

Assessment Day Focus Group Report – Assessment Day 2012

Topic

How can university advising and other support services help you to achieve your academic and personal goals?

Format

Four Focus Groups (2 consisting of freshmen and sophomores and 2 consisting of juniors and seniors) were held. Total number of participants was 23 and there were representatives from the following academic colleges at Marshall: COLA (5), COFA (1), COS (1), COHP (2), COEHS (4), CITE (2), LCOB (6), SOJMC (1), and UC (1). Four freshmen, three sophomores, five juniors, and eleven seniors participated. Participants were eleven males and twelve females.

Major Themes

Advising

1. Role of Advisors

- Participants felt that intrusive advising was helpful for first year students.
- Most participants felt that the primary role of academic advisors should be to help students schedule courses and resolve academic issues. Specifically, they felt that it would be helpful for advisors to
 - Help students learn to register using MyMU.
 - Provide students with advice regarding internships and career choices related to their majors.
 - Advise students regarding good combinations of classes to take simultaneously and sequentially.
 - Advise students regarding major changes and how these changes might affect graduation requirements and timelines for graduation.
 - Advise students regarding the costs/benefits of dropping classes.
 - Provide students with course offerings ahead of time.
 - Advise students about the help they can receive through Career Services.
 - Advise students about major related opportunities following graduation other than attending graduate school.

2. Professional or Faculty Advisors?

- Most participants felt that both professional and faculty advisors were important for different reasons.
 - Professional advisors are important to help students understand university-wide requirements and issues.
 - Professional advisors are important to help students find non-academic resources they might need.
 - Some participants felt that each college or department should have a dedicated professional advisor with training in counseling.
 - Professional advisors conduct important yearly degree audits.
 - Professional advisors are important because faculty are often not on campus when students need to see them.

- Faculty advisors are important to mentor students, to help them with discipline-specific issues, internship choices, and to help them connect their disciplines to possible careers.
- Faculty advisors are better equipped than professional advisors to counsel students about which classes to take simultaneously and sequentially.
- Students do not like having graduate students as advisors.

3. Characteristics of an Effective Advisor

- Knowledgeable
- Available (Open Door Policy): Students were especially concerned when they were not able to talk to faculty advisors due to schedule conflicts and their perception that faculty had a limited amount of time to talk to advisees.

4. Advising Timeline

- Students need to know what classes are required and when they are offered.
- Four-Year plans, subject to future modification if the student so desires, should be completed during advising.

5. Easily Navigate-able Online Scheduler

- Participants felt it would help with planning their schedules if they could easily determine which courses fulfill university requirements, e.g. which carry the critical thinking designator, which are writing intensive, multicultural, international, etc. They stressed that this information should be housed in one location, i.e. on some online course scheduling page.

6. Mandatory Advising

- Although opinions varied regarding the optimal frequency of advising, most freshmen and sophomores felt that advising should be mandatory, at least during a student's first year of college.

7. Communication among Colleges

- Participants felt that when a student changes his or her major, the paperwork for that change should be entered immediately so as to facilitate a smooth transition for the student.

8. Miscellaneous Issues Related to Advising

- Students in career-related majors should be paired with mentors who are actively working in the field.
- Students should complete job shadowing experiences early. These experiences help them to determine whether or not they are good fits for specific careers.
- Colleges/Departments should initiate peer advising to supplement (not replace) faculty and professional staff advising.
- Upon entering Marshall, students should complete assessments with professional advisors that will help to highlight their strengths and weaknesses. These assessments can help guide students into compatible majors and career paths.
- Students should complete courses that provide them with skills useful to employers.
- Content and outcomes for a specific course should be consistent across instructors.

- There should be a comprehensive list of majors, minors, etc. easily available to students.
- Each college/department should have a written advising guide, which sets forth its policies and procedures.
- Poor advising, resulting in extending a student's time to degree completion, has negative financial implications for students.

Academic Support Services

1. Most Helpful Academic Support Services

- Student Resource Center
- Career Services
- Guest speakers on topics relevant to students' majors.
- Writing Center
- Professors
- Tutoring Center
- Counseling Center
- Student Health
- Some participants felt that peer tutoring networks should be set up within colleges/departments. They noted that tutoring other students helps the tutor to learn the material at a deeper level than he/she otherwise might.
- Dean of Students
- Office for Students with Disabilities
- E-Z Borrow at the MU Library
- UNI 101 – especially learning how to use library resources.

2. Needed Academic Support Services

- Specific portion of MU website devoted to student organizations with contact information.
- Advisors should have access to University event schedules.
- Each student should receive an organized check-sheet of university-required information for admission.
- Each College's or Department's website should contain a list of "frequently asked questions."
- Provide a link to Financial Aid on MUOnline. Perhaps include a checklist of materials students need before speaking with their financial aid counselor.