

## **Consultants' Report**

### **Prepared for Old Dominion University**

On October 28-30, 2009 a team of consultants consisting of Dr. Charlie Nutt, Executive Director of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), Dr. Jayne Drake of Temple University, and Dr. Nancy King from Kennesaw State University visited Old Dominion University (ODU). The charge was to conduct a review of the undergraduate academic advising program at ODU and make suggestions for improvement. Prior to the visit, we were provided a great deal of information regarding the university and the advising program. These materials are included in the appendices of this report. The visit began with a public forum on “Advising as Teaching” presented by Drs. Nutt and Drake and the launching of the ODU Master Advisor Certificate Program.

During our visit, we met with a wide representation of individuals including the Provost; the academic Deans and Associate Deans; the Dean of University College; various committees under SEM—the retention, transfer, and freshman committees as well as the SEM steering committee; representatives of the Faculty Senate; the Academic Enrichment Group; the Chief Departmental Advisors (CDA); the Director for Distance Learning; the Excellence in Advising Commission; and student representatives from the SGA. As a result of the materials provided for us and our meetings with individuals from all parts of the campus, we gained an understanding of the campus culture at ODU. Our overall observations will cover what we believe are strengths of the institution as well as challenges facing ODU. Finally, we will offer some recommendations for your consideration that we believe will improve the advising program at ODU.

## **GENERAL OBSERVATIONS**

### **Strengths**

Old Dominion University is an institution whose enrollment has shown impressive growth. We also noted an unusually high commitment to the university on the part of faculty, staff, administrators and students. Indeed all of the constituencies demonstrate a great deal of pride in ODU that reflects well on the institution. The campus has undergone a great deal of change in recent years. An important shift occurred when ODU added residential life to what had been a commuter campus. In addition, 25% of the faculty have joined ODU in the past five years; however, there is also a large number of faculty and staff who have very long tenures (including many who graduated from ODU prior to employment). There also seems to be a strong commitment to facilitating student success and making improvements to the advising program. For example, the Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) initiative has fourteen committees created to focus on critical issues related to student success. It is also worth noting that advising is part of the institution's strategic plan and the commitment to advising is further demonstrated by bringing in the NACADA consultants' team. Other strengths we noted include:

- A very attractive, well maintained campus, which is an important component of students' positive perceptions about the institution. In fact, several students commented to us that they were impressed with the campus when they first visited ODU.
- The implementation of Degree Works should free up more of the advisors' time to spend in meaningful interaction with their students.
- A strong interest in assessment and data-driven decision making
- The Center for Major Exploration appears to be a valuable resource for undecided students and major changers
- The requirement of Preview for new students

- An institutional desire to build upon a strong foundation for continuous improvement
- The creation of the Excellence in Advising Commission to pull together major stakeholders and to provide a communication vehicle
- The newly developed and soon to be implemented Master Advisor Certificate Program
- The newly developed advising awards program
- The Provost's commitment to enhancing academic advising

Although ODU has a number of strengths, like all institutions, it faces a number of challenges.

Those **challenges** that most impact academic advising include:

- Resource challenges (the number one challenge facing most colleges and universities in the current economy)
- Lack of consistency in the advising program. Almost everyone mentioned this lack of consistency in both structure and quality. The program is highly decentralized (which is not in itself a problem) but the quality is very uneven. There are pockets of excellence in advising and other areas where advising is at best minimal. Everyone agrees that **all** students deserve strong academic advising to facilitate their success.
- No shared understanding of academic advising or common language regarding its purpose and practice
- Changing student demographics including residential students; growth in traditional-age students; an exceptionally large transfer population, including increasing numbers of military students, that brings with it a number of advising issues
- Limited number of advisors for summer advising
- No professional development program for faculty advisors to give them the skills needed for quality advising
- Training for professional advisors is also not consistent across campus

- Lack of recognition and reward strategies for supporting faculty advising
- No career ladder for professional advisors
- Communication is not as strong as it should be (top-down and lateral)
- Collaboration across units of the university. This “silo” effect seems particularly noteworthy between the divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs
- Limited involvement of faculty or student affairs professionals on the SEM committees
- Challenge of connecting students to the university. Advising can play a key role here, but the feedback we heard from a sampling of student leaders indicated that there is serious dissatisfaction with advising currently.
- Consideration of faculty advising as a service rather than an extension of teaching

With these identified strengths and challenges as a backdrop, we would encourage you to consider the following:

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- There needs to be a campus-wide conversation about academic advising. Although there has been an Advising Mission Statement developed, we were surprised to learn that very few people we spoke with were aware of it. The Provost and Deans need to discuss and support the mission and purpose of academic advising. The Deans need to find ways to facilitate the conversation within their colleges and the Faculty Senate also should become engaged. Finally, there needs to be a clearly recognized person or unit at ODU that is responsible for leading advising initiatives. The goal should be both to develop a shared understanding of the purpose and practice of academic advising at ODU and to craft a vision for moving the advising agenda forward.
- Improve communication on campus regarding advising. The Excellence in Advising Commission is a means of communication among advisors, but this effort needs to be

extended so that all CDAs across campus have an opportunity to meet together regularly as well as professional advisors from all areas. We noticed announcements advertising the “Provost’s Conversations on Teaching and Learning.” We would strongly recommend that these conversations include “teaching, learning, and advising” as a way of encouraging communication about these important topics. Another means of improving communication about advising would be to expand the current Advisor Listserv to include not only announcements but also best practices in advising. Finally, an online Advising Handbook is an important communication tool that needs to be developed at ODU.

