

ONT-Advise

A Newsletter About Post-secondary Academic Advising in Ontario

Welcome! This is the inaugural issue of a new venture. In future editions, we will introduce members of a small ad hoc group of post-secondary academic advising professionals that has come together in order to provide guidance towards some professional development opportunities for those who engage in academic advising at our colleges and universities in Ontario. As many of you know, we re-started the tradition of having a province-wide conference for advising professionals in our province a couple of years ago. This group has come together to ensure that the tradition continues, and that new ones are developed. One of those new traditions is this newsletter that will go out at least twice a year. Announcements about professional development opportunities will appear along with brief articles from colleagues across the province. The articles will be written about a wide variety of issues that pertain to advising post-secondary students at our educational institutions. We welcome input and feedback, so please feel free to send comments or future submissions to Jo Stewart at jo.stewart@brocku.ca.

One of the first things that we need to do is to come up with a name for our newsletter. The title of this edition, "ONT-Advise" does not have to be the title of our newsletter. We would love feedback and suggestions from you, our advising colleagues across the province. If you have any ideas, please send them along to Jo for consideration. All submissions will be announced in the next edition, and an on-line vote will be taken for the new title.

In order to include everyone when we discuss advising at colleges and universities in Ontario, we will use the term "advising professionals" to mean anyone who engages in advising post-secondary students as part of or all of their work. This could mean faculty advisors, academic advisors, counsellors, career advisors, or a multitude of other professionals who help to guide our students in order to encourage a positive experience at our educational institutions. Because we want to be inclusive in order to present a broad perspective of advising, if you know of anyone at your institution who regularly engages in advising, but who didn't receive a copy of this newsletter, please feel free to have them contact jo.stewart@brocku.ca in order to be added to the Ontario advising e-mailing list.

This month, we hear from Sarah Campbell from Northern College. She talks about the different titles that are used for our profession across the province and discusses some of the issues that are involved with advising in the north. We hope to provide "snapshots" of advising at our various institutions. We also hear from David Marasco from Algoma University has contributed an article about some of the advising initiatives there. Craig Cameron at the University of Trent in Oshawa has also contributed a thought-provoking article about the professionalization of

advising. In addition, Charlie Nutt provides a brief introduction for those of you who are not familiar with the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA).

Please enjoy this newsletter. We are sure that it will change in future editions, but some possible sections include “Best Practices”, “Letters to the Editor”, “Advising Research”, “Help Needed” (whether it is gathering data for a graduate thesis about advising, or an actual advising position at your institution), and many others. So, if you have any ideas, please don’t hesitate to pass them along to Jo Stewart (jo.stewart@brocku.ca) who will be the editor of the newsletter and contact person for the ad hoc committee.

Advising at a College in Northern Ontario – Sarah Campbell, Northern College

Social Worker, Academic Advisor, Mediator, Financial Advisor, Job Coach, Liaison, Advocate, Referral Centre. These are all words that should be located in the job description of an Advisor at a Northern Ontario Community College. Given the lack of resources, small student population and lack of community services which are widely available in larger centres, Advisors at Northern College must act in a variety of capacities in order to provide the best possible support to our students, whether they are located here in Timmins, or at a remote classroom setting by audio- conference such as Attawapiskat, a First Nations community on the James Bay Coast.

Providing Advisory services to the Aboriginal communities of the James Bay coast is one of the unique and most challenging tasks faced by Northern College. This is often very difficult given the lack of resources (whether it is timely access to on-campus counselling, access to a physician, or simply a culturally safe and healthy environment in which to study.) Advisory staff are faced with students who are either still living in their home communities (with no road or train access), or students who have travelled to the Timmins area to pursue their post-secondary studies. Both groups of students enter the College system with a unique set of challenges to be faced prior to their ability to focus on their studies - some may face economic and/or social issues, as well as language barriers – all of which present significant obstacles to the first year Aboriginal student. The unique challenges of Aboriginal communities, racism, and lack of appropriate career counselling prior to entering College also pose significant problems for both the student and Advisor in their efforts to achieve success. Imagine trying to help a student negotiate their first week of class when they may have never had access to the internet, health care or even banking!

