

UNIVERSITY OF LA VERNE ADVISING

EXTERNAL REVIEWER REPORT

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By

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At the invitation of Carlos Cervantes, Associate Dean of Advising at the University of La Verne, I visited the University's main campus on November 2, 2011, to review undergraduate advising. To this end I met with academic advisors, academic deans, university staff, and students. This report is in accord with the mandate I received to focus on the University of La Verne's main campus and its traditional undergraduate population; in structure, the report follows the External Reviewer Guide of Program and Department Reviews provided by the University.

The Academic Advising Office (AAO) at the University of La Verne is to be commended for clearly articulating its goals and objectives. Moreover, these goals and objectives are appropriate and realistic, in that they recognize the diverse levels of preparation of students at La Verne, and are geared toward improving student retention rates and persistence toward graduation. Under the guidance of Adeline Cardenas-Clague and Carlos Cervantes, the AAO is more theoretically informed about advising than it was in the past, and is committed to the principle of developmental advising, whereby students become more responsible for their own progress toward graduation and more independent and informed about the advising process. Developmental advising is already taking place at La Verne, as indicated by the approximately

fifteen students with whom I spoke, many of whom expressed satisfaction with their own increasing involvement in handling the progress of their educational careers. AAO is moving in the right direction by emphasizing developmental advising, which addresses a concern expressed by some faculty about increasing students' responsibility and independence.

It is also clear that the AAO is deeply committed to serious assessment of its various programs, as indicated by the lengthy program review given to me, by extensive data available about student and faculty participation in advising, and by the conversations about various aspects of advising that I had with the AAO staff. The AAO is engaged in ongoing evaluation and improvement of its programs. It is obvious that the office does not view advising as the itemization of a fixed set of rules, but rather as a dynamic process of communication and counsel which, as necessary, may evolve in response to changing student needs and institutional policies and goals. I left La Verne convinced that the core values of NACADA (the National Academic Advising Association), which emphasize advisors' responsibilities to students, to their home institutions, to higher education generally, to involving others in advising, and to the educational community, inform the work of the AAO.

The overall health of the AAO is excellent, though it does show signs of strain, as will be discussed below. In general, both faculty and student comments about the AAO were highly complimentary. One of the first remarks a University of La Verne professor made to me was that the people in the advising office "are doing a fabulous job." Another comment was that "the AAO works fairly well"; yet other faculty stated that the current advisors in the advising office are more theoretically informed than was previously the case, and that they do "good work" and provide "good advising workshops." Most students interviewed were satisfied with the advising process. One interesting pattern that emerged with students was that, apart from a few

exceptions, students believed that their faculty advisors were better than staff advisors in terms of personal relationships and knowledge about courses and majors, but that staff advisors, though less personal, were more informed about General Education requirements and the technicalities of advising. The AAO, like some other entities on campus, has provided extensive information on the University website regarding advising, selecting a major, and General Education requirements. The AAO is to be saluted for its good faith efforts to humanize the at times dauntingly bureaucratic process of negotiating not only the General Education requirements, but the numerous exceptions and conditions that apply to these requirements; examples of such efforts include the Math Advising Tips, as well as other detailed documents available to students both in print and online. The Excel-based, interactive 4-year plan worksheet, which was recently implemented, received high praise from students and faculty alike.

At the same time, the advising system at La Verne generally, including but not limited to aspects of the AAO, is under a good deal of pressure. The single overarching explanation for this is that those faculty and professional staff at the University who are dedicated, competent advisors are burdened almost beyond capacity by their extensive, time-consuming advising duties. More specific problems needing attention are addressed below. My report will conclude with some action recommendations to be considered to alleviate these problems.

Various factors contribute to or exacerbate the overload of advisors with advisees. In considering these factors, it is crucial to note that not all of them apply to, or are under the control of, the AAO. For example, neither the complexity of General Education requirements, nor the lack of sufficient incentives and rewards for advising come under the authority of the AAO, though such matters obviously impinge on the advising experience at the University.

Advising-related problems noted by faculty, staff, or students at La Verne include the following: too few faculty advisors (only 20%) attending AAO advising workshops; lack of sufficient preparation on the part of certain faculty advisors, with the result that well-prepared faculty advisors, especially department chairs, have to “pick up the slack” for others, or answer “inane” questions posed by poorly prepared colleagues; budget cuts to the AAO, resulting in the office having to serve a larger student body with fewer resources; lack of “enforcement” or “consequences” for those who fail to take advising responsibilities seriously; piecemeal distribution of information about changes to rules governing student registration (too often, I was told, major and General Education regulations become “one big jigsaw puzzle” with changing pieces that make it hard for advisors to keep up); lack of sufficient compensation for, or recognition of, the value of advising; complicated, labor-intensive communication between University offices (students told me that to obtain approval for study abroad, they must procure signatures from different entities at different parts of campus and then provide evidence of these signatures in other offices to obtain yet further signatures for such approval).

