

First Year Engineering Advising: Shift from Transactional to Developmental

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Abstract - This paper describes strategic changes in engineering first year advisor assignment over the last five years. We provide a comparison of our 2013 and 2016 advising surveys and suggested continuous improvements from the end of year advisor memo. The previous first year engineering advising model could be characterized as transactional with an emphasis on course selection and the new model as developmental with an emphasis on engagement and overall success of the student. When we compared student feedback across a set of questions contained in both surveys (advisor availability, advisor response time, advisor curricular knowledge, advisor policy knowledge, comfort in discussing career development with advisor, advisor's enjoyment of advising, and student's recommendation of advisor), we found a compelling improvement in each individual metric. In this paper, we highlight the importance of utilizing as advisors those faculty and instructors who have regular, scheduled contact with students in the first semester, and provide rationale for centrally compensating them for this additional responsibility. Future research includes comparing those students that had an advisor who also taught one of their first semester courses to those that did not within this new model.

Index Terms – best practices, first year advising, student success

INTRODUCTION

Often, engineering first year advising initiatives measure their success by assessing (and decreasing) attrition rates. In a departure from this traditional emphasis, we have recently redesigned our first year advising activity to focus upon provision of a robust advising experience, moving the student experience from A) random assignment of advisor and largely transactional interactions (i.e., confined to necessary actions such as course selection, registration, and withdrawal) to a B) course integrated and intentionally developmental format. Based on the National Academic Advising Association's (NACADA) standards, we expected advisors to "encourage, respect, and assist students in establishing their goals and objectives" and to "gain the trust of their students and strive to honor students' expectations of academic advising and its importance in their lives" [1]. Less abstractly, we wanted to shift the advising experience from one that was mainly transactional to one that is

developmental with increased contact with advisors in the first year. Given that our students enter the engineering school as undeclared majors, we feel it is particularly important to support them as they seek to understand and choose their different study and career options.

The new paradigm mirrored an advising structure in another school at our university where students were advised by the instructor of one of their first semester courses [2]. As the new model was adapted into the engineering school, whenever possible, students were assigned advisors who also taught one of their first semester courses. They were engaged in small group and one-to-one advising sessions with their advisor, and the teacher-advisee connection sought to facilitate personal and contextual mentoring. Also, students were actively provided information about opportunities for engagement on the university and school level, for determining their future engineering major and career opportunities. Within the new advising model, 85% of students were assigned an advisor who also taught one of their first semester courses, such as Introduction to Engineering or a Science Elective. Prior to moving to this model, first year advisees were randomly assigned to faculty throughout our engineering school.

Under the prior model, when our last (optional) undergraduate advising survey was conducted in 2013, the survey results, including students across all years of school, were overall positive. However, when filtered down to just the first year engineering advising experience feedback, the results were less encouraging. In 2016, as the new model was piloted, the same survey questions were combined with the second semester major application process, again as an optional survey. When we compared results across the questions contained in both surveys (availability, response time, curricular knowledge, policy knowledge, comfort in discussing career development, enjoyment of advising, and recommendation of advisor), we found increases in each individual metric. In this paper, we describe the new model in greater detail and highlight the importance in utilizing faculty and instructors who have regular, scheduled contact with students in the first semester, and we provide rationale for centrally compensating advisors for this additional responsibility. Future research includes comparing those students that had an advisor who also taught one of their first semester courses to those that did not within this new model.

I. Institutional Background

Our institution is a public, mid-Atlantic, four year research university that enrolls approximately 15,500 undergraduate students and is classified as “highly selective” in undergraduate admission. The university offers decentralized academic support through the individual schools and college and centrally offers a myriad of co- and extra-curricular activities. The school of engineering is the second largest school with about 2,660 undergraduates enrolled and an average incoming first year class of 630 students.

