

Arts & Sciences Academic Advising Center Collective White Paper: What Advisors Need in a Re-envisioned College

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The purpose for this white paper is to articulate the value Academic Advisors add to the College of Arts and Sciences, particularly in alignment with strategic goals to improve cross-departmental collaboration and interdisciplinary learning. Advisors must currently operate under suboptimal constraints -and are continually required to do more work with less resources- that impact ideal support offered to students, as well as challenge morale for employee work-life. Advisors are in a unique position to have deep disciplinary knowledge and relationships with academic departments, while supporting undergraduates in making sense of their degree progress to completion. Resource allocation for Advisors can strengthen bridges across campus between departments and students, provide needed support on undergraduate concerns for academic departments, and enact critical (and non-graded) dialog about applied interdisciplinary concepts between students and a trained campus professional. Therefore, appropriating resources to increase Advisor staffing capacity, in addition to further professional development opportunity for personal growth and community interaction, reinforces campus strategic goals and inherently the benefits of a knowledgeable Advising professional for all campus members.

In addition to appropriating resources to grow the number of Academic Advisors, professional development opportunities for Academic Advisors benefits a two-fold purpose: to increase organizational effectiveness, and employee quality and satisfaction (Nottingham, 1998; Scott, 2000). Research on how professional development training is experienced demonstrates that when employees are invested in for personal growth as individuals and acknowledged for how work-life impacts identity, transformational learning can occur that contributes to cultural shifts and organizational change (Vahey, 2011). Essentially, to change an organization, it is critical to provide sequential professional development that addresses a mission statement and communicates cultural norms, while also builds camaraderie, mutual skill exchange, community support, and that influences personal and professional identity reflection, as an investment in human capital.

While the day-to-day work of Advisors contributes to articulated College goals, in practice recent organizational shifts challenge Advisor's flexibility to provide optimal interdisciplinary learning and customized service that offers students a connected relationship to a campus professional that can ultimately support retention. Change examples include increases to student roster-loads (professional standards recommend rosters of 400; A&S Advisors average 600-700), required multi-disciplinary knowledge sets, removal of long-term flexible work schedules including part-time status, and time-tracked quotas which inhibit schedule flexibility to either meet student needs or Advisor interaction with the campus community. These changes have ultimate detriment on any student's advising experience. These changes build on an ethos of "one-stop shopping" that many Advisors have for years provided in response to frontline demand for a myriad of student (and faculty, and staff) questions. These cumulative pressures mount against Advisors feeling supported and good about their work. Remodeling Advising services for efficiency and effectiveness is a recognized need. And continued building on Advisor

expectations to meet increasing demands, as well as forced attrition efforts to cut expenditures, has exhausted and impacted well-being of essential human capital: Advisor's ability to care deeply and connect with students.

The following articulations are contributions from Arts and Sciences Advisors and Advisor advocates. With the intended purpose for community understanding of the role Advisors serve to CU-Boulder, feedback was solicited on four identified themes, including: What Advisors Do, What Advisors Need, Why Advisor Needs are Necessary, and How Advisor Needs Further Campus Goals. The following conglomerate includes these edited responses.

Themes

1. What Advisors Do

- Across the college and the campus, advisors have varied responsibilities: to students, to their units regarding programming or assessment, and to their own professional development. What we do varies greatly based on the departments, colleges, and units that we work with and for. Because of this variation even among individual advisors, it still leaves the question, what does academic advising actually entail? For instance, in my department, I participate on a curriculum committee and assist faculty in decision-making changes for their undergraduate degrees. Others may be responsible for organizing events or keeping up a listserv or developing outreach and engagement opportunities. Our primary focus should be intrusive and appreciative advising of our students, but our time can be limited with these other responsibilities. My time is often taken with scheduling and email.
- Academic Advisors offer dedicated one-on-one time and attention to undergraduate students at CU-Boulder to promote student success in higher education. In the College of Arts and Sciences alone, we're talking roughly 18,000 enrolled/20,000 active students, assigned to a total of less than 50 professional Advisors. For half an hour or forty-five minutes at a time, advisors listen to students and focus solely on that student's needs, goals, opportunities, struggles, questions, ideas, triumphs and disappointments. This kind of personal, face-to-face attention from an adult who is not a parent is almost unheard of, and it is why Advisors can and do impact student satisfaction, success, and retention. Academic Advisors do this all within the context of the academic mission of the university - the pursuit of higher education - tapping into departmental and campus expertise that is both broad and deep. Their expertise is also fluid, as students moving through their degrees are fluid.
- First and foremost, advisors establish that all-important personal connection between a student and the University. Advisors are students' go-to person for institutional knowledge, referrals, advocacy, coaching, educational program development and moral support. We are the ones that help them open their minds to the wealth of possibilities offered by the University that will enable them to achieve their goals and reach their highest potential.
- Advisors help students to see the possibilities of their overall education well beyond simple course selection, e.g., internships, study abroad, work and school after graduation. Advisors also have the opportunity to help students to tap into their potential both academically and in life.
- Advisors help students design their CU experience. They help them weave together their academic and extracurricular experiences to help a student meet their academic, personal and professional goals. Advisors are also in a unique place to

help students see the value in their liberal arts education, helping them to identify and articulate the skills they are building in their liberal arts degrees as well as pointing them towards other opportunities in the students' interest. Advisors don't just address the academic side of a student; they are interested in the students' entire well-being, weaving together a customized support network per student, connecting them to resources. This often involves taking time to destigmatize services like counseling or disability services and also coaching students on how to get the most out of all of the resources they are accessing - helping them know what to expect, what questions to ask, etc. Advisors also find themselves advising the departments they serve; helping faculty understand curriculum, policies and procedures; helping departments feel more connected to the undergraduate student experience; and helping to problem-solve all types of curricular problems.

