Academic Advising Task Force II (AATF II)

Final Report and Recommendations

November 1, 2010

The Academic Advising Task Force II (AATF II) was appointed by Dr. Gail Burd, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs in January 2010. Academic advisors are deeply committed to the role they play in affecting student persistence and timely degree completion. The goal of this task force was three-fold: assessment of advising programs, resources dedicated to advising, and barriers to timely progress of degree completion. The AATF II differed significantly from the AATF in 2001 as that focus was on the actual structure of advising on campus. Since then, the UA has had two events that significantly altered the advising landscape: the transformation process and the launch of UAccess. Prior to this final report, an interim report was submitted to Dr. Burd in June, 2010.

The AATF presents the following series of recommendations in response to the Charge Statement (Appendix A). These recommendations are intended to strengthen campus-wide assessment practices, improve communication with students and among advisors, and offer solutions to factors that negatively impact students' persistence and time to graduation.

Campus-Wide Assessment of Academic Advising Services

The UA fully adopted a decentralized, college-based academic advising structure in 2002. A number of assessments of student satisfaction with advising are routinely conducted.

- With respect to assessment of academic advising, almost every department and college assesses student satisfaction of academic advising in some manner.

- A university-wide senior survey that includes questions regarding satisfaction with the students' academic advisor is distributed to all graduating students.

- A campus-wide assessment instrument was developed by the University Academic Advising Council (UAAC) in 2005. These survey questions are emailed to each student after a note has been entered into the central advising note system by an academic advisor. The response rate for this instrument is 15.85% with an overall favorable impression of academic

advising services. (Appendix B: Student Satisfaction with Academic Advising Appointment).

Results from these survey instruments consistently indicate that students are satisfied overall with their academic advising experiences when they are able to gain access to the services in a reasonable amount of time. Timely access to advising services, however, can be difficult in some of the highly-subscribed departments.

All of these assessments, however, do not constitute a campus-wide assessment of academic advising services from a programmatic standpoint. It makes sense that an institution the size and complexity of the UA would adopt a college-based system. The advising task force is not suggesting a different advising structure; however, as an institution we would be well served to evaluate how effective we are at communicating the advising structure to students. Many students understand they are part of the university advising system, but do not realize there are 15 different college components in that makeup. We know that students change their majors or add second majors and minors every day. Are we serving students well and communicating effectively about our academic advising services? Are we telling them how important it is for their academic success to establish a working relationship with their advisor from the first day?

We believe the most critical time to educate students about academic advising begins at New Student Orientation and Transfer Student Orientation. The process of orienting new students to campus continues throughout the first year at the UA. The AATFII offers the following set of recommendations to establish a campus-wide academic advising assessment and first year communication program that can help us refine our practices and provide students with a holistic view of academic advising services.

Recommendations are numbered continuously throughout the document:

1. Develop a rotating schedule of Academic Advising Program Reviews (AAPR) for each college advising program. (Appendix C: AAPR Templates for Centralized and De-Centralized College Advising Structures)

2. Form a working group of faculty and academic advisors to develop questions specific to departmental academic advising and include them in the Academic Program Reviews (APR) that are currently conducted on a 7 year schedule. Many programs already include academic advising in their APRs, and the task force believes this best practice should be a requirement for all programs.

3. Adopt institution-wide student learning outcomes specific to the academic advising process. (Appendix D: Suggested Student Learning Outcomes)

4. Include a set of common messages pertaining to the academic advising services and structure in all of the college meetings during New Student Orientation (NSO). (Appendix E: Suggested Common College Messages) A pilot study of the college meetings was conducted this past summer and the findings are summarized in Appendix F: Pilot Assessment Project: Common College Messages NSO Summer 2010.

5. Develop a process to assess the student learning outcomes for first year programming from an academic advising perspective. Areas to assess: New Student Orientation (college meetings, orientation program, student survey), programming for new students (transfer and new student follow-up orientation meetings, mandatory advising, online assignments, welcome receptions, electronic messages, etc.)

