Advising at Union

Introduction

Academic advising is central to the mission of a liberal arts college such as Union and is a key faculty responsibility. Students, and their parents, have the expectation that there will be close contact with the faculty advisor and that, particularly in the first two years, there will be a level of interaction and consultation that would not be expected at other types of institutions.

To quote a Union faculty member from the Advising Survey done in 2002:

”Without good advising, small classes and quality teaching, small colleges don’t have a very big role in post-secondary education. It is knowing students as individual personalities, learners and young people that should make a critical difference in a small college…the major rationale for a small college is to reap the rewards of a close-knit community.”

Evidence suggests that advising at Union has improved over the past 5 years, particularly with regard to first-year students. However, it is clearly still an area where much can be done. It continues to emerge as an area of concern on student satisfaction surveys and senior exit interviews. Many faculty do a wonderful job. However, there is a lack of consistency and, just as importantly, a lack of agreement on what good advising is or should be. The quality and level of commitment by faculty to advising varies enormously across campus, as does the workload, with some faculty advising a handful of students and others close to 40. Furthermore, there is some feeling that good advising is not valued or recognized by the College.

There is overwhelming evidence in the literature on college students that the nature of the student body has changed significantly in recent years. One need only look at the recent spate of literature and discussion about the so-called Millenials, who are less independent and in need of more developmental advising.

Last fall, Kimmo Rosenthal, the Dean for Undergraduate Education, asked Melinda Lawson, Assistant Director of Advising, to prepare a report on advising. This resulted in a 35 page report Academic Advising: Theories and Practice, which examined national trends in advising and also discussed them in the context of Union College. In the winter term, a Committee on Academic Advising was formed and they have been meeting since then. There was also a meeting with department and program chairs to discuss a draft version of this report.

Melinda Lawson’s report concluded with a list of six areas that need to be addressed in order to begin to achieve an excellent system of Advising.

1. Creating a commonly held vision of advising
2. Elevating the status of advising from a “little regarded add-on to faculty load”
3. Establishing an understanding that recognizes both student needs and limits on faculty training and time
4. Creating training programs and advisor manuals to disseminate information and strategies
5. Creating a system of evaluation
6. Creating a system of reward and recognition.

We believe that this report begins to address some of these areas in a significant way. It includes a statement on “advising at Union”, as well as statements of faculty, student, department, and college responsibilities. It also identifies important areas that need to be addressed beyond these, such as assessment, evaluation and reward/recognition and offers ideas that will require serious debate. These include the idea of “research releases” as opposed to “course releases” for faculty who are making an extra commitment to advising. We also think the College should consider the idea of sampling of advisees during reappointment and tenure reviews, as is done, for example, at Grinnell. This report is a first step towards beginning a dialogue on campus about the role of advising at Union, with suggested guideposts to show us the way towards agreeing on what we think the role of academic advising is, and then working towards ensuring that we continue to make progress towards excellence.

Committee on Academic Advising

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Kimmo Rosenthal, Dean for Undergraduate Education
Academic advising at Union is an educational process and an extension of faculty teaching responsibilities. Advising attempts to engage students in an interactive process designed to assist them in making informed choices that maximize the benefits of the liberal arts education that Union offers. Good advising recognizes the individuality of each student. It has a developmental component requiring different approaches with students at different times in their academic careers. Ultimately, students are responsible for their decisions and for availing themselves of what Union has to offer. Nevertheless, a strong advising program will help them realize their potential.

Effective advising results from a collaborative effort between the faculty advisor and the student. There are things that the College can do to assist in this effort and we begin by listing those first.

**College Responsibilities**

**To assist in advising, the office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education should:**

- Produce and disseminate accurate and up-to-date information for advisors about college requirements, regulations, and policies
- Prepare an advising manual that is periodically updated
- Be able to answer questions for advisors who have questions about advising or their advisees and have exhausted other avenues of inquiry
- Continue to work to provide improved technical and on-line support for advisors, including electronic sign-off on schedule approvals
- Provide students with the capability of accessing their own course audits
- Implement the Sophomore Plan of Study project endorsed by the AAC. The Dean for Undergraduate Education will now include a discussion of advising for students at Orientation.
- The Dean of First-Year Students will contact first-year students in the middle of fall term to help guarantee that their first on campus registration goes smoothly.
- It will be recommended that more time be spent on advising at New Faculty Orientation.
- Educate faculty about Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

**Faculty Responsibilities**

**A faculty advisor should:**

- Be informed about college requirements and curricula including the major, Gen Ed and International Programs. Advisors of undeclared majors should also have a good knowledge of the curricula of other departments
- Be able to explain Union College policies, regulations and procedures
• Be proactive, especially with first and second year students, initiating contact. Checking in periodically with first-year advisees is very important
• Help students be proactive in making informed decisions about their academic progress and help them understand the benefits of the breadth requirements of the College
• Be able, if an advisee enquires, to provide initial assistance with regard to graduate study, career questions, tutoring resources, and then be able to make an appropriate referral (study skills, psychological, housing, etc)
• Set aside designated times for appointments during the preregistration process specifically for advising. One can not assume that regular posted office hours will be sufficient
• Help students look beyond the current term and think about their greater college experience; this includes helping the students with long-range planning in terms of course selection
• Maintain confidentiality and have an understanding of the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).
• Assist students in taking responsibility for tracking their own progress in general education, program, and graduation requirements
• Maintain a complete and accurate record of advisees’ progress, review students’ schedules and grades at the very beginning of each term, and alert them to problems and issues
• Assist students who are unable to register for three courses in completing their schedule
• Meet with senior majors early in the Fall to plan the rest of their year
• Make arrangements with their department chair to have advisees taken care of whenever on leave from the College

