

August 20, 2004

Advising in the University of Nebraska, College of Arts and Sciences: A Final Report

During the 2003-2004 academic year, the UNL College of Arts and Sciences made advising the focus of its annual outcomes assessment program. This report presents the results of that activity.

Background

In the years following UNL's last accreditation, outcomes assessment has become an established part of the culture of the College of Arts and Sciences. Virtually every program in the College has established an assessment plan and ongoing systems for gathering information on their academic effectiveness. The results of these plans have been collected annually since 1997 and have become a vital tool that faculty members and program use to create, adjust, and evaluate curricula. Because of the success of program assessments, the Arts and Sciences Assessment Committee, and the UNL Assessment Office recommended a change in pattern of assessment reporting. In place of annual reports, a decision was made to receive assessment reports biannually. In addition to other benefits, the College of Arts and Sciences Assessment endorsed this reporting rhythm because it allows for the assessment of activities that are outside specific academic programs. The 2003-2004 consideration of advising was the first of the "off-year" assessment efforts.

As further background, it is important to begin this report by recalling a couple of key points about assessment research. First, outcomes assessment focuses on results. Evaluation of student satisfaction may be a useful part of assessment, but it is not a primary goal. Likewise, demonstration of programmatic success is not the same as assessment of the overall results. The outcomes assessment effort that has evolved at UNL is primarily concerned with determining the effectiveness of educational programs. That is, they focus on the degree to which students bring away information and skills that faculty and programs have sought to convey. Secondly, it is critical to remember that outcomes assessment is not an end in itself. The point of assessment is to find ways of improving programs.

The Assessment Process

After the program assessment reporting cycle was changed, the A&S Assessment Committee faced the problem of selecting an issue to address in the off year. This topic was discussed at three of the Committee's meetings and in a number of conversations and emails. Prof. Gordon Woodward, Undergraduate Adviser in the Department of Mathematics, made the specific suggestion that we focus on advising. During the spring of 2003, Peter Bleed discussed that suggestion with Drs. Rita Kean and Anne Kopera and laid out some potential methodologies to the Committee. After considering various assessment activities and the available resources, the Committee agreed to use a survey of students as heart of the effort. To develop issues to be addressed by the survey instrument, two members of the Assessment Committee, Peter Bleed and Prof. James Ford, led a focus group of Chief Advisers. On April 23, a group of nine chief advisers spent two hours discussing their work. The direct result of

that meeting were four lists that describe: 1. activities carried out by advisers, 2. goals of advising, 3. characteristics of a well-advised student, and 4. sources of advice and guidance available to students in the College.

On the basis of that list, Bleed generated an initial set of questions that would address advising effectiveness. Those questions were reviewed by the Assessment Committee. Additionally, Bleed discussed them with several Chief Advisers, staff members of the A&S Advising Center, Prof. Dan Hoyt of the Bureau of Sociological Research, and members of the Arts and Sciences Student Advisory Board. After four major iterations, the instrument was judged ready to apply. The final survey instrument, together with the explanatory cover that was given to students who took part in the survey, are attached (**see Attachment 1**).

With leadership from President Miranda Swanson, members of the Arts and Sciences Student Advisory Board administered the instrument to other A&S Students. Bleed met with the Board on Sept. 3, 2003 to discuss the instrument and explained how it should be used. Board members were asked to solicit 10 responses at locations in Oldfather and other buildings where A&S students could be expected. They were asked to administer the instrument in person and record the responses given. To avoid biasing the survey results toward the rather narrow subset of students who find themselves on the Advisory Board, surveyors were asked not to solicit responses from friends or from their own residences. With a Board of 30 members, the original plan was to gather some 300 responses. When they were returned, three weeks later, 188 completed surveys were received.

Given how they were gathered, the 188 completed survey responses can be viewed as no more than an unsystematic “grab sample” of students with majors in the College of Arts and Sciences. The sample is also rather small, constituting only some 5% of the approximately 3600 students currently enrolled in the College. A comparison of the majors of students in the survey sample with the primary majors of the entire College indicates that the survey sample seems to offer a fairly good representation of students in the College. The major area of difference in the two populations is in undeclared majors. That difference seems small and is largely due to the fact that some surveys did not record a major. There also appears to be a mix of transfer students in the survey sample since some 11% of the sample expect to spend no more than 3 years at UNL. In the end, then, the survey sample shows no sign of systematic bias, but, instead, seems adequate to support further analysis.