6. Develop a survey instrument to assess advising services for mid-career and graduating students, possibly through the note system or UAccess.

Resources for Communication with Students and Among Advisors – Recommendations:

There are a number of electronic tools that can be used to enhance communication with students and among advisors.

7. Create a set of user-friendly advising documents for each degree program that are available through an official UA publication such as the catalog. The ARC website can serve as the interim location using pdf files completed by all academic advisors until e-advising tools are developed. (Appendix G: Sample 4 Year Plans, Requirement Checklists, and Transfer Guides)

8. A standard appointment scheduling system, easily accessible to current and prospective students, should be made available to all department and college advising offices that choose to use an online appointment scheduling system.

9. UAccess Analytics, My Planner, Shopping Cart. These tools available in the new student information system should be fully explored and developed in consultation and collaboration with the advising community. The AATF appreciates that discussions are underway with respect to the development of e-advising tools and other web interfaces that can improve functionality of the new system.

10. Create an online orientation map that provides an overview of the function of the student service units on campus. The ARC should organize the

creation of a series of podcasts featuring the role of academic advisors as well as the functions of the various student service units and display them on the ARC website.

Note: While the AATFII Interim Report included a recommendation regarding the mandatory use of the central Advising Note System associated with UAccess, there was enough opposition expressed with various constituents that the recommendation was removed from the final report.

As a result of the first advising task force, a central advising office was created to be a repository and resource for both advisors and students. Housed in the student union, the Advising Resource Center (ARC) has an extensive website with all the tools (i.e. forms, policies, etc.) and information that advisors need to help students. In addition, it is a place that students (and their parents) can go to when searching for a specific advisor or program contact information. One task of the AATFII was to review the ARC and evaluate whether it still meets the needs of our advisors and students. With respect to the advisor survey conducted in June, there appears no evidence to indicate the ARC was insufficient in meeting these needs.

Administrative Supports, Caseloads, and Compensation for Academic Advisors:

Administrative Supports and Advising Caseloads

At the beginning of this decade the advising function was supported in most offices by administrative assistants. Although only a few advising positions were eliminated as a result of the transformation process, many advising offices lost their administrative and technical support. The additional work has been absorbed largely by academic advisors, reducing the time they have to spend working directly with students. In some advising offices, advisors must take turns covering the front desk and performing other office tasks. Advisors are not alone in assuming additional responsibilities during the past several years. However, in light of these additional responsibilities, the advising caseload recommendations currently in practice require some adjustment. The advisors simply cannot continue advising the same number of students along with the extra duties they are assigned.

Many additional factors have complicated the advising environment during the past decade.

- Course availability issues exacerbate the advising caseload in that now many students must return for follow-up advising because they are unable to register for the classes initially planned with their advisor.

- In today's economic climate there is a greater need for academic advisors to provide more career advising as an important supplement to services provided centrally through Career Services. An effective academic advisor is well versed in career options for students in their discipline. Advisors can discuss these options fluently in addition to discussing ways students can become competitive applicants in a competitive environment whether they are seeking admission to a professional undergraduate program, examining employment opportunities or applying for admission to a graduate or professional program.

- The complexity of the new student information system, UAccess, requires a high-performing technical skill set for today's academic advisors to perform effectively in their work. The task force recognizes that the advising community at present is in a significant learning period while the staged "college go lives" unfold and phase two enhancements are developed. With that said, it doesn't seem premature to suggest that UAccess presents a new level of accountability *and* workload for academic advisors.

- The increased number of students at the University has not been met with an increased number of academic advisors.

The following appendices further illustrate that the growth in student population coupled with the complexity of today's advising landscape call for a reduction in the advising caseload.