II. Retention

Over the last decade, the university-wide undergraduate six year graduation rate has been over 92%. The graduation rate for first-time, first-year engineering school students is nearly identical, with approximately 85% of those incoming engineering students earning their undergraduate degree from the engineering school. Indeed, the in-school retention rate of students in engineering has been climbing in recent years, towards 90%, perhaps as the result of the increased national emphasis upon science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). While retention could potentially improve further, this paper focuses upon our efforts to improve the student advising experience, towards engineering major selection and future career planning. We believe we have an exceptional responsibility to provide all of our students with a personal advising experience that connects with each student and supports their professional preparation.

III. Changes in Student Support

It is important to note the creation of two additional student support roles in the engineering school between the years the surveys were conducted. During the 2013-2014 academic year, the Associate Dean of Undergraduate Programs filled a Dean of Students position specific to engineering, shared between the Office of the Dean of Students and the engineering school. A Director of Undergraduate Success was also hired during this time and started in spring of 2014. Both of these individuals were located in the engineering school, and they served students as a general resource and advocate, informal advisor, source of just in time support, and a central referral mechanism for additional university resources. Because we documented an increase in positive student academic outcomes by comparing a cohort of student prior to and after the creation of the Dean of Students, it is difficult to isolate the impact of these positions from the changes to first year advising in regards to academic outcomes (e.g., suspension, probation, withdraw, active, transfer) [3]. Since we know that academic outcomes were positively affected, for this study, we focus on student reported experience directly with their assigned academic adviser.

MOTIVATION FOR RESTRUCTURING FIRST YEAR ADVISING

I. History of Design of Past Model

First year advising for engineering students relied, for many years, upon a volunteer corps of faculty who were solicited in the early summer, participated in advising during summer orientation, and then continued advising their first year students until those students were placed in majors at the end of the first year. This structure provided students with a specific faculty advisor to whom they could go with questions or for advice, but in practice it encouraged transactional advising about key issues like course registration. This function is important, and students did indeed receive course registration advice, so at its most basic level this advising structure was successful.

However, enrollment growth starting around 2009 exposed a significant advising challenge: there was not a sufficient number of faculty volunteers to support the entire first year engineering class. While the faculty volunteers were dedicated and knowledgeable, the time pressures associated with advising 30+ students only reinforced the transactional nature of the advising experience. This enrollment growth spurred three intermediate evolutionary steps of the advising structure that culminated in the model used now and detailed in the remainder of this paper:

- 2011: group advising at summer orientation. Because of time constraints during summer orientation, students have very little time to organize their course schedule. The University schedules a wide range of activities for students during orientation, and engineering students have just 2 hours available for advising about their first semester course schedule. We embraced this constraint and organized a small-group advising structure in which our best, most trusted faculty advisors were engaged in advising groups of about 20 students in the key dimensions of course selection. We removed the individual one-on-one meetings that previously characterized summer advising, and gained the efficiencies of having many students with quite similar questions in a group format. Most importantly, the set of summer advisors were completely decoupled from the first year advising once students arrived for the fall semester. In fact, in the university's data systems, students are no longer assigned an advisor until they arrive on campus for the fall semester.
- 2011: mandatory faculty advising. At the same time as the summer orientation shift, we worked through an experiment in which all engineering faculty were required to serve as first year advisors. A collaborative decision between the Dean's office

and the department chairs, this plan assigned approximately 5 first year undergraduates to each engineering faculty member. The expectation was that the faculty could—given the small number of advisees—develop multi-dimensional relationships with their advisees and move away from the purely transactional model of advising. The department chairs especially liked the idea of having all faculty exposed to and supporting first year students.

- 2013: departmental advising responsibility. The 'mandatory' faculty advising model had both strengths and liabilities, the most prominent of which was low quality advising from some faculty. The advising survey described above captured some of this dissatisfaction among students, and this spurred a final intermediate step toward 'departmental' responsibility for advising. In brief, each engineering department was assigned advising responsibility for a certain number of students, and it was up to that department to determine the best way to serve those students. Some departments continued with an even distribution of responsibility across all faculty, while other departments assigned their advisees to a small number (2-3) of faculty. Department chairs made these assignments based upon their faculty's advising experience/competence, and availability. This structure provided flexibility to the department chairs to optimize their faculty resources. Departments who had more students enrolled in their departmental major(s) were assigned fewer first year students, while under-enrolled departments were assigned more first year students.

