



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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Our Advising System Does Not Work

The Office of University Planning recently released the results of the annual survey of graduating seniors at WCU. The good news is that the students were very satisfied with their classes; fewer than 7% of seniors judged their academic experience at WCU as "poor" or "fair." Unfortunately, this was not the case with advising – 23% of seniors categorized their advising experience as poor (6%) or fair (17%). Particularly telling were the ratings for receiving accurate information about degree requirements from advisors (27% unsatisfactory) and their advisor's knowledge of campus policies and procedures (25% unsatisfactory).

Students are not the only ones who have problems with the undergraduate advising system. Over the past couple of weeks, I have talked with faculty advisors, department heads, and staff in the Registrar's Office and the Advising Center. There was near universal dissatisfaction with the present system. There are many reasons our system is failing; here are a few of the problems and some possible solutions.

1. The Liberal Studies curriculum is incomprehensible. - Liberal Studies was a big improvement over the old Gen Ed curriculum. However, amendments in recent years have undermined the original intent of the program and produced a mishmash of convoluted rules. One of my friends in the English Department accurately characterizes the Liberal Studies curriculum as "labyrinthine." (The program is actually in violation of some of its own guidelines. We are supposed to have a Student Advisory Council and a pot of money designated for "attracting and rewarding Liberal Studies faculty participation." The student advisory council has been defunct for years, and, according to Fred Hinson, the faculty development funds have never been allocated.)

2. There is insufficient training of advisors. - There is no functional advising manual, and the University Advising Coordinating Committee, which is supposed to oversee advisor training, no longer exists. Given the complexity of the curriculum, one might think that advisors would flock to training sessions. But, by and large, we don't. On average, only 2.6 faculty members attended each of the 13 training sessions offered by the Advising Center in October. I expect that many of those who did attend left the sessions befuddled, realizing our system is more screwed up than they thought.

3. There is a lack of standardization of student information. - Students can have three or four different versions of the Liberal Studies check sheet in their advising folders. We have two separate registration information systems. The WIN system is more user-friendly but automatically kicks you off every 15 minutes. SIS offers a little more information, but is incomprehensible; I can't tell Screen 107 from The Racing Form. Hopefully, the much-anticipated Banner system that will gradually replace WIN and SIS over the next couple of years may rectify some of these problems. We'll see.

4. The Degree Audit is bewildering and inaccurate. - The convoluted layout of the Degree Audit form makes it nearly impossible to interpret. The most serious problem, however, is that in my experience, the information on the audit is **nearly always wrong**. My friends in the Registrar's

Office admit that degree audits are rarely accurate but insist that they are “useful tools” which were never intended to be taken literally. I am skeptical. The problem is that the computer that generates the audit is dumber than a banana slug. It is hopelessly inept at the type of tasks computers are supposed to do well – following a set of “if-then” rules that match courses with requirements. As a result, audits typically end with a long list of courses under a heading that brings terror to the hearts of graduating seniors – “Section 4 -Work Not Applicable To This Program.”

5. Advising loads are too high. - According to the April 2004 report submitted by the now-inactive Advising Coordinating Committee, a reasonable advising load is 20 to 33 students. Currently, some faculty members have more than 70 advisees. High advising loads have consequences. A few departments have opted to reduce their number of advisees by discouraging new majors. Other departments resort to group advising. Some faculty members only meet face to face with problem cases; they just email RAN numbers to the rest.

6. More time spent bean-counting means less time advising. - The toll taken by heavy advising loads will be greatly exacerbated by the recent shift in the burden for certifying graduation requirements from the Registrar's Office to the departments. Ideally, most advising time is spent discussing career options, helping students choose appropriate courses, and identifying academic and personal problems that can interfere with adjustment to university life. Beginning next semester advisors will need to attach to applications for graduation a list of every course grade the student made, along with copies of all waiver and substitution forms. I suspect that most faculty members are uninterested in this sort of clerical work, and many are inept at it. Further, paying a full professor 50 bucks an hour to copy grades from Form A to Form B is a waste of tax dollars. Faculty members will whine a lot about their new responsibilities. The real burden, however, falls on the already overworked department heads. A department head justly complained to me that he had spent over 100 hours this semester hassling over applications for graduations.

