

**Advising Matters: An Analysis of Undergraduate Advising at UIC
Report on the Baseline Survey of Second Year Students**

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Advising Matters is a multi-year institutional study of how students use and value advising services and resources on campus. Previous studies of undergraduate student experiences suggest that advising resources are important, yet disparate and uneven in utility and value. Through this study we hope to identify both formal and informal networks of information for student advising; to capture student perceptions of the quality of information provided from various advising resources; to learn what sources of advising information are most influential when students make various advising decisions; and to gather thoughts about how to improve advising.

The *Advising Matters* project includes a two-pronged approach. A longitudinal component is following the freshman class of 2012 over several years. The baseline survey is a single snapshot view of the experiences of students over the course of their first year at UIC. The survey was administered during Fall 2012 to a sample of students who entered as freshmen in Fall 2011. This report on the baseline survey provides a context for the longitudinal study. It is especially relevant in light of the changing advising landscape on campus with the implementation of aspects of an 'Undergraduate Student Success Plan'; an ambitious blueprint for improving undergraduate degree completion at UIC.

Advising Defined

We focus on advising as distinct from academic support – that is, the myriad tutoring and learning centers available on campus. We limit the scope of the study to include the advising related to decisions about courses, major, and career; including course selection and scheduling. While we are limiting the scope of this study to this definition of advising, we acknowledge that students obtain information from multiple sources, sometimes cross referencing or triangulating information sources to come to decisions related to courses, major, and career. Consequently, the survey instrument was designed to capture all responses that fit within our definition of advising.

Survey Administration

The Instrument

This survey was designed as a snapshot of the Fall 2011 New Freshman Cohort reflecting on their advising experiences over the course of the first year. The electronic survey was administered in the fall of the students' second year (Fall 2012). The survey gathered students' reflections of sources of

information; quality, value (trust) and accessibility of information received. Student enrollment and academic performance data were collected from student records to supplement the survey data.

Specifically, the survey questions covered:

- from which resources the students sought advising, including:
 - College advising offices
 - Individual faculty and academic departments
 - Support services and resource offices (e.g., African American Academic Network (AAAN), Latin American Recruitment and Educational Support (LARES), Academic Center for Excellence (ACE) Campus Housing staff, ROTC, etc)
 - Informal networks – both on and off campus (e.g., family, friends, etc.)

- the types of information that the student sought from each resource, within the following list:
 - Guidance on academic requirements
 - Guidance on selection of major
 - Course selection
 - Information about academic policies (e.g., course withdrawal, course repeat, etc.)
 - Career planning

- Providing a value to the information received from each resource, specifically asking (each with a 5 point Likert scale response):
 - How knowledgeable was the advising from the resource?
 - How helpful was the information provided the resource?
 - How approachable was the resource?
 - To what extent did the resource care about the student’s academic success?
 - A rating of the overall quality of advice from the resource.

- Students were also asked about use of non-person resources such as *my.UIC* - the online student portal and the UIC Catalogue tools.

- Students were asked two open-end response questions to end the survey. The questions were:
*Overall, what source of advising has been most influential to your academic decisions at UIC? ; and
Please give us any feedback that you have about your advising experiences at UIC.*

The Sample

The sample was drawn from the population of UIC undergraduates who entered as new freshmen in the Fall 2011 term and were enrolled in the Fall 2012 (returned for their second year). Under these criteria, 2420 students were eligible. A total of 630 randomly selected students were invited to participate in the survey. The sample represented all freshman-admitting undergraduate colleges (Applied Health Sciences, Architecture & the Arts, Business Administration, Education, Engineering, and Liberal Arts & Sciences). The racial/ethnic distribution of the sample closely reflected the eligible student population racial/ethnic distribution. A total of 184 students completed the survey. The response rate overall was 29%. A detailed table of the eligible students, sample and respondents is found in table 1.

