

# **The First-Year Advisor Program**

by

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Spring 2018

## **Academic Advising at UNA – A Historical Perspective**

Prior to 2013, academic advising had been the responsibility of individual academic departments. Department chairs or their designated faculty representatives would advise students in SOAR and New Student Orientation. Students who were undecided majors within the College of Arts and Sciences met with professional staff in the Center for Academic Advising and Retention Services (CAARS). Typically, no further contact was made with the student from the time of the SOAR or NSO session until well into the semester. It was the responsibility of administrative assistants to assign advisors to students prior to academic advising for pre-registration each semester. Some academic departments assigned advisors soon after SOAR, but others would delay this task until mid-way through the semester.

Departmental advisors contacted their advisees via email if they knew who they were. There is a location in Self-Service Banner to click on the option “email all advisees” but this option has not always been functional for faculty members. When this option did not work, it was the advisors’ responsibility to create their own lists and contact their advisees via email, a medium that is typically not utilized by the current generation of college students. Often, there was no communication between advisor and advisee until the student wished to pre-register for classes, and then the communication was often initiated by the student who wanted their PIN number.

Consequently, students who wanted to talk with their academic advisor early in the semester were frustrated that they had not been assigned an advisor in UNA Portal. This was especially challenging for our first-year students who often needed assistance with some of the unique challenges of being a first-time college student. These students did not know to whom to turn for assistance and support. Without that point of contact, many of our students just slipped into academic and personal difficulty.

Another difficulty occurred as students changed majors, an activity that first-year students do often. Students were shuttled from department to department and advisor to advisor. Under this arrangement, there was no quality control for advising students. Some group advising occurred, some students were emailed their PINS and had no interaction with their advisor, while other students were able to meet with their advisors in a timely manner. There was no expectation for consistent advising for first-year students that used any approach, much less the NACADA (National Academic Advising Association) standard for developmental advising.

## **Creation of the First-Year Advisor Program**

### **History**

When the new Director of University Advising Services was hired in late spring 2013, she was charged with developing and implementing an advising program for first-year students with the purpose of helping our students be more successful and consequently increasing the retention rate. Through her extensive experience working with students as Pre-Health Professions Advisor for ten years, the Director was acutely aware that first-year students have unique challenges compared to their upper class peers. Using this knowledge, the Director created the First-Year Advisor Program, which uses the model of developmental advising supported by NACADA as the overarching philosophy. This program is now heading into its fifth year of operation thanks to the support of participating faculty and staff dedicated to helping first-year students.

In the developmental advising approach, the relationship established between advisor and advisee is the most important component. This approach grew from previous research on cognitive development theory, person-environment theory, and psycho-social theory. The presence of the relationship and rapport established between advisor and advisee then fosters thoughtful conversation to help students consider and articulate their needs and goals. In essence, developmental advising considers that advising is a mutual experience; First-Year Advisors journey alongside their advisees down the path of the first year of college and act as a guide and resource for their advisees. The result is that both advisor and advisee learn from the shared experience. In this model of academic advising, course selection and registration take place in the broader context of a student's life and career goals.

This approach contrasts with prescriptive advising in which the advisor is viewed as the problem-solver and the advisee is viewed as a passive participant. The advisee takes no responsibility or initiative in this relationship, which can be viewed as being one-sided. In addition, registration and course selection was viewed as the central activity that took place during an advising session and did not address students' interests or concerns, nor was it an avenue for discussion of broader life and personal goals important to the student. Unfortunately, many UNA faculty advisors still equate advising with registration.

### **Why this is particularly important for UNA's first-year students?**

When the demographics of our first-year students are examined, we find that nearly 25% of UNA students who are first-time, full-time students are considered low income. Moreover, nearly 30% are first-generation college students and 12% are both low-income and first-generation. Finally, 25% who are considered low income also attended underfunded and underperforming high schools. Nearly one-fourth of all first-time, full-time UNA students were likely to have attended high-poverty schools, to score lower on national assessments, and to enter UNA academically underprepared. These realities must be taken into account when we address the challenges of retaining these students.