While these intermediate steps in the evolution of our advising model made some progress in addressing both the increased enrollment and the 'transactional' relationship problem, these solutions did not fully embrace the potential for first year advising. As a result, we sought inspiration from another college on our campus.

II. College Advising Seminar courses (COLA)

In 2005, the College of Arts and Sciences created a pilot joint course/advising to afford students with the opportunity to get to know their advisor prior to selecting a major. The course, called the COLlege Advising Seminar (COLA), is a one-credit, graded seminar designed to deliver content within the instructor's field as well as spend class time covering important and timely information about advising topics such as add and drop dates, resources and opportunities [2]. The success of this advising program inspired engineering to consider similar advising structures

appropriate for the engineering school population and curriculum.

An important spark motivating revision of the first year advising structure in engineering was completion of a new university strategic plan in 2013. Within that plan the university expressed a commitment to "total advising" for students whereby students would receive academic, career, and co-curricular advising intended to further the individual development goals of each student. Starting in the College of Arts and Sciences, the university began to organize first year courses that paired students with instructors who also served as their academic advisor. By pairing students with advisor-instructors, the university felt that students would develop a more comfortable, open bond with their advisor, in part by encountering them more often, during regular class meetings. Faculty advisors would also be able to assess and support student transition to college by observing student attendance, participation, and academic success in their course. Student questions could be answered more quickly by a trusted source, their advisor-instructors. These advisors were trusted sources in part due to the faculty opting into this responsibility to dedicate time in the classroom to provide accurate information around advising. Student needs could be potentially addressed before challenges in different arenas became truly significant.

In 2014, the Provost's Office provided an incentive to the engineering school to pilot their own version. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) provided the initial funding of stipends for Introduction to Engineering instructors to take on the additional role for advising first year engineering students in their class, as described later in this paper. Introduction to Engineering served as an appropriate starting point given the typical section size of 35 students and the existing focus of the course, in part, upon selecting an engineering major and preparing for professional practice in engineering. In both the College of Arts and Sciences and the engineering school, advisor-instructors were compensated with additional, discretionary funds, on the order of \$35 - \$75 per advisee, in recognition of the extra "attention to detail" effort required to teach *and* advise students in a coordinated, thorough manner.

III. 2013 Engineering Survey Results and Findings

Evidence of the transactional nature of the advising relationship for engineering students was grounded in survey data through students reporting the frequency and content of their advisor meetings. Of first year students, 11% reported not meeting with their advisor at all, and 87% meeting once or twice. Eight out of ten first years surveyed in 2013 indicated they did not talk about anything other than course schedule with their advisor. Most telling was that only 33% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that their advisor takes an active role in ensuring their success in school. These statistics did not indicate a crisis with advising—the first year retention rate for engineering students remained high, on the order of 90%. Nonetheless,

the school administration felt a responsibility to improve students' advising experience in the first year in a manner consistent with the shifting university advising priorities at the time.

NEW ADVISING STRUCTURE

I. Shifting from Transactional to Developmental

Recognizing that student-advisor pairing by itself was not enough to ensure “total advising,” the engineering school made an effort to provide advisors with explicit guidance about how to support their students. Key elements of that guidance included:

- Having the Director of Undergraduate Success meet with all advisors to answer questions and highlight key advising activities.
- Providing a checklist of minimum activities (see Appendix A) that each advisor should undertake (e.g., greeting each student at the start of the first semester and later meeting for course selection, meeting poor performing students at the start of the second semester to discuss strategies for academic success, and offering to meet with advisees prior to major selection during the second semester).
- Motivating activity sharing among introduction to engineering advisor-instructors, to help all instructors share useful information about important curricular and co-curricular activities.
- Delivering frequent, often weekly, “advising points” to advisors so they had timely information to convey to advisees (availability of career exploration activities like internship, job fairs, etc).

