ADVISING

1. Expected Learning Outcomes

The University of Montana is a “mandatory advising institution,” meaning students are required to meet with an academic advisor prior to registering for each semester. Our mechanism for ensuring students meet regularly with advisors is to mandate that a student acquire an advising number or PIN from the advisor before registering. What sometimes happens is that students conflate processes and conclude that the purpose of advising is to get the advising number. To combat this, it is essential to start with a consideration of what we hope will happen as a result of advising.

Academic advisors are among the campus professionals who provide students with information about requirements, opportunities and procedures. Effective advising, though, goes well beyond the informational (this is how to add or drop a class) to help a student integrate all elements of the academic experience (these are the pro’s and con’s for you to consider before adding or dropping this class). Advising is substantively more complicated than picking out classes.

There is no “advising period.” Advising happens year round, whether or not students are preparing for registration. Part of an advisor’s job is to help students understand the difference between acquiring an advising number and being advised.

Each advising unit has a unique set of outcomes linked to the nature of the program. The following list includes outcomes that can be modified, as appropriate, for your unit.
- Student will develop a realistic academic plan suited to the student’s interests, abilities and career objectives.
- Student will identify a major before the 45th attempted credit.
- Student will understand the scope and requirements of the major.
- Student is aware of common professional opportunities for the chosen major.
- Student integrates general and major-specific requirements in a meaningful way.
- Student knows of and utilizes campus resources appropriately.

2. Advising Best Practices

No two advising sessions are ever the same. There are guidelines and best practices, however, that apply to most interactions between an advisor and advisee. These include:

- First, do no harm. Ask questions, double check, and always document your interactions.

- Confidentiality. All discussions (face-to-face, by phone or via e-mail) between you and an advisee cannot be discussed with a third party unless you have the advisee’s authorization.

- Ask students how their semester is going, and what you can help them with today. Getting or giving the advising number shouldn’t be the goal of advising. Sometimes students are looking for the opportunity to discuss an issue but don’t know how to start the conversation.
- Don’t short change the prepared student. Some students come in having spent much time and effort developing a multi-semester graduation plan. Take advantage of the opportunity to go beyond approving a class schedule and discuss the student’s major choice, career or professional objectives, co-curricular opportunities and university resources.

- Emails with the student should be through their university address. They can always forward their email to a preferred address, but we can only verify identity via the official UM email account.

- Advisors help students find the information they need to make good decisions for themselves; advisors do not make decisions for the advisee.

- Look for possible red flags that indicate a student is struggling. A consistent pattern of avoidance of a requirement, a sharp decline in grades, or repeatedly failing foundational courses in the chosen major are all appropriate topics for an advisor to bring up in an advising session.

3. Strategies or approaches

Every academic advisor has a unique style and collection of techniques for working with students. Your approach with a student may change over time, depending on the student’s needs. Most advisors use a combination of the three primary advising strategies described below.

**Developmental advising** focuses on shared responsibility. The objective is for the advisor to facilitate student growth, skill mastery and, ultimately, independent decision-making. Developmental advising depends on interactive dialogue, with the advisor’s questions stimulating self-reflection and discovery by the student. For a more comprehensive discussion, see Grites, 2013. Although developmental advising is typically associated with the freshman undeclared major, it can be equally effective with a senior declared major.

Common discussion threads of a developmental advising session might include:
- Tell me about your academic interests (what did you like best/least in high school?)
- What are your goals for the semester/year?
- Have you thought about extra- or co-curricular activities that might complement your academic pursuits?
- Have you thought about what you’d like to do after graduating from college?

**Prescriptive advising** is most commonly used in majors or academic programs that follow a linear, clearly defined academic plan with limited flexibility. Prescriptive advising goes well beyond providing a student with a list of courses and generating a schedule that begins at Point A (the top) and ends at Point X (the bottom) however. It should consider the unique experience of the student in generating a plan that the student can reasonably complete in a time-effective manner. The student’s interest or motivation in the program should also be discussed.

Common discussion threads in prescriptive advising might include:
- Do you have any AP, IB or prior college work that might affect your course selection?
- Are you involved in any programs, or receive scholarships/ funding that might affect your credit load?
- How many credits do you plan to take this semester?
- Do you work or have other obligations that might affect your credit load?

