

Advising Task Force, Fall 2007

Summary of Recommendations

Our thoughts on advising at Smith have been shaped by thinking about both advising generally and the specific advising context at Smith. The Smith context includes such issues as our open curriculum, our recent strategic plan and the resulting agreement to focus on development of certain capacities in our students, and the diversity of our student body. In evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of our current advising system we have benefited not only from the experiences (here and elsewhere) of the members of our task force but also from faculty and student input and from some preliminary analysis of an in-depth, qualitative study on advising in which Smith students are participating. These inputs and our work this semester have led us to make the following recommendations, which range from “quick fixes” to, in some cases, more substantive restructuring of the way we envision and carry out advising at Smith.

Our recommendations are paired with a proposed timeline that we hope reflects the amount of additional thought and work that each recommendation requires. Where we believe that a substantive change would provide the maximum benefit to Smith students (and in fact to the Smith community at large), we propose to take additional time over the next year for the community as a whole to engage in thought about the best ways to enact that change. Because advising requires a significant commitment from students, faculty and staff, we feel strongly that the best model will be based on meaningful input from all those stakeholders.

The Current Advising System

Major advising at Smith is a success from both the student and the faculty perspective. Both advisers and advisees feel that major advisers have sufficient expertise to guide students, and within their major departments or programs students have the opportunity to build the type of relationships with faculty that are recognized as a hallmark of liberal arts colleges like Smith. We found through a survey of Chairs and Directors that departments and programs vary markedly in how they provide information to their majors, but all responding departments have some way to make information available to students. In some cases our survey prompted respondents to comment that they would like to better organize or to formalize this information; our recommendations include some suggestions for how this might be done.

Department advising could be made stronger in the way departments and programs disseminate information to students who are *not* their majors, whether those students are potential majors or are simply interested in exploring courses within that department. Particularly as we work on helping students design pathways outside their majors, it is critical that departments and programs provide readily available tools for students and their advisers to do just that. We see department and program websites as an obvious avenue for dissemination of this type of information (as well as for information useful to faculty and students within those departments), but right now those websites are almost uniformly ill-suited to this type of use.

Premajor advising is experienced by both advisers and advisees as quite distinct from major advising and in many ways as less satisfactory. At Smith and at similar institutions, both students and faculty express dissatisfaction with the “match” between advisees and advisers. From the students’ perspective advisers often do not have immediate answers to specific questions about offerings and policies in other departments. From the advisers’ perspective it is hard to provide the same quality of advice they can offer to students majoring in their field. We see limits to the ability to “match” advising pairs as both inevitable and, in some sense, desirable: we do (and should) not expect students to arrive with a major selected.

On a related note, data show quite clearly that advisers are not the primary source of information for students selecting their courses, even at Smith. Given the intrinsic limits on the omniscience of even the most conscientious advisers, and given that students will continue to seek out information

about courses from sources outside the formal advising relationship, we think it would be wise to shift the focus of premajor advising. Richard Light's book, *Making the Most of College*, provides compelling evidence that the best outcomes from advising are achieved when advisers help students engage in the kind of self-reflection that prompts students to make connections between their curricular and co-curricular lives at college. Furthermore, premajor advising is the first opportunity students have to begin establishing academic relationships with faculty; these relationships are, according to the studies cited in Light's book and to the experience of the task force members, one of the most valuable facets of undergraduate education (and, ideally, a defining strength of the liberal arts college experience).

Particularly at an institution with an open curriculum, the role of faculty in guiding students' course of study is not to be taken lightly, and we do not want to de-emphasize that role. Rather, we would like to shift the focus of the premajor advising relationship from the mechanics of course selection to the establishment of a thoughtful, intellectual interaction that enables each student to reflect on her goals and on her progress at Smith. At the same time, we seek to centralize and clarify resources that will allow faculty to provide better and more accurate guidance when they do help students plan their courses of study. We have some ideas about both resources and structures that might help faculty and students make the most of premajor advising. However, since a shift in focus for this campuswide activity is a fairly major change, we propose to engage faculty, students and staff in further discussion to arrive at a system (or systems) that has the potential to work for everyone involved.