Survey Results

Responses to key parts of the survey are presented in **Attachment 2**. The following section will discuss those data in order to highlight specific patterns.

A. Progress toward graduation.

The Chief Advisers identified timely progress toward graduation as a goal of academic advising and a characteristic of well-advised students. The first three questions in the survey instrument were designed to address this issue. More than 60% of the respondents think they

will graduate in 4 years with 85% expect to be done in 5 years. By the same margin, students in the surveyed sample judged themselves to be moving smoothly toward graduation.

By these measures, our students feel adequately prepared to move smoothly through their degree requirements.

B. Familiarity with degree requirements.

Question 4 of the survey was designed to assess student familiarity with the requirements of their major. The basis of this question was the focus group's assertion that well-advised students would know their major requirements.

When asked the number of credits required for their major, however, students demonstrated great uncertainty. Some two thirds of the sample did not know that number. Furthermore, most of those who replied to the question appear to have confused major and degree requirements. That unsettling situation may be balanced somewhat by the responses given to a question about the core course requirements. More than 90% of the respondents felt familiar with the classes they must complete for their major. If we can trust these responses, this situation seems to suggest that students do know how they should move through their majors even if they do not command specific details like the number of credits they must complete.

Students were asked about students groups in their major because Chief Advisers had recognized the potential importance of student-to-student advising. As potentially important as such groups may be, however, responses suggest that most students do not know about or take part in these groups.

C. Sources of Advice.

Chief Advisers recognized that students draw on several sources of academic advice. A series of questions were offered to determine the degree to which students draw on the formal sources provided by the College and University. Before exploring the responses, it is significant to note that A&S Chief Advisers who attended the focus group entirely overlooked the University Office of Career Services as a source of academic advice.

In this section of the survey, students were asked to list all of the sources they consult for advice. Many students said they draw on more than one source of advice.

Major Advice

As revealed by the survey, students' primary source of information and advice about their major is their major adviser. This seems hardly surprising, but even when other faculty members are added, somewhat less than half (47.9%) of the surveyed students said they use a faculty member to be their "main" source of information about the field they have selected as their major. A majority of students claim to get advice about their major from non-faculty sources. Other students (hopefully with the same major), and their own consultation of the

UNL Bulletin and departmental websites are the sources most students use to select major classes and instructors.

Other parts of the survey suggest that the situation may not be as bleak as those responses might indicate. Question 11 addressed student familiarity with their major adviser. More than 90% of the respondents know they have an adviser. More than 63% know who that person is. Even though only 41% of the respondents list their adviser as their “major” source of advice, half of the respondents (49.1%) say they meet with their adviser at least once a semester. Only 15% say they never meet with their adviser. These numbers appear to indicate that our students are getting more expert disciplinary guidance than they realize or appreciate.

University Information

Students draw their information on University operation and requirements from a variety of sources. Of the sources identified by Chief Advisers, no one serves a majority of students. Indeed, the survey shows that the major sources of guidance for our students in this regard do not require personal interaction. For this sort of information, just under a half of our students (47.4%) turn to either on-line sources or the University Bulletin. To people used to more personal contacts and less automated systems, this preference may seem surprising, but it is probably quite in keeping with “tech savvy” modern students.

Academic Guidance

The goal of Question 8 was to determine where students turn for general academic help. This would include dealing with issues like selection of a major, selection of classes outside the major, and how to structure and pace class work. The question may have been unclear and neither on-line sources nor the UNL Bulletin were included in the listed options. Given those limitations, students indicated their major source of answers to these sorts of questions is their major adviser or another faculty member. Students also regularly speak with family members and other students for help with these kinds of issues. Only 18% of the surveyed students listed the A&S Advising Center as a major source of this information.

Omitting on-line sources from the list of options in this question reflected the biases of the Chief Advisers, but it may offer an interesting insight to the responses received for Question 7. Nearly a third of the respondents to that question claimed to use the web. For Question 8, on-line sources were not included in the potential advising source. Students could list “other” sources so they could have cited on-line sources if they wanted. Only three (3) students mentioned any other sources. Perhaps on-line sources are not useful in this regard, but the difference in the responses between these two questions may suggest, that students think they use the web more than they actually do. Alternatively, these response differences may indicate that students are disposed to use on-line sources when they are aware of them.

