has been suggested that faculty should maintain records of the numbers of students who make direct contact with an advisor. The advantage of this measure is that it is relatively simple to collect data and does not require complex reporting. An important disadvantage, however, is that it *only* measures the number of student contacts with faculty advisors; it does *not* provide any evidence that such contact was useful to the student! It is not at all clear that faculty members will be receptive to the proposal that they be asked to maintain records and

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complete forms for yet another round of data collection when the significance to the data is so uncertain.

In my view, the advisement of students is not an enterprise that lends itself to this type of quantification, and I would hope that such an idea will never be implemented. Much of the time spent with students does not lend itself to a convenient categorization. Even though there are external pressures to quantify all aspects of its programs, such pressures should be resisted. One would hope that, somewhere, there must be some officials in state government who understand that higher education is, by its very nature, an amorphous process that must be allowed to develop without being subjected to needless scrutiny and micromanagement.<sup>6</sup>

## OFFICIAL PUBLICATIONS

The University produces a variety of official publications that are important means of disseminating advisement information. The principal publication of this type is the General Catalogue. As it represents a contract between the University and the student, all requirements are stated explicitly, and all courses that are offered are described completely. The difficulty with using the Catalogue as an advisement tool, however, is that it is not written in a very readable prose style. Furthermore, the index is very inadequate, making specific information difficult to locate. It would be helpful if, at the very least, the Office of the Registrar tried to improve the quality of the index.

Another important advisement publication is the annual Schedule of Classes. Its usefulness is limited, however, because often it is not accurate and because classes listed in the schedule may not be open for students. With the advent of Class Finder, many of these problems should be ameliorated, and the further development of Class Finder and similar tools should be encouraged.

Some faculty believe that the statements of course prerequisites in the General Catalogue represent a form of advisement to students. These prerequisites warn the student of the level of experience or background that will be expected of each student in the class. The University should examine whether or not there ought to be a mechanism included in the registration process to enforce prerequisites.

## WHAT NEW RESOURCES ARE NEEDED TO IMPLEMENT THE ADVISING MODEL?

A third charge to the person preparing this report was “to prepare an assessment of new resources, if any, needed ... in order to comply with the proposed advising model.” In my view, the principal new costs will stem from the imposition of three new requirements:

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<sup>6</sup> The Provost's Accountability Work Group has discussed this form of accountability measure and has decided not to recommend any measure that would count departmental advising contacts.

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- ◆ The addition of a new 60-credit (or whatever credit level is set) check-point.

This new mandate will bring with it the need for some additional paperwork. The office staff who represent the initial contact point for students inquiring about academic majors will have additional responsibilities. The registration system must be modified to include new levels of record-keeping. The Academic Advising Center will be obliged to work with students who have had their registration blocked and who will be petitioning for waivers from the new requirement. In addition, the Academic Advising Center will carry most of the new burden of having to work with undecided students seeking help to determine which department to approach for a formal declaration of interest.

*In my view, this new requirement will entail considerable new cost, particularly at the level of the academic units and for the Academic Advising Center.*

- ◆ The assignment of more students to faculty (or staff) advisors.

Here, the principal cost will be time. Faculty advisors are already hard-pressed to perform their teaching and research function and be competent advisors. Requiring more advising contacts with each student and adding additional record-keeping duties to these advisors will be excessively burdensome. A similar burden will fall on classified staff who function as advisors.

*In my view, the University administration should consider awarding additional faculty or staff positions to impacted departments to cover these new duties. Currently, faculty time to assume new duties has become a very scarce commodity; the administration should consider carefully easing some of this burden. I do not recommend implementation of the new advising model unless there is simultaneous consideration of how this can be accomplished without increasing the workload burden on the faculty advisors in each academic unit.*

- ◆ Monitoring of each student to ensure that he or she is making satisfactory progress in the major.

To fulfill this expectation, the computerized data base system used by the Office of the Registrar will have to be modified to allow advisors easy access to the academic records of their advisees. At this time, it is not clear what computer programming obstacles this requirement will entail. With the implementation of the new degree audit system, perhaps this information will be readily available, but I am not sufficiently familiar with the new system to make any projections of costs at this time.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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