TABLE 1: Eligible Population, Sample and Respondents							
	<u>Population</u> ¹		<u>Sample</u>		<u>Respondents</u>		<i>Response Rate</i> ²
	Count	<i>Distribution</i>	Count	<i>Distribution</i>	Count	<i>Distribution</i>	
A & A	149	6.2%	31	4.9%	6	3.3%	19.4%
AHS	82	3.4%	17	2.7%	6	3.3%	35.3%
CBA	183	7.6%	44	7.0%	16	8.7%	36.4%
Education	42	1.7%	10	1.6%	2	1.1%	20.0%
Engineering	257	10.6%	78	12.4%	23	12.5%	29.5%
LAS	1707	70.5%	450	71.4%	131	71.2%	29.1%
	<u>2420</u>		<u>630</u>		<u>184</u>		<u>29.2%</u>
Honors ³	325	13%	93	14.8%	43	23.4%	46.2%
Afr Amer	181	7.5%	60	9.5%	17	9.2%	28.3%
Hispanic	611	25.2%	150	23.8%	34	18.5%	22.7%
Asian	658	27.2%	169	26.8%	58	31.5%	34.3%
Caucasian	825	34.1%	216	34.3%	63	34.2%	29.2%
Other	145	6.0%	35	5.6%	12	6.5%	34.3%
	<u>2420</u>		<u>630</u>		<u>184</u>		<u>29.2%</u>
NOTES:							
¹ The eligible population is all students who entered as freshmen in Fall 2011 and returned for year 2, registered in Fall 2012.							
² The response rate is the number of respondents divided by the number in the sample.							
³ Honors College students are distributed across the undergraduate colleges.							

Survey Results

The results from the survey will be reported in three parts. The first part will report on each group of advising resources separately (e.g., College Advising Offices; Support services and resource offices; etc.). The second part we briefly discuss how students triangulate information across resources, (e.g., use of college advising, friends and support services). The third section addresses the students’ responses to the open-ended questions.

College Advising Offices

Almost all of the students (98%) used at least one college office over the prior 12 months (since first enrolling at UIC). Some specifics include:

- ✓ 76% of the students used only one college office, while the remaining 23% used multiple college offices in seeking advising,
- ✓ 20% used 2 different college offices, 3% used 3 or 4 different offices
- ✓ The colleges most frequently associated with a multiple office combinations are LAS and Honors College.

- ✓ 17 students (9%) switched majors and colleges from when they first enrolled (fall 2011) to year two (fall 2012) when the survey was administered, (thus, explaining the multiple office use for some students).

The purpose for seeking advice from a college advising office covered the range of topics (academic requirements, selection of major, course selection, academic policies, career planning). Students were able to indicate all the topics that applied. Across colleges:

- ✓ 76% indicated the type of advice sought was *guidance on academic requirements*;
- ✓ 77% indicated the topic was *course selection*;
- ✓ 39% sought information on *academic policies*.
- ✓ 36% of the students indicated discussing *guidance on selection of major*; and
- ✓ 26% of the students spoke with a college advising office about *career planning*.

The most common combination of reasons for seeking advice from a college advising office was related to *guidance on academic requirements and course selection*. This is expected since mandatory freshman advising requires that students consult with a college advisor prior to course registration for the upcoming term.

Faculty and Academic Departments

When asked if they sought advice from their major department, a total of 54 students named 19 different departments within the Colleges of Applied Health Sciences (1), Business Administration (2), Architecture and the Arts (1), Engineering (4) and Liberal Arts and Sciences (11).

The survey also asked students if they sought academic advising from an individual faculty member, independent of the formal college advising programs. The survey did not ask for names of departmental affiliation of the faculty member. A total of 112 students (61% of the respondents) indicated that they discussed matters of academic advising with a faculty member. When students engage with faculty, the topic(s) most frequently covers: course selection, and academic requirements, followed by selection of a major and career planning, and finally, academic policy questions.

Support Services and Resource Offices

Support services and resource offices include a range of academic and student support units on campus. In some instances, (e.g., AAAN, LARES – see Table 2), the offices provide academic support with ties to college advising networks. In other instances, (e.g., Career Services, Disability Resource Center), services are related to specific types of academic support. In general, the units may provide advice on general academic topics. A total of 17 offices that provide student support services were listed in addition to the option to report interactions with a UIC staff member, not affiliated with any of the colleges or offices named or a Campus Housing resident advisor (RA). The complete list of resources is found in Table 2.