Problems and Resolutions

Question 9 asked where students go for specific help when they encounter problems because Chief Advisers viewed supporting students as one of their primary responsibilities. While discussing the survey instrument, members of the A&S Student Advisory Board were quite sure that most students would say that they had had “serious” problems. In fact, however, only some 18% of the respondents answered this question positively. Whether this number is

high or low, the problems were resolved in all but one case. Students went to their major adviser for solution to these problems at a slightly lower rate than they did for other advice. They turned to the A&S Advising Center at a slightly higher rate. Nearly a third of the students who encountered problems got help resolving them from an “other” source that was not identified. It is not clear what “other” sources of help are encompassed in these responses, but they probably deserve further investigation.

Career Guidance

Chief Advisers recognized career guidance to be a part of their responsibilities, but responses students gave to Question 10, listing who they speak with regarding career guidance, suggests that the College does not do a good job in this regard. As noted, Advisers entirely overlooked the help students can get from UNL’s Career Services office. The fact that only 3% of the respondents report using Career Services suggests that our students are unaware of the office and its activities. Beyond that, nearly 20% of respondents gave no answer to this question or said that they get no career guidance. This may be because pre-professional students may have chosen not to respond to this question. In any case, the major sources of career guidance that our students report come from outside of the University. Family, other students, and working professionals offer nearly 60% of the career guidance students receive.

Pre-professional Advising

Thorough consideration of pre-professional advising is beyond the scope of this assessment activity. Question 13 was included simply to reflect the Arts and Sciences Advising Center’s responsibility for overseeing the University’s pre-professional programs. The largest group of students in a pre-professional program did cite the Advising Center as a source of advice, but that number constitutes less than half of the (44.6%) of the respondents. Pre-professional students seem more aware of Career Services since 12% said that they use that source. Only some 3% of other students indicated that they use Career Services. Once again, guidance from informal or off-campus sources is very important. Family, other students, and working professionals offer some 29% of the career guidance pre-professional students receive. It seems remarkable that 10.8% of students who have gone to the effort of identifying a pre-professional interest still claim to be without guidance.

D. Use of Advising Resources.

Chief Advisers felt that well-advised students should meet with their adviser regularly and certainly should know how and where to contact their adviser. Questions 11 and 12 were included in the survey to assess these issues. As discussed above, students seem to be familiar with their major advisers and interact with them relatively more often than they realize or credit.

The situation seems to describe students’ relationship with the Advising Center. Although the Advising Center is cited as a minority source of advice and guidance in all of the areas discussed above, more than 82% of the students know where the Advising Center is and more than 55% say they visit the Advising Center at least once a year. This usage rate indicated that students are drawing on the Advising Center, but not counting it as a source of

advice or guidance. The number of students reporting that they never visit the Center is accounted for almost entirely by the number who do not know where it is. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that our student respondents under-reported their use of the Advising Center. By the end of September, Advising Center counted just over 10,000 student visits in 2003. This number includes all contacts, not simply “visits.” In coarse terms, however, it suggests that A&S students contact the Advising Center about 3 times a year on average. The number of visits reported by the students in the assessment sample seems well below that level and may suggest that students draw on the Advising Center more than they realize.

The obvious lesson to take away from these figures is that we must work hard to assure that all students know about the Advising Center and its services.

E. Advising Quality.

Many of the responses discussed so far seem low and more than a little disappointing. There are areas where we must do better, but it is also useful to consider the evaluations students gave to the advising they receive within the College. Fully 80% of the respondents judge their advising “Adequate” or better and more than twice as many students say it “Great” rather than “Very Bad.” Overall, this suggests that students are satisfied with the advice and guidance provided by the College of Arts and Sciences and, furthermore, that our advising programs are not major blocks to their academic progress.

F. Issues raised by the survey results

Results of the survey suggest that those involved in the A&S advising effort have work to do, although it does not appear that we are facing a crisis. Indeed, by several measures, advising within the College is doing well. Notably, our students are satisfied with the advising they receive. They feel they are making timely progress toward graduation. And in the practical terms, they seem overwhelmingly aware of the information they need to move ahead.

As positive as all that sounds, the survey results clearly reveal some serious holes in student academic understanding. Details of degree and major requirements, for example, seem to be very uncertain to the mass of students. If such details matter, we must do more to make students aware of them. The fact that some students lack basic information about matters like the location of the Advising Center or the identity of their major adviser seems genuinely troubling. We must work hard to apprise students of basic information they need to get advice and to succeed. This may have to begin early in their time on campus and may require closer cooperation between advising personnel and those involved in Admissions and New Student Enrollment.