Advising is a continuous process with an accumulation of personal contacts, which may need to be more involved and mandatory at the beginning stages. Getting to know advisees and listening to student interests and concerns, if they are open to sharing, can be an important part of the advising process

Student Responsibilities

It is ultimately the student’s responsibility for meeting all graduation requirements of the College.

A student should:

• Be prompt and prepared when meeting with advisors. Preparation for an advising appointment means having reviewed the current course schedule and course catalog, and having thought about options ahead of time and bringing any relevant paperwork to the meeting.
• Share with your advisor information about your interests, activities, and ambitions. Your advisor can be of more help to you more if she/he knows more about you.
• Seek advisement in a timely manner and try to schedule appointments in advance with your advisor.
• Be proactive with regard to the advising process; ask questions about curriculum, courses, college programs, and career advice.
• Familiarize yourself with general education requirements, graduation requirements, and program requirements.
• Consult your advisor when making schedule changes such as adding/withdrawing/dropping classes.

Departmental Responsibilities

• Assist in providing advisors with up-to-date lists of advisees and inform them of new advisees
• Make sure that advisees (including non-majors) are reassigned for faculty on sabbatical or leave. Departments should notify the students of their new advisor.
• Departments should have on-line forms outlining the requirements for the major, as well as indicating the appropriate courses that non-majors could take in the first year or two.
• Department chairs should work to ensure that there is an equitable distribution of advisees among department members. Department members who do more than their fair share and do it well should have this noted in their performance reviews, as should faculty who are not assigned many advisees because of concerns and complaints.
• Departments should discuss how they can best advise majors for graduate school and how they can best create ties with the Becker Career Center.
• We will recommend to the AAC that they direct every department to engage in a self-study of their advising practices and report back on their “local rules” with regard to assignment of advisees, the role of junior faculty, the role of chair, guidelines regarding distribution of advisees etc.

Other Issues that are important to the Advising process, but may fall beyond the scope of faculty responsibility

1. Student development/adjustment issues that fall at the intersection of academic and student affairs. These include, but are not limited to:
   Dealing with anxiety, stress, social problems that affect academics
   Psychological issues
   Mental/physical health issues
   Conduct issues and how they relate to academics
   Housing issues

2. Assisting students with time management, study skills and study habits, organization etc

3. Monitoring of “at-risk” students – how much of a role can or should the advisor take on?

4. Career and graduate school related discussions
Recommendations for addressing “other issues”

- Increased communication and collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. One possibility might be to have a person who is half-time in Academic Affairs and half-time in Student Affairs, who serves as a liaison between the two areas
- Increased staffing in Student Support Services
- Have a centralized Academic Resource/Learning Center (there are such things at many of our peer institutions) where there is a multitude of centralized support services readily available
- PALs program is important and will be expanded because of the new Mellon grant, but this will only partially address these issues
- The idea of a handful of “superadvisors”. This is partly built into the Mellon grant the College recently received, but could be expanded upon
- Increased interaction between the Becker Career Center and academic departments
- Increased programming for faculty with regard to these issues (this is a time and resource issue) and increased interaction between faculty and Student Affairs staff
- Perhaps ideally a combination of some or all of the above

Assessment, Evaluation, and Recognition

After discussions with Department Chairs, it is not clear that the College is ready to move towards a system of evaluation and reward for advising. However, we are putting forward some ideas that merit discussion.

- The College should undertake a formal assessment of advising next year to elicit information from students as to what they expect from academic advisors. This assessment should seek to obtain information on what is working and what is not working.
- The College should do a similar assessment of faculty opinion.
- Any plan whereby some faculty take on advising responsibilities well beyond the norm, whether college-wide or departmentally, will require a mechanism within the context of the FRB where these important contributions are appropriately accounted for. We recommend the notion of “research releases” as opposed to “course (teaching) releases”. A “research release” means that there will be reduced scholarly expectations and increased service expectations for that year in the review process, much as a “teaching release” means the faculty will have less evidence available regarding their teaching performance.
- We recommend that the idea of a random sampling of advisees be undertaken at both reappointment and tenure reviews, so as to give some substance to the credo that “Union takes advising seriously”
- Once the above lists of “responsibilities” are introduced across campus, department chairs can and should indicate in reviews when they have information regarding particularly effective advising, or reports regarding faculty not fulfilling some of the responsibilities.
• The College needs to find ways to promote and recognize effective advising. One possibility is through the Dean’s Discretionary fund. Perhaps there could be annual recognition by Division of effective advising. If we do not recognize excellence when it is occurring, then we can not hope to achieve uniform excellence.