Appendix H: Student College Census Data by College 2000-2009
Appendix I: Change in Work Environment and Responsibilities of Academic Advisors 2000-2010
Appendix J: Examples of Advising Caseload Exceeding Current Recommended Ratios

11. Based upon the combined effects of all the factors described above, we estimate that the advisor workload has increased by approximately 25% per student over the past decade and that much of this increase will likely be a permanent situation. For these reasons, the task force recommends that the advisor caseload be reduced to 300/1 for declared majors and 250/1 for exploratory students. Pre-majors are similar to exploratory students with respect to the type of advising services they require, and ideally the advising caseload would be reflective of the time required to appropriately serve pre-major students. The advising caseload should also be factored to include minors in programs that are highly subscribed or that require individual advising services.

Advisor Compensation

The issue of compensation for academic advisors becomes more urgent as we witness renewed advisor turnover. This academic year began, for example, with three of UA's best advisors accepting advising positions with PCC at salaries higher than $15,000 higher than the UA. There is a body of literature speaking to the relationship between effective academic advising and the positive impact it can have on student persistence and time to graduation. The UA is not competing in terms of advisor compensation on the local or regional level. For instance, the starting salary for academic advisors at the UA is $29,000 in most units. By contrast starting salaries for academic advisors at Pima Community College begin at $47,000 (Appendix K) and approximately $38,000 at Arizona State University (Appendix L). A recent posting at the UA for an entry-level counselor in the Office of Student Financial Aid which is at least comparable to an academic advisor started at $35,515.

A salary survey conducted by UA Human Resources in Spring 2007 revealed that there's a substantial turnover rate, and that the majority of advisors are considered new in their positions. Given that it takes at least one year for a new advisor to become fully trained and to experience the full ebb and flow of an academic year, the risk to institutional integrity that can accompany elevated levels of turnover in advising personnel should be a reason for concern.   A follow-up salary study of advisor compensation in May 2010 provided similar findings as the 2007study; there is a relatively high turnover rate and the majority of advisors are poorly compensated. (Appendix M)

12. Advisor compensation should be adjusted to reflect the level of skill, education, and experience required to be successful in the position. The institution can use comparative positions both internal and external in the local community and devise a more equitable pay scale that will be able to attract and retain the best advisors. A base salary at least in the mid-thirty thousand dollar range is a recommended first goal.

13. In addition to elevating the base salary of academic advisor and academic advisor, sr. positions so as to more effectively compete with other institutions for the best candidates, the advising task force recommends the establishment of standards of excellence as a way of promoting and recognizing academic advisor professional development.

The program should be developed that stimulates and encourages broad participation in professional development offered within and outside of the institution. While support and development of an individual professional development plan will involve the advisor's immediate supervisor, it will also include consultation with an appointed team of experienced professional colleagues. Central resources to support incremental salary increases should be

a part of the Standards of Excellence program. Several years ago a working group of advisors developed a proposal for a Step Progression Program for UA Academic Advisors (Appendix N) which might serve as a starting point for this recommendation.

Barriers to Student Persistence and Time to Graduation

Course availability issues are complex and multi-faceted. Students and advisors experience the frustration that results when plans A, B, and C fail to materialize during priority registration or after because there are not enough seats in courses, or the seats are being held for specific majors. We are a land grant institution, and students should be able to take classes outside of their specific area of study to further their education. The AATF II would also like to note the fact that the new funding model may also influence course availability in the future. The following recommendations can help us overcome some of the obstacles that prevent student persistence and time to graduation.

14. The advising task force recommends that a separate task force be convened to more thoroughly examine and recommend solutions that will solve some of the barriers and bottlenecks students increasingly face. With that said, a table of courses (Appendix P) has been collected from advisors which represents a campus-wide view of bottleneck areas.

There are also bottlenecks and perhaps retention issues with a number of professional programs with pre-major requirements. Recognizing the enrollment management challenges of some of the highly subscribed majors, it is also challenging for students to navigate the advising environment at the right moment to successfully declare/change a major. This is especially true during priority registration when most students think of changing their major, and, unfortunately, is exactly when many programs do not permit students to declare majors.

