

## **University Task Force on Advising Report and Recommendations November 12, 2015**

In the fall of 2014, President Sheley convened a University Task Force on Advising and requested that the group review national and campus best practices, synthesize recent discussions and make recommendations for meaningful improvements to academic advising at California State University, Stanislaus. The Task Force was co-chaired by Provost James Strong and Vice President for Enrollment and Student Affairs, Suzanne Espinoza. Membership included three students recommended by ASI, three faculty members recommended by the Committee on Committees (one a department chair), a college dean, three advising specialists from Student Affairs, an information systems analyst from enrollment services, and a community member. This report has been prepared in response to the President's charge. For more information about the University Task Force on Advising, a list of members, and a discussion about the charge, please refer to the cover memo for this report addressed to President Sheley dated November 12, 2015.

The University Task Force on Advising met throughout the 2014-2015 academic year and part of the fall semester of 2015. Within this period, the group conducted the following activities. First, the Task Force reviewed previous reports, committee recommendations and campus policies related to academic advising. National reports on best practices in advising were reviewed and a series of webinars regarding national trends were attended by Task Force members. A series of focus group interviews were conducted with undergraduate students regarding their academic advising experiences at Stanislaus State. A survey of faculty, staff and students regarding various academic advising issues was also conducted. A number of constituents met with the Task Force and provided information regarding their perspectives on the strengths and challenges of academic advising at Stanislaus State. A work group was created to evaluate options and software products for an advising information system (in progress).

Survey and focus group responses, the recommendations of recent committees, and all of the other materials (cited above) generated by the Task Force were reviewed and analyzed. Below is a discussion of the themes that emerged from these documents. The Task Force recommendations follow this discussion.

First of all, the reports, documents and other materials reviewed by the University Task Force on Advising make clear that California State University, Stanislaus has a long-standing institutional commitment to student achievement and learning. Student success is widely recognized as essential to the realization of the University's mission and has been the focal point of many campus initiatives. The University strives to create systems that offer accurate, reliable and timely academic advising to support student retention and graduation.

Toward this end, academic advising is currently governed by various campus policies.<sup>1</sup> Through these policies, the Academic Senate has set forth advising objectives, as well as defined the roles and responsibilities of key campus constituents. By Senate policy, advising in the major is assigned to department faculty. Students are encouraged to declare an academic major early to benefit fully from connections with faculty advisors and learn more about career and other opportunities. Advising in general education and for undeclared majors is primarily assigned to professional advisors in the Advising Resource Center (ARC). This model is common in higher education and many universities of similar size, type and student demographics employ a hybrid model with some advising centrally located and some decentralized to colleges and departments.

This model has resulted in an advising structure that has both strengths and challenges. Key indicators of success include improving graduation rates and a reduction in the achievement gap between underrepresented minority (URM) and non-underrepresented minority (Non-URM) groups. Significantly, the overall six-year graduation rates for Stanislaus State have improved steadily in recent years, from 49.5% for the 2003 cohort to 53.5% for the 2008 cohort. Similarly, the six-year URM and Non-URM graduation rate gap has declined to 2%, making Stanislaus State's gap substantially lower than the CSU system average.

These promising outcomes have been achieved even while the student demographic profile of the campus has changed and presented new challenges in academic advising. A growing proportion of first-time freshmen (FTF), for example, are first-generation students from low-income, URM families. Between 2003 and 2014, the number of FTF URM students, as a percentage of all FTF, grew from 32.8% to 62.4% respectively. The proportion of FTF that are first-generation college students also grew, increasing from 39.8% to 50.8%. The percentage of low-income students (Pell recipients) also increased in this period from 40% to 62.9%. In addition, a significant number of students enter the University with remediation needs and require assistance transitioning to college level coursework. These changing campus demographics have increased the overall demand for advising services in both academic departments and in ARC.

Along with this changing student profile has come enrollment growth, an increasing complexity in academic programs, an increased demand for assistance in career exploration, and an ongoing challenge to deliver consistent, high quality advising services to every student. In addition, advancements in technology now offer new opportunities to streamline processes and improve advising services. In response to these pressures and opportunities, over the past few years, various groups have engaged in discussions about further developing academic advising services.

