

Rolling with the Tide: Retaining First Year Students through Quality Advising and Support Services

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A students' first year of college can be filled with numerous challenges, expectations, and responsibilities, thus influencing their decision to matriculate into sophomore year. Advisors from The University of Alabama's College of Engineering place great emphasis on providing quality services and encouraging students to achieve their academic and personal goals.

Prior to the development of The College of Engineering Academic Advising Center, the responsibility of advising students in class selection and degree progress fell solely on the Engineering Faculty. Because of how rapidly the Engineering Program has grown, the Advising Center was developed to allow Professional Advisors to see students and give the Engineering Faculty more freedom to be available for defining course content, offering career advice, and encouraging participation in research.

The College of Engineering Academic Advising Center was created in 2012, under the direction of Gregory Singleton. At that time, the Advising Center Staff consisted of four Professional Advisors who were responsible for advising all 3,580 students within The College of Engineering. Students were originally assigned to their advisor by alphabet (last name), and were required to be advised each semester in order to register for classes. As the College of Engineering continued to grow, more advisors were needed to better serve our students.

Today, the Advising Center Staff consists of seven Professional Advisors who advise nearly 5,600 students each semester. Because of the increase in both advisors and students, advising assignments changed to a Departmental Advising Model—meaning students are assigned to an advisor based on their major. The Departmental Advising Model keeps advisors and students more accountable for curriculum and graduation requirements. In addition, the new advising model allows advisors to serve as liaisons between students and faculty, strengthening the overall advising experience.

To best accommodate our students, the Advising Center offers four types of advising options:

1. **Individual Appointments** are 30 minutes in length and used for semester and/or degree planning, co-op discussions, study abroad planning, and addressing other academic goals and interests.
2. **E-Advising** is intended for students who are away from campus (on Co-op, Study Abroad, etc.) or students who are unable to attend an in-person advising appointment. To complete E-Advising, students are asked to complete a PDF Academic Plan (emailed by

their advisor). It is expected that students who complete E-Advising already have an academic plan in mind and simply need to get their advising hold lifted.

3. **Group Advising** is conducted when advisors are invited to attend select engineering courses to review the core and engineering curriculum. First, students are provided their major flowchart and instructed to mark it according to their completed academic history and their current course schedule. Next, students identify courses they intend to take for the upcoming semester. Lastly, advisors review students' plans for accuracy, offer feedback/recommendations, and both the students and advisors sign the plan.
4. **Walk-in Appointments** should be used by students who have a plan in mind for the upcoming semester and only need a quick double check and sign off. These appointments should average 5-7 minutes in length per student.

The Advising Center Staff strives to grow in knowledge and size to continue providing a supportive environment for all of our students, faculty, and staff. Because of the College's growth, advisors seek to learn through professional development opportunities, such as reading articles for best advising practices, attending regional and national conferences (National Academic Advising Association, NACADA), and participating in campus advising initiatives (The University of Alabama Academic Advising Association, UA-AAA). With these opportunities, we continue to learn there are numerous theories, models, and philosophies which can be utilized to foster effective student-advisor partnerships.

While working with students, the Advising Center Staff often uses the Appreciative Advising philosophy. Bloom, Hutson and He (2008) define Appreciative Advising as "the intentional collaborative practice of asking positive, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials." Incorporating Appreciative Advising practices helps the Advising Center Staff empower students to take ownership of their educational experiences by understanding and utilizing the resources available to them. Students should leave the Academic Advising Center with confidence in their knowledge of their curriculum, their ability to create and execute their academic plan, and their potential for success.

Now that the Advising Center is established, the staff desires to become more involved with freshmen initiatives related to retention and success. In doing so, advisors also want to bridge the gap between the Advising Center and the College of Engineering by becoming more involved with the Freshman Engineering Program (FEP). Tinto's (1987) Model of Student Retention states that enhancing interactions between students and campus personnel is related retention. With that in mind, advisors seek to provide quality advising and support services to encourage students to achieve academic and personal goals at The University of Alabama.

The University of Alabama FEP is the designated engineering program for incoming freshman students as well as new transfer students. The overarching goal of the FEP is for students to be excited about a career in engineering or computer science and be prepared with the core knowledge in Math, Science, English and Engineering to be successful in their later years on campus. Through the FEP, students will take a common four hours of courses designed to

introduce them to the major themes of engineering and computer science. Students immediately begin working in teams on multiple design projects, testing their Math and Science skills and building their teamwork capabilities. The courses and purpose statements are listed below.

ENGR 103 (3 hours): Engineering Foundations. The purpose of the Engineering Foundations course is to provide students with the basic skills required for engineering with an emphasis on problem solving, sketching, teaming, oral and written technical communication, and the design process.

ENGR 111 (1 hour): Introduction to Engineering. There is a general introductory course as well as introductory courses that are specific to the Engineering Departments (AEM 121, CE 121, CHE 125, CS 121, ECE 121, ME121, and MTE 121). The purpose of the introductory courses is to identify the history of engineering and practices that can enhance academic/professional success within each major.

After collaboration with the FEP Director, Dr. David Cordes, the Advising Center Staff identified ways to assist first year students beyond advising. The first goal is to extend group advising to FEP by attending each section of ENGR 103, to teach the importance of advising and how to make appropriate course selections. The second goal is to identify campus resources that students can take advantage of to help navigate life at The University of Alabama. To help encourage students to utilize key campus resources, the Advising Center Staff will encourage students to attend at least three workshops that highlight academic success and encourage students to set realistic and attainable goals.

Workshops that will be available to FEP students would include:

- How the University of Alabama is Different From High School
- Motivating Yourself to Study
- Time Management
- How to Prepare for Tests
- Dealing With Test Anxiety
- Advising 101
- Career Services: Create Your Career Action Plan
- Co-op/Internships
- Mentor UPP: Undergraduate Peer Partnering

The Rolling with the Tide: Retaining First Year Students through Quality Advising and Support Services workshop will focus on advising practices and goals the Academic Advising Center has for students and the College of Engineering. In addition, workshop facilitators will identify the goals of the FEP and how advisors aspire to become more involved with the program through class and outside programming. Workshop participants will learn the importance of how quality interactions with students, faculty and staff are related to retention and how support services are integral to the undergraduate experience. In return, the workshop facilitators will encourage participants to share their advising practices and retention efforts so conference attendees can stay abreast to student retention and success initiatives.

Bloom, J. L., Hutson, B. L., & He, Y. (2008). *The appreciative advising revolution*. Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing.

Tinto, V (1987). *Increasing student retention*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.