Included in the assessment results may be signs of a cultural gap between students and advisers. Advisers seem to emphasize personal contacts and written sources like “department booklets.” Students, on the other hand, may be much more interested in non-personal sources of advice and guidance. These sources would include on-line sources and the Bulletin. This difference may reflect deeper differences between modern advisees and advisers. Advisers

certainly need support and guidance to keep up with their clients. They must also be made aware of the full range of resources that are available to students. As much as they may wish to help with career guidance, the fact that advisers overlooked UNL's Career Services and that our students do not make regular use of that office indicates that we have not helped our students as much as we could.

Our students do not limit themselves to the advising sources we provide. Students, friends, family members, and off-campus professionals all provide our students with advice. This is very positive, of course, since it greatly increases the amount and richness of guidance available to students. It also reflects a laudable responsibility and curiosity among our students. The risk of informal advising is that students may be given advice that will not help them with specific aspects of their academic program. Advisers must at least be prepared to deal with misinformation. More positively, we should look for ways of making effective use of informal advising. Students should be encouraged to be sure to balance the advice they get from formal and informal sources. Beyond that, at NSE and other venues, we might be able to suggest ways that parents can give their students relatively good advice. Residence halls may be able to offer opportunities that maximize students-to-student advising. We may also wish to develop posters and brochures that explain the importance of advising. The list could go on.

Beyond specific misunderstandings and knowledge gaps, the survey results also suggest that many students do not understand the importance of academic advising. The fact that students may under report their formal advising interactions, suggests that they take advising for granted. Possibly they do not value interactions with advisers. Anecdotal evidence from A&S Student Advisory Board members indicates that at least some students do not like getting advice. Chief Advisers recognize the complexity of the adviser's role by pointing out that they must offer guidance while also enforcing rules and standards. Finding solutions to these problems may be knotty, but we should seek ways of making it easier for students to seek and use advice.

Considerations of the Survey Results

As soon as the results of the survey had been gathered and tabulated, a preliminary report with some tentative conclusions, were presented to groups and individuals who are involved in advising and student support. This was done in recognition of the importance of using assessment data to guide program improvement. The initial report was distributed to members of the College Assessment Committee and to virtually all of the people who were involved in the design and distribution of the survey instrument. Formal presentation of the results was made to the A&S Student Advisory Board, the A&S Assessment Committee, the A&S Deans, the staff of the A&S Advising Center, and, on August 17, 2004, to the Arts and Science Chief Advisers who had gathered for their annual retreat. In all of these presentations, the results and implications of the survey were thoughtfully discussed.

**UNL College of Arts And Sciences
Advising Outcomes Assessment Survey Fall 2003**

F/M

1. When did you enter the University? _____
2. When do you expect to graduate? _____
3. Do you feel you are moving smoothly toward a degree? Yes _____ No _____
4. What is your major? _____
 How many credit hours does your major require? _____ Not Sure _____
 Do you know the core courses required for your major? Well _____ Generally _____ Not Sure _____
 Is there a student group in your major? Yes _____ No _____ Not Sure _____
 Are you a member? Yes _____ No _____ Not Sure _____
 When does it meet? _____
5. Are you also in a Pre-professional program? Yes _____ No _____
 Which one? _____
6. What is your main source of advice and information about your major?
 High School Teacher _____ My Major Adviser _____ Another faculty member _____
 The A&S Advising Center _____ Other Students _____ Friends/Family _____
 On-Line sources _____ UNL Bulletin _____ Other _____
7. What is your main source of advice and information about the University?
 High School Teacher _____ My Major Adviser _____ Another faculty member _____
 The A&S Advising Center _____ Other Students _____ Friends/Family _____
 On-Line sources _____ UNL Bulletin _____ Other _____
8. When you want academic guidance, who do you talk with?
 High School Teacher _____ My Major Adviser _____ Another faculty member _____
 The A&S Advising Center _____ Other Students _____ Friends/Family _____
 Other _____ I Rarely/Never talk with anyone about this _____
9. Have you ever had a serious problem with registration or requirements? Yes _____ No _____
 If yes, where did you go to get it resolved?
 High School Teacher _____ My Major Adviser _____ Another faculty member _____
 The A&S Advising Center _____ Other Students _____ Friends/Family _____ Other _____
10. When you need career guidance, who do you talk with?
 High School Teacher _____ My Major Adviser _____ Another faculty member _____
 The A&S Advising Center _____ Other Students _____ Friends/Family _____
 Career Services _____ A Professional in the field _____ Other _____
 I Rarely/Never talk with anyone about this _____
11. Do you have a Major Adviser? Yes _____ No _____
 Do you know your adviser's name? _____ Not Sure _____
 How often do you meet with your major adviser?
 Twice a Semester _____ Once a Semester _____ Once a Year _____ Very Rarely _____
 Never _____
 Do you contact your adviser by email? Commonly _____ Rarely _____ Never _____
12. Where is the Arts and Sciences Advising Center? Not Sure _____
 How often do you go to the A&S Advising Center?
 Twice a Semester _____ Once a Semester _____ Once a Year _____ Very Rarely _____ Never _____

