THE VALUE AND IMPACT OF ADVISING

A CALL FOR MORE INTENTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH FACULTY AND LEADERSHIP ACROSS CAMPUS

UC DAVIS SUMMER 2023

ADVISING COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

INTRODUCTION

STUDENT: "WHAT DO YOU DO?"

ADVISOR: "EVERYTHING."

The role of academic advisors has always been integral to the mission of the University, both in its operations and in fostering student learning outside of the classroom. Academic advisors support students, faculty, and staff through their expertise in academic policy, student development, higher education, and advising approaches and strategies.

During the pandemic, advisors proved to be even more critical as we often served as a student's sole connection to our campuses outside of their instructors. The complex role of advisors has become even more nuanced and transformative during- and post-pandemic, giving us an even deeper understanding of the multifaceted, diverse, and ever-changing needs and experiences of students; thus, we have great insight into potential challenges and possess a desire to contribute meaningfully to innovative solutions.

On September 7, UC Davis academic advisors from units across campus held a community dialogue with guest facilitators from UCLA who have also facilitated these same discussions on their campus rooted in acknowledging our value as advisors, examining challenges and innovative solutions. We brainstormed together how we may advocate for advising through creating more intentional collaboration with faculty and campus leadership. It is imperative that we are seen as equal partners to better support our Aggie community and to achieve the University's mission.

BACKGROUND: SISTER CAMPUS UCLA

Marian H. Gabra, Ph.D. is the director of Advisor Training & Professional Development & the director of University Studies at UCLA. In her role, she works collaboratively across campus to cultivate spaces of learning and growth for staff and students. Marian and the Advising Communities of Excellence (ACE) Committee have been awarded the 2018 NACADA Region 9 Advising Innovation award. She is a published author, has been a featured keynote speaker at various programs and conferences, and currently serves on the NACADA Research Committee. Marian also advises students in the Center for Academic Advising in the College.

Alina Avila has been an academic advisor for almost 15 years. She started as the graduate advisor in Ecology, Evolution, and Marine Biology at UCSB before transitioning to the role of undergrad advisor. In 2012, she transferred to the UCLA campus and was the lead undergraduate Computer Science counselor in the School of Engineering for 10 years before landing in the role of Coordinator of Advising Curricular Initiatives in the Center for Academic Advising in the College. She has been involved with ACE for about 6 years which helped her develop and define her interest in advocacy for both students and staff. In her current role, in addition to advising students, she supports ACE initiatives and University Studies alongside Marian.

Marian and Alina served as our facilitators for our UCD community dialogue, sharing information about UCLA's model of supporting training and professional development for advisors on campus. ACE was created in 2016, and the committee comprises 20 campus colleagues that represent different schools and colleges, as well as different roles in advising and student affairs. UCLA, similar to UC Davis, has a decentralized advising model. Part of the work of the ACE committee was to create a shared language and framework amongst the advising community at UCLA to best support each other and the student population. ACE leads with research focuses and theory practice, so that the work is informed in scholarship and simultaneously contributing to the research of advising practices. Programming to create an infrastructure of support includes study groups and writing groups for advisors, "TED Talks" for advisors to amplify unheard voices, informal community dialogues and more formal workshops, and more. UCLA distinguishes training from professional development – training is learning the regulation, but professional development should be always ongoing learning.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, advisors' already complex roles became even more complex. Advisors, along with everyone else in the world, were navigating a new online environment, but also witnessing and experiencing so much grief and loss, and working to understand what healing looked like, on behalf of their students and themselves. Oftentimes advisors during the peak of COVID found themselves as the only connection to campus that students had – with asynchronous and online instruction, students missed out often on peer-to-peer connection as well as interaction with faculty, instructors, and other mentors. Advisors have continuously adapted to an ever-evolving field, maximizing the output of both in-person and online outreach, and **meeting students where they are.**

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED THROUGH THE PANDEMIC? WHAT IS OUR ROLE AS ADVISORS? HOW CAN WE GIVE LANGUAGE TO THAT?

While we have made progress in our practice, we still have a long way to go in supporting advisors and identifying the missing links. The goal is creating intentional partnerships with leadership, higher-level administration, and faculty, to base campus community knowledge of advisors' efforts in facts and experience. How can we share that we are an investment? **Investing in advisors is investing in the University mission, investing in promotion of student learning and development.**

The long-term vision:

Sharing the value and impact of advising at the University. Advisors have a seat at the table and are highly trusted in their departments. Call for intentional collaboration with faculty. Address staff retention and create a supportive, good work culture. Ensure staff are seen, valued, and heard. Experience of all kinds and backgrounds of all types are welcome and valued. Help advocate for change in the way staff are considered in the hierarchy of needs. Eliminate the disconnect: leadership can come together to reach out to all parts of the campus community, to discuss how we can work more cohesively to understand each other's value and how we contribute to student growth.

CHALLENGES IN ADVISING AT UC DAVIS

Following Marian and Alina's presentation on UCLA's efforts to support advisors, we divided into breakout rooms to discuss and assess UC Davis' advising practices and experiences of our advisors. Advisors shared many of the challenges they have experienced in recent times, which included (but were not limited to):

WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF THE GREATEST CHALLENGES FACING ADVISORS IN THE PAST YEAR, POST-PANDEMIC? WHAT ARE OUR LIMITATIONS IN ADDRESSING THESE CHALLENGES AND WHO CAN WE REACH OUT TO IN ORDER TO ADDRESS THEM?