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<sup>1</sup> 8/AS/08/UEPC Policy on Undergraduate Academic Advising, 15/AS/06 UEPC Mandatory Advising within the Major, 4/AS/12/UEPC Mandatory Advising for Undeclared Students, 3/AS/12 UEPC Policy for Declaration of Major.

## **Task Force Findings**

Academic advising and the quality of student-faculty relationships continue to be critically important and key drivers in overall student satisfaction at Stanislaus State. These findings are based on an analysis conducted by Hanover Research of data gathered from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). This survey was administered at Stanislaus State in 2008, 2011 and 2014. In the 2014 NSSE survey, students who were satisfied with their educational experience overall gave significantly higher ratings to their interactions with academic advisors than students who were dissatisfied with their educational experience overall. These findings were similar to results from the 2011 and 2008 NSSE surveys. These documents will be included on the University Task Force on Advising webpage currently under development.

A long-standing campus ethos of providing timely services to students has led many advisors to provide services in a one-stop-shop fashion. For example, a number of programs (e.g., Student Support Services, PACE, Honors, Housing, Athletics, Veterans, EOP, Summer Bridge and Promise Scholars) provide advising services to program students. The decentralization of advising services for various student groups has led to some miscommunication and a lack of clarity about the roles of various advisors and more generally, a lack of integration in advising. For example, campus advisors are often unfamiliar with the policy set forth by the Academic Senate in 2008 regarding the expected structure of academic advising and the roles of various campus advisors. There are both strengths and challenges to this decentralization.

While the commitment to advising remains strong, many faculty report difficulty balancing the demands of teaching with the increasing demand for advising, especially in majors with large numbers of students. Peak advising times are challenging for many faculty members and the rewards and recognition for strong advising activities are not always emphasized. Part-time instructors also report that they feel pressure to provide advising to students.

There are significant differences across academic departments, colleges, and ARC regarding the delivery of advising services to students. There are variations in advising tools, support materials and resources used across these entities. Students themselves often meet with multiple advisors for various reasons. While some students may feel they have been given incomplete or inaccurate information, others appear to be “shopping” for better answers. In general, advising services may be improved by pursuing a more strategic approach, providing better advising tools, standardizing information, and providing professional development opportunities for advisors.

CSU and campus policies and regulations governing academic programs and student progress toward degree are complex and sometimes change. At the same time, increased enrollments have led to pressure on the course schedule. Registration

levels in some important categories (e.g., general education) are regularly near 100 percent capacity, thus limiting scheduling options for students and slowing time to degree. This pressure has required a two-pass registration system to facilitate equitable access to course offerings among various student groups. New tools have also been developed that offer campuses the ability to better plan the course schedule and provide advisors faster, more comprehensive and integrated student advising information. On many campuses, these new tools have resulted in improved scheduling, reduced time to degree, and more effective communication with students.

**On the basis of the Task Force's work, research and deliberations, the following recommendations are offered.**

1. Continue to implement and reinforce guidance provided by the strategic plan and campus policies regarding all facets of undergraduate academic advising. Pursuant to these policies (15/AS/06/UEPC Mandatory Advising within the Major, 8/AS/08/UEPC Policy on Undergraduate Academic Advising, and 4/AS/12/UEPC Mandatory Advising for Undeclared Students), faculty advisors will provide all facets of academic advising to declared majors and are encouraged to do so each semester. The Advising Resource Center (ARC) will provide academic advising to undeclared majors each semester. ARC will also develop a plan to coordinate advising with academic departments for each program.
2. Continue to encourage students to declare a major as early as possible but before they complete 60 units, consistent with 3/AS/12 UEPC Policy for Declaration of a Major.
3. Provide regular professional development workshops for faculty members and others regarding CSU academic policies, regulations, deadlines, financial aid, campus resources, degree audit, and other topics related to advising and student success.
4. Develop a handbook on academic advising with information on university-wide advising topics to improve the consistency of information provided by faculty and staff advisors. Develop a checklist of questions, advising topics and suggestions for handling difficult conversations (delineated by student year) to assist advisors. The handbook should include course maps for majors, minors, and concentrations, and information about the frequency in which department courses are offered.
5. Ensure that degree audit is the official and predominately used tool on campus for identifying remaining academic requirements. Discontinue reliance on department-based, parallel degree audit systems that do not interface with PeopleSoft (so called "shadow systems"). The importance of using degree audit should be emphasized to all campus constituents.