ACE – Academic Center for Excellence	LARES – Latin American Recruitment and Educational Services
AAAN – African American Academic Network	LCC – Latino Cultural Center
AACC - African American Cultural Center	NASP - Native American Support Program
AARCC - Asian American Resource and Cultural Center	Project Chance
Athletics	ROTC
Career Services	UHP - Urban Health Program
Disability Resource Center	Trio Program
Gender & Sexuality Center	Women's Leadership and Resource Center
GPPA - Guaranteed Professional Program Admissions	Resident Advisor/Housing Staff
	Other UIC Staff

Highlights from the survey detail which resources were used by students:

- ✓ 106 students (58%) had used at least one of the resources during their first year, with 37 students using a combination of the resources;
- ✓ 78 students (42%) did not use any of the listed resources;
- ✓ 'Other UIC Staff' – staff not affiliated with any of the offices listed received the most mentions with 36;
- ✓ Support service_resources receiving the most mentions included: Career Services (21), LARES (16), Housing Staff (16), and the GPPA Office (12);

In some instances the types of advising sought from a resource is tied to its mission. For example, students primarily used the Career Services Office for guidance on career. On the other hand, guidance from AAAN, GPPA, LARES, RA/Campus Housing staff provided guidance across the spectrum of academic requirements, major choice, course selection, academic policy and career choices.

Informal Networks

Informal networks include family, on-campus friends, off-campus friends, teachers or other adults from high school and other non-UIC individuals who have advised the student. A total of 172 students (93% of the respondents) used one of the categories of informal networks and most (135 students) used multiple informal networks. The most commonly acknowledged informal network resource is on-campus friends; followed by family members, off-campus friends, high school teacher, and other non-UIC person.

On-line UIC resources

Ninety-three percent of the students used on-line resources – the UIC website, *my.UIC* student portal, and the catalogue to guide them in all areas of academic advising – information on academic requirements, guidance on major and career choices, courses selection and academic policy.

Combined Advising Resources

It is interesting to note the triangulation or combinations of resources with which the students engaged. Over 92% of the students used on-line resources in conjunction with college advising. In addition, of the students who used college advising and on-line resources:

- ✓ 59% also used at least one of the support services/resource offices,
- ✓ 95% also sought information (family/friends) network, and
- ✓ 58% received advice from at least one faculty member

Students' Responses to Open-Ended Questions

At the end of the survey, students were asked two open-ended questions:

- *Overall, what source of advising has been **most influential** to your academic decisions at UIC?; and*
- *Please use the space below to **give us any feedback** that you have about your advising experiences at UIC.*

The 155 responses regarding the most influential advising resource were distributed as follows:

- ✓ 51% of the students found college or departmental advisors to be most influential
- ✓ 20% turned to friends or family as most influential
- ✓ 9% depended most on student support services
- ✓ 9% self-advised, using electronic advising websites
- ✓ 6% turned to faculty as most influential
- ✓ The remaining 5% based their decisions on multiple inputs, or found advice from high school counselors, career counselors or on campus housing staff most influential

While almost all students (98%) reported that they saw a college or departmental advisor at some point in their first year, only about half (51%) regarded the formal academic advisor as most influential when they actually made an academic decision. This means that the other half were most influenced by individuals who may not be trained to address academic advising needs of students. In fact, the next largest groups that were most influential as advisors to students were friends and family members (20%).

While 61% of the respondents indicated that they discussed matters of academic advising with a faculty member, only about 6% considered faculty advice most influential in making academic decisions. For about 9% of the respondents the most influential source of academic advice was from an academic support unit. Another 5% found advice from former high school counselors, career counselors, their resident advisors most influential.

A full 9% self-advised, using non-person electronic resources. That is, students reported that use of *my.UIC* and the online undergraduate catalogue were the most influential tools when making academic decisions.

A brief review of student suggestions may begin to reveal some of the reasons behind their choices regarding academic advice. Ninety-one students (about 50%) provided feedback about their advising experiences that fell into three response categories: students who were positive or very positive about the advising they received (57%); students who reported both positive and negative experiences (17%); and students who had negative or very negative experiences (26%). Students in all three categories related suggestions for the improvement of advising.

Students in the positive or very positive category offered suggestions in the form of appreciation for the helpfulness, caring or personal attention that they received. One very positive student expressed that *“the counselors are very friendly, approachable, understanding, knowledgeable, and helpful!”* Other students expressed that their advising experience was good, but *“rushed.”* In some cases, students indicated that mandatory advising proved to be of more value than they thought it would be. Other suggestions of the students in this positive category were made on behalf of their peers, whom they felt did not have experiences as positive as their own.