Proactive (also referred to as Intrusive advising) identifies a student at risk or in difficulty, and targets specific resources to the student in a meaningful way. Instead of waiting for the student to contact the advisor, the advisor reaches out and tells the student the date and time of the appointment. Our Freshman Core-course Registration is a form of proactive advising; we register students for the math appropriate to the student’s major and math placement score. Pre-requisite enforcement is another example: students cannot register for a course without successful completion of one or more foundational courses. If students fail or withdraw from a pre-req, they are dropped from the higher level course before the start of the next term. Students are notified that they need to make the change (prescriptive), but if they fail to act, the task is done for them (proactive).

Typical elements of proactive advising include:
- Determine risk factors, such as an extended period of time since last academic experience.
- Anticipate potential areas of difficulty (most commonly math or writing-related).
- Establish preventative measures or supports (TRiO-SSS, Disability Services).

4. Documentation

Documentation provides a written record of the conversation between the advisor and the advisee. Whether your unit maintains paper or electronic files, documentation is there to protect the student and the advisor in case questions arise later in the student’s academic career. A good guiding principle is to consider what the next advisor really needs to know about the advising session.

- Standard content
  - Program-specific differences (are there professional guidelines or compliance issues that should be considered)
  - Include policies explained, referrals made, recommendations discussed

- Referrals
  - Sensitivity issues (less is typically more; if it is an especially touchy scenario, explain documentation to the student, draft it together and get student’s approval)
  - Use generic terms such as “Chronic medical issue impacted attendance,” “discussed appropriate campus resources” whenever possible
  - If no sensitivity issues are present, be specific (“Walked student to Career Services to schedule appointment”)

All advisor notes and documentation are part of a student’s academic records. They are accordingly covered by FERPA Privacy Laws and cannot be disclosed to a third party without the student’s clearly articulated authorization. Students also have the right to review any and all parts of their advising records. Additional information on FERPA appears in the next section.

5. FERPA

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), in conjunction with Montana law, prevent advisors from releasing any part of a student’s academic registration unless there is a legitimate educational interest or the student has consented to release of information. The Registrar’s Office
maintains a comprehensive webpage (http://www.umt.edu/registrar/Privacy%20and%20Release%20of%20Student%20Education%20Records%20-%20FERPA.aspx) detailing the requirements and implementation of FERPA. Some FERPA issues for advisors include:

- Advisors MAY NOT release any part of a student’s record (what courses they are registered for, whether they attended or missed an appointment, if they are on probation or suspension) to a third party (typically a parent or other family member) unless there is a release on file with the Registrar’s Office (check SPACMNT if you have access to Banner).
- Advisors MAY discuss academic policies or resources with that same parent or family member, provided it does not disclose a student’s status.
- The release form (http://www.umt.edu/registrar/forms/pdf/CONSENT%20TO%20DISCLOSE%20STUDENT%20EDUCATION%20RECORDS.pdf) is available on the Registrar’s website. An advisor may serve as the student’s witness (indicate on the form that the student’s identity and signature have been verified and return the form to the Registrar).
- FERPA does not prevent the third party from providing the advisor with information about the student.
- The advisor rarely has information that the student can’t access. The student is almost always going to be the better source of information about his or her standing in classes during the semester. Helping the parent or family member understand what the student can access sometimes reduces the frequency of requests for FERPA-protected information.

6. Assessment

“Effective Assessment is not a satisfaction survey but rather a multidimensional assessment of learning outcomes” (Miller and Alberts, 2003, p 111).

Assessment is tied to the learning objectives of your department or unit. In a nutshell, assessment should answer the question, “How do we know our advising practices are effective?” Assessment need not be an onerous task, but it is important to periodically review various elements of your advising. Specifically:

- **Accuracy**- When a new advisor joins your team, how is the advisor trained, supported, and evaluated? This will have a substantial impact on that advisor’s ability to provide consistent and accurate advising to the student.
- **Availability**- Students need advising throughout the year, not just during the peak registration periods. Do your students know how to reach their advisor(s), and when it is appropriate to do so?
- **Approachable**- Advisors do not need to be the most popular members of the university community, but students must feel comfortable meeting with us. A welcoming environment is especially important for students who might feel marginalized for any reason. Are there barriers in your unit? How do you know?
- **Metrics**- How can you measure whether you are achieving your learning objectives? Is there an increase or decrease in the number of Financial Aid Max Credit Appeals or Graduation Appeals coming from your unit?
Most of us don’t have time to develop (or analyze) comprehensive questionnaires or survey instruments. In lieu of formalized assessment, take note of your most common student-related processes and consider how they relate to advising. For example, might strategic proactive advising reduce the need for course drops or repeats of foundational courses? You can also informally solicit feedback from students (advisees as well as student workers) on what they find useful or frustrating about the advising process. Ask students who are struggling in addition to the high achievers.