II. Challenges

While the engineering school sought to connect first year students with their introduction to engineering instructors for advising whenever possible, some students needed to be advised by other individuals. Sometimes, the introduction to engineering instructors were teaching three sections of the course, and they felt they could not individually advise over one hundred students in the “close touch” manner envisioned. In other instances, introduction to engineering instructors felt that they already had significant advising loads in their discipline, and thus they declined to serve as advisors. In those instances, an effort was made to pair first year students with engineering school instructors of one of their other first semester courses. During this pilot phase of “total advising,” this strategy allowed about 85% of students to be advised by one of their first semester instructors.

RESULTS

In order to assess any improvements to the engineering first year student advising experience, we strategically surveyed students to gain their insights.

I. Methodology

Survey data was obtained through SurveyMonkey. The first survey in 2013 was anonymous and included a cross section of all levels and majors of students with an overall response rate of $r.r. = 860/2519 = 34.1\%$. We were able to filter down to the first year responses with $r.r. = 215/600 = 35.8\%$. We used the same quantitative questions in the design of the 2016 survey and strategically placed the optional survey at the end of the major application, which meant the students were not promised anonymity, in contrast to the 2013 survey. Because of the mandate of filling out the major application, there was an overall response rate of $r.r. = 600/611 = 98.2\%$. See Appendix B for the survey questions that were exactly the same wording between both surveys.

II. Data Comparison

Likert Scale questions were compared from 2013 to 2016, and for ease of reference, we will use 1) Availability, 2) Response Time, 3) Curricular Knowledge, 4) SEAS Policies, 5) Career Discussion, 6) Refer, 7) Enjoy and 8) Success as short hand.

- 1) My advisor is generally available to meet with me.
- 2) My advisor responds to email inquiries in a reasonable time (within 72 hours).
- 3) My advisor is knowledgeable about the curriculum.
- 4) My advisor is knowledgeable about SEAS policies and regulations.
- 5) I feel comfortable discussing concerns about my academic career with my advisor.
- 6) If my advisor does not know an answer to one of my questions, s/he actively helps me to find the answer.
- 7) My advisor seems to enjoy advising.
- 8) My advisor takes an active role in ensuring my success in SEAS.

We added the percentage of students reporting that they agreed or strongly agreed across surveys and found that a higher percentage of students in 2016 were reporting agree or strongly agree (see Table 1). These results are statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$ level, with the Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon test yielding $p < 0.001$ for a difference in the number of students reporting “agree or strongly agree” across the 2013 and 2016 populations.

These increases were achieved while students reported only a slightly higher frequency of meetings with their advisor. We believe that this is in part due to advisors opting into the advising activity, intentional communication advisors shared with students about opportunities to engage throughout the semester, and the more frequent interactions available by routinely seeing the advisor in class. In future survey deliveries, we hypothesize that we will see a

difference in affirmative reporting between students who had an advisor-instructor as compared to those who did not.

TABLE 1
AFFIRMATIVE REPORTING PERCENTAGES AND DIFFERENCES FOR LIKERT
SCALE QUESTIONS FOR 2013 AND 2016 SURVEYS

Statement	2013	2016	Difference
Availability	61%	81%	20%
Response Time	72%	79%	7%
Curricular Knowledge	54%	79%	25%
SEAS Policies	65%	82%	17%
Career Discussion	57%	79%	22%
Refer	48%	72%	24%
Enjoy	50%	79%	29%
Success	30%	68%	38%

III. Advisor Memo and Feedback

In addition to the survey data collected from first year undergraduates, faculty advisors were asked to reflect upon their advising experience and provide feedback. Eight advisors contributed feedback, and their written comments voiced a number of recurring themes. Faculty advisors:

