

Introducing Academic Advising at Orientation: Penn State's Strategy

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The First-Year Testing, Consulting, and Advising Program at Penn State introduces students to academic advising and the university's academic structure. The initial interactions with academic advisors at FTCAP helps students recognize the role academic advisors can play in their educations. When coupled with an academic structure that facilitates student movement among enrollment units, students are supported to persist at the university even if their academic goals change.

Orientation provides opportunities to support a successful transition to college by welcoming students to university life and teaching them to make decisions consistent with the social, academic, and persistence issues important to the university. In particular, introductory orientation programs provide a critical opportunity to students by introducing them to the academic advising process.

The potential of the advising relationship to students' academic growth is often not understood by new students or their families (White, 1993). At The Pennsylvania State University, academic advising is viewed as an educational endeavor that teaches students to make informed academic decisions (PSU, 2007). Advisors work to increase students' sense of control and responsibility for their choices, as students identify initial academic interests, refine those interests based on their experiences, and learn how their academic directions relate to myriad other aspects of their life (including their co-curricular involvement, career possibilities, citizenship responsibilities, and course scheduling decisions). Students can engage in thoughtful decisions about their education when this expectation for intentional decision-making and the advising relationship is introduced early in their academic careers.

Penn State has a decentralized, non-mandatory advising model. Following Faculty Senate policy, each of its 19 enrollment units (e.g., College of Engineering, College of the Liberal Arts, School of Nursing, Division of Undergraduate Studies) provides every student with an assigned academic advisor. The 18 academic colleges/schools have mixed models of advising, employing both professional staff and faculty members, while the Division of Undergraduate Studies, an enrollment unit for undecided or exploratory students, exclusively employs professional staff.

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Although it seems counterintuitive, the non-mandatory nature of the advising system serves to encourage students to more fully engage in the advising relationship for several reasons. First, the early and significant introduction to advising during orientation helps students recognize the role advisors can play in helping them make broad decisions about their education. Second, although advisors help students build their schedules, the first interaction students have with advisors is in a classroom context, where advisors introduce students to the academic structure of the university and engage in both group and one-on-one discussion of students' larger academic goals. This decoupling of advising from administrative procedures helps students appropriately engage with advisors in academic information gathering and decision-making.

Two other factors contribute to student decision-making consistent with the persistence and retention issues important to the university: 1) The university's structure allows students to shift academic focus while still making progress toward graduation and, 2) early in their academic orientation, students learn how academic advisors can help them navigate this system.

Penn State's Academic Structure Facilitates Movement

Penn State grants undergraduate degrees through its 18 academic colleges/schools (e.g., College of Liberal Arts, College of Engineering, Smeal College of Business, School of Nursing). All colleges share a common general education foundation, which composes about one-third of all majors' degree requirements. Similar areas of study share common foundational courses. For instance science or engineering focused majors all require the same beginning calculus sequence. The university-wide general education program and common curricular foundations allow students to shift academic direction with minimal disruption in academic progress.

With very few exceptions, students are admitted to pre-major status in one of the academic colleges, or if undecided, to the Division of Undergraduate Studies. To enter a major, students must attain sophomore standing and formally request entrance. This delay in entry supports the underlying notion that all students need to learn more about Penn State's curriculum (majors, minors, and specific requirements), their own interests and strengths, and the connection of their education to other life goals. Students are allowed to make changes in their academic direction, including moving between academic colleges, through simple administrative procedures.

The First-Year Testing, Consulting, and Advising Program

Penn State has a long tradition of introducing students to academic decision-making and advising through the First-Year Testing, Consulting, and Advising Program (FTCAP), the first of several orientation components for new first-year students. FTCAP introduces students to the academic structure of the university and

to academic advising as a resource to help navigate that structure. The particular focus on academic decision-making at the first significant orientation experience teaches students that their academic decisions are a legitimate and important topic for consideration, research, and discussion.

FTCAP originated in the mid-1950s as a retention intervention meant to equip students with information that would help them match their interests and strengths to an attainable curricular goal within the university (Anonymous, 1957). In 2011, the focus on helping both students and their families understand the academic structure of the university, the nature of the curriculum, and how students move within the institution remains. Also consistent over the program's history is its inclusion of placement testing, discussion of non-academic transition issues, and one-on-one conversations between each student and an academic advisor.

Students are informed of the expectation that they participate in FTCAP when they formally accept their offer of admission to Penn State. Historically, 96% of the incoming first-year students at the University Park campus attend the program. In order to schedule a campus visit for FTCAP, students must first complete an online Educational Planning Survey which captures information about their academic goals, expectations, and attitudes. This information is used to facilitate one-on-one conversations during the advising day. Students also take online placement tests in English, mathematics, and chemistry, which they use to help make decisions about course selection. (See dus.psu.edu/ftcap for more information.)

Prior to attending their scheduled FTCAP advising day, students are asked to examine their academic decisions through a series of assignments. Students view two online modules: degree requirements, and using university-specific web-based resources to select and register for courses. They then apply what they learned from the degree requirements module to examine their intended major's curriculum, identify areas of flexibility and course prescription in that major, and start thinking about what skills and knowledge they will build through their major and general education selections.

