

CONSULTANT'S REPORT

Prepared for Washington State University Vancouver

By

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I visited Washington State University (WSU) Vancouver on September 25 and 26, 2008 as a consultant charged with assessing the effectiveness of the academic advising structure and making recommendations regarding improvements. In addition, I was asked to make suggestions regarding improving communication across advising units and with students. I was also charged with making suggestions that applied more broadly to retention at WSU Vancouver. Prior to my visit I reviewed information on the WSU Vancouver website and the Survey of Academic Advising at WSU Vancouver released in Spring 2008. During my visit, I met with the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs; the Assistant Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs; the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs; members of the Advising Group; Student Resource Center (SRC) advisors; academic coordinators from SENCS, CLA, HD, Business, Nursing, Education; faculty advisors from a variety of departments; Academic Directors; and a group of students.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

As an external consultant, my views are based upon an objective, although of necessity fairly limited, investigation of programs at WSU Vancouver. Overall my impression of the university is extremely positive. The institution appears to have successfully navigated a significant transition from a two-year upper level campus to a four-year university. I was particularly impressed by the collaboration that apparently exists across campus units—with Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, for example. Indeed, there appear to be fewer silos than exist on many campuses and that is a definite advantage. The university is growing in enrollment, and the faculty, staff, and administrators I met with seem exceptionally committed to student success. Although the institution's retention rates are not out of line with national averages for commuter schools, I do believe that with a few adjustments, the university could definitely improve its retention. Despite the overall stability and success of WSU Vancouver; however, there were several issues and areas of concern that impact the advising program and the overall retention that I noted during my visit. These issues are listed below.

AREAS OF CONCERN

1. Complexity of the advising system

There is a highly individualized and decentralized advising structure currently in place. Although I am certain this system grew out of the various departments' attempts to meet the specific needs of their students and customize an advising

program for them, the end result is an advising structure that is extremely complex and very difficult to communicate effectively to students and others.

2. Role of the Advising Group

This group includes representatives from many of the campus units. It has been in existence since 1996; however, it has not been officially recognized by the institution. My sense is that the group currently feels undervalued and being officially recognized by the administration could be very helpful. Furthermore, the basic structure of an Advising Council exists in this group. On campuses with outstanding advising programs, one will usually find an Advising Council that operates as an advisory group made up of representatives from all units connected to academic advising.

3. Communication

Based upon feedback I received during my visit, I do not believe that communication at WSU Vancouver is as effective as it should be. The perception seems to be that the communication is more “top down” and the “bottom up” is not heard. Incidences were cited when information failed to be communicated, for example, when there is a change in personnel or leadership. In addition, the communication with students seems, at best, uneven. Some departments do an excellent job of communicating with their students while others do not do as well. The University’s website is not as user-friendly as it perhaps could be.

4. No advisor training/professional development program

According to all of the research and best practices in advising, there are three components that must be in place in order to build a successful advising program: advisor training, assessment of advising, and rewards/recognition for excellent advising. I could find no evidence that any advisor training currently exists at WSU Vancouver.

5. Lack of regular assessment

In addition, I found no evidence of any on-going formalized assessment of the advising program or regular evaluation of advisors.

6. Rewards and recognition structure

The third critical component for a successful advising program, rewards and recognition of excellence in advising, is apparently not in existence. Without These three essential components—training, assessment, and well established rewards and recognitions—the advising program can not reach its full potential.

7. “Hand-off” from SRC to departments

When a student transitions from being advised in the SRC to an academic department, the hand-off does not seem to be as clear and clean as it should be. The development of a transition form between the SRC and the College of Liberal Arts holds promise, however.

8. Technology issues

DARS, the degree audit system currently being used, is a huge problem for both faculty and staff as well as students. It is apparently often inaccurate in its information and is not at all user-friendly. In addition, very little in advising is being done electronically. The Pullman campus is currently using Advisor Track, so perhaps WSU Vancouver might investigate following their lead. Finally, it is definitely an issue that student files being transferred from one department to another are paper files. The process would be much smoother if the files were shared electronically.