- **Policy communication and messaging**: With our advising model on campus, messaging is often coming from many different sources and can also often be inconsistent. Communication needs to be solidified, especially of policy, and the many related exceptions and nuances. There is too much information for advisors to keep track of, and streamlining how these policies are relayed would help ensure that the policies are followed.

- **Lack of information**: While advisors must constantly monitor all kinds of changes in University policy, there is a systematic lack of access to data that could facilitate decision-making. Change would require partnership with campus IT and Budget & Institutional Analysis to ensure advisors can access updated information and data.

- **Flexibility and change:** in environment and in policy. New teams and new modes of operation. Being creative with structuring staff time and work and providing accommodations as necessary and desired to meet student needs.

- **Vehicle of change**: COVID-19 acted as a vehicle of change in adapting to uncertain and urgent circumstances, but how can we keep that momentum of change going in changing our institutional and managerial practices?

- **Student engagement:** How can we meet students where they are? How can we promote maximum engagement in post-COVID times? Many units have been adapting staff work based on student need and response. The International Center noted that 80% of international students surveyed preferred online advising and have adjusted their staffing policy to have physical office coverage and allow for online appointments.

- **Staff duties:** Most advisors wear multiple hats and it is difficult to capture everything that is needed. What is the true workload of an advisor? What duties do you prioritize? Expressed need for clear, consistent expectations of an advisor and avoid constant shifting of roles within a department or larger group.

- **Staff retention:** More positions are needed as job duties continue to grow. Historical knowledge is often lost when staff retention is low. High turnover leads to not having a through-line where individual staff members understand their roles and their offices. How can we fill gaps in knowledge when staff move on? How can we return to pre-COVID team building and connection amongst staff, and maintaining a sense of team cohesiveness?

- **Wellbeing:** Addressing burnout and ensuring that staff have the resources for self-care, with initiative coming from the top. Leading with care, compassion, and support. Finding movements for ourselves and debriefing on interactions. Balancing being present and intentional in interactions, and avoiding fatigue.

- **Collective advocacy:** What kind of collective organization or advocacy can we create? Graduate students and other staff units have labor unions, faculty have the Academic Senate – what is the equivalent body that can advocate for advisors' needs as a whole?

SOLUTIONS: INNOVATING ADVISING

While staff identified many challenges, the discussion also called to identify the solutions that units have been able to implement as part of adjusting to these new practices:

WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF THE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS WE HAVE IMPLEMENTED TO ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES?

- **Staff roles:** Advisors have learned to navigate multiple roles in their department, as the jobs are expected to be done. Learning through the process is crucial, especially without the required time and resources. Re-evaluating job descriptions to address retention issues. What are our duties, workload, and roles?

- **Staff culture:** Quarterly retreats planned by advisors. Identify topics, presenters, and plans to address needs in a timely manner, and be flexible with needs. Learning together.

- **Collaboration:** Being more cooperative with other entities on campus, having campus partners be present in conversations in various modalities.

- **Student engagement:** Integrating services to better support students and improve accessibility. Bridging the gap between student services and outreach, and administrative duties. Dive deeper into efficacy and needed tasks. Developing and experimenting with new, creative ideas:
  - Group advising models for first-year summer advising
  - Third party vendor partnership for online orientation platforms to serve international students
  - Creating advising office LinkTree systems to ensure critical information is centrally located for student access

*ADVISORS **ARE** THE INNOVATION.*

ADVOCATING FOR NEEDS AND CHANGE

STORY: SERVICES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS & SCHOLARS, INTERNATIONAL CENTER

SISS and the International Center are a hallmark of identifying their needs and pioneering solutions. With a new team with various specializations, they took professional development into their own hands and piloted team retreats. Their team discusses streamlining processes, finding ways to improve services, and building team relationships and connections. They have collaborated with OSSJA and HR to discuss staff resources and mental health, and work to accommodate staff needs for work flexibility while still providing coverage for students. They launched a survey of their international student population regarding appointment preference and adapted their staffing policies accordingly.

A main point that the dialogue raised was that advisors do not have a clear way to express their concerns or ask questions of policy, especially with UC Davis' decentralized model of advising. Many advisors are siloed in their separate units, and are even more so isolated if they are the only advisor in their unit or department. **Advisors are often the face of policies and initiatives created by other campus entities, and need the context and the "why" behind the decision before being required to justify it to students.**

Specific examples of where advisors' perspective could potentially change efficacy of these programs:

- Campus technology: Utilizing DegreeCert instead of the implemented external vendor platform, MyDegree – to ensure students and advisors are all using the same tools and are on the same page about degree progress
- Reserved Seating for incoming students: Goal to avoid complications with this process by asking for advisor input on creation and implementation
- Orientation for incoming students: since the change to a fall orientation model occurred, advisors have experienced a decrease in communication and requests for advisor feedback in planning. Students have shared confusion about which entity to meet with and who to seek assistance from

Advisors face a challenge in advocating for their needs and for changes collectively, given the vast differences in experience, backgrounds, policies, and populations served across campus. Increasingly, advisors are taking on additional responsibilities outside of their traditional job description as student needs evolve. More advisors are delving into case management duties when students require more than solely academic support. Knowing resources is half the battle in taking care of ourselves and each other, and our students, but it is difficult to navigate when resources like Student Health and Counseling Services are also deeply impacted.

Advisors have been charged with thinking outside of the box and compelled to practice ingenuity and innovation in not only student-facing work, but in all aspects of their duties. **We as advisors look to campus leadership to recognize the evidence of our impact as a vital safety net for our students, and to utilize us and collaborate with us, as experts on the student experience.** We ask for leadership's support in ensuring that advisors have a safety net for themselves and a seat at the table when it is necessary.