Encourage the use of degree audit through training workshops and by identifying improvements to make it more user friendly.

6. Ensure that the PeopleSoft Degree Audit System is accurate and up to date by requiring that:
  - a. all academic departments have correctly identified all courses required to earn a degree in their programs so that these courses can be coded correctly by Enrollment Services in the PeopleSoft Degree Audit System, and;
  - b. course substitutions are sent to Enrollment Services at the time they are granted to the student so they can be entered into PeopleSoft and reflected in the degree audit system in a timely manner.
7. Continue to develop and evaluate e-advisor tools (e.g., degree audit, Starfish, EAB, Smart Planner) and/or other computer-based systems to provide easily accessible tools to support accurate and timely advising. Allocate resources to train faculty, ARC advisors, and other users on the e-advisor tools implemented.
8. Implement an early alert system that allows faculty to identify students who are presenting a pattern that may lead to academic difficulty. Encourage faculty members to use campus resources and partner with other advising professionals early to proactively assist students so they are able to succeed and graduate.
9. Improve department websites to provide easy access to academic policies, regulations, deadlines and other academic advising related information.
10. Ensure that every department has up to date course maps for majors, minors and concentrations and that they are posted to the department website. Include information about the frequency in which department courses are offered.
11. Ensure that departments periodically review courses listed in the catalog and that they remove from view courses that are infrequently offered. Ensure that departments note in the catalog the frequency in which courses are offered. For example, courses may be noted in the following manner: infrequently offered, typically offered each semester, typically offered in the spring term. Include this information on department websites, advisor manuals, course maps, and other places where students and advisors seek information on course requirements.
12. Facilitate students' ability to enroll in courses required for normal and timely progress to degree by implementing the following actions:

- a. limit course conflicts by reducing the number of overlapping class times, the number of standard time modules, and the number of courses offered at irregular times;
  - b. acquire or develop software to conduct demand analyses to enable deans and department chairs to offer sufficient sections of bottleneck courses; and
  - c. hire an analyst (in the Provost's Office) with responsibility for reviewing the schedule and working with deans and chairs within and across colleges to minimize scheduling conflicts among courses commonly taken by students in the same semester.
13. Develop a close working relationship between ARC advisors and faculty advisors. Increase the number of academic advisors in ARC. Develop program specializations for ARC advisors by assigning two or more ARC advisors to each of the academic programs to gain expertise in major advising issues and provide back-up advising support as agreed between ARC and academic programs.
  14. Initiate discussions as to how to make advising part of the RPT elaborations. Evaluate whether there are additional ways to recognize and reward academic advising.
  15. Continue the "commons" advising support concept in the College of Science.
  16. Explore establishing an advising area in the College of the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.
  17. Evaluate the feasibility and efficacy of developing a student peer mentor program to support academic advising.
  18. Develop and implement paperless workflow for processing petitions, course substitutions, graduation checks and other enrollment operations that involve various campus departments. Ensure that the selected solution is fully vetted with appropriate stakeholders.
  19. Utilize various social media to advertise campus programs and resources and to communicate with students about academic advising issues.
  20. Complete an annual advising assessment including a satisfaction survey. Host a campus advising summit annually.
  21. Continue the Advising Task Force during the impending campus discussion period regarding these recommendations.
  22. The Provost and Vice President of Enrollment and Student Affairs will administer the implementation of the recommendations, the annual advising

assessment, the campus advising summit, and will convene a broader work group as needed.