9. View of the Student Resource Center (SRC) varies

The SRC offers a wide variety of services from tutoring and Supplemental Instruction to resources for students with disabilities as well as counseling and an advising program. The comments I heard during my visit ranged from “the SRC offers strong student support” to “it’s pretty mysterious; I don’t really know what they do.” I think it’s fair to say that the advising in the SRC is sometimes uneven—as is the case across campus. As one student noted, “the folks in the SRC care a lot and they want to help, but they don’t always have answers because they don’t have enough information.” Others in the group seemed to agree with that assessment while another student said, “they helped me a lot.”

10. Class Scheduling

There is no long range course schedule available at WSU Vancouver. Many classes are only offered once a year or even every two years. Students expressed a great deal of frustration about not knowing what will be offered and the impact that has on their academic planning.

11. Resource Issues

As is the case with most institutions around the country, resources have become a major issue. There is a need for space (some advisors do not have private areas in which to advise), but most importantly in order to keep pace with enrollment growth there is a need to have sufficient faculty and staff. For example, in advising the pre-health major has grown to 250 students. Because

of the lack of sufficient advisors, these students have been added to the advising load of the Science advisors thus creating an entirely unmanageable number of advisees.

12. Level of student involvement

The fact that the majority of WSU Vancouver students are not involved in campus life is very typical of most commuter institutions. Student Affairs does appear to be making some progress getting students involved in out-of-class activities, but it is indeed a challenge given your student population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although I have identified a number of issues based upon my visit to your campus, I am offering recommendations on areas that I think are the most pressing in order to improve your advising program and retention rate.

***MAKE ADJUSTMENTS IN THE ADVISING STRUCTURE**

My primary recommendation for dealing with issues relating to the complexity of the advising structure is to try a pilot of a new model of advising that would be based upon the current model but with some modification. The structure would still divide the advising duties between the SRC and the academic departments. The major roles of each must be clarified, however, and some adjustments made.

SRC

The focus of the SRC advisors would remain on the undeclared (or exploratory) freshmen and new students not admitted to a major. High achieving new students (those with exceptional SAT/ACT scores and high school GPA's who are clear about their major intentions) should go directly to the academic department. Because of the variety of services offered by the SRC, the division of responsibilities needs to be made clear. There definitely needs to be a director of the advising program within the SRC identified. This individual's job would include oversight of advising within the SRC as well as providing leadership for campus workshops and updates regarding advising. In essence, this individual should be highly trained and able to provide some advising leadership campus-wide. The director would report in Student Affairs because the SRC is a part of the Student Affairs Division; however, the overall advising program would be under the auspices of Academic Affairs. This split reporting model of advising with one part within Student Affairs (most often the first-year advising) and the rest within Academic Affairs is not unusual. In fact, this is an excellent way of insuring that advising is perceived as a holistic activity.

The transfer of advisees (other than those who are eligible to go immediately to their major department) from the SRC to the academic departments should allow for some

flexibility. A suggested range of credit hours would be 25-30.. Clearly the hand-off to the departments needs improvement. You may wish to consider these suggestions:

- Develop a Transition Form with a contact name and number for the department . The triplicate form would provide a copy for the student, the receiving department, and the SRC files.
- The receiving department should still be pro-active and charged with contacting the students; however, after a reasonable amount of time, students would be able to contact the department if they have not been contacted by the department.
- Clearly there needs to be a concerted effort to create a way for student files to be electronically transferred from the SRC to the departments. The use of paper files in 2008 is highly unusual. Cleaning up this “hand-off” process would go a long way toward making the academic advising program a smoother and more successful process.

Academic departmental advising

Most of the “pieces” are in place with a few additions and a bit of tweaking. What I recommend would involve a team approach to advising students within the academic areas.

