

## **QEP PROJECT NAME: Fostering Student Success Through Proactive Advising**

### **PROJECT ABSTRACT**

Academic Advising at Southwestern has greatly improved since the addition of the Director for Advising and Retention who implemented initiatives that emphasized building resources for consistency in the advising process. However, in the current QEP topic selection process, “advising” was the most recommended topic from faculty (12/49 or 24.5%) and included three staff recommendations but none from students. These recommendations indicated a need to improve advising of incoming students so they receive advising from people within areas relevant to their academic and professional interests and building the overall advising experience to integrate academics with the “development of professional and life skills and perspectives.” This QEP offers a two-part approach to enrich the advising experience for students. First, six professional advisors who specialize in an academic area will work exclusively with first-year students to help them transition from the high school to the college environment, help them move into a path of their choosing, and help them build agency to enrich the advising experience. Second, moving first-year students to professional advisors purposely shifts the advising role for faculty and staff who will be better prepared to use proactive advising with second, third, and fourth year students to engage in larger discussions beyond the scope of prescriptive advising.

### **STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES**

1. First-year students will improve their understanding of their academic discipline(s) of interest.
2. First-year students will identify and engage with appropriate academic resources and co-curricular experiences that align with personal and professional goals.
3. All students will cultivate and refine the ability to effectively manage personal, academic, and/or professional challenges and advocate for oneself.
4. All students will articulate their *Southwestern Experience* by intentionally exploring and participating in academic and cocurricular experiences to build the foundation for a well-balanced life.

### **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

#### **a. Introduction**

Most students transitioning from high school to college are beginning their first true independent experience while moving into a completely unfamiliar system (Smith, 2002). This transition requires a resocialization process that has been likened to an immigrant in a new country faced with unfamiliar vernacular and social protocols that must be quickly learned (Chaskes, 1996). First year advising is a process intended to help students navigate not only the academic but also the personal aspects of this challenging time. Yet Drake (2011) suggested that advising on college campuses has trended towards a prescriptive model similar to that used in high school. This may be because it helps the advisor manage the workload or it may provide outcomes for the incoming students with which they positively identify. Given the dramatic personal and career aspirational changes college students will experience, moving towards a more encompassing advising approach would better serve students.

Proactive advising “involves intentional contact with students with the goal of developing a caring and beneficial relationship that leads to increased academic motivation and persistence” (Varney, 2007, p.3). Advisors initiate contact with advisees to build relationships, with the ultimate goal of developing a rapport in which students become comfortable advocating for themselves and initiating necessary support. Proactive advising strategies include demonstrating genuine interest in students to learn about their needs and informing students about all of their options to intervene before difficulties arise (Varney, 2012). This advising approach can be especially beneficial for at-risk or underprepared students (Rodgers, Blunt, and Tribble, 2014). Kuh et al. (2011) suggested that advising is an integral way for universities to help students build positive connections to campus, thereby impacting student success and

persistence. This QEP proposes to cultivate a proactive advising model that specifically addresses the challenges of first-year advising while developing and focusing advising of existing faculty/staff advisors to sophomores, juniors and seniors.

### **b. Broader Historical Context**

At Southwestern, the issue of advising has long been recognized as an important component of the education experience. In 2012, a survey inquiring about QEP Proposal Topics “advising” was the most suggested topic (27 suggestions, 10 from faculty/staff and 17 from students). In the current QEP idea solicitation, a similar survey found “advising” to be the third most suggested topic of interest (with 15 suggestions, 12 faculty/3 staff) suggesting a continued recognition of the importance of advising in our academic environment. This was by far the most suggested topic by faculty (second most suggested topics received 5 votes). However, NO students identified advising as a potential QEP topic suggesting that students are no longer prioritizing this as an important topic. The reasons for this divergence in priorities between students and faculty/staff may be the substantial progress made in structuring and support of advising on campus. In 2017, Southwestern University hired a Director of Advising and Retention. The Director and her team implemented

1. an advising syllabus to unify the campus’ understanding of the purpose of advising and codify the expectations for students and advisors in this process
2. new advisor training that included research on student development and advising theory
3. continued professional development regarding advising for all faculty/staff advisors
4. development of advising tools that include “pathway documents” for each academic major and advising checklists for advisors
5. an easily accessible hub of advising information and tools by the development and launching of an advising website for advisors and students

While the intent of this progress was to promote prescriptive and developmental aspects of advising, it is likely that students recognized and were immediately impacted by the prescriptive aspects of advising (i.e., more students were successfully navigating the curriculum).