Moreover, many of our first-year students have unrealistic expectations of their abilities coupled with low self-efficacy and an inability to navigate university culture. They often did well academically in high school with little or no effort and they are confident that they can do the same in college using that same work ethic. Because so many of our students are first-generation, they do not understand the reason for and value of quality academic advising in their success in college.

Equally alarming are the ACT scores of incoming UNA freshmen. Our first-year students are consistently below ACT college readiness benchmarks in math and science. The American College Test (ACT) has identified college readiness benchmarks (ACT test scores) for the four subject areas of English, Mathematics, Reading and Science that reflect the level of achievement required for students to have a 50 percent chance of obtaining a B or higher or a 75 percent chance of obtaining a C or higher in corresponding college level courses. The numbers below reflect the challenges faced by some of our first-year students for our 2017 freshman cohort. The reality is that:

- 17% fall below the readiness benchmark in English
- 37% fall below the benchmark in Reading
- 58% fall below the benchmark in Math

These numbers mean that the majority of incoming freshmen must take developmental math classes. That number is increasing. In addition, 17% must enroll in developmental English classes **and** developmental Math classes based upon their ACT sub scores. (The benchmark for English was recently changed to an 18. Based upon our old benchmark, only 7.5% of our freshman class would need developmental English.) Not surprising, faculty and support services such as the University Success Center have reported that students who have trouble with math also have trouble with reading, writing, and critical thinking. Although the same difficulties have been observed by faculty from a range of disciplines, faculty in mathematics, computer science, economics, chemistry and physics have found that students who cannot read or think critically are unable to critically analyze problems and information with sufficient depth and that impacts their success in those classes. Stating this another way, the reading, writing and critical thinking skills which are integral to the liberal arts writing sequence are also essential to preparing students for success in mathematics and the sciences.

Also keep in mind that the typical UNA student is likely not like you or me. Whereas some of us can identify with the typical UNA student, many of us cannot. We came from different socioeconomic backgrounds or attended private colleges or even public colleges with either greater or fewer number of students. Perhaps we did not choose to work. Many of our UNA students must work to either pay for the cost of college or to pay for living expenses that their parents cannot provide. Anecdotal evidence from University Advising Services professional staff indicates that many of the academic difficulties encountered by our students are the result of working too many hours coupled with poor or non-existent time management skills and study skills.

This generation of college student is far different from our generation. These students have been raised by helicopter parents who do tasks the child is capable of doing alone. The consequences of this parenting style are that students have a lowered self-confidence and self-esteem, increased anxiety and a sense of entitlement, as well as undeveloped life skills. We see this in our UNA students as parents register their students for SOAR, insist on coming into an advising session with their student during SOAR, and often contact professors and administrators regarding issues that should be handled by their students.

Because of all of the reasons above, our first-year students need a different kind of advising beyond simple course selection; they need an academic advisor who understands the UNA students' academic and nonacademic needs and how that impacts students' success. Our first-year students need an advisor who uses a developmental advising approach. This is why the First-Year Advising Program is so desperately needed for our first-year students. UNA has been taking a multi-pronged approach with this special population, and the First-Year Advisor Program is only one of several initiatives that is designed to better assist and retain our first-year students by focusing on the challenges of the first-year UNA student.

### **How the First-Year Advising Program works:**

Not only is the philosophical approach to working with first-year students different, so is the timing and process in which advisor and advisee are paired. The First-Year Advising Program initiates contact between advisor and advisee much earlier than has been done in past years. It begins formally at the initial meeting at SOAR, although much behind the scenes work has been completed prior to that meeting. One of the crucial pieces of information that determines who a student's First-Year Advisor will be is their intended major. When first-year students register for SOAR, the student's major is displayed as part of the online SOAR registration. The major listed is the one that students indicated on their college application to UNA. A significant period of time may have elapsed between when a student submitted his/her application and the time the student registers for SOAR. A student's interests and intended major

often has changed during that time. Therefore, during the SOAR registration process, the student is asked if he/she wishes to change his/her major. If a student decides that the major listed is no longer his/her intended major, the student may choose a different major; a drop-down box appears with a list of UNA's current majors. Students are encouraged to submit a formal major change with a document that they submit to the Registrar's Office.