Many programs require that students attend a general advising information session before declaring a major program, and many have developed online sessions in addition to offering these sessions in person. Some programs only offer live information sessions, and if the student happens to miss the dates they are scheduled, they run the risk of a full semester delay in declaring the new major. Yet other advising programs increase the number of information sessions and allow students to declare their new major during priority registration which should be considered a best practice.

15. The advising task force recommends all programs that require students to attend an orientation session provide both in-person and web-delivered options for students' scheduling convenience and opportunity.

16. It is further recommended that departments explore ways within the limitations of their own circumstances, and assuming that all requirements are met for admission to the major, to either admit new majors during priority registration or at least provide these students with a triage-level of advising services so that they can make more informed decisions when they select courses during their enrollment appointment.

17. The ARC should develop a small grants program of in-kind service to provide the technical resources needed to develop a web-delivered major information session through the ARC's new contract with the Office of Instruction and Assessment (OIA).

There is broad agreement among advisors that a small offering of late start courses could be very beneficial with respect to student academic performance and retention. Increasingly, students turn to their advisors the second, third, and forth week of the semester indicating they are struggling in a particular course and need to drop it. These students, frequently, need/want to add another course or drop to a lower level. These types of inquiries most often come from first semester freshmen.

18. The institution should offer a small menu of key foundation and Tier I late start courses. Some of these courses could be offered as hybrids and could positively impact student academic performance outcomes and ultimately their persistence.

19. The AATF II recommends that an Implementation Team be appointed to assist with the implementation of the recommendations approved by the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs.

Concluding Remarks

The goal of this task force was three-fold: assessment of academic advising programs, resources dedicated to advising, and barriers to timely progress of degree completion. The first two goals, involving assessment and resources, give rise to several important issues. It must be remembered that this whole discussion takes place within a context where the increased number of students attending the university over the years since the first AATF report was implemented has not been met with any increase in the overall number of academic advisors. In addition to this important consideration are others that have added even more greatly to advisor caseload.

Without the assistance of administrative office staff and because of new challenges brought on by UAccess and by course availability issues, present caseload expectations are unrealistic and should be corrected. As a result, the task force's near-unanimous conclusion was that the expected ratio of academic

advisors to students should be lowered. Lowering the caseload of academic advisors has obvious implications relative to resources, but if student retention is an important focus at the university, we cannot afford to jeopardize the quality of academic advising services with caseload expectations that are too high. There were many comments on the 2010 Academic Advisor Survey that reflect this conclusion.

Attracting the most capable advisors and also reducing the disturbingly high rate of turnover of our best advisors requires attention to compensation issues as well. Aside from comparisons to outside college and university salary scales, there should be attention given to internal inconsistencies in salary for positions similar to advising positions. Positions at the university requiring similar professional skills and experiences are sometimes posted with higher salaries than advising positions (see current job posting for Program Coordinators in Financial Aid starting at $35,500).

Implementing Academic Advising Program Reviews, establishing learning outcomes for students relative to advising, expecting that each college will present common messages during new student orientation, and creating standards of excellence for advisors are strategies that allow effective and continuous evaluation of caseload, compensation, and other important components of an outstanding advising program.

The AATF II discussed the issue of barriers to completion of degree, at length. A comprehensive listing of barriers was developed and responses to the Advisor Survey provided important information about course availability and concerns about transfer student procedures. For years, most advisors could identify the particular courses that become bottlenecks and affect students' ability to graduate, but, for the first time, a comprehensive list of bottlenecks exists so that these problems can be solved.

Many of the task force recommendations require directives from the central administration to change operational processes and some recommendations require additional resources. The larger question of whether or not the university wants to continue building an advising structure that provides students with the support they deserve must be answered as these recommendations are considered.

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