Despite this shift in student perception, other factors directly affected by advising, such as student retention and graduation rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), suggest that students are not receiving the support they need to persist at Southwestern. The persistence of this topic as a QEP suggestion from faculty and staff suggests that additional work is needed to address continued concerns related to advising.

### **c. Southwestern University**

#### **I. How does the QEP connect to Southwestern’s mission, purpose, or values?**

Southwestern University’s mission “seeks to involve the student in finding a personal and social direction for life.” This mission goes beyond academic and curricular exploration and emphasizes personal growth. Further, one of the University’s core values is “promoting lifelong learning and a passion for intellectual and personal growth.” In line with this mission, the focus of this QEP is to advance the advising culture at Southwestern University to a proactive advising model in which students’ academic, professional, and personal needs and interests are addressed in more depth. A strong student-advisor relationship can empower the student to explore and engage with academic and co-curricular experiences they may be reluctant to navigate without such a support system on campus.

#### **II. How does the QEP contribute to Southwestern’s strategic plan?**

Strategic Objective 1.2 from Southwestern’s 2016 Strategic Plan is to “increase the first- to second-year retention rate to 88% (current rate is 86% as of fall 2019) in 5 years and first-to third year retention rate to 85% (current rate is 74% as of fall 2019) in 10 years.” Central to this objective is improving the first-year student experience. Having a team of professional advisors dedicated to first-year students provides resources needed to navigate this challenging time and

build the foundation for a meaningful advising relationship. For example, these advisors would be able to use more frequent meetings with students to help students develop effective advising practices and cultivate deeper advising relationships (Drake, 2011).

Strategic Objective 1.3 is to “achieve a 6-year graduation rate of 75% in 5 years (current rate is 69% as of fall 2019) and a 4- year graduation rate of 75% (current rate is 68% as of fall 2019) in 10 years.” Using the proactive advising foundation built in the first year, students can engage with faculty/staff advisors in the second, third and fourth year continuing to use the proactive advising approach. The increased frequency of contact and deeper conversations between advisors and students will permit earlier identification of and intervention with students’ struggles that may impede a 4-year graduation plan.

Strategic Objective 2.5 is to “continue the commitment to inclusive pedagogy and relationship building across our diverse community.” This commitment requires that students not only have a support network on campus to help them navigate difficult situations but access to this support. Students who enter college most unprepared for the academic and social experiences of college often face both academic challenges as well personal struggles (Fowler and Boylan, 2010). Providing a strong foundation of professional advising at the start of a student’s university experience, coupled with proactive advising throughout her/his/their tenure at Southwestern, will provide this support.

#### **d. Initiatives**

##### **I. Professional Advisors**

We are proposing adding 6 professional advisors under the supervision of the Director of Advising and Retention; 1 in Humanities, 1 in Social Sciences, 1 in Fine Arts, 2 in Natural Sciences (one will work with students focusing on pre-health pathways), 1 in Academic Success to serve as a Generalist. All advisors will be trained to work with all first-year students, regardless of major, but will have a specialized focus in the academic area. Incoming transfer students will still be assigned to faculty advisors. Professional advisors are to be housed in buildings associated with the academic areas to be more accessible to students and the department chairs. Professional advisors will attend their respective area meetings at least once a year to discuss the curriculum. The Director will also hold bi-weekly meetings with all of the professional advisors. The Director will conduct extensive training including meetings with department chairs to discuss the curriculum and Registrar staff about policies and procedures. Advisors will also learn about all campus resources and advising-related materials/technology. These advisors will be able to manage a larger caseload (60-80) than faculty/staff, as advising will be their only role. This staff addition will reduce faculty/staff advising loads.