13. When you need information about your pre-professional program, where do you turn?

High School Teacher _____ My Major Adviser _____ Another faculty member _____
The A&S Advising Center _____ Other Students _____ Friends/Family _____
On-Line sources _____ UNL Bulletin _____ Other _____

14. Describe the quality of the academic advice you receive at UNL.

Great		Adequate		Very Bad
1	2	3	4	5

Surveyor _____ Location of Interview _____

Date _____

Attachment 2: Selected Responses to Arts & Sciences Advising Assessment Survey Fall 2003

Q.1 Years to Graduation											
	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Seven	Total			
	1	2	20	110	35	4	1	173			
	6%	1.2%	11.6%	63.6%	20.2%	2.3%	.6%				
Q.3 Good Progress Toward Graduation?											
	Yes	No	No answer								
	160	23	5								
	85.1%	12.2%	2.7%								
Q.4 Core Requirements?											
	Know Well	Know Generally	Not Sure/No Answer								
	101	75	12								
	53.7%	39.9%	6.4%								
Q.6 Advice/Info About Major											
	High School	Major Adviser	Other Faculty	A&S Adv Center	Other Students	Family/Friends	On-Line Source	UNL Bulletin	Other	No Answer	Total
	4	77	13	23	34	20	14	58	8	1	252
	2.1%	41.0%	6.9%	12.2%	18.1%	10.6%	7.4%	30.9%	4.3%	0.5%	
Q.7 Advice/Info about Univ											
	2	24	10	7	51	42	59	30	13	2	240
	0.8%	12.8%	5.3%	3.7%	27.1%	22.3%	31.4%	16.0%	6.9%	1.1%	
Q.8 For Academic Guidance											
	1	88	20	34	37	37			3	13	233
	0.5%	46.8%	10.6%	18.1%	19.7%	19.7%			1.6%	6.9%	
Q.9b. Registration Resolved											
	High School	Major Adviser	Other Faculty	A&S Adv Center	Other Students	Family/Friends			Other	No Answer	
	0	11	3	8	2	3			12	1	40
	0.0%	31.4%	8.6%	22.9%	5.7%	8.6%	0.0%	0.0%	34.2%	2.8%	
Q.10 Go for Career Guidance											
	High School	Major Adviser	Other Faculty	A&S Adv Center	Other Students	Family/Friends	Career Sevices	A Professional	No guidance	No Answer	Total
	4	49	22	11	12	73	6	26	1	36	240
	2.1%	26.1%	11.7%	5.9%	6.4%	38.8%	3.2%	13.8%	0.5%	19.1%	
Q.13 Go for Pre-Professional Program											
	0	17	4	37	8	9	10	7	6	3	101
	0.0%	20.5%	4.8%	44.6%	9.6%	10.8%	12.0%	8.4%	7.2%	3.6%	
Q.11a. Have adviser?											
	Yes		No								
	171		17								
	91.0%		9.0%								
Q.11b. Adviser's Name											
	Know Name		Don't know Name	No answer							
	108		60	3							
	63.2%		35.1%	1.8%							
Q.11c. Meet Adviser											
	Twice in Term 1/Term		1/term	1/year	rarely	never	no answer	Total			
	26		58	23	36	26	2	171			
	15.2%		33.9%	13.5%	21.1%	15.2%	1.2%				
Q.12a. A&S Advising Center											
	Know location		Don't know location								
	155		33								
	82.5%		17.5%								
Q.12.b Go to Advising Center											
	Couple of times		1/term	1/year	rarely	never	no answer	Total			
	25		51	28	44	36	4	188			
	13.3%		27.1%	14.9%	23.4%	19.1%	2.1%				
Q.14 Advising Quality											
	Great			Adequate			Very Bad	No Answer		Total	
	16			81			6	2		188	
	8.5%			27.6%			3.2%	1.1%			