The need for Advisory services at a Northern Ontario Community College is also undeniably linked to the cyclical nature of a resource based economy, the impact of which is often profound on the College student. A downturn in the price of metals naturally leads to local mining layoffs, which in turn, often produces a new, but unprepared College student. The pressures faced by these students often include providing for a young family, or dealing with a disability or workplace injury. While there have been significant steps to reduce barriers to such

students pursuing a post-secondary program, these individuals still face obstacles (such as lack of funding or lack of awareness regarding disability issues) on a daily basis which hinder their ability to be successful. Students with a disability also tend to seek a post-secondary setting with smaller classes, so Northern College Advisors are faced with a growing number of students requiring support and advocacy. Young students from such areas may also have never had the opportunity to travel, experience urban environments or even understand the nature of a globalized society.

Finally, the growing number of “Generation Y” students have forced the Advising team to take new approaches when helping our students. We would love to hear about any new ideas and service methods that other Advisors have used when assisting these students! As Advisors at a Northern Community College, the nature of our work is unique and challenging, but always rewarding!

Submitted by Sarah Campbell, ad hoc committee member (campbells@northern.on.ca).

Snapshot of Advising at an Ontario University – Algoma University

As a small liberal arts institution, Algoma University prides itself on the close personal relationships we develop with our students. We place a great deal of importance in understanding the students’ needs both personally and academically. Understanding the needs of the student affords the staff and faculty with the foundation to build relationships in order for the student to ultimately succeed both academically and individually.

All post-secondary institutions understand the importance of academic advising as a tool to enhance the success of the student and broaden the scope of their learning. Retention, enrolment, graduation rates, employment rates and personal career goals, to name a few, are all at stake when we measure the academic advising process. Algoma University provides for a student-centered approach to academic advising where the student makes informed decisions based on professional advice from the advisor.

Every February, the university begins its academic advising for returning students – every student is assigned to a full-time faculty advisor. It is strongly recommended for returning students to receive academic advising before they are allowed to register. This process is also supported by the Senate of Algoma University. This approach allows students to access accurate information en route to appropriate decision-making both academic and in their career goals. At this level, the relationship between the student and faculty provides for a sense of belonging and enhances student growth at the institution.

During the summer months, first year students are assigned academic advising appointments during the first year academic orientations hosted by the university. All academic advisors and faculty representing their respective departments are present advising students about

programmes, degree requirements and career exploration. The sessions serve as a primary source of information and responds to the academic needs of all first year students.

As a footnote to the academic advising opportunities we provide our students, we also have annual training sessions for staff and faculty advisors to aid in the delivery of the goals and expectations of advising. Algoma University strives to provide accurate and valuable information to students in fostering important partnerships with our student body. Furthermore, the Office of the Registrar and Department of Enrolment Management are currently studying other methods to enhance academic advising including the use of technology.

Respectively submitted by David Marasco, ad hoc committee member
(David.Marasco@algomau.ca).

Just what is it that you do in that Advising office? Elevating Advising to its rightful place

There is no doubt academic advisors within post-secondary institutions in Ontario would be able to provide an answer to the question posed above yet we can also be fairly certain that our individual definitions will vary depending on the environment in which we work. The reasons for this can be complex not only in terms of the variance in advising model or approach we each use as individual advisors but also with respect to how our institutions may define advising and indeed whether or not they recognize the value of advising and support a consistent model.

I don't have to look far to see differences in how we define and deliver advising because such a difference exists within my own work environment. Although it is not defined as such by our institution, in essence we have a centralized advisory system operating on the satellite campus where I work. Advisors work with students in a collaborative educational process that includes planning their educational career and learning how to access the variety of resources and services available to them. We clearly define academic advising for all students by building ongoing relationships that require active participation on the part of both the student and the advisor. In other words, trained professional advisors are the first point of contact for *all* students on our campus (including quite a number of prospective students). This model is quite different from the main campus where advising is a decentralized system that relies upon a combination of professional advisors, administrative staff and faculty. This 'difference' in model does not necessarily mean that there are not 'philosophical' or 'theoretical' congruencies between how each campus 'delivers' academic advising, but with students taking courses on both campuses, it has become apparent that confusion ensues when there is not a consistent message about how advising is positioned within our educational framework.