- **Academic coordinators**—These individuals would be the first point of contact with students and would provide all of the “nuts and bolts” advising for students in the departments. I highly recommend that one of the first things the coordinator should do is introduce students to an “Advising Agreement” that outlines the responsibilities of the advisor and the responsibilities of the advisee. This agreement is a teaching tool to educate students about the role of academic advising. Ultimately the goal is for students to increasingly take charge of their educational journey. There are many models of such an agreement (See the NACADA Clearinghouse) but it is most helpful to develop an institution-specific list of responsibilities. Because these individuals would be dealing with potentially large numbers of students, it will be important to be sensitive to the caseloads. At the present time there is no consistency in job descriptions for academic coordinators and that needs to be established. In addition, it would be helpful to reduce non-advising roles for those coordinators who carry the largest advising loads. In the ideal world, the institution would be able to hire more professional advisors in the largest advising areas; however, I understand that at the present time that may not be possible.
- **Faculty advisors**—Faculty would fall into two basic groups. First, those who would like to be trained in academic advising could volunteer to be assigned a cadre of advisees in the major. There would need to be rewards/incentives established for these faculty members who self-select to become trained academic advisors. For faculty who do not choose to be assigned a list of advisees, there

should be an expectation for them to engage with students outside the classroom by meeting with small groups of majors in “advising groups.” These group meetings would allow time for the faculty to discuss relevant information with students pertaining to the major, career opportunities, and perhaps some introduction of their research interests. These faculty members should be seen more in the role of mentors rather than academic advisors because mentoring capitalizes on their strengths and interests. Interaction with faculty outside the classroom is critically important to retention and for that reason both faculty advising and mentoring are essential in retention plans.

- **Peer Advisors**—The third part of the “advising team” would be the addition of peer advisors in a supplemental role to assist the academic coordinators. Research indicates that peers can be very useful if they are selectively recruited, trained well, and evaluated regularly. In addition, peers are an important retention tool because peer-to-peer interaction has been shown to be important in connecting students to an institution. These peers should be selected from upper-level and graduate students who would undergo a comprehensive training program.

This structure would need to be clearly communicated throughout the university among all constituencies—administrators, faculty, staff, and students.

***OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZE THE ADVISING GROUP**

- Consider changing the group’s identity to an Advising Council that would maintain representatives from a broad spectrum of the university
- Charge this advisory group with specific responsibilities
- Establish the reporting line through Academic Affairs.

***ESTABLISH AN ADVISOR TRAINING PROGRAM FOR ALL ADVISORS**

- There are three important elements that make up a comprehensive advisor training program and all three must be included:
 1. Conceptual elements—including the mission and purpose of academic advising, (i.e., what is it; what are the goals, and how does it contribute to retention and student success)
 2. Relational elements—establishing rapport and connection with students (i.e., how to structure an advising meeting, how to recognize problems, listening skills)
 3. Informational elements—including all policies and procedures, rules and regulations, important dates—the “nuts and bolts” of advising. Far too often advisor training programs only include this third element and neglect the first two. It is also important to recognize that advisor training can not be a “one-time” event, but must be on-going. For example, SRC

staff could take the lead in conducting workshops and brown-bag sessions on particular advising topics. All individuals who regularly advise should be strongly encouraged to attend these events.

***ESTABLISH A CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT AROUND ADVISING**

Begin by identifying the core values of WSU Vancouver's advising program and developing a list of learning outcomes for advising. The newly created Advising Council could take the lead in developing these. For assistance, I would recommend that they consult the NACADA Clearinghouse on learning outcomes and the NACADA Core Values and the CAS Standards on Academic Advising. The assessment should measure the effectiveness of the program in meeting these goals and standards. Ultimately assessment of advisors and the advising program should be both formative and summative.

***IMPROVE COMMUNICATION**

Three suggestions relate to improving communications. First, the administration needs to be particularly mindful of communicating information from the top down. For example, when there are personnel changes, the campus needs to be informed. Secondly, I would recommend that steps be taken to improve the website and make it more user-friendly. Include information and updates about the advising program that are easily accessible. Finally, create an online Advisor Handbook and an Advising Newsletter to keep the issue of advising as an important retention tool in front of the campus as well as providing timely information, advising tips, and regular updates on campus information. All of these suggestions would help address the communication needs. As for the communication with students, I was impressed by the communication plans within the Business school for communicating with their students. I would suggest duplicating some of their practices (i.e., emailing students, a student handbook, and group sessions) across all academic areas.