- First Year Advisors may be the only professional on campus that a student has connected with one-on-one during their entire first year at CU Boulder. First Year Advisors bridge the gap between college and high school and assist students in the transition to college life. Students see their First Year Advisors for a variety of questions (anything from study tips, to navigating personal relations, to how to do laundry) because they know they are the one person on campus that is assigned to them and dedicated to their success. Advising conversations with first year students range from role-playing how a student would go to an instructor's office hours, to how to navigate the health center, to interpersonal communication issues with their roommate, to understanding the vast policies on campus, to major, career, and life exploration and goal setting.

2. What Advisors Need

- Our most precious resource is time. We need time to talk with students and not feel like we are shuttling them out the door before they are done processing, even though this is often the case because the next appointment is waiting. We can have a student in tears or with a health crisis, and must end an appointment with no transition time for the Advisor because the next appointment must begin. We also need time to record those interactions faithfully so that other student services personnel across campus can benefit from background on our interactions. We need time to be able to meet with other advisors and campus committees in order to improve processes, policies, and services. And we need time to develop ourselves, including attending conferences at CU and elsewhere to learn about our profession.
- Advisors need the acknowledgment that what they do is considered "mission critical." Advising units need to be appropriately resourced in terms of staffing (ideally working within a 350:1 student advisor ratio) so that advisors have the time they need to do this mission critical work. They need opportunities to grow within the field and to become its innovators. They need to be at every table and in every conversation regarding student success.
- First and foremost, advisors need adequate funding of the AAC so rosters are at or below 350 students and that there are in-house resources available for students, e.g. academic coaching, early warning, advisor participation in first-year seminars and other support services. With smaller rosters we can take the time each student deserves, that can balance self-care with the responsibility of caring deepening for student's needs. With reasonable rosters advisors can pay more individual in-person attention to their students, engage in department, division or unit-wide projects that benefit students as a whole, and have the opportunity to take advantage of more professional development opportunities. Second, salaries reflect the high cost of

living in Boulder, wherein a household is considered low income at \$63K. Some of us have second jobs to make ends meet while others of us have to commute long distances in order to find affordable housing. Third, advisors need autonomy and minimal micro-management. We are professionals who should be trusted to know what's best for our students. Instead of watching over our shoulders, managers should look at student surveys and such to assess the effectiveness of individual advisors. One size does not fit all. Each discipline is unique, the students in each discipline is a unique collection of different student personalities. Advisors ought to be able to adapt their personal styles to their own needs and those of their students.

- A reasonable caseload is a good first step. Everything revolves around respect. Respect for our time (fair caseload). Respect for our qualifications (fair compensation). Respect for our judgment (appropriate level of schedule flexibility, tele-work, etc.). Respect for our feedback about what does and does not work. We also need to advise few enough different majors so that we can develop expertise in each major. Deep disciplinary knowledge is essential for quality advising.
- Support for advising also needs to take shape as rigorous, focused, intensive training for new advisors, with significant assessment, follow up, mentoring and check-ins. Professional development is important and at the most fundamental level, advisors need to be armed with the skills to navigate institutional resources. We must have an organized central resource for advisors to access to keep track of policy changes.
- To positively influence the transition for first year students, the university needs to drastically re-think how students are welcomed to the CU community. The Online Experience and First Year Seminars need to be tweaked to better meet student needs and improve retention. It is imperative that First Year Advisors are at the table to communicate these needs and are able to actively participate in the rollout of new programming and services for first year students.
- As advisors, we strive to actively listen to students concerns and provide an outlet to dialogue about creative problem-solving solutions. However, as a unit, advisors are not given the same opportunity. Advisors do not feel that their voices are heard or that they are valued on a campus level. More emphasis on meeting the needs of advisors is critical to advisor retention and positive student interactions. I want my colleagues to be happy, healthy, and supported for all the amazing work they are doing for students on our campus. This needs to be through adequate job resources (enough advisors, a seat at the table from front-line advisors, ability to innovate, and to use professional judgment), flexibility (flex schedules, work from home, adjusting work hours to meet unique needs), and understanding the personal life situation each advisor experiences (taking care of children or family members, health concerns, long commutes, etc). These are holistic needs that focus on creating an environment where advisors feel appreciated and treated as professionals.
- In order to do my job well, I need technology network and speed to be congruent with the tasks I have to complete. Also, to have adequate coverage when a person is sick, out on leave, has vacation time, etc. I appreciate the value on professional development and love to learn more and be the best professional that I can be. The value advisors add to student's experience is a worthwhile university investment. In my interactions with students I have seen dramatic shifts in the student experience directly due to advising satisfaction and interactions.

