

“Cradle-to-Grave” advising and the ACE approach: A model for a School of the Environment, Design, and Sustainability

An Academic Futures White Paper authored and submitted by the Advising Center for Excellence, serving the Environmental Studies Program, Department of Geography, and Program in Environmental Design

Introduction

The advantage of the Advising Coordinator model currently employed in the Advising Center for Excellence (ACE) at CU-Boulder is the perspective it affords advisors to simultaneously understand and react to the needs of students, faculty and the curricula of all three disciplines (ENVD, ENVS and Geography). ACE staff members serve as “Advising Coordinators,” requiring them to act as both academic advisors and program coordinators serving the needs of students from the point of recruitment all the way to career – we identify this model as “cradle-to-grave” advising. Advising Coordinators also possess a deep curricular fluency and maintain strong relationships with the faculty, staff, and administration across the three disciplines. This comprehensive familiarity works to intimately embed advisors within the three disciplines, allowing them to advise not just students, but also faculty members and administrators.

Accordingly, Advising Coordinators serve as entrusted program stewards, as they identify, publicize, and act upon *1) student enrollment and retention needs, 2) connections and common themes across disciplinary curricula/faculty expertise, 3) opportunities to share courses and leverage co-curricular experiences (such as internships, research assistantships, and independent studies)* to create a truly cohesive interdisciplinary community.

The purpose of this white paper is twofold. Firstly, we elaborate on the processes of the ACE model according to the three highlighted points above. We suggest the model represents an effective approach to building and sustaining “academic neighborhoods.” By academic neighborhoods, we mean comparable academic disciplines sharing an advising center and working to foster a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration for the purpose of student, faculty, and staff professional development and the advancement of disciplinary scholarship. We believe that stewardship over academic neighborhoods rests with professional advising coordinators working to connect the commonalities between disciplines within neighborhoods.

Secondly, the academic neighborhood consisting of ENVD, ENVS, and Geography is poised to elevate its status from a cluster of academic disciplines sharing an advising center, to a more systematic joint-relationship equipped with a managing administrative apparatus, career center, alumni/donor relations and admissions staff, academic centers, and graduate programs. The most logical outcome of this expansion is the establishment of a school. As part of their duties ACE Advising Coordinators already manage several areas constituting the future units of the school, including alumni and donor relations, career development, and admissions. They also maintain

strong ties to the academic centers and graduate programs existing in all three disciplines. We recommend the ACE Advising Coordinators assume the charge of expanding these units to accommodate their academic neighborhood's transition into a school. Finally, we propose the title of the school to be "The School of the Environment, Design, and Sustainability."

The design of "cradle-to-grave" advising

ACE Advising Coordinators developed their cradle-to-grave approach as a direct response to observations and subsequent understandings of student need. Our team is designed to have two committed advising coordinators dedicated to the first two years of a student's curricular experience. Students then transition to an upper division team for their remaining years at CU-Boulder. The purpose of the student transition upon their junior year is to pair them with Advising Coordinators specializing in professional development and career readiness, graduation preparation, and alumni relations. In addition, we have one dedicated advising coordinator who is solely focused on our Diverse Scholars program and general recruitment. This key role ensures that ACE recruits, retains, and graduates a diverse array of students, embodying a variety of identities and ideas poised to contribute to the disciplines we service. This model embodies a "cradle-to-grave" approach, as ACE Advising Coordinators work with students from their initial recruitment contacts until well into their professional careers.

The ACE model also works to buttress a highly effective system for undertaking interventions for the purpose of student retention and graduation. Firstly, our close communication with faculty members paired with our curricular knowledge allows Advising Coordinators to anticipate trouble spots for students in their coursework and maintain consistent access to their course performance at various points throughout the semester. This early detection system allows us to quickly employ established intervention tools well before poor course performance translates into unsuccessful course outcome. Secondly, our programmatic roles serve to introduce students to opportunities outside the bounds of traditional advising interventions. These include offering co-curricular and professional development opportunities, leadership roles, diversity programming, and discipline-specific coaching. It is this commitment and process that exemplifies what it means to elevate advising in order to ensure we elevate our students.

Leveraging disciplinary knowledge, faculty relationships, and co-curricular opportunities

ACE advising coordinators have developed a strong curricular knowledge of all three disciplines in which they serve. They accomplish this through membership in faculty-level curriculum committees, attending courses, developing and maintaining strong faculty relationships, and in some cases achieving higher degrees in the disciplines (two of the ACE members have PhDs and all have master's degrees). This disciplinary knowledge not only allows for effective advising of our student populations, it also helps us to advise faculty by raising their awareness of common course subject matters and similar research interests their colleagues in the other disciplines possess. This inclination to introduce commonalities to students and faculty across the

disciplines has fashioned a new network of partnerships, potentially resulting in stronger research and teaching collaborations.

