

I'm an Academic Adviser – Now What?

Betsy F. Willis

Southern Methodist University, bwillis@smu.edu

Abstract – The role of an academic adviser is to provide students with accurate information and guidance to assist students in their academic journey from first-year student to graduate. Each adviser brings a unique skill set and background, and advising structures vary across institutions. Four key aspects of advising include degree requirements, academic policies and procedures, the students themselves and documentation. Each student brings unique strengths, goals and life experiences, so each student's college journey is different. Advisers with a network of colleagues across campus are best equipped to assist students with a variety of questions and issues that will arise. This workshop will discuss whom to include in a campus wide network, four aspects of advising and case studies on which to try out advising skills.

Index Terms – Academic advising, student records, case studies.

INTRODUCTION

The path to becoming an academic adviser is different for each person. Whether you are a faculty member who has been asked to provide academic advising to your students or you are a staff member who has come to advising through student services – we each start our role as an academic adviser asking ourselves “Now What?” This workshop will cover whom to include in your advising network and four basic aspects of advising. We will conclude by pulling together the information with case studies.

ACADEMIC ADVISING STRUCTURE

Academic advising takes on different structures at different institutions. In some schools, students start in an all-university advising center then move to advising within their chosen departments. In other schools, students are advised within their chosen department, either by a staff or faculty adviser, from their first-year orientation. Some advisers are professional staff and others are faculty members who also teach and conduct research. Advisers need to understand how students experience advising at their institution as well as the advising structure from a faculty and staff perspective.

Despite the varying advising structures, several truths remain:

- Engineering and computer science curricula are complex and pre-requisite driven. Academic missteps

can result in delayed graduation. Therefore, students need a strong academic advising support system.

- Staff and faculty advisers often have multiple job responsibilities, so they must balance advising and availability for students with their other roles.
- Advisers provide students with information on course sequences and academic policies – what must advisers know and what must they document?

No one adviser will have the answer to every question or issue that arises, so advisers need a network of colleagues across campus such as the Registrar, Provost, other schools/colleges records offices and Student Life to assist in finding answers and solutions to advising questions.

FOUR ASPECTS OF ACADEMIC ADVISING

The main role of academic advising is to provide students with information on what is necessary to go from an incoming student to an engineering graduate. The journey from incoming student to graduate is different for each student, so the academic adviser must be able to use basic degree and policy information to assist the student with his/her individual academic journey. The basic roadmap for the journey is the degree requirements, which are governed by academic policies. The journey is made more interesting by the unique goals and background each student brings. Parents and “life experiences” can create challenges and/or successes along the way. Documentation of the journey is critical to a successful graduation with minimal conflict. This workshop will cover four basic aspects of advising - degree requirements, academic policies, working with students and documentation.

The first basic aspect of academic advising is the degree requirements, which include the minimum number of hours to graduate, the minimum required GPA for graduation and the courses required to graduate. The course requirements can be subdivided into general education requirements and engineering/computer science degree requirements. The general education requirements are those courses or areas of study required of all students at the university. Before moving into major coursework, many programs have subset requirements – a smaller set of courses and a minimum GPA that must be attained in order to declare the major. The engineering/computer science degree requirements are the specific math, science and courses in the major required to graduate. Combining the general education and major requirements can result in a large number of credit hours with little room for error.

CONCLUSION

Advisers play a key role in helping students understand the requirements and helping students move efficiently through the requirements.

The second basic aspect of academic advising is knowing and implementing academic policies and procedures. The undergraduate course catalog or bulletin is a comprehensive source of university policies and procedures. Examples of academic policies include course repeats, grading, academic good standing, grade changes, etc. Academic procedures include pre-approval to transfer courses, course substitutions, and schedule changes, to name a few. Advisers assist students with understanding these policies and navigating academic procedures. Reviewing new catalog updates and maintaining a network of colleagues across campus in various functional areas are critical to helping advisers learn and stay abreast of changes to policies and procedures.

The third basic aspect of academic advising is working with students. This can be the most rewarding and challenging aspect of academic advising. Multiple factors dictate the format of academic advising. Such factors include the number of assigned students, other assigned duties of the adviser and school policy on required or optional academic advising. Academic advising can take on a number of formats ranging from individual, in-person sessions to group sessions to remote advising via platforms such as Skype. The bulk of academic advising focuses on course selection for the upcoming semester. However, advisers also assist students with long-range planning that provides a semester-by-semester degree plan taking a student from their first semester through graduation and incorporating experiences such as internships and study abroad. Academic advising becomes more challenging as parents, academic disappointments and “life” experiences intervene with an otherwise perfect plan.

The fourth basic aspect of academic advising is documentation. Accurate documentation is critical for both the student and academic adviser to record the journey to graduation and to help mitigate conflict. Students rely on written documentation to enroll correctly and to serve as supporting information for petitions and forms. Advisers rely on accurate documentation to assist students with questions, policies and procedures. Documentation includes lists of classes for the upcoming semester, forms, petitions and email communications. If the document could affect graduation or a scholarship – save it as part of the student’s academic record!

CASE STUDIES

After covering four basic aspects of academic advising, we will discuss case studies based on actual students. From the outstanding student with lofty goals to the student facing suspension to the parents who are too involved – we will come up with solutions to some of academic advising’s most challenging circumstances.

Each student’s journey from first-year student to graduating senior is different, and advisers are the guides. Advisers play a key role in helping students navigate the often complex degree plans and university requirements to graduate with a degree. Knowing campus resources and points of contact enable advisers to provide accurate information to students. Four key aspects of advising are degree requirements, academic policies and procedures, the students themselves and documentation. Just as each student brings unique abilities and goals, each adviser has a unique background and skill set. The academic adviser provides timely, accurate guidance to students enabling them to successfully navigate their academic journey.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Betsy Willis, Ph.D. Director of Undergraduate Advising and Student Records, Southern Methodist University, bwillis@lyle.smu.edu