Professional advisors will be experts in best practices in advising, university policies, degree requirements, course planning, support services, and student development. They will participate in Sprog advising for all incoming students and provide continued advising support for incoming students throughout the summer. Professional advisors will hold mandatory appointments with first-year students who are on warning or probation after the first semester (shift from Center from Academic Success). They will also collaborate with Mosaic to begin the process of creating their SU Experience. Professional advisors will assist with major exploration in collaboration with the Center for Career and Professional Development. These advisors will work with academic departments for any curricular issues and to develop programming for potential majors (i.e., group advising/information sessions). They will also collaborate with Admissions to assist with recruitment of incoming SU students. Professional advisors will facilitate major exploration conversations allowing for students to have an informed decision and assign students to a faculty advisor when ready to declare (potentially at the end of the first-year).

##### **II. Faculty/Staff Advisor Development in Student Mentoring**

To support faculty/staff advisors in implementing proactive advising with sophomores, juniors, and seniors a robust program of (1) professional development opportunities related specifically to proactive advising skill-building and (2) training for new integrated student success software will be provided. Multiple professional development opportunities would occur yearly and at Fall Faculty Conference. Targeted development with professional advisors will be provided in

area meetings. Sessions would be led by the Director of Advising and Retention's team. Students completing their first year with a professional advisor will be well-grounded in effective advising practices and have a better understanding of how to integrate co-curricular and curricular experiences. Therefore faculty/staff advising would transition to one of advisor-mentor. To facilitate this, development opportunities would be used to equip advisors with tools, resources, and practice at developing these deeper mentoring relationships. Such work will help faculty/staff advisors work more effectively with students to identify and participate in experiential learning options and career exploration. New student success software will also be used to enable this proactive advising approach. This system will not only provide standard advising tools related to the curriculum but would also permit notes from advising meetings and insights from different offices/departments on campus to be saved in a student's online record. This will allow advisors to gain a more holistic perspective about a student's experiences at Southwestern. Training for this software would be provided for all campus members with specific features related to advising highlighted in faculty/staff advising training sessions.

## **e. Assessment**

### **I. First-year students.**

We will assess retention from 1st year to 2nd year as a means of student success, as well as first and second semester GPA. To measure SLO #1, we will determine the percentage of first-year students who have selected their major at the end of the first year. It is believed that through the proactive advising strategies discussed above that students will be able to make intentional decisions about their academic major and be able to complete the process to officially declare their major. In addition, we will be able to use National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data to assess students' perceptions of their advising relationships, as well as engagement in academic and cocurricular programs. We will also be able to use the software system to determine the percentage of first-year students who engage in at least (1) one CCPD sponsored event and (2) one event under the "Make Meaning of the Academic Experience" development area under Mosaic (SLO #2).

### **II. All students.**

With the software system, we can track referrals made by advisors and subsequent use by the student of campus resources such as, financial aid, tutoring, and advising appointments (SLO #3). To measure SLO #4, we will use the software program to determine the percentage of all students who engage in at least (1) one CCPD sponsored event (2) one event under the "Construct a Well-Managed Life" development area under Mosaic and (3) one high impact experience (CEL, internship, student-faculty research, or study abroad). Also, for seniors, we will have NSSE results related to advising, academic, and co-curricular experiences. We also recommend including a pre-assessment at the start of the students journey about what they want out of their *Southwestern Experience*. Senior students will then draft a 3-sentence reflection as a part of the graduation process to address their development. We anticipate that through proactive advising, students will be able to identify and articulate how they have been able to gain skills, hone their interests, and make progress toward their personal and professional goals. We also can review four-year and six-year graduation rates to measure student success.

## **QEP PROJECT RESOURCES/PARTICIPANTS**

Multiple campus entities will partner with this initiative including the Center for Academic Success (CAS), Center for Career and Professional Development (CCPD), Mosaic and the Residential Experience, and Student Life. The CAS's collaboration would include professional advisors partnering with peer mentors to offer programs and workshops (e.g., study skills, test-taking strategies, and time management, pre-advising, and creating 4-year degree plans). Staff in the center also meet with first-year students who go into academic warning or probation following the fall semester. Professional advisors would become the point of contact for these students by working with students to determine resources needed and making schedule revisions for the spring semester to ensure good standing after the spring semester. CCPD's collaboration will include professional development for faculty around topics related to career

exploration and goals to facilitate the advisor-mentor relationship with students. In addition, professional advisors will work with CCPD to offer and/or advertise events and workshops. All advisors (professional, faculty and staff) will collaborate