7. Bottom line – a lot of students get bad advice. - We don't know how many students do not graduate on time because of advisor errors. There may be a lot of them. One department head told me that 25% of seniors in his department this semester had been seriously misadvised. In two of these cases, advising errors prevented the students from graduating on time. Advising problems are particularly acute for new faculty members, who don't know which rules are flexible or which administrators look favorably on waivers. More importantly, faculty haven't had time to develop a network of advising cognoscenti who they can turn to when they are really in a jam.

Solutions.

Here are a few changes that could be implemented quickly and easily that might help in the short run:

- Give each faculty member a good advising handbook.
- Generate a Top 10 List of Advising Pitfalls indicating the most critical curriculum rules – the ones that cause the most graduation problems.
- Develop standardized Liberal Studies and curriculum check sheets for all majors.
- Don't give advisees to first year faculty.

Structural problems will be more difficult to fix. I suggest we:

- Simplify the Liberal Studies Program.
- Translate the degree audit into English and improve its accuracy.
- Consider instituting a professional advising system like Chapel Hill has done.
- Add more tenure/tenure track faculty members in popular majors such as Criminal Justice so that no one has more than 35 advisees.

I am convinced that the vast majority of WCU faculty members take the advising part of their jobs quite seriously. Our byzantine system, however, works against both students and their advisors. Right now, nearly everyone seems to agree that our advising system, like Social Security, is on the verge of collapse.

Hal Herzog, Psychology

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Our Advising System Does Not Work," by Hal Herzog, 12/1/04

Bravo Hal Herzog!

His comments on the current advising "system" (if such it can be called) are right on the money. It is proof positive that as things evolve they become evermore complex, until they finally destroy themselves by their sheer complexity and inability to adapt.

Convinced that mastering this array of procedures, requirements, exceptions, rubrics, and guidelines was absolutely beyond me, I attended a "training session" for the "new *improved*" version of Liberal Studies. I expected an eager crowd of at least a dozen concerned and dedicated advisors. What I saw were three other people nervously squirming in their seats as the instructors dispensed reams of printed instructions and procedures for implementing this new improvement.

I collected a stack of paper half an inch thick that was color-coded. The colors WERE nice. Reminded me of the paint and wallpaper section of Lowes...you know, those color swatches? Pink for this, yellow for that, orange for the next, and so on...

Still confused 20 minutes later, we (the four of us in the Peanut Gallery) asked for more clarification. "Not a problem," came the answer, and we promptly found ourselves with a new, *taller* stack of colored paper. "Jumpin' Jeeminy," I thought innocently, "this sure must really be *improved*!"

Well, by the time class was over, I staggered out of McKee with the two reams of gaily-colored paper and a 3-ring binder that said "Instruction Manual" on the cover. But by this time, those 4 or 5 of my remaining brain cells responsible for common sense sent me a signal that said anything so "improved" that it needs evermore thicker stacks of color-coded paper to explain itself PROBABLY IS NOT IMPROVED. In fact, PROBABLY IT'S DOO DOO!

So there. We should scratch the Liberal Studies brainchild or vastly simplify it. And if that doesn't work, go back to the system we used for the first decade or so I taught here, which clearly and simply laid out the required courses, the electives, their contents, how many of each (or from what column you wanted to take them, etc.), and how your hours were adding up. They were easy to add up because there were no exceptions or reversions or other confusing factors, and the advisor could see as he/she toted up the hours whether or not his advisee was ahead, behind, or on schedule for graduation day.

I'm a hundred percent behind you, Hal. In fact, if we can collect all that colored paper from campus, we'll load it into my car and head to Lowe's. Maybe we can sell it back to them.

Rick Boyer, English

WCU Liberal Studies and Advising: Fixing the Flawed System

I am writing in response to Dr. Herzog's recent article in the *Faculty Forum* newsletter titled "Our Advising System Does Not Work." A faculty member shared the article with me when I expressed my own frustrations with the very unsteady system in place today. Perhaps it would be helpful to view the problems from a student's perspective. A bit about myself first: I am a senior and have attended WCU for the duration of my college years. I am scheduled to graduate in May, on time, which is something of a miracle these days. Even though I won't be barred from graduating on time by advisor error, I feel cheated. Here are the flaws I see:

1. Liberal Studies, as currently dictated, is a waste of students' time.

Liberal Studies was supposed to be a golden opportunity for me to become a more well-rounded college student. Instead, it caused me almost nothing but stress. It was very difficult to figure out what exactly the requirements were for me and which catalog I should follow to make certain courses count when they didn't fulfill the requirements I originally planned. Granted, perhaps six of the 42 hours I took for Liberal Studies (two classes of the fourteen) were well-spent. I had two interesting classes that I otherwise might not have taken. That doesn't make the overall program feel worthwhile.