3. Why Advisors Needs are Necessary

- Particularly In the last several years, Advisors feel the College of A&S does not value dedicating resources to advising, even as they talk about how important we are to retention. Our budget is not sustaining, but relies on temporary funding, and we feel

short-handed. We added supervisors and leadership to increase advisors' access to professional development through coaching and mentoring, yet those folks are now tasked with all kinds of programmatic responsibility, making the coaching and mentoring they were supposed to do a challenge.

- Simply put, if advisors' needs are met, so too are the needs of the students and their families. Students come to this campus with an expectation that they will have access to timely, accurate, friendly and individualized guidance toward successful completion of their degrees. Advisors cannot consistently deliver on this expectation unless they are appropriately resourced.
- Meeting advisor needs is necessary in order to ensure high morale and low turnover. Also, schedule flexibility, such as ability to work from home or part-time contracts supports both advisor and student needs. It's important to note that the recent elimination of part-time employment affected only women. While overt discrimination was not the motive, the de facto result was the same. Within the AAC, all part-time workers affected by the forced attrition decision were female. By eliminating part-time contracts the University disproportionately eliminated opportunities for women.
- The type of deep disciplinary and campus knowledge that is required of advisors takes time and experience to develop. The longer we can keep advisors, the more this knowledge will grow and be useful for students. High advisor turnover is a problem for students and the university, because students may not be seeing the value of their education or their CU experience without the meaning-making that can happen with an experienced, knowledgeable professional. High advisor turnover could be abated by competitive salaries, housing assistance, supportive work environment, appreciation, opportunities for promotion, opportunities to build mastery that are rewarded, etc.

4. How Advisor Needs Meet Campus Goals

- Academic advising can be key to increased retention and persistence for students if we were able to do it intrusively. If I was able to call all of my students when I see that they haven't yet registered for spring by the end of November, many more of those students would see me before the end of the term to figure out how to get enrolled. But I have close to 600 students and that is not possible. I want to be able to do more for my students, but realistic time constraints don't make that possible.
- Referring to the current Strategic Imperatives: 1) Shape Tomorrow's Leaders. High impact practices are not happening in the classroom alone. Academic Advising appointments offer safe spaces for students to think, wonder, doubt, try, and reaffirm - all without the burden of trying to achieve a specific grade; without the fear of looking dumb in front of an instructor. Advisors help students in the self-shaping process by introducing them to opportunities and ideas that might be newly considered. They help students identify and leverage strengths, and connect with professors and leaders that can then push intentionally to progressive futures. 2) Be the Top University for Innovation. Advisors are in a unique position to innovate both their own practices and as contributors to innovations such as Unified Communication, First Year seminars and other programming, and "degree design" as made possible by the introduction of the new A&S General Education requirements. 3) Positively Impact Humanity. When approx. 16,000 undergraduate students have access to timely, caring, accurate and individualized attention from an adult who is not a parent - whose sole reason for existing at the university is to offer guidance, support, advocacy and encouragement - this creates a community of

students who are emboldened to be their very best. Academic advisors can reinforce the roles and purposes of higher education (including positively impacting humanity) introduced and unpacked in CU classrooms.

- Many students never achieve their potential. Advisors with training (and stories to share) that can help their students to succeed will go far in helping students to overcome fears and hopefully fall in love with learning.
- We help shape tomorrow's leaders by thoughtfully connecting them to the value of their education - not just for career success, and to show them the value of a liberal arts degree towards making a more informed citizens. Advisors can help students identify and articulate the value of their degree both in skills to help them with their careers, and values to shape their impact on humanity.
- "Improving Retention and Graduation Rates at CU Boulder," a report by the Planning Committee of the A&S Council, cites a finding from the Center for Public Education showing the strong correlation between student success and contact with an academic advisor. "The authors of the report were particularly surprised to find that the correlation with academic advising was so strong that it held up even for low-achieving and low socioeconomic status (SES) students." (page 6)

This white paper was a collaborative effort to glean knowledge and experience from advisors across the College of A&S. Current professional Advisors at CU-Boulder are caring, compassionate, talented, and dedicated people who choose this career because they want to support students. The overwhelming message is resources for Advising services must be reprioritized moving forward. Advising has been under supported for too long; the expectation of Advisors from students and parents, faculty and staff, and the entire CU-Boulder community, is too high for the current model to be sustainable.

Themes included in this paper address multi-angles of what Advisors do and need for optimal community contribution. Advisors are aware that we have been a last resort for funding allocation, and our efforts must be reprioritized. Advisors are dynamic in provided services, as students have individualized needs. Advisors are that personal connection to students, that has proven direct correlation and benefit to campus goals and strategic initiatives. We ask for change. Moving forward, Advisors aim to be respected and valued for the service we provide for the entire CU-Boulder community.

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