The abundance of literature on the subject of academic advising suggests there are as many conceptions of advising as there are people involved in its delivery. It can be decentralized in some schools, whereby each department develops its own definition, or it can be centralized with an institution recognizing the universal 'value' of advising and subsequently positioning advising as a teaching and learning opportunity for students. Advising is also sometimes used

as a response mechanism to target specific 'problem' areas in certain institutions. In other instances, it is treated as an 'add-on' to existing positions and not recognized as a legitimate profession. There are many more incarnations that develop as we struggle to legitimize our efforts.

How often have we heard our colleagues describe academic advisors as the 'people who tell students what courses they need to graduate and what courses to drop'. How frustrating is this when we know there is so much more to our profession? The question remains—just how do we get our institutions to recognize the value in our work? We must first find some unity in the language we use to describe what we do. For example, are there similarities in the 'models' we are using? Are these models only constructed from the perspective of convenience or are there deeper theoretical and philosophical principles where we can find common ground. Hopefully, this discourse will help define our responsibilities. The core of this definition should be that Advising is *teaching* and not a *service*. I'm not sure we are sending out this message in Ontario as clearly as our peers south of the border.

A brief search of the advising literature and research reveals a positive link between academic advising and student success, satisfaction and retention but nothing hits home like 'in house' data, or at least data shared amongst those advisors in Ontario. We need to develop and conduct pilot projects linking advising to student success and retention through our *own* research done within our own backyards. Some other things to consider include: working with faculty (whether they engage in advising or not) to clarify our role and to further strategies that help students be better prepared *before* they engage with faculty; continue to change the 'characteristics' of advising within our schools whereby advising becomes more about what *students* need and want to do and less about getting them to do what *we* as an institution want them to do.

Finally, I do know that many of us have taken a variety of practical measures, such as imbedding advising in the 1st year experience, which helps define advising for our students but lack of recognition for advising at an institutional level can sometimes undermine these efforts. Moving forward as a group will go a long way toward getting the message out to our administrators that academic advising is of vital importance to our students and produces tangible results which favour the institution as a whole.

Submitted by Craig Cameron, University of Trent at Oshawa (ccameron@trentu.ca).

Professional Associations for Advising

There are a number of professional associations that support professionals who advise post-secondary students. They will be featured in upcoming editions of this newsletter. If you are not yet a member, these associations provide a number of professional development opportunities that may interest you. The first featured association is the National ACademic

ADvising Association (NACADA). Charlie Nutt, the current Executive Director of NACADA has provided the following in order to introduce you to NACADA if you are not already a member, and to provide further contact to those of you who are current NACADA members.

Dear Ontario Academic Advising Community Members:

On behalf of NACADA, the international association focused on student success with members in all areas of the academic advising communities globally, I wish you a Happy New Year. This promises to be an exciting but challenging year for us all in higher education. As we face economic challenges world wide that will affect all of our colleges and universities, I am certain that academic advisors and academic advising is going to become more valued than ever before. This will be due to the fact that as our budgets are cut student success and retention will be integral to our institutional success, and academic advising is KEY to the success of our students. As you step up the challenges, NACADA is here to assist all of the advising communities globally. I encourage you if you are familiar with NACADA to explore our many resources and services and those of you who are members, I encourage you to continue to utilize our association.

Academic advising and academic advisors in Ontario are key to the quality educational experiences to the students in your institutions. Please contact me at any time if I can be of any assistance to you or institutions -- my email is cnutt@ksu.edu. I look forward to hearing from many of you.

Sincerely,
Charlie L. Nutt, Ed.D.
Executive Director
National Academic Advising Association

Conference Opportunities

Advising is an international concern. As an example, NACADA is co-sponsoring the International Conference on Personal Tutoring/Academic Advising. The 3rd Annual Conference will be held **April 21-22, 2009**, in Liverpool, England. For information on registration and all other aspects of the conference, visit

www.nacada.ksu.edu/IntrntlConf/PersTutAvsg/2009UK/index.htm

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