***IMPROVE THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY**

- Investigate the possibility of purchasing an electronic advising system that would allow advisors to keep students' advising files online and to make advisor notes electronically. Because the Pullman campus has such a system, there may be a way to incorporate their system on the Vancouver campus.
- Reevaluate the use of DARS. Complaints about DARS came up in every group I met with at WSU Vancouver. A major problem is the inaccuracy of the system. This is perhaps exacerbated by the fact that there are two General Education Requirements in place—WSU and WSU Vancouver. Improving your

degree audit system would go a long way toward demonstrating a sincere desire to make improvements at WSU Vancouver.

- Find a way to build the prerequisite checks into the registration system to assure that students are not put in the wrong classes.

***DEVELOPMENT OF A LONG-RANGE CLASS SCHEDULE**

Begin with a two-semester schedule that would provide students the information they need to plan their schedules most effectively. The ultimate goal would be to provide schedules that would be multi-year. Clearly this is an area of great frustration for students and should be addressed as soon as possible.

***WORK TOWARD DEVELOPING A CAMPUS CULTURE THAT ENCOURAGES RETENTION**

Included under this recommendation are suggestions for establishing WSU Vancouver as a university where students want to come and want to remain until they graduate.

- Clearly identify WSU Vancouver's niche. I suggest that in establishing this niche the institution emphasize the opportunity students at your university have to be taught by faculty who are not only excellent instructors but who are also very invested in research in their fields. Establish the institution as a "learner-centered" university that honors both outstanding teaching and research. Many people I spoke with stressed the value of WSU Vancouver's size. Several indicated that as the university grows it will be important to maintain the sense of community that comes with being a smaller campus. One of the students said, "the thing I like about WSU Vancouver is that I don't feel like a number. I hope we always keep that feeling."
- Create and structure a number of ways for faculty to engage with students outside of the classroom. A few suggestions you may consider are:
 - Encourage faculty to become advisors to academic clubs and organizations in their majors. Every academic area should have an extracurricular group for students. Honor Societies should also be encouraged to promote and recognize academic achievement
 - Involve upper-level students with faculty on research projects. A great deal of mentoring can take place in this "win-win" activity.
 - Develop activities that are low-cost but high impact (i.e., Faculty Firesides, book or film discussions with faculty and students, and receptions that bring groups of students together with faculty)

--Develop campus “traditions” and ways to connect students to WSU Vancouver. Some suggestions include:

- Expand the involvement of the Ambassadors beyond orientation by encouraging them to communicate with groups of new students throughout the first semester. There are many ways to do this—emails, phone calls, and occasional group pizza meetings to catch up with the students’ adjustment to college life.
- Emphasize student leadership programs. I was impressed with the student leaders with whom I met and they should become one of the primary means of communicating with all students.
- Take maximum advantage of a cross-generational campus by bringing non-traditional and traditional age students together (they do indeed learn from one another), but also providing specific programs and services that address the unique needs of both groups.
- Hold regular student forums to receive feedback from students about their concerns and ways to address those concerns. These open forums can be around a particular topic or issue and others might simply be a way to find out what is on students’ minds.
- Encourage student groups to brainstorm about ways to establish traditions and a sense of pride in WSU Vancouver

CONCLUSION

I very much enjoyed visiting your lovely campus, and I appreciated the exceptionally warm hospitality I received. I was extremely impressed by the administrators, faculty, staff, and students with whom I met during my two-day visit to WSU Vancouver. All were extraordinarily welcoming, and I sensed a strong commitment to student success that was evident in my conversations with various groups. The university certainly deserves commendation for making a successful transition from a two-year upper-level institution to a four-year campus. WSU Vancouver has had a great deal of change in a short period of time; but the institution is showing strong enrollment and a commitment on the part of the leadership to continue to grow not only in size but quality. I trust you will find my observations and recommendations helpful as you strive to make an outstanding university even better. I applaud your interest in improving your advising program. Many of the “pieces” are in place and with some rearrangement into a more cohesive, integrated whole and with improved communication, I am confident you will improve your delivery of advising. Certainly I encourage you to take advantage of the wide range of resources NACADA has to offer as you seek to improve your advising system. I also commend you for wanting to improve your retention rates. Clearly they

are well within national averages, but the spirit of wanting to do better is very admirable. I appreciate the opportunity to work with you. If I can be of any further assistance to you, please do not hesitate to contact me.