You can't convince me, either, that the Liberal Studies program is supposed to help students figure out what they want to major in, which is something a professor once told me. I didn't have that kind of time. If you don't get careful advising and don't bring hours in, you can't really afford to change majors or be too indecisive. Most college kids have no idea what they want to major in or are still uncertain when they are forced to decide. If we had a more flexible system, students could explore what they wanted to without being forced to take classes they won't like or do well in. I know there are other English classes I wish I had had the time to take, but instead I suffered through *Grassroots of Democracy* and the like. Did I retain anything useful from the classes I didn't like? No. Nearly half my time (and money) at WCU was spent on classes I didn't find useful. That's a big investment for a very small return!

The fix is simple: Make Liberal Studies much more flexible and publish ONE comprehensive guide for it, as Dr. Herzog suggested. No more of this "What year's catalog are you using for your major? What about your minor?" stuff. And be more flexible in letting students take different courses if their interests lie in different areas than the ones listed. Students will be happier and less stressed as a result, and will probably perform better as well.

2. Students need excellent advising and aren't getting it.

Sometimes I couldn't get up with my advisor when I needed his advice. He was usually helpful when I found him, but I wish the contact had been more frequent and more in-depth. I added a second advisor (one in my minor) because my major advisor knew nothing about those requirements, and I needed someone very reliable who would consistently try to get me proper information – which can be amazingly hard to find. Due to the rigidity of programs and lack of adequate advising, two of my friends are looking at an extra semester. Ouch! Others I know, also

seniors, didn't even know the names of their advisors! These indicators should be a red flag for all of us.

If you were my advisor and I were a first-semester freshman, I would ask first of all that you try to understand how important this relationship will be for me in the coming years. I will come to you for help when I have no idea what I need to do to meet the requirements for Liberal Studies, my major, or my minor. I will place my trust in you to get me out of here on time. You are the only person who can help me, at least that I know of. I can't be just a number or a name to you – I could have found that at Chapel Hill. I came to Western because I can get one-on-one time with you. I want that, and I need it.

Since this relationship is important to both of us, why not get adequate training? Leaders, make it mandatory for faculty if people don't show up. You cannot afford to have a sloppy advising system, and I can't afford for you to, either. I try to follow the guidelines I know of, but my advisor is my safety net. I don't think I can do this by myself, and I shouldn't have to.

In addition to just helping me figure out what courses I need to take, I will come to my advisor for bigger questions. Am I in the right major? If you don't know anything about me, how can you help me through this? Please make an effort to see me as an individual with my own set of talents and weaknesses. Even twenty minutes per semester is enough to get this done.

Don't give up face time with me. If you have too many advisees, seek another faculty member who has fewer students to meet with. See if your colleagues will help ease your burden so that each student gets the help he or she needs. Don't shortchange new majors or programs. If we need to hire more faculty, let's bring it up to someone who can make that happen. Advisors are trying – they could use some good help, too!

3. That degree audit has to go!

The degree audit at WCU is one of the most confusing "helps" a student or advisor can dig up. It always seems to be wrong, doesn't credit classes that DO fit the requirements you took them for, and is probably a factor in early hypertension among students. I almost had a heart attack when I looked at my audit before going to talk with my department head this semester. I was sure the courses listed as "work not applicable to this program" were indeed very pertinent! I chose them off one of those annoying little check sheets that seem to change every week. How could the classes not count?

After two anxious appointments with my already overworked department head, the classes counted as they were intended to, and I was cleared for on-time graduation. It took over an hour and a few different catalogs to figure it out, and I remember thinking "Why couldn't I just look at the degree audit and know this already?"

If we had a more useful program for tracking student developments, my department head would not have had to spend so much time filling in the blanks by course and grade on my final audit. We could have just hit "Print" and tucked the pages into my forwarded file. Wouldn't it be nice if we had a more accurate program? It would solve many problems, and it has to be possible. I don't have to be a CS major to tell you that programs far more complex than a competent degree

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requirement-tracking program exist today. Why don't we get or make a program that actually works for us?