Recommendations

For premajor advising we recommend the development of a new paradigm that focuses on mentoring and reflective practices as students begin their work at Smith and, eventually, choose a major field of study. While we would like more campuswide input in designing the exact form this advising will take, there are some obvious components that will be required for such a model. At the same time, we would like to make the logistical piece of premajor advising more straightforward for both students and faculty by providing easier access to information about department- and College-level requirements.

For major advising our recommendations center on the accessibility of information for advisers and advisees. This information will certainly be of use for premajor advising as well, and in part we seek to create a system whereby advising is addressed as a consistent four-year process.

The following are recommendations supported by the Advising Task Force. Further discussion of these ideas with the larger Smith community will guide our next steps.

1) Electronic portfolio: We envision an e-portfolio as central to advising over the four years. This portfolio can be seen as a much more interactive and dynamic form of our current advising folders; it provides both an opportunity and an expectation for students to engage in reflection as preparation for meetings with their advisers. We expect that such a portfolio will enhance, not replace, one-on-one interactions between students and advisers.

While we do not have an exact model in mind, we expect that students would be asked (required) to respond in the portfolio to questions geared to their stage at Smith. These questions would provide students with an opportunity to think about how their curricular work is advancing their mastery of designated capacities; at the start, they offer an opportunity for students to reflect on what they think those capacities mean. They offer students an opportunity as well to reflect on (and to share with their advisers) how co-curricular activities address those capacities, and to identify overlap between curricular and co-curricular experiences.

As one example, the University of Pennsylvania uses such questions for what they call an "Academic Blog." Sample questions from UPenn include the following:

1st semester, October: In what ways have your expectations for this first semester been challenged, or confirmed? How are you responding?

3rd semester, October: If you had to choose a major today, what would it be? Why? How does this major play to your strengths? How has the sense of your strengths and weaknesses changed or been confirmed since high school?

Junior year: What has your growing experience in your major meant for your intellectual identity? How has it affected your plans for life after Penn?

Similar questions (geared to Smith) and their responses could serve as the foundation for advising conversations. Advisers would not be expected to “grade” the portfolio, and we do not want to make this process time-intensive for advisers. It would certainly require more of a time commitment from advisees, but we think such a commitment is reasonable and in students’ best interests. We are interested in more input about how and if other students and faculty members might find such a system useful for advising at Smith.

2) Logistical support for advising: If we ask faculty advisers to focus more on mentoring, it seems reasonable to ask them to spend perhaps less time on the purely logistical aspects of premajor advising (e.g. course registration). Some logistical support can be provided by centralization and streamlining of resources as outlined below. However, we are interested in exploring other ways to provide the nuts-and-bolts information that students need. One source of inspiration is the success of Conversations at providing students with efficient access to accurate information about different departments and programs. We might think of extending this kind of support by identifying department and program Advising Liaisons, faculty whose advising responsibility is to provide general information to all students and advisers who need it during the semester. We considered setting up a system in which these liaisons would offer regular office hours for advising during the semester. However these liaisons work, though, we recommend the establishment of these positions as standard department/program jobs, since many faculty identified the difficulty of knowing whom to contact with questions about a particular department when they don’t have a personal contact there. Making this work solely the responsibility of chairs and directors does not seem to us the best use of faculty resources, although some departments and programs could certainly choose this route. We also discussed the possibility of using department student liaisons and/or SAA’s to offer this kind of support. While we have some simple ideas about ways to make the current SAA system more effective as is, we are also open to more radical ideas to improve the way students provide information to each other. In general we are interested in more feedback about imaginative ways to provide critical logistical support while leaving premajor advisers time for more substantive interactions with their advisees.

3) Premajor advising structure: We recommend rethinking how we structure the “required” advising interactions to better reflect the goals of premajor advising. If there is support for our model of a more mentoring-focused interaction, then it might make sense to mandate a certain level of interaction (e.g. a minimum number of meetings per year) rather than to mandate the exact timing of those interactions. While some advisers and advisees might prefer the current practice of meeting close to course registration times, others might prefer to meet instead during other times of the semester. If we emphasize that the goals of premajor advising are a bit broader than simply helping first- and second-year students register for courses, then this gives advisers some freedom to structure advising in a way that fits with individual schedules and preferences.

