The Need for a Task Force on Undergraduate Advising

It has been many years since Duke has looked systematically at its undergraduate advising system and clearly there is a need to do so. For many years, data from Duke’s COFHE senior survey have indicated that advising (both pre-major and in the major) is among the least satisfactory aspects of students’ college experience. Although the picture has become somewhat more positive over the past 10 years, COFHE senior survey data from the Class of 2013 show that 39.7% of Duke University graduating seniors were dissatisfied with the advising they received prior to declaring a major, and 31.2% were dissatisfied with the advising they received after declaring a major.

In December, 2012, Dean Laurie Patton and Dean Lee Baker formed a task force charged with making a “holistic examination of and recommendations for both pre-major and major advising,” toward the goals of developing “more coherence in the advising process,” and “making the college experience a transformative one.” The task force they formed consists of 19 members (faculty members, administrators, and an undergraduate student) with representation from Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Pratt School of Engineering, Nicholas School of the Environment, and Sanford School of Public Policy (see Appendix for a complete list of task force membership). The task force met 15 times from February, 2013 to March, 2014, including over the summer when bi-monthly meetings were held. In addition, two working groups were formed, one focused on assessment and research and one focused on vision/goals, organizational structure and logistics (there were a total of eight working group meetings).

Soon after the Advising Task Force’s formation, the task force had an opportunity to work with the Office of Institutional Research to add several “local” items to the COFHE senior survey administered to students toward the end of the spring semester of their senior year. Students were asked to indicate the number of formal or informal advisors who they regularly sought out for advice about academics, research, career plans, and/or general life plans. From this number, students were asked to indicate how many formal or informal advisors they considered to be mentors; how many they considered to have had a significant impact on the
development of their academic career, their professional career, and/or their personal life or plans; and how many they thought they would remain in contact with over the next 5–10 years. In answering these questions students were asked to think not just about formal pre-major advisors and/or advisors in the major, but also about professors in courses, professors who supervise their research or other projects, advisors in the athletic program, career counselors, and graduate students. Our task force calculated how many students named no one in response to each question—the percentage ranged from 13.2% to 31.5% depending on the question. For example, 25.5% of graduating seniors indicated that they had no formal or informal advisor at Duke who had a significant impact on their development. Follow-up analyses showed that students who had no significant connection to a formal or informal advisor also reported lower levels of excitement and passion about their academic work, less involvement in mentored research, less satisfaction with advising prior to declaring a major and in the major, less satisfaction with their undergraduate education overall, and somewhat lower feelings of belonging to the university (these differences between “zero connections” students and students with one or more connections were all statistically significant). These data, in combination with advising satisfaction data, are concerning.

*Recommendations from the Task Force on Undergraduate Advising*

This report is designed to communicate 20 recommendations that the task force is putting forward to improve advising at Duke. The recommendations can be grouped under seven broad themes, with many recommendations falling under more than one theme. These seven themes are (1) advising should be designed to facilitate transformational educational experiences for all undergraduates; (2) transformational advising is most likely to occur in the context of high-quality advisor–advisee relationships; (3) in order for advising to be improved, it needs to be construed as an integral part of the academic life of the university and as an institutional priority; (4) advisors need to be given the tools, resources, and flexibility they need to fully engage in their advising roles; (5) a critical component in any advising model is the recognition of the role of the student; (6) advising across the four years of college should be better coordinated and integrated; and (7) decisions about advising should be informed by data through an ongoing process of “continuous improvement.” The 20 recommendations are presented below with a
brief rationale for each. A summary table presenting these recommendations organized according to the seven broader themes is presented in Table 1.

1. Feedback/accountability: All academic advisors should receive data-based feedback about how they are doing in their role as an academic advisor.

2. Training: Everyone who is involved in academic advising (faculty, staff, professional advisors, etc.) should receive sufficient training.

3. Visibility, valuing, and recognition of faculty academic advising: The role of faculty as academic advisors needs to be more visible, more valued, and better recognized. This could be accomplished by: (a) including a category on the faculty annual report for advising activities to be reported, (b) including expectations for advising in offer letters to new faculty and in new faculty orientation activities, and (c) communications from Deans to department chairs, DUSs, and faculty that advising is important and is valued at this institution.