The campus visit is split into two components: a university-wide class during the morning and enrollment unit-specific meetings in the afternoon. Students and family members participate in separate but parallel programs. During the morning, students from all enrollment units participate in a three-hour class co-taught by an academic advisor, a student affairs professional, and a current undergraduate student. The class introduces students to the Penn State Principles (respect, ownership, academic integrity, and responsibility), which frames the remainder of the session. Students are introduced to common social and academic transition challenges and the behaviors and resources that can help them to be successful. In particular, students are encouraged to engage in their education through intentional, goal-oriented decisions about academic and co-curricular involvement, and to make responsible decisions (particularly regarding alcohol consumption). Through a series of small group activities, students are introduced to a broad array of campus resources and are encouraged to consider seeking out available resources even in the absence of need to enhance their experience and success at

the university.

Students are also introduced to the academic structure of the university, where they learn about the characteristics and curricular patterning across the campus' academic colleges. For example, they learn that the colleges of Engineering, Science, and Earth & Mineral Sciences have very similar foundational course work, and that majors in all three colleges will provide a math and science focused education. They realize that Penn State offers a wider variety of majors than they may have been aware of and are encouraged to research majors similar to the one they initially targeted. For example, a student who initially selects Biology (housed in Science) may be even more interested in Toxicology (housed in Agricultural Sciences), or Biobehavioral Health (housed in Health and Human Development), or Biological Anthropology (housed in Liberal Arts). Foundational math and science courses are similar across these majors, buying the student time to further explore before committing to a particular major.

At the beginning of the academic segment of the FTCAP class, we ask students to answer via classroom response system ("clickers") how they feel about the fit of their current enrollment unit. During both 2010 and 2011, about 85% of students in the class say they agree or strongly agree they are enrolled in the unit that best fits their interests and goals. During the FTCAP class, students meet one-on-one with an academic advisor to consult about their enrollment decision. Students who feel they are enrolled in the unit that best fits their interests engage in a brief reflective conversation about how they came to their initial decision. Students who feel they are not enrolled in the best fitting unit have the opportunity to engage in a longer discussion where they consider other enrollment options and potentially make a change to another enrollment unit.

During the 2009, 2010, and 2011 programs, about 15% of all students sought this longer conversation with an academic advisor to help them clarify concerns about their enrollment unit, and about half of those (7.5% of new students) made a change in their college of enrollment during the FTCAP advising day. In all cases, this movement was driven by students' further discovery of where within the university they can pursue their academic interests. At the end of each FTCAP class, we pose the same clicker question we asked earlier. The number of students who agree or strongly agree they are enrolled in the best fitting unit increased to 94% in both 2010 and 2011. The initial one-on-one conversation during this session models the kind of conversation students can have with academic advisors throughout their academic careers. Students spend the afternoon with advisors in their college of enrollment, expanding on this conversation and implementing their academic plan.

Student Movement among Academic Units

At Penn State, 65% of the students admitted in 2010 indicated on the Educational Planning Survey that they were undecided about their major to some degree. Although the literature presents a mixed picture, undecided students are often regarded as particularly at risk for non-completion (Steele & McDonald,

2008). However, at Penn State, this population is as successful as any other at the institution (PSU, 2010b). The FTCAP discussion of how students can move among academic units and the role advisors can play in helping to make those decisions is an important foundation for the persistence efforts of the university. Beginning at FTCAP, students learn how to view and handle changes in academic interests. Undecided students are a high proportion of the entering class and are given opportunities to shift around the university as they learn more about themselves and the academic opportunities available at Penn State.

About 25% of all first-year students choose to enroll in the Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS), a unit that enrolls and advises students who are undecided or exploring majors. Students who initially enroll in DUS graduate at the same rates as their peers who initially enrolled in an academic college (PSU, 2010b). Although the advising system is non-mandatory, in the past academic year, 94% of students enrolled in DUS initiated an advising contact.

All academic colleges lose students for a variety of reasons. The academic structure and advising system at Penn State allows students who need to change academic direction to move elsewhere in the university, rather than leave the institution. Focusing on the University Park campus, which enrolls about 7,000 new first-year students each academic year, 32% of students move out of their initial college of enrollment but persist to graduate from the institution in five years or less (PSU, 2010a). Many Penn State students who change academic directions did not begin their enrollment in DUS. Among the 2003 cohort, 19% of students who were initially enrolled in an academic college left their initial academic college, but persisted in their enrollment and graduation from the university (PSU, 2010a). Based on the Penn State experience, undecided students are at no greater risk than others when they are given appropriate advising and a chance to modify their academic path.

No one program can accomplish all the goals of an institution or take primary credit for students' success. Various efforts, including academic advising and its introduction through orientation, contribute to student resource-seeking and persistence. At Penn State, students learn that initial dissatisfaction or misalignment between academic strengths and a major's curriculum does not spell the end of their career at Penn State. Many students change their initial academic directions both within their initial college and across colleges at some point in their academic careers. Penn State's advising structure provides students a person to talk to about their direction and a process to accommodate their changes.

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