- Continue to strengthen and define the role of University College. The College is in the early stages of its development with a primary role being to provide advising for undecided students. One idea for consideration is to use the term “exploratory” instead of “undecided” because of a more positive connotation of the term. The College participates in the ‘advising triads’ that exist in a few of the academic colleges. The concept of these triads is excellent, but there is a great deal of work that needs to be done to eliminate confusion regarding the role of each member of the triad and to insure that students understand their function. Another challenge facing University College is that there is no definable “space.” We understand that they will have a home in a building that is in the planning stages and that should help the College to define its role and market its services.
- Build upon the newly created Master Advisor Certificate program as a way of providing professional development in advising to those who do not self-elect to participate in the certificate program. The major elements contained in the program are essential for all advisors to understand—conceptual elements, informational elements, and relational elements. The “building blocks” for very effective advisor development are already

outlined in the Master Advisor program. Furthermore, we would like to recommend that those in leadership positions in both academic and student affairs across the University make a concerted effort to explore this program, to become familiar with what it is and why it is important, as well as its various important elements, especially the conceptual level.

- It is critically important that ODU enlist the technical support needed in order to develop an academic advising website that is user friendly and easily accessed from the University's home page. We urge the University to consider an advising website through which students can easily access information on majors and careers, as well as make advising appointments via an on-line appointment scheduling system. We would like to recommend the implementation of such a system for University College and for the other advising units across the University.
- Many campuses have had a great deal of success with the creation of a Center for Teaching and Learning. We understand that ODU currently has a Center for Technology and Learning housed in Distance Learning. You may wish to consider expanding the function of this Center to include teaching. Because the NACADA philosophy is that advising is truly teaching, this would be another avenue for advising conversations and professional development.
- The reward and recognition structure must be improved. Currently advising in the Promotion and Tenure process for faculty is listed under "service." We strongly recommend that in keeping with the definition of advising as teaching, that academic advising be moved from the service category to teaching in the promotion and tenure process. On the professional advisor side, there needs to be an advising career ladder established that is based upon training and merit not simply the number of years one has spent advising.

- Monitor the success of the new Early Alert program. The sooner students in academic difficulty are identified and offered support, the more likely it is that they may be retained.
- Since approximately half of the ODU enrollment is made up of transfer students, it is important that improvements be made in this area. Things to consider: require a Preview program for all transfers, whether in person or online; improve the timeline alignment to provide for an earlier transcript evaluation, a very important element in advising; and establish ways to connect transfer students to the institution such as mentoring programs and social events.
- Issues surrounding summer advising were frequently mentioned during our visit as a significant problem. Ideally students attending Preview would have the opportunity to meet individually with an academic advisor for a full advising meeting. Unfortunately the ideal is not always possible. One recommendation is that personnel in University College and the CDAs in the six colleges engage in a serious discussion about the purpose and structure of Preview. If there is consensus that students attending Preview should indeed meet individually with advisors in their area of study, it will be necessary to provide enough advisors to accomplish that goal. In the absence of adequate resources, however, the decision may well be to acknowledge that the primary role of Preview is to connect new students to campus services, resources and organizations and to have them register for classes. In that case, students attending Preview should be told that they will not see their regular advisor but that they will be given assistance in course selection and registration. It is critical to delineate the difference between “advising” and “scheduling” in order for students to understand the difference in the two activities. There are ways to assist students with course selection and registration or “scheduling” during the summer when there is not an adequate number of advisors. For example, meeting

students in homogeneous groups is an excellent way to give information about scheduling and registration. In addition, peer leaders can be available to assist the students. When peer leaders are carefully selected, trained, and evaluated, they can be extremely valuable during summer orientation programs. In order to insure accountability, we recommend paying the peers a stipend.

- There is not the level of collaboration between the Divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs that needs to exist. As “outsiders” it was clear to us that the two areas do not work as closely together as they should in order to provide the seamless, holistic education that definitely benefits students. Both divisions have a keen interest in student success and in improving ODU’s retention and graduation rates. We recommend opening a dialogue about ways to work together toward the common goal of student success. Advising is provided by both areas, and it is important to reinforce the unique skills that both faculty and student affairs professionals have in facilitating student learning both inside and outside of the classroom. Another way to break down the barriers would be to include more faculty and student affairs representatives on the various SEM committees.
- Create a series of student forums to get feedback about the advising program. We recommend using the SGA to organize and implement these forums that should include representation from all areas of the student population—traditional, non-traditional, residential, commuter, athletes, transfers, involved students and those who are not involved at all—as well as students from the various colleges. Each of the forums should have a scribe from the faculty or staff to record the major points and this information would be extremely helpful in evaluating the effectiveness of the advising program. Having the SGA plan and implement these forums would be a learning opportunity for the students in addition to providing very useful information.

- We encourage ODU to build on its good work in helping students explore (especially) careers in their first year by opening discussions about reinstating learning communities with career and academic advising as strong components. Living / learning communities and theme-based housing have provided excellent results on many campuses, and we are confident they could be successful at ODU.

We very much enjoyed visiting your campus and appreciate the warm hospitality we received. Clearly faculty, staff, administrators, and students take a great deal of pride in Old Dominion University. We very much admire this commitment and pride that we consistently heard as we spoke with individuals from all across the campus. Hopefully you will find our observations and recommendations to be helpful as you seek to improve your advising program. Certainly your students will be the beneficiaries of these improvements. We would also suggest that you take advantage of all NACADA's resources as you seek to enhance academic advising at ODU. We applaud your interest in undertaking change on behalf of your students and wish for you great success in this endeavor.