Possessing this disciplinary familiarity with both curricula and faculty allows advising coordinators to identify how curricular goals implicit within courses of all three disciplines might collectively meet the requisite professional training for the entire student population that ACE services. Over the two years of ACE's existence, we have observed and acted upon how course and co-curricular opportunities across the disciplines benefit common professional development needs. In addition to courses, we have developed relationships with academic centers existing within the disciplines that provide co-curricular opportunities for students. These centers include the Community Engagement, Design, and Research Center (CEDaR), Growing up Boulder, and the CU Environmental Center. In addition, through our familiarity with both individual faculty and student interests and needs, we introduce students to opportunities for involvement in faculty-led research projects.

ACE's management of the internship program in ENVD and its collaborative relationships with the ENVS and Geography internship programs connect students to internship opportunities within CU (such as in the centers mentioned above) and among the wider professional community. The ENVD internship coordinator works vigorously with students, professional communities, and institutions within CU to match students to internships and career opportunities after graduation. We have found that the skills sets and interests of students in all three disciplines often overlap, suggesting that certain internships might be suitable for students across our three communities. As an illustration of the benefits that ACE model provides its community of students and faculty, we cite the network we created through environmental and urban planning.

Connecting professional and prospective planners in Geography, ENVS, and ENVD

Planning exists as a sub-discipline within ENVD and consists of urban design, urban planning, and environmental planning. Several ENVD faculty members are professionally licensed and scholarly planners, as are a number of faculty members in ENVS and Geography. Numerous advising conversations between ACE advisors and ENVS majors suggested a significant, but latent interest in environmental, urban, and green infrastructure planning. When asked to discuss the types of careers ENVS students imagined for themselves, many describe aspirations to work within communities to create sustainable and green neighborhoods, conserve recreational and open spaces, and provide healthy and sustainable sources of food. These aspirations express a definite interest in planning careers relative to community engagement, green infrastructure planning, land conservation, and food sustainability. Given these interests, we soon realized the possibilities for leveraging the curricula in all three disciplines to meet students professional development needs. We began to introduce ENVS students to ENVD planning courses and asked the ENVS curriculum committee to approve these courses to meet their degree requirements. We

also identified planning-related courses taught in Geography and ENVS, such as Geography's *American Cities* and ENVS' *Health and the Built Environment*, which we encouraged ENVD planning students to consider.

We then accessed our connections to the academic centers at CU and the professional planning community to provide internship and post-graduation professional opportunities for students interested in planning as a career. An example is the internship opportunities available through the Community Engagement, Design, and Research Center (CEDaR). CEDaR maintains the Green Infrastructures Internship Program, which supports the collection and analysis of data for use in the green infrastructures planning process, in addition to the actual design and execution of planning projects. These neighborhood-based efforts happen through close engagement with the communities involved with the infrastructure projects. ACE's relationship with CEDaR has resulted in a large number of student interns from ENVD and ENVS participating together in the Green Infrastructures Internship, allowing these students to develop deep understandings of civic engagement, creating impactful and inclusive features of local infrastructure.

Finally, ACE's familiarity and relationships and with faculty members across the disciplines has helped us to introduce scholars and practitioners with common interests in the various fields of planning. This has led to heightened cooperation with course planning and the potential for collaborative interdisciplinary research. For example, ACE advising coordinators identified the commonalities existing between an ENVD studio course related to designing a portable garden for urban food deserts and a sustainable food course in Geography. Upon their introduction through an Advising Coordinator, the two instructors discovered the complementary nature of their respective curricula. They collaborated to fashion a portion of the food course into a seminar of relevance for the ENVD studio students. Several of the ENVD students subsequently registered for the sustainable food course, for which they receive praxis design seminar credit as part of their program requirements. As a result of our position amidst the intersection of curricula, students, and faculty, identifying and acting upon these interdisciplinary connections has arisen organically. Above all, these connections have assisted our efforts to increase levels of student retention and enrollments.

Academic Advising Coordinators and the transition to a "School of the Environment, Design, and Sustainability"

In summary, we suggest that ACE's services to the disciplines inhabiting its advising neighborhood present a model to which advising neighborhoods in the College of Arts and Sciences at CU-Boulder might aspire. Given the programmatic roles that ACE Advising Coordinators undertake, we also suggest they are in a position to expand their roles into the formative supportive structures for the School of the Environment, Design, and Sustainability. These roles subject to expansion include:

- A Center for Careers in the Environment, Design, and Sustainability
- Alumni relations
- Donor relations
- Scholarship programming
- Admissions
- Diversity Programming
- Transfer Evaluations
- First-Year Experience
- Academic Coaching

ACE Advising Coordinators manage these significant programmatic pieces at a small scale in partnership with the campus offices dedicated to these general services. We contend that with a relative increase in resources, we can effectively expand the coordinator roles and processes to meet the needs of a school structure operating independent of the College of Arts and Sciences to serve students more effectively on disciplinary-specific level without duplicating efforts of our campus partners. These efforts in relation to student services, faculty support, and disciplinary excellence deserve an academic home as a landmark of CU-Boulder's commitment to sustainability, the environment, and design representative of the flagship institution of which we take great pride in being part.