I agree with Dr. Herzog's recommendations. Why isn't there a panel of faculty and students already at work on how to implement these solutions? We've known about these shortcomings for a while now. Let's get started on the solution phase before another student slips through the cracks of WCU's faulty advising system.

Mel Robbins, WCU senior

First of all, I would like to say that the advisers I work with at Western are great. They have the student's best interests at heart and work very hard at being good advisers.

Secondly, I want to speak in defense of the degree audit. I find the summary information at the beginning of the degree audit to be invaluable when doing a graduation checkout. Problems such as a student being short the hours to graduate are immediately identifiable. Section one, "Degree Requirements Remaining," identifies students who have not met the 25% rule. Repeated courses are noted within the degree audit whether a "Repeated Course" form has been processed or not. This helps students to see courses they may want to file "Repeated Course" forms for and helps me to see if a repeated course is going to short a student the total hours needed in order to graduate. I use the degree audit all of the time in conjunction with the student transcript and disagree with Hal's statement that "the information on the audit is nearly always wrong." The information is fine but interpretation of the information is required. I will be the first to admit that it took me some time to learn how to interpret the degree audit and use it, but now that I understand it, I have come to rely on it.

Finally, I would like to say that I liked the solutions Hal proposed. At least three-fourths of the article focused upon the problems with advising; nevertheless, it is the one-fourth of the article offering solutions that I wanted to read. I hope work begins soon to begin solving these problems. Obviously there is frustration with the advising here at Western so let's start fixing it.

Elizabeth Frazier, Associate Registrar

Hal just scratched the surface. This has been the worst semester ever in terms of advising issues and I write with well over two decades of intensive advising experience. The first-year students who were rammed down our throats didn't have a clue about how liberal studies worked. I thought that was to be imparted at the summer orientations; it wasn't! We need to get first year students OUT of majors and back into general circulation for **at least** 30 hours. The notion that first year students need a declared major is a profoundly misguided one that ignores the fact that students change majors what...3 times(?)...during their tenure. Sticking them in departments in which they will not matriculate is a cynical ploy to extract yet **more** uncompensated labor from complaisant (and cowed) faculty. Does the administration honestly believe that students will be actively encouraged to stay at WCU by harried faculty working under the strictures of advising loads that exceed 50? A far better policy would be to constitute an active junior division or functional advising center that does more than instantly refer students on to the academic departments. I won't even begin to

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discuss the problems with transfer students but will say that uneven transcript interpretations and misrepresentation about transfer credits (and articulation agreements that are **very unfavorable** to the WCU academic departments) by the several community colleges make dealing with them an often adversarial experience.

My first suggestion is to "REMOVE GRADUATION CHECKOUTS FROM THE DEPARTMENT LEVEL AND HAVE THEIR CHECKING CENTRALIZED IN THE REGISTRAR'S or COLLEGE OFFICES." Have a few competent career professionals do this instead of angry, depressed and unmotivated faculty (who are in flux anyway). The present system has one disaster after another dumped in decentralized departmental offices where rectification is just about impossible.

Anonymous

I read Hal's Faculty Forum piece with great interest. The problem is doubly compounded for distance learning students. It is a nightmare!! However, the number of advisees is too low—one faculty member has close to 150 advisees. All this time I've been thinking what a complete incompetent I am because I have so much trouble advising students. Maybe the 25% who were not satisfied with all of the poor advice they received weren't all mine.

Anonymous

As a new faculty member, I have nearly 50 advisees, ranging from first year freshmen to graduating seniors. My vision of advising is that I should focus my interaction with advisees on career advice, selection of electives, pursuit of minor(s), etc. Instead, I have been inundated with red tape. My focus has been on trying to figure out what courses fit into the "real program requirements" as opposed to that on the degree audit. . . .In the past two weeks, I have advised two seniors, showing them that their proposed graduation date is a year premature. Their prior advisor had not clued them into the fact that they actually needed to achieve all the graduation requirements, not just the ones they were partial to. I hold the students responsible, but their now-departed advisor should have made them aware of their actual standing. The idea of an on-line graduation audit is great. But the reality is quite painful at this point. To survive the advising process, our program has generated our own 1-page degree audit sheet, listing both Liberal Studies and major requirements. First year faculty should have little-to-no advising responsibilities, giving them time to learn the system. If we can remove some or all of these obstacles, then we can get down to real advising.

Anonymous