- Felt that it was important to connect with students early, just as they arrived for the school year. By creating early connections, faculty could be “built in” to the new schedules and the new academic lives that students were organizing. Faculty thus supported “early matching” with advisees, prior to the start of the academic semester.
- Welcomed the opportunity to engage with students more deeply, beyond basic course selection discussions. They sensed this more substantive connection allowed them to add real, lasting value. Advisors reported they were able to stimulate substantive student inquiry into and reflection upon their upcoming major selection and career opportunities.
- Found that students particularly appreciated that a faculty member wanted to get to know them and talk with them about selection of a major and possible career pathways. As a result, many advisees ultimately engaged in repeated, substantive discussions outside of advising meetings.
- Supported the plan for a robust new advisor training session at the start of the first semester. The session was deemed to be especially critical because advisors were asked to forge more substantive connections with students. The deeper connections meant that faculty needed to be better informed than previously about a wide range of academic, degree, career, and university life topics.

They also needed to know whom they could consult for questions that were initially beyond their capacity to answer.

- Asked to be provided a private space in which to meet with advisees. Not all faculty advisors had individual offices, and the deeper discussions of this new advising format sometimes led to more personal discussions best conducted in private.
- Cautioned about asking them to advise too many students. Those faculty teaching multiple sections of introduction to engineering felt that advising more than 60-70 students was likely impractical in the new “high touch” model. In addition to introduction to engineering teaching and advising, most instructor-advisors also had other research/scholarship, teaching, and service duties.
- Felt more robust first year advising model “set a high bar” for follow-on advising in the major. During the second semester, advisors handed off their advisees to faculty in the degree programs selected by the student. By providing significant attention to students during their first year, a number of students developed an expectation that such advisor availability was “the norm.”
- Support and training from centralized staff made it possible for some of the new advisors to refer students to when advice was unclear. The registrars specific to engineering along with the Director of Undergraduate Success were mentioned as important staff to which to refer students.
- Sincerely appreciated the compensation that they received for their advising efforts. By placing the earned funds in a discretionary spending account, the advisors had the flexibility to use the funds to support course activities of their choosing, to treat students to lunch discussions, and to attend professional meetings.

CONCLUSION

A confluence of factors influenced our school to develop a more robust advising activity in order to alter students’ first year experience and to provide a financial incentive for faculty to participate. The key factors include a university-wide cornerstone plan with total advising as a main pillar, another school’s success with pairing advisees with a course instructor, the provost’s interest in expanding this activity, our school’s survey that indicated that although the advising system was not in crisis it was also not ideal, the engineering school increasing its undergraduate enrollment, and the survey data verifying at the end of the pilot that the student advising experience was elevated. Although retention was not the main driver for the advising system change, we might observe positive effects on retention in the coming years. While the frequency of interactions between advisees and advisors clearly increased, meaning more faculty time, the dramatic increase in students’

affirmative reporting of important advising success metrics was substantial enough that our school has now committed to this expenditure (both in time and resources) without matching investments from the Provost's office.

I. Recommendation Based on Student Feedback

We reported across the board increase in student affirmative feedback on our advising survey. Most notably, a dramatically increased (38%) number of students reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that their advisor took an active role in ensuring their success in the school. We partly attribute this increase to the specific population of advisors that opted into advising the first year students, and partly to the weekly resources that each advisor was provided. The increase in affirmative reporting coupled with the minimal administrative and funding needed convinced our administration of the value of this new structure and justified the continued expense.

II. Recommendation Based on Advisor Feedback

If other institutions look at instituting similar advising structures, we share a few cautions we learned as we developed this model. Advisors need to have access to space to meet regularly with students as well as a reasonable number of advisees that allows them to have higher quality and more frequent contact with each student. Ensuring the system is in place before the academic year starts allows students to start the advising relationship sooner, specifically during the time they are making the transition to college. Because a few of the advisors were new to advising, they appreciated centralized resources that they could share with the students and training on the curriculum. Lastly, expectations of both advisor and advisee responsibilities should be clear in the first year and particularly when the student makes the transition to an advisor in their major.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Because the 2016 survey data contains identifiable data, where the 2013 did not, we expect to collect another year's worth of data to do a comparison of those students that had an advisor who also taught one of their first semester courses to those that did not within this new model. We plan to implement some of the recommendations provided by the advisors and require up front training and create sustainable centralized resources. With additional focus on the research enterprise in our school, we hope to elevate the advising experience while not increasing demand on faculty resources, namely their time. Within the next year, our school will be investing in a substantially improved advising website, and we hope to capitalize on a more streamlined advising navigation, both for advisees and advisors that may have an additional positive impact on the first year advising experience. In any advising structure, turnover of key centralized staff can impact students' advising experience.