In the intervening time, First-Year Advisors (who have received initial professional development and/or continuing professional development) are then asked to provide the Director of UAS with the SOAR dates they can voluntarily attend and meet with their assigned advisees.

The Director then assigns advisors to the SOAR attendees using the following system:

- Students who have not chosen a major (are undecided in the College of Arts and Sciences) are assigned to First-Year Advisors who are staff employees of the university.
- Students with declared majors are assigned to First-Year Advisors in their respective major departments.
- If a department does not have a First-Year Advisor or one available for a particular SOAR session, any students who have indicated a major in that department are assigned to UAS professional staff First-Year Advisors.

Official advisor assignments are made once the SOAR session is "locked" (no students can register without calling Student Affairs), which typically occurs one week prior to the beginning of the SOAR session. Before that time, students may change their SOAR dates or cancel their registration. Any questions regarding a student's major are resolved by the Director prior to making the assignments. The Director of UAS pairs First-Year Advisors and their advisees based upon the major information provided. The Director sends out information to First-Year Advisors regarding their assigned advisees prior to each SOAR session. The information includes the student's name, L number, address, phone numbers, email addresses (both UNA and personal), major, ACT scores, and any prior college credit. The assigned First-Year Advisor then develops a tentative fall schedule for an advisee using this information.

A First-Year Advisor and his/her assigned advisees meet as a group during the afternoon of the first day of SOAR to briefly talk and to begin to finalize a class schedule for fall semester. Students were also given contact information for their First-Year Advisor. Students leave the advising session with a point of contact (their First-Year Advisor) before ever being on campus if they have any questions or concerns in the intervening weeks or months.

Official advisor assignments are made in Self Service Banner by UAS following each SOAR session. When the fall semester begins, a student will have been assigned an advisor so that students can see their First-Year Advisor listed officially in Self-Service Banner should they lose the contact information or when asked to look during their FYE class.

During the fall semester and spring semester, First-Year Advisors are expected to contact advisees for an initial "check in" at the beginning of the semester (within the first week or two) and at least two or three times throughout the semester as needed. It is expected that frequent meetings between First-Year Advisor and advisee will foster the development of the rapport necessary to focus on a student's needs and goals. In addition, students should be more at ease asking their First-Year Advisor for assistance as the student adjusts to his/her first semester or two of college.

The First-Year Advisor Program is designed so that First-Year Advisors serve as an anchor for first-year students. Once a student has successfully transitioned to his/her second year at UNA, it is the responsibility of the academic departments or colleges to reassign an advisor to the second-year student. Any students who remain undecided in the College of Arts and Sciences can either stay with their First-Year Advisor by mutual agreement or be assigned an advisor in UAS until a student decides on an academic major.

### **Professional Development for First-Year Advisors**

Any successful advising program must offer professional development opportunities for its advisors so that they remain cognizant of current trends in academic advising, retention efforts, and changes in university policies and procedures that directly impact their advisees. Initial professional development sessions for First-Year Advisors are designed to prepare advisors for the summer SOAR sessions. These training sessions consist of:

- The theory and application of developmental advising
- Recognition of signs that students are in distress and the proper interventions
- Academic policies and procedures as they pertain to first-year students

Continuing professional development is expected each semester and in past semesters has consisted of:

- A continuation of academic policies and procedures that affect currently-enrolled first-year students
- Characteristics of the Millennial Generation and Generation Z and how generational differences affect advising
- Specific majors' requirements for Elementary Education, Secondary Education, the College of Business, and the College of Nursing
- Specific majors and subpopulations of first-year students: DDEP and Pre-engineering, International student challenges, student-athlete challenges, future changes to the General Education Curriculum

Each previous professional development session has been recorded for advisors to view on the FYAP website. It is expected that First-Year Advisors participate in all three initial professional development sessions and participate in each semester's continuing education session to maintain their status as a First-Year Advisor so they may continue to work with first-year students during the semester and during SOAR each summer.