Students who had both positive and negative responses were often comparing their advising experiences in two different departments or colleges. One representative response was:

“I receive better advising from departments such as the Honors College and Math Department versus general LAS advising because other departments are more knowledgeable about the things I am interested in and invested in helping me.”

It’s important to note that advising in a unit criticized by one student as a bad example, was often praised by another student as a good example of effective advising. Consequently, it may be equally important, if not more important, to focus on the students’ descriptions of good or bad advising and their suggestions rather than the unit being criticized.

Finally, students who were negative or very negative expressed a lack of caring, and attentiveness to students’ individual advising needs. A representative student expressed that:

“I believe the academic counselors should relate more to our majors. Both of my academic advisors had Ph.D.’s in English and had no clue what path I should take for pre-med. They were very rushed and rude.”

It is interesting to note that within the 91 student responses, the words “help,” “helped” or “helpful” occurred 71 times. The words “care” or “caring” or “interested” occurred 17 times. This gives us a good idea about the fundamental advising expectations of students.

Content analysis across all 91 student responses regarding advising feedback revealed that suggestions clustered into six categories:

- ✓ **The University should continue the mandatory advising policy.** Some students reported that advising proved to be more valuable than they had anticipated. Without the mandatory advising policy they may have “missed out on something useful.”
- ✓ **Advisors should ensure adequate time for advising sessions.** A number of students related that they felt rushed by their advisors during scheduled advising sessions, and that that they needed more time to get adequate advising information.
- ✓ **Advisors should be knowledgeable about academic majors, programs and policies.** Students want advisors to be knowledgeable about their interests, and their programs, and about programs and majors in other colleges. Students expressed frustration that not all advisors are equally qualified and helpful. As one student stated, “I would feel more confident knowing I could see anyone available and I would still get the same amount of help.”
- ✓ **Advisors should provide more detailed advising recommendations that help students successfully navigate academic requirements and policies.** Ideally, students want advisors to know their programs well enough to anticipate their advising needs. They want advisors to share strategies for scheduling and course selection that ensure success and prevent them from taking courses they don’t need. They want advisors to provide guidance about the relationship between academic decisions and the consequences for financial aid.
- ✓ **Improve the advising experience for students transferring between colleges.** Students may have a good advising experience with both the sending and the receiving college, but the process during the transfer leaves the student without adequate assistance.
- ✓ **Advisors should demonstrate caring.** Students want their advisors to demonstrate that they care about them by giving them undivided attention during advising sessions, and by being knowledgeable of their individual program goals. Ideally, they would like for advisors to be approachable and understanding, and to express that they care about the success of each student.

Final observations

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, early institutional studies have suggested that advising resources are disparate and uneven in quality. That sentiment is evident when asked about the perceived quality of advising across the advising resources. Students rated their advising experiences on five characteristics of quality advising -- knowledgeable, helpful, approachable, concerned about student success and overall quality of advice. Of all the individual advising resources across all the types of advising resources – college advising offices, support services units, faculty or informal networks -- the **highest** ratings were given to one of the eight college advising offices. On the other end, the **lowest** quality ratings were given to a different college advising office. This contrast reinforces the unevenness of college advising resources.

As a group, students receive academic advising from college offices more often than any other type of resource. After college advising, students seek guidance from their friends and family at a higher rate than the other campus resources listed on the survey. However, the overall quality rating for informal networks (family/friends) is average (compared to other types of advising). When averaging the quality ratings for each type of advising (college, support services, faculty and informal networks), support services were rated higher than college advising offices and informal networks. A key quantified distinction was that students perceived that individuals in the support services offices higher on the 'care about my success at UIC' dimension.

The open-ended questions provided more depth to the students' responses. The students' most influential source in making academic decisions covered the full range of advising resources, but most often were college and departmental advisors, followed by family and friends. As detailed earlier, student general feedback and suggestions regarding advising experiences fell into six broad categories.

Closing Remarks

This is a report of the baseline study for a multi-year longitudinal study of student advising at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In another facet of the study, information drawn from focus group interviews will allow us to further develop our understanding of student advising experiences. In addition, it will be interesting to compare these findings with data gathered in Fall 2013 with a second cohort of students. Each year of the study, we will continue to update our findings, and will disseminate our reports through national and regional conferences, the Illinois Educations Research Council symposium, and the UIC Office of Degree Progress website.