The criticisms just cited represent the main patterns of response. Some individuals had other complaints, e.g., one student felt that his graduation had been needlessly delayed because of confusion over changes between the catalog in force when he entered La Verne and more recent catalogs. Several students would prefer not to use advisors at all, but favored the creation of an optional online advising system, whereby students could complete their own online registration for courses, a process that would be vetted by the advising office but that would allow students to elect to bypass one-on-one advising. Some faculty felt that the mandate to concentrate on the main campus of La Verne was in error, and that advising needed to be considered in relation to all the various branches of the University. That said, these were more

isolated suggestions and complaints. They may merit further attention within the University itself. But this report relies on the broader patterns of data collected prior to, during, and after my visit to La Verne, and restricts its focus, per the mandate received from AAO, to the main campus and its traditional undergraduate population.

An additional topic that repeatedly came up—not so much as a problem but as an issue to consider—was the tension between faculty advising and professional staff advising models. Some faculty claim that advising would benefit from moving to an entirely professional model, especially with regard to General Education requirements. This camp includes those who, though initially committed to faculty advising, have come to believe that it is virtually impossible to get faculty to advise well. Other faculty, even if interested in and skillful at advising students about careers and majors, balk at advising for scheduling, semester registration, and General Education. However, Arts and Sciences faculty and administrators were generally emphatic about preferring a faculty advising model; those in the School of Business, in contrast, tended to favor a staff advising model. From the student perspective, faculty advisors were more personal and relationship-oriented but less knowledgeable about college rules; students generally agreed that staff advisors were less satisfying in personal terms but more helpful with regard to scheduling. Some faculty with numerous advisees, e.g., 80 and above advisees per faculty member in Communications, are committed to advising but would welcome assistance from staff advisors trained to work with their majors. Rather than expend funds on hiring staff advisors, a number of Arts and Sciences faculty, especially, would prefer those funds to be used to encourage or reward more faculty advising.

After reviewing these observations, and the data obtained from the program review and campus interviews, I concluded that the University of La Verne should avoid moving to a “one

size fits all” model for advising—i.e., entirely faculty or entirely staff-based advising. A hybrid system, with more faculty advisors in Arts and Sciences and more staff advisors in, for example, the Schools of Education and of Business, would be a way of avoiding any one campus group feeling dominated by another. Moreover, the students I interviewed tended to favor having both faculty and staff advisors—faculty especially for consultation about the nature of individual courses, as well as about majors, careers, and specific projects, and staff for more “nuts and bolts” information about registration rules and General Education requirements. This does not, of course, preclude faculty from attaining the kind of knowledge that would enable them to succeed as General Education advisors as well. More important than a faculty or professional advising model is the “buy-in” of all parties—faculty and staff alike—to the value of advising and to increasing the number and competence of University advisors.

On the basis of my consultation with various constituencies at the University, I make the following action recommendations, some that can be carried out by the AAO, and some that come under the purview of other entities on campus. These action recommendations fall under two broad categories: communication and incentives.

1) **Communication**

- Streamline communication between departments, advisors, and administrative offices. Some simplification of rules for approving student requests through email authorization would help in this regard. In short, advising would benefit from implementation of a more centralized information system and streamlined approval process, e.g., for study abroad.
- Provide advisors with emailed information about changes to requirements not as individual points, which are hard to track in relation to the big picture, but as

highlighted areas within the entire set of regulations. This would help advisors to identify changes quickly and in the overall context of University regulations.

- Provide advisors with more information along the lines of the much appreciated “Path to Graduation,” e.g., explicit General Education checklists, and more definite information about substitutions, etc., so that advisors will be able to tell students about rules that “definitely,” rather than “probably,” apply.
- Increase the AAO budget at least back to its 2009 levels.
- Streamline the advising-related information on the University website. It is unlikely that many students will make their way through the lengthy guidelines on the website. Within these various documents there is much good information, but shorter, more simply expressed alternatives, with somewhat less jargon (e.g., “global planning”) and more everyday language would benefit a greater number of students, especially those who already have difficulties in terms of reading skills, motivation, and time management. These students need more straightforward, immediately accessible information—perhaps a more synthesized form of the now rather discursively presented materials.

2) Advising Incentives

- Faculty and staff advising alike would benefit from greater compensation for advising, whether in terms of funding, increased emphasis on advising in evaluating faculty and staff performance, course release, or relief from other service obligations. Many faculty expressed appreciation for the SOAR program’s generous (\$2500) compensation of faculty for summer advising.

- Compensation for advising should be distributed more equally over the campus as a whole, e.g., including faculty, AAO advisors, Learning Enhancement personnel, etc. This will be crucial to building advisor morale.
- Mandatory attendance at AAO advising workshops for advisors should be considered, though the enforcement of such attendance would obviously lie outside the AAO.
- Many La Verne faculty are burdened by great numbers of advisees, making it difficult for even the most dedicated professors to balance teaching, scholarship, and service demands with successful advising. To alleviate this burden, staff assistance and/or increased faculty responsibility for advising should be allocated on a department-by-department basis, in consultation with individual departments.

No list of recommendations can cover all circumstances, solve all problems, or represent the views of every single member of an institution. But the above steps could make advising less of a chore or burden for faculty and staff at the University of La Verne. Even more important, these steps could enhance student progress toward graduation by helping students develop the confidence, knowledge, and self-reliance they need in order to take more control over the achievement of their own educational goals.