Our current premajor advising structure dictates three formal meetings in the fall of the first year (one during orientation, one to register for the fall semester, and one to register for the spring semester) and one formal meeting in the spring (to register for next fall’s classes), along with one informal meeting (Connections Dinner) in the fall. We would like to get a better sense of how much time faculty members spend with their premajor advisees, because anecdotal evidence tells us that there is great variation among advisers and, for a given adviser, among advisees. If we think about decoupling meeting times from the course registration calendar, what is the minimum number of

times an adviser should meet with each advisee to accomplish the stated goals for premajor advising? We do not anticipate a significant change in the time commitment faculty make to premajor advising, but we would like more input about what a reasonable and useful commitment would be, and about how to structure these interactions so they are most productive to advisers and advisees alike.

4) Other models for premajor advising: We recommend reinstating the possibility (though not the requirement) for FYS instructors to serve as advisers for some of their FYS students. One preliminary result from the ongoing advising study mentioned above was particularly noteworthy to us: while student satisfaction with premajor advising is reported as fairly consistent among all the participating schools, the one exception is Bates College, where advising is linked to a FYS-like program, and where students on average respond more positively to questions about their advising experiences. Since some faculty at Smith who have participated in this model have not liked it, we do not wish to mandate this model, but we are interested in feedback about how best to implement this system for those who wish to use it. We would also like to provide opportunities for experimentation with other models for premajor advising, whether they relate to curricular linkages or to other ways of structuring adviser/advisee interactions. One idea that the task force supported would be to provide some funds to support advising proposals. Faculty who would like to try a new model for their own premajor advising could apply for funding to do that; they would then present the results of their experiment the following year, perhaps as part of our ongoing faculty development activities around advising.

5) Advisee training: Entering students should be provided with some expectations about the advising relationship. We would like to emphasize from the start that advising and mentoring are not limited to one person or to one relationship. Students sometimes feel “cheated” when a premajor adviser sends them elsewhere for specific information, but this should be expected and even welcomed. From the start (perhaps even the summer before coming to Smith) students should understand the centrality of their own self-reflection to advising. Expectations might include an advising contract and/or an advising syllabus, and those might be adviser-specific. We would also like to make it easier for students to switch premajor advisers, something that can be productive once students (and advisers) understand what they are looking for in an advising relationship.

6) Adviser training: The task force members have found it incredibly helpful for our own advising simply to spend a semester discussing advising with a group of faculty, staff and students. We hope to propose a model for faculty development centered on advising, to allow faculty both to learn about successful advising models and to discuss their own advising experiences. We would like to begin this process in Spring 2008 with some campuswide events about advising. We think it is important to incorporate discussion of advising into new faculty orientation, but it is also important to recognize that advising is ongoing work for all faculty. As we work to shift the focus of advising to mentoring, we think it will be helpful to provide advisers with examples of ways to initiate productive advising conversations, including questions they might want to ask advisees at different stages of their time at Smith. As the student body at Smith changes over time, we feel that it is particularly important to give faculty opportunities to reflect on how we might best use advising to make opportunities at Smith (and beyond) transparent and accessible to all our students.

7) The first year: We envision advising in the first year as being better integrated with the First Year Program that already exists through the Dean of the College's and the Dean of Students' Office. The Connections dinners are one example of the type of activities that bring together both spheres, but there are (and could be) additional opportunities to provide better links between the ways faculty and staff work to help first-years make the transition to Smith. These opportunities might also provide ways for faculty who are less comfortable serving as premajor advisers to work with the first-year class. We also note that while many faculty like the Connections dinners, others have found it more fruitful to interact with advisees in a different venue (e.g. by hosting a dinner or attending another event on or off campus), and we recommend that the College provide some funding for faculty wishing to follow this model instead.

8) The sophomore year: For second-years premajor advising will be focused on sophomore-year issues such as choosing a major and making decisions about junior year (e.g. JYA). The ongoing advising study has found that sophomores generally feel lost in the premajor advising system, which is often focused on first-years' transition to college. We are considering a proposal to bring second-years back for a pre-sophomore orientation program that will set the stage for the sophomore year, and we are interested in more input into what this program should entail. Clearly a major issue in sophomore advising is the students' choice of major, and we envision a process of reflection where students articulate in writing not only their choice of a major and what has led them to that choice, but also their vision of where this major might take them. This is not a new idea to Smith; in fact, it is dictated in the Faculty Code, Section 72(f):

Each student is required to submit to her major adviser during the second semester of her sophomore year a written plan for the final two years, including a statement of the objectives that determined the plan, a tentative list of courses to be taken both inside and outside the major, and a tentative specification of how the other requirements for the major will be met.