Our main challenge will be the retirement of our registrars specific to engineering as this role also plays a vital source of information about student records and course requirements. With these changes in mind, we hope to isolate the assigned advisor experience by adding a few additional survey questions and also incorporating assessment tools and standards from the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) and the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education [4] – [6]. These standards and formulated assessments will potentially allow us to compare our school with other institutions and more clearly delineate best practices.

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APPENDIX A

Activities to help students explore resources

The goal of these activities is to help students explore resources and to learn more about their own academic and personal strengths.

Each faculty participant will be required to create an assignment/activity related to the following:

- Students taking the StrengthQuest assessment.
- Students going to office hours of at least one of the faculty in their non-ENGR 1620 courses.
- An assignment/activity related to attending a talk in SEAS' Academic Accelerator Speaker Series
- An assignment/activity related to attending a departmental research seminar
- An assignment/activity related to attending the Study Abroad Fair in September or a presentation by the International Studies Office
- An assignment/activity related to attending the SEAS' Major Nights
- An assignment/activity related to attending the Fall Career Fair in September or a presentation by the Center for Engineering Career Development.
- An assignment/activity related to attending a meeting of one of the professional student organizations in SEAS
- An assignment/activity related to participating in a cultural event to help students value diverse viewpoints within a team

Integrating Advising Functions into Intro to Engineering

Integrate advising functions (broadly defined) into class meetings. These advising functions can include as little as 10-15 minutes per week, during which the faculty member and students discuss time-specific topics such as:

1. Up-coming academic deadlines (add/drop/withdrawal)
2. Available University support resources for study skills, test preparation, etc. in a just-in-time way (i.e., before a calculus exam, for instance)
3. Course scheduling for spring.
4. How to select an academic major

We anticipate approximately 10 of these throughout the fall semester.

APPENDIX B**Archived Advising Survey Data (2013 and 2016)**

This optional survey seeks your feedback about your advising experience in your first year. We recognize advising as one of the critical resources we provide to students, and we value your feedback. Please answer honestly, and thanks for your help. This survey should take no more than 5 minutes of your time.

Please answer the following questions about your OFFICIALLY ASSIGNED ADVISOR, and not any other faculty who have informally given you advice or the Undergraduate Office staff with whom you may have interacted.

About how many times per semester do you meet with your advisor in person?

- 0
- 1 or 2
- Between 3 to 5
- 6 or more

Do you meet with your advisor to discuss issues OTHER THAN course scheduling?

- Yes
- No

During the course advising period (when you choose classes for the following semester, and your advisor removes your advising hold), does your advisor use a sign up sheet, Doodle poll, open advising/office hours, or other method that makes it easy for you to meet with them?

- Yes
- No

When you meet your officially assigned advisor to discuss course scheduling, about how long is that meeting?

- Less than 5 minutes
- 5-10 minutes
- 10-20 minutes
- Longer than 20 minutes

Please answer the following questions about your interactions with your officially assigned advisor. (Likert scale – strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree, Not Applicable)

- 1) My advisor is generally available to meet with me.
- 2) My advisor responds to email inquiries in a reasonable time (within 72 hours).
- 3) My advisor is knowledgeable about the curriculum.
- 4) My advisor is knowledgeable about SEAS policies and regulations.
- 5) I feel comfortable discussing concerns about my academic career with my advisor.
- 6) If my advisor does not know an answer to one of my questions, s/he actively helps me to find the answer.
- 7) My advisor seems to enjoy advising.
- 8) My advisor takes an active role in ensuring my success in SEAS.

Would you recommend your officially assigned advisor to a friend?

- Yes
- No