

How Can Advising Best Serve the Needs of Students, Academic Units, and the University?

Program in International Affairs

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Academic advising is central to the success of students, academic units, and the university as a whole. There are three key aspects of advising that we hope the university will nurture. Our conclusions are based largely on the experiences of the International Affairs Program (IAFS) as an interdisciplinary undergraduate major, but we believe that they may apply more broadly.

Advisors Should Have Specialized Training and Experience with the Discipline(s) and Other Requirements of the Units They Serve

Advisors who have relevant experience will be best placed to advise students on the particularities of their discipline and unit. In the case of IAFS, we hope we can retain advisors who have specialized experience and training in interdisciplinary work. Our current advisors, because they have worked in interdisciplinary environments, are well equipped to guide students through our complex curriculum.

One example of the importance of specialized advising knowledge relates to our catalog process, which plays an important role in IAFS's efforts to serve future students as effectively as possible. Including specialized advising knowledge in this process is crucial, especially for students who study abroad. Relying on standardized advising practices can potentially lead to problems. This year, the Office of the Registrar oversaw the creation of a four-year IAFS plan to graduation, written in accordance with general advising knowledge. However, this four-year plan included information that would potentially interfere with progression to graduation for IAFS majors. It recommended students consult their degree audit when registering, rather than our semester-specific list of courses. Given our reliance on special topic sections in other departments that are approved on a semester-to-semester basis, we need in-unit advisors with curricular and interdisciplinary experience to ensure our students progress toward graduation. Additionally, our four-year plan did not mention study abroad. Since over half our majors study abroad, students must work individually with our IAFS advisors to understand the various ways study abroad coursework may work for IAFS degree requirements.

Advisors Should Have Appropriate Workloads

Currently, academic advisors carry heavy caseloads, which prevent them from carrying out non-essential but valuable tasks that would benefit individual students and university goals relating to diversity and inclusive excellence.

For example, identifying students who have high major-GPAs during the junior year would facilitate recruitment into our Latin Honors program of promising students who might not otherwise consider writing an honors thesis. High GPA in the major, when combined with lower overall GPA, can help identify talented students who may have had a rocky academic start. This group may include first-generation college students or those who lack the financial support of their more privileged peers. Often, such students can be extremely successful honors thesis writers. Identifying, recruiting, and mentoring them takes time and energy beyond the basics of academic advising.

Advisors Should Be Located in Academic Units

Advisors are key members of the academic team. In IAFS, we consult with advisors on a daily basis (often multiple times a day). They help guide students through a complicated and demanding curriculum, and they help the program make important judgment calls about how students can meet curricular requirements. Locating advisors in academic units will help build relationships among advisors, faculty, and staff and improve overall unit communication and cohesion.

Conclusion

Different academic units have their own advising needs and an advising model that best serves their students. As an undergraduate interdisciplinary major, IAFS values embedded advisors with specialized knowledge in areas such as a wide-ranging curriculum and study abroad. Caseload management allows advisors to take a proactive role in identifying and developing student academic opportunities. The overall goal for IAFS is to include advisors as important partners in the work of the academic unit, ensuring a constructive and engaged academic environment for students.