4. Clarification and simplification of advising roles and functions: There needs to be clear communication to advisors and to students about the roles that various advisors fulfill. As soon as students arrive on campus, they should be able to easily identify their primary advisor and to understand who they should go to for what types of questions/guidance. Additionally, advisors should have a clear understanding of their own roles and responsibilities and how these are distinct from and overlap with the roles and responsibilities of other professionals in students’ “network of advisors.” Our focus should be on making this network of advising roles as simple and straightforward as possible.

5. Communication between advisors in the first two years and advisors in the major: When students are assigned an advisor in the major, there should be mechanisms to promote communication between the newly-assigned advisor in the major and the student’s advisor in the first two years. This could provide more continuity in the student’s
experience with advising and help the advisor in the major develop a better understanding of the student’s background and to do a better job advising the student.

6. **Opportunity for four-year advising relationships:** The advising system should encourage and enable students to continue their relationship with their initial academic advisor across four years.

   [NOTE: RECOMMENDATION 19 PROVIDES A PARTICULAR INSTANTIATION OF RECOMMENDATION 6.]

7. **Opportunities for students to engage with faculty in the major before declaration of major:** Before students declare a major they should have the opportunity to communicate with faculty members who are knowledgeable about the majors they are considering, both in terms of curricular requirements and in terms of *intellectual content*. There should be well-defined opportunities that encourage students to talk early on with faculty members in majors of potential interest to help clarify which majors they are most interested in pursuing. These opportunities can be organized differently by each department, but the timing and promotion of these opportunities should be coordinated across the university to ensure broad awareness on the part of students.

8. **Evidence-based practice:** Decisions about making changes to improve advising practices and systems should be based on the systematic and coordinated collection, dissemination, and review of metrics that: (a) provide feedback to advisors, (b) create a basis for accountability at the departmental or program level (examples of programs are pre-major advising, global advising, pre-professional advising, and certificate programs), (c) provide data about how the advising system as a whole is functioning, and (d) provide data to evaluate the efficacy of specific components of the advising system (e.g., a new way to handle orientation of students, training of advisors, a newly-created handbook).

9. **A sequel to the Blue Book to help students maximize the benefits of their college education:** Incoming first-year students would benefit from a sequel to the existing *Blue
Book that would provide information about how to navigate the curriculum and the university more broadly to get the most out of their college education. This second handbook would provide information about the goals of a liberal arts education, the university’s expectations for students with regard to their intellectual development, the organizational structure of the university, the variety of resources that exist on campus, and other pertinent information and perspectives about how to get involved in the intellectual life of the university. The goal of this handbook is to provide students with information about how to use the rich array of resources that the university provides to develop a course of study with breadth, depth, and coherence while avoiding the pitfalls of becoming overcommitted and overwhelmed.

10. Increase faculty involvement in advising: Advising is part of the academic role of the faculty, and faculty members have valuable perspectives and expertise that are currently under-utilized in advising. Many of the recommendations made by the task force are designed to facilitate greater participation of faculty members in advising and greater recognition of advising as an integral component of the faculty role. As part of this broader effort and as a way to facilitate new traditions related to advising, we recommend that new faculty members be asked to take on a small cohort of advisees at the pre-major/pre-declaration/four-year level as well as in the major rather than being “protected” from advising responsibilities. With appropriate training and mentoring this will help new faculty members to become familiarized with the organization and policies of the university and to develop a deeper connection to the university and to its students. In addition, we recommend that existing faculty members be asked to take on a small cohort of advisees at the pre-major/pre-declaration/four-year level in addition to advising students in the major. Advising should be viewed as neither “voluntary” nor “required,” but rather construed as part of the portfolio of activities in which all faculty members are expected to participate.

In making this proposal we are not implying that there should be a diminishing involvement of academic professionals in advising, but rather that this increased faculty
involvement in advising would be in addition to the substantial involvement of academic professionals that we hope continues.