It is worth noting here that issues pertaining to JYA are critical to early advising in both the first and the second years, and that many faculty members have strong opinions about ways advising could better integrate with these programs. We look forward to developing more specific recommendations about the ways advising in the first two years (and beyond) addresses JYA and its impact on students' trajectories through Smith and beyond.

9) Advising Handbook: There is consensus within the Task Force and among faculty who have given us feedback about this issue that logistical resources such as those currently found in the Premajor Advising Handbook should be standardized and condensed. We propose to group them together with a different name, i.e. an Advising Guidelines Handbook (because it can be useful for all 4 years). We would like to develop a standard table for departments and programs to fill out about placement, intro courses, etc. The Handbook should, we feel, also contain the basic information it does now about general academic requirements for first-years and others. It should be available both online and in print form. If our recommendation to establish department/program advising liaisons is enacted, each year's update should include the names of those liaisons.

10) Course registration: For first-year course selection we want a model that is fair and does not use unnecessary faculty time. Many students and faculty have expressed dissatisfaction with the current practice of assigning students time slots, since students with later appointments have much more difficulty finding openings in courses they have selected. In fact, some faculty members have found ways to circumvent this practice by meeting earlier with all advisees and then holding open registration for all their advisees, and their reported success is worth noting. Our current thinking is to open up Banner to all first-years at a given time and to give advisers/advisees the option (but not the requirement) of meeting to sign up together. Under such a model we would need to make extra support available to students registering on their own (e.g. through the Registrar, the Class Deans, SAA's and perhaps faculty volunteers), and we welcome ideas about other ways to make registration smoother. We recognize the importance of providing students with sufficient guidance both to navigate Banner and to deal with contingency plans when their first choices don't work out, but we are confident that with additional input we can come up with a system that is more fair and at least no less efficient than what we currently offer.

11) Advising Portal: A centralized web location for advising resources through the College website is critical. There should be a central page where advisers and advisees go to find information that they need not only for course selection but, more importantly, for general resources. For example, we envision links to on-campus resources such as the CDO, the QLC and the Jacobson Center. We also hope that this portal can centralize in a virtual way some resources that are more dispersed across campus but that may be relevant to advisers and advisees. As an example, a link to Financial Resources for Students could include not only a link to Student Financial Services but

also links to Women and Financial Independence and centralized information about emergency funds available to students. All the tools for advising (e.g. e-portfolio access) could be made available through this one site, so that advisers and students can easily access them together or separately.

12) Department/Program websites: We recommend that each department/program have a standardized part of their webpage devoted to advising/courses. Right now most departments have simply a link to the college course catalogue. We will work this next semester to develop a template for this site and welcome input about what would be most useful. For each department/program we envision that this site will provide information useful to students considering the major (a version of that department's/program's standardized sheet from the Advising Guidelines Handbook, a worksheet to check off major requirements, sample schedules if useful) and information useful to non-majors looking for courses (pathways for minors or for general exploration that takes students to the upper level, course clusters that may involve courses from other departments and programs). We might also think about a way for departments to make transparent to students and advisers how specific courses address different capacities. We think it is also important to specify a sustainable mechanism for maintaining these websites, and we welcome further feedback on how best to accomplish this. At this point we simply note both that maintenance of a well-designed template can be as simple as word-processing and that this type of work when carried out by faculty should be (as it is currently in some cases) recognized as a contribution to department/program service.

13) Assessment of advising: As we enact changes aimed at improving advising, we think it is important to put in place a program that helps us assess how these changes are working. General surveys of student satisfaction with advising do little to help us understand how our advising system achieves our specific goals and how it shapes the ways students experience Smith. While the current qualitative study of advising is rich with information, it is also extremely labor-intensive. We recommend development of a more streamlined method of assessment that focuses not on the performance of individual advisers but more generally on the success of different components of the advising system.