

ADVISING TASK FORCE REPORT

Hamilton College
June 1, 2009

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Summary

In the absence of a major change in the existing curriculum such as the establishment of First-Year Seminars, the Task Force recommends the following:

1. Update admissions and NSO documents to more effectively define and foreground student responsibility within the process of advising in relation to the open curriculum.
2. Establish an orientation program for new and continuing advisors to highlight faculty responsibilities, academic requirements, and College policies and resources.
3. Redefine advising as a teaching responsibility as opposed to a service responsibility
4. Implement assessment of advising and a corresponding system of accountability to ensure its effectiveness.

Charge of the Task Force

On February 2, 2009, Acting President Joe Urgo delivered the following charge to the Task Force:

The strategic planning process revealed dissatisfaction with aspects of the current system, and a willingness to explore alternatives. The strategic plan expresses "a concern about disparities in advising," and states, "We will use our growing array of assessment tools to address these inconsistencies and to identify and correct weaknesses in our advising program." Of particular concern are pre-major advising and freshman advising specifically. The task force assembles persons with specific interest and expertise in some aspect of advising on campus.

The members of the task force are Caitlyn Williams '11, Marianna Vinacur '09, Leslie Bell (Career Center), Phyllis Breland (Opportunity Programs), Karen Brewer (Associate Dean of Students, Academic), Todd Franklin (Associate Professor of Philosophy), Kristin Friedel (Registrar), Leslie North (Health Professions Advisor), Steve Orvis (Professor of Government), Edith Toegel (Associate Professor of German), and Steven Yao (Associate Dean of Faculty for Diversity Initiatives). In addition, Assistant Dean of Faculty for Institutional Research Gordon Hewitt served as a resource person for the Task Force, providing invaluable help in gathering, collating, and interpreting information requested by the group.

Advising and the Open Curriculum

The current system of advising operates within the context of Hamilton's open curriculum. The burden of assuring course breadth and promoting a liberal arts education has fallen to the advising system in light of the freedom from distribution requirements that is a fundamental feature of the open curriculum. As the Strategic Plan rightly observes, "an open curriculum is best suited for students who are independent, motivated, and committed to the ideals of a liberal arts education. But it requires a high level of faculty advising" (Hamilton Strategic Plan, 7). Consequently, in such a curricular environment, advising takes on a particular importance and faces specific challenges.

Challenges Facing the Current Advising System

The Task Force determined that the following issues loom large in the current advising system.

1. Accuracy and Timeliness of Information regarding College and Major requirements

Students have reported receiving inadequate or inaccurate information about issues such as the physical education requirement, the writing intensive requirement, the quantitative literacy requirement, and the sequencing of courses for different hierarchically structured majors. In some discussions, students reported that advisors sometimes knew absolutely nothing about concentration requirement outside their own departments, and even did not know whom to contact in order to get information needed by the student. These complaints surfaced despite the diligent efforts made by the Dean of Students office to remind students about their curricular obligations and the physical education requirement in particular.

2. Consistency of Advising

There is strong evidence of dramatic variation among advisors with regard to both knowledge and even interest in advising. Most faculty execute this responsibility with expertise, savvy and dedication. Even so, some students report difficulty obtaining anything more than instrumental advice. In addition, evidence suggests that there is inconsistent attention paid to course breadth and in some cases no discussion about the idea of a “liberal arts education.”

3. Availability and Continuity of Advisors

The registrar reports facing consistent challenges with administering the advising system, most especially in matching students with faculty members who have some connection to their declared academic interests. These problems were especially acute under the previous advising system that sought to assign students an advisor from among the instructors of their freshman courses (the “Bradfield model”). Furthermore, for some large departments in particular, the task of major advising precludes the possibility of any pre-major advising, which in turn generates a sense of disappointment among certain students who came to Hamilton with a particular set of interests in mind. This problem is due to enrollment pressures in these departments, and it is not likely to change in the current economic environment. In addition, due to leaves and other shortages of faculty, some students report having to change pre-major advisors several times over the course of two years, or upon returning from abroad.

4. Equity among Advisors

Currently, there is no system of assessment or accountability for the quality of advising. This situation fosters inequities for students and faculty alike. The Faculty Handbook states that “Advising students concerning academic matters is an important responsibility of each faculty member” (33). However, the Handbook groups advising under the heading of “Service,” which may explain why assessment and accountability measures have yet to be introduced. As a result, there are no positive or negative incentives for taking advising seriously. Indeed, there is currently an incentive to disregard advising in favor of research and teaching. The Task Force wishes to emphasize that its review has shown that most faculty do in fact take advising very seriously. But the current system relies on the goodwill of faculty members, rather than upon an institutionally sanctioned set of expectations and rewards, to ensure good advising.

These challenges arise from numerous causes, and they collectively underscore the extent to which advising is connected to a variety of different areas of the college.

Additionally, the recent award of a grant from the Mellon Foundation to the College includes provision for a Curricular Breadth and Advising Leader who will assume responsibility for overseeing the advising system and implementing any changes. The Task Force sees this development as a positive one, and its recommendations are intended to provide this Advising Leader with a possible road map for improving the current system.

Data Sets and Documents Reviewed

1. Course-breadth data, originally requested by CAP and performed by Gordon Hewitt. (Appendix A)
2. Suggestions from Student Assembly about the current advising system (Appendix B)
3. Survey of current sophomores regarding their experience with pre-major advising, developed by the Task Force and administered by Gordon Hewitt. (Appendix C)
4. Senior satisfaction survey data relating to pre-major and major advising (Appendix D)
5. Open meeting about advising for Faculty, held on February 24, 2009
6. Existing advising documents from various offices around the College
7. articles on advising by Paris and Elgren and Chambliss and Takacs.
8. Teagle Foundation “White Paper” on “The Open Curriculum: An Alternative Tradition in Liberal Education (http://www.teaglefoundation.org/learning/pdf/2006_brownwg_whitepaper.pdf)

Findings of the Task Force

The Task Force found that different segments of the data told contradicting stories. Most notably, perhaps, there was substantial anecdotal evidence that suggested numerous and fundamental problems with the advising system. On the other hand, statistical data relating to curricular breadth and student satisfaction indicated a system that largely succeeds in encouraging students to study broadly and discussing with them their academic options. These data in particular remain somewhat broad, however, and we believe that the small but observable diminution of breadth remains an issue for concern and warrants more detailed examination. We further observed that there has been a growing disparity in student satisfaction with pre-major and major advising, beginning with the advent of the open curriculum in 2004. We hypothesize that this disparity stems from the differences in faculty roles between pre-major and major advising. We did not find this disparity a cause for great concern. Indeed, we concluded that the focus of our recommendations should be on pre-major advising within the context of the open curriculum.

The Task Force agrees with the view articulated in the Teagle Foundation “Working Group” White Paper, entitled “The Values of the Open Curriculum: An Alternative Tradition in Liberal Education,” which remarks that, “Advising in the context of an open curriculum is conceived of as an extension of the teaching responsibilities of the faculty because it is a crucial way in which faculty collaborate with students in guiding, shaping, and facilitating their learning” (Values, 33). We further agree that “advising [should be] viewed as a dialogue about a student’s intellectual and personal development in which the faculty member plays the role of a supportive critic” (33). The Task Force agreed that the ideal scenario is one in which holistic advising takes place through a close mentor/ mentee relationship. But the Task Force also recognizes that such relationships must evolve organically in the absence of an established mechanism for promoting them, such as first-year seminars. We believe that any attempt to mandate such relationships through an imposed system is both doomed to failure and counterproductive. Accordingly, the Task Force recommends that advising be moved to the section on “Teaching” in the discussion of faculty responsibilities. Furthermore, the Task Force identified the following list of qualities as desirable in an advisor:

1. Continuity and Availability
2. Depth of Knowledge about Curriculum and Policy/ Willingness to seek that knowledge
3. Commitment to discussing student interests in the context of a liberal arts education
4. Openness to a Mentoring Relationship

In addition, we determined that there is currently no system of assessment or accountability for advising to gauge its effectiveness and recognize its importance.

Recommendations of the Task Force

The Task Force has sought to consider the advising system as a distinct enterprise, and we have based our recommendations upon that premise. Yet our deliberations have shown that advising is fundamentally connected to other aspects of the College and, more immediately, shaped by the existing curriculum. As we have noted, the open curriculum creates particular demands and responsibilities for the advising system. Correspondingly, any major curricular change or innovation would bring with it an opportunity to restructure the current advising system. For example, the institution of first-year seminars would provide a logical and more organic means to foster mentoring relationships for advising based upon sustained academic engagement. Such a model would resolve some of the most glaring challenges intrinsic to our current system. Short of changing the existing curriculum, however, there remain possible ways of rethinking advising so that it can more effectively and reliably meet student need and improve outcomes.

The Task Force believes that the College must take steps to bolster the advising system in light of the structural implications of an open curriculum. In general, the Task Force believes that expectations and resources for faculty and students alike must be made more consistent and more efficient. Consequently, we believe that advising demands more conscientious administering, as well as protocols for assessment and accountability, to achieve its stated purpose.

One model for doing so would be the creation of an “Advising Corps” of roughly 40 faculty members, who would assume responsibility for all pre-major advising and receive additional compensation in the form of a stipend. Assuming a three-year term and a corresponding stipend level of \$500/\$1000/\$500, the costs for implementing this advising corps would amount to \$80,000 over a three-year period. The Task Force recognizes that in the current fiscal environment such an arrangement will be difficult. We observe, however, that this stipend could be given as research fund for each member of the Advising Corps to be used for conference travel or other research expenses, and so be drawn from existing funds for faculty development, thereby resulting in a net zero cost for the College. These faculty members would be selected from among those who have demonstrated a commitment to advising within the context of a liberal arts education. In theory, this model has numerous advantages over our current system. Most significantly, the establishment of such a corps would promote greater consistency in the advising experience for students, improving both the depth of engagement with advisers and the dissemination of accurate information regarding College policies and requirements. Additionally, the attention and resources devoted to such an endeavor would also signal the value placed on advising by the College. Lastly, this type of system would greatly facilitate our ability to assess advising and ensure the quality of the advising experience.

Although this model has definite advantages, there are a number of ways in which its implementation would prove quite challenging. Aside from the financial cost of establishing an “Advising Corps” there are also the issues of faculty equity and faculty dynamics. The creation of such a core would relieve most of the faculty of advising outside of the concentration and potentially adversely affect the parity of workload between faculty members. Additionally, it could create situations in which tenure-track faculty feel pressured to either unwittingly attempt to join the “Advising Corps” or regrettably refrain. Given these and other logistical challenges of such a model, the Task Force believes that moving

forward with it would require an additional study. However, given its obvious advantages, the Task Force urges the College to pursue such a study.

Alternatively, and more immediately, the Task Force recommends the following actions:

- 1) Update admissions and NSO documents to more effectively define and foreground student responsibility within the process of advising in relation to the open curriculum. Introduce or highlight a set of general academic “goals” in order to better align student expectations with institutional aims. The current set of documents given to students does include discussion of academic goals as part of the necessary preparation for advising. Still, we believe that greater emphasis needs to be placed on the student role in fostering a strong advising experience.
- 2) Establish an orientation program for new and continuing advisors to highlight faculty responsibilities, academic requirements, and College policies and resources. Currently, first-year tenure-track faculty do not have any pre-major advising responsibilities. The Task Force considers this a sensible policy, but it observes that there is currently no orientation or explanation of expectations for faculty upon assuming advising responsibilities. It seems unwise to assume that new faculty will somehow “naturally” come to understand following their first year at Hamilton the demands of advising within an open curriculum. In addition, the Task Force recommends that faculty receive better supporting documents to assist them with advising. In particular, we recommend that the document entitled “Academic Advising Checklist: First-year Students” be updated and revived for use by the faculty. This document gathers in one convenient place a host of questions and information about advising that can serve as a guide for faculty at all levels in meeting their advising responsibilities.
- 3) Redefine advising as a fundamental aspect of the teaching function of a liberal arts faculty and take steps to ensure that the commitment to and quality of our advising program is commensurate to our commitment to and the quality of our instructional program.
- 4) There should be some assessment of advising and a corresponding system of accountability to ensure its effectiveness. The pre-major advising survey that the Task Force developed in consultation with Gordon Hewitt would serve as a good model for such an assessment instrument (Appendix C); and the execution of advising responsibilities should be part of faculty performance review for tenure and promotion.

Furthermore, the Task Force recommends that these efforts be undertaken by the new Curricular Breadth and Advising Leader with the assistance of an ad hoc committee on advising comprised of faculty, students, and representatives from Admissions and the Registrar’s office.

Respectfully Submitted by: Caitlyn Williams ’11, Marianna Vinacur ‘09, Leslie Bell, Phyllis Breland, Karen Brewer, Todd Franklin, Kristin Friedel, Leslie North, Steve Orvis, Edith Toegel, and Steven Yao.