11. Rather than focusing simply on whether requirements are being met and making students eligible to register for courses, advisors should be encouraged and trained to construe their role broadly and engage in a variety of diverse advising functions and processes: Potential advising roles are diverse, and although it is unlikely that an advisor will engage in all of these roles with a particular student, the range of advising roles includes the following: (a) Educating advisees about the resources that are available to help them meet their academic and career goals (e.g., Office of Undergraduate Research Support, Career Center, Preprofessional Advising, Academic Resource Center, Writing Studio); (b) Alerting students to campus resources such as CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services) or DukeReach if a student is having personal problems or needs extra support; (c) Educating students about the range of academic year and summer opportunities at Duke (e.g., Study Abroad, DukeEngage, DukeImmerse, Bass Connections); (d) Informing students about and/or facilitating contact with others on campus who have similar or complementary interests; (e) Encouraging students to be the architects of their own education by thinking about the goals they have for their education and thinking about what they need to do to achieve those goals; (f) Helping students to develop the tools they need to be able to find answers to their questions about requirements, resources, opportunities in the major, campus programs, and courses; (g) Being receptive to student disclosures about a range of problems and/or concerns; (h) Having conversations with students to help them identify where their interests and passions lie; (i) Serving as a “thought partner,” helping students think through decisions like which courses to take or which summer opportunities to pursue; (j) Providing information about career options and possibilities within a student’s field of study; (k) Consulting with students about graduate/professional school programs; and (l) Encouraging students to reflect on and clarify their goals, values, or other aspects of their identity.

12. Advisors should have relatively small advising caseloads to increase the likelihood that faculty members will participate in advising and to increase the probability that
transformational advising will occur: If the goal is for advisors and advisees to develop relationships that have the potential to foster transformational educational experiences, advising caseloads will need to be relatively small to allow advisors the time and space to really get to know advisees and develop meaningful relationships with them. Caseloads will vary by advisor, but may be as low as four students in a year for a pre-major/pre-declaration advising role or two students in a year for a four-year advising role.

13. Create a “Director of Advisor Training” position: Given the considerable expansion of advisor training that will occur when these recommendations are implemented, a full-time “Director of Advisor Training” will be needed. This person would plan, design, and implement training for pre-major/four-year advisors, advisors in the major, and professional advisors.

14. Create a group of “Faculty Advising Fellows” led by a “Faculty Director of Advising” who together will partner with the Director of Academic Advising to recruit more faculty members to advising roles and evaluate where things are going well with advising and where there is room for improvement: Faculty leadership will be essential in recruiting faculty members to the role of four-year academic advisor. One way to accomplish this is to create a group of Faculty Advising Fellows whose primary role is to recruit and retain faculty members into four-year advising roles. The Director as well as the Faculty Fellows should be highly respected and influential faculty members who lead by example in their academic advising. This group would have representation from Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Pratt School of Engineering, Sanford School of Public Policy, and Nicholas School of the Environment. Within Arts and Sciences, it will be important to have representation from the three divisions: humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. This group would work in close partnership with the Director of Academic Advising not only to recruit advisors but also to review data and make changes to the advising system in a process of “continuous improvement.”

15. Each incoming first-year student should receive advising in the summer before they first register for classes: First-year advising should begin in the summer so that students will
have the benefit of guidance from their advisor before they make their initial course selections. Since many/most students and advisors will not be on campus over the summer months, these advising meetings could occur via a one-on-one video meeting (e.g., Skype, Facetime, Google Chat), phone, or even in person if the student will be in the Durham area for any reason. A more leisurely phone call or one-on-one video meeting over the summer would do a lot to help a student make more informed course selections, to feel calmer, and to set the stage for a relationship that should continue to grow once the student comes to campus.

16. **Allow flexibility in how advising is carried out:** Faculty members and academic professionals should be given the freedom to function as creative professionals who can carry out their advising responsibilities in the ways that they think will best meet the needs of students and that they find most enjoyable and reinforcing. Communicating flexibility (while maintaining accountability) will free people up to advise in a way that works for them.

17. **Maintain and expand the role of professional advisors by having Directors of Academic Engagement play a role in consulting with pre-major/four-year advisors and advisors in the major:** The position of Directors of Academic Engagement (DAEs)/Global Advisors in the current advising system was created to provide students with information about the complex landscape of opportunities that Duke offers and to help students make connections between their curricular and co-curricular experiences. This type of position is valuable and should be retained as the task force’s recommendations are implemented. In addition, we propose that the DAE role be expanded to include an important consultative function vis-a-vis faculty members and academic professionals who are pre-major/pre-declaration/four-year advisors and/or advisors in the major. DAEs have unique expertise in the intricacies of curricular and co-curricular opportunities at Duke, and could bring their expertise to bear as liaisons to advisors. An important benefit would be increased integration and “cross-talk” between faculty and academic professional advisors on the one hand and DAEs/professional advisors on the other.
18. Articulate indicators that will help us learn whether changes in the advising system are succeeding. Possible indicators include: (1) student satisfaction with advising, (2) the percentage of students who have no significant relationship with an adult on campus, (3) student retention rates, (4) students’ level of academic engagement (i.e., enthusiasm for the work they are doing), (5) students’ feelings of belonging at Duke, (6) advisor satisfaction, (7) advisor retention, and (8) “melt” (i.e., the loss of students who have committed to attend Duke by the notification deadline to other schools where they may have been waitlisted or for other reasons): If properly implemented, we expect that changes to the advising system recommended by the Advising Task Force would result in changes to a number of specific indicators. First, we would expect to see a decrease in the percentage of students who indicate that their advising experiences in the major and prior to the declaration of a major were unsatisfactory. Based on student satisfaction with other aspects of the academic enterprise (e.g., instruction), a reasonable target would be less than 10% for both indicators. That number is currently over 30%. Second, as changes to advising are implemented we would expect to see a decrease in the percentage of students who leave Duke saying that they have no significant relationship with an “adult” (perhaps construed as a faculty member or academic professional) on campus. Third, student retention should be tracked to see if changes to advising might decrease the loss of students through transfer to other universities, “failing out,” or withdrawing from the university for other reasons. Fourth, students’ excitement and passion about their academic work (i.e., academic engagement) should be assessed. Fifth, feelings of belonging should be assessed since belonging correlates with a variety of important factors including how much students would recommend Duke to a high school senior similar to themselves and their overall satisfaction with their undergraduate education. Sixth, advisor satisfaction should be tracked to see if changes in the advising system result in higher levels of advisor satisfaction. Seventh, advisor retention should be tracked to see if more advisors are retained in the role after changes to the advising system are implemented (e.g., changes such as small caseloads, increased flexibility and more training might make the advising role more sustainable in advisors’ busy lives). Eighth, if the recommendation for summer advising were implemented we would expect to see a decrease in “melt” over the summer—the loss of students who have committed to
attend Duke by the notification deadline to other schools where they may have been waitlisted or for other reasons. The number of students Duke loses to “melt” is currently between 60 and 120 students per year.

19. The role of “Pre-Major Advisor” in the current advising system should be replaced with a “Four-Year Academic Advisor” role: This proposal for four-year advising would involve each student being matched with a faculty member or an academic professional who would serve as an advisor for the student’s full four years at Duke, with potentially lighter involvement on the part of the advisor after the student has declared a major (depending on the needs and preferences of the student). It is important to note that students should be allowed to switch advisors if the relationship is not “working” for them for any reason. Such a “generalist” advisor has an important role to play in guiding students’ exploration of potential majors before they declare a major, and in helping them to develop a meaningful, cohesive program of study after a major has been declared.

[THIS RECOMMENDATION PROVIDES A PARTICULAR WAY TO INSTANTIATE RECOMMENDATION 6.]

20. Convene a standing advisory committee on advising: As the work of the advising task force wraps up and the work of implementing the task force’s recommendations passes to administrators, it will be important to have a standing advisory committee on advising that will provide feedback and advice regarding implementation. There should be some intentional “turnover” in the membership of this committee such that there is some degree of continuity over time, as well as an integration of fresh perspectives. This advisory committee should have broad membership from across the university and include representation from all advising “stakeholders.”

In advancing these 20 recommendations we realize that other components of the advising system at Duke—including pre-professional advising, career advising, and the advising of student athletes—also need attention since they too play an important role. Accordingly, the last of our 20 recommendations is to create a standing advisory committee on advising that
will play a major role in consulting with campus administrators as they work on the implementation of these recommendations and as they focus on other important components of the advising system at Duke.

Application of Recommendations to Pre-Major/Pre-Declaration/Four-Year Advising and Advising in the Major

Table 2 presents a checklist indicating the applicability of each recommendation to pre-major/pre-declaration/four-year advising and to advising in the major. As noted in Table 2, the majority of recommendations are aimed at improving advising not only in students’ first years at Duke but also as they progress through their later years at Duke and transition into their majors. We believe if these recommendations are implemented improvement will be evident in the indicators described in Recommendation 18. Duke could play a leadership role in not only carrying out innovative advising practices but by carefully evaluating the effects of changes in the advising system. None of the task force members are content with advising satisfaction scores in the mediocre range or with a situation on campus where so many students seem not to be well-connected with either a formal or informal advisor. Also, it is worth mentioning again the range of people students were asked to think about in answering the questions they were asked about formal and informal advisors. The percentage of “zero connections” students is high in light of the fact that they could have indicated not just formal advisors, but also faculty members in courses, graduate students, coaches, career counselors, and people who supervised their research or other special projects. These data invite the attention of everyone who cares about undergraduate students. Although changing the picture involves more than changes to advising, we believe that making recommended changes to advising will have a significant impact on the problem.
Table 1
Recommendations Organized by Theme

Theme I. Consistent with the Dean’s charge to our task force, advising should be designed to facilitate transformational educational experiences for all undergraduate students. Transformational advising is most likely to occur in the context of relationships based on trust and mutual understanding, and the recommendations organized under this theme are designed to facilitate the development of those types of relationships between advisors and advisees.

a. Everyone who is involved in academic advising (faculty, staff, professional advisors, etc.) should receive sufficient training (Recommendation 2)
b. Increase faculty involvement in advising (Recommendation 10)
c. Rather than focusing simply on whether requirements are being met and making students eligible to register for courses, advisors should be encouraged and trained to construe their role broadly and engage in a variety of diverse advising functions and processes (Recommendation 11)
d. Advisors should have relatively small advising caseloads to increase the likelihood that faculty members will participate in advising and to increase the probability that transformational advising will occur (Recommendation 12)
e. Each incoming first-year student should receive advising in the summer before they first register for classes (Recommendation 15)

Theme II. The quality of the advisor–advisee relationship is a key factor in facilitating transformational advising. We believe that high-quality advising with the possibility of transformation is most likely to occur in the context of relationships based on trust and mutual respect, and a thorough knowledge of the student by the advisor. Although the development of these types of relationships cannot be forced, we think they are most likely to occur in the context of advising relationships that are construed as “long-term” (i.e., likely to last across the student’s four years at Duke). The recommendations under this theme are designed to facilitate the development of such long-term relationships.

a. Opportunity for four-year advising relationships (Recommendation 6)
b. The role of “Pre-Major Advisor” in the current advising system should be replaced with a “Four-Year Academic Advisor” role (Recommendation 19)

Theme III. In order for advising to be improved, it needs to be construed as an integral part of the academic life of the university and as an institutional priority. The recommendations below are designed to facilitate institutional cultural change in this direction.

a. Visibility, valuing, and recognition of faculty academic advising (Recommendation 3)
b. Increase faculty involvement in advising (Recommendation 10)
c. Create a group of “Faculty Advising Fellows” led by a “Faculty Director of Advising” who together will partner with the Director of Academic Advising to recruit more faculty members to advising roles and to review data and evaluate where things are going well with advising and where there is room for improvement (Recommendation 14)
d. Convene a standing advisory committee on advising (Recommendation 20)

Theme IV. Advisors need to be given the tools, resources, and flexibility they need to fully engage in their advising roles.

a. All academic advisors should receive data-based feedback about how they are doing in their role as an academic advisor (Recommendation 1)
b. Everyone who is involved in academic advising (faculty, staff, professional advisors, etc.) should receive sufficient training (Recommendation 2)
c. Visibility, valuing, and recognition of faculty academic advising (Recommendation 3)
d. Advisors should have relatively small advising caseloads to allow for increased participation in advising (Recommendation 12)
e. Create a “Director of Advisor Training” position (Recommendation 13)
f. Allow flexibility in how advising is carried out (Recommendation 16)
g. Maintain and expand the role of professional advisors by having Directors of Academic Engagement play a role in consulting with pre-major/four-year advisors and advisors in the major (Recommendation 17)
Theme V. A critical component of any advising model is the recognition of the role of the student. The recommendations below are aimed at empowering students and having them play a more active role in the construction of their own liberal arts educations.

a. Clarification and simplification of advising roles and functions (Recommendation 4)

b. A sequel to the Blue Book to help students maximize the benefits of their college education (Recommendation 9)

c. Maintain and expand the role of professional advisors by having Directors of Academic Engagement play a role in consulting with pre-major/four-year advisors and advisors in the major (Recommendation 17)

Theme VI. Advising across the four years of college should be better coordinated and integrated. The recommendations below are aimed at facilitating better coordination between advising prior to major declaration, advising in the major, and professional advising.

a. Communication between advisors in the first two years and advisors in the major (Recommendation 5)

b. Opportunities for students to engage with faculty in the major before declaration of major (Recommendation 7)

c. Maintain and expand the role of professional advisors by having Directors of Academic Engagement play a role in consulting with pre-major/four-year advisors and advisors in the major (Recommendation 17)

Theme VII. Decisions about advising should be informed by data through an ongoing process of “continuous improvement”; the recommendations below reflect this principle and articulate specific indicators that will provide information about whether changes to the advising system are having the desired effects.

a. All academic advisors should receive data-based feedback about how they are doing in their role as an academic advisor (Recommendation 1)

b. Evidence-based practice (Recommendation 8)
c. Articulate indicators that will help us learn whether changes in the advising system are succeeding. Possible indicators include: (1) student satisfaction with advising, (2) the percentage of students who have no significant relationship with an adult on campus, (3) student retention rates, (4) students’ level of academic engagement (i.e., enthusiasm for the work they are doing), (5) students’ feelings of belonging at Duke, (6) advisor satisfaction, (7) advisor retention, and (8) “melt” (i.e., the loss of students who have committed to attend Duke by the notification deadline to other schools where they may have been waitlisted or for other reasons) (Recommendation 18)
Table 2
Applicability of Recommendations to Pre-Major/Four-Year Advising and Advising in the Major

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<td>5. Communication between advisors in the first two years and advisors in the</td>
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9. A sequel to the Blue Book to help students maximize the benefits of their college education

10. Increase faculty involvement in advising

11. Rather than focusing simply on whether requirements are being met and making students eligible to register for courses, advisors should be encouraged and trained to construe their role broadly and engage in a variety of diverse advising functions and processes

12. Advisors should have relatively small advising caseloads to increase the likelihood that faculty members will participate in advising and to increase the probability that transformational advising will occur

13. Create a “Director of Advisor Training” position

14. Create a group of “Faculty Advising Fellows” led by a “Faculty Director of Advising” who together will partner with the Director of Academic Advising to recruit more faculty members to advising roles and to review data and evaluate where things are going well with advising and where there is room for improvement

15. Each incoming first-year student should receive advising in the summer before they first register for classes
16. Allow flexibility in how advising is carried out

17. Maintain and expand the role of professional advisors by having Directors of Academic Engagement play a role in consulting with pre-major/four-year advisors and advisors in the major

18. Articulate indicators that will help us learn whether changes in the advising system are succeeding. Possible indicators include: (1) student satisfaction with advising, (2) the percentage of students who have no significant relationship with an adult on campus, (3) student retention rates, (4) students’ level of academic engagement (i.e., enthusiasm for the work they are doing), (5) students’ feelings of belonging at Duke, (6) advisor satisfaction, (7) advisor retention, and (8) “melt” (i.e., the loss of students who have committed to attend Duke by the notification deadline to other schools where they may have been waitlisted or for other reasons)*

19. The role of “Pre-Major Advisor” in the current advising system should be replaced with a “Four-Year Academic Advisor” role (Note. If this recommendation is adopted it will supplant recommendation 6)

20. Convene a standing advisory committee on advising
Appendix

Members of the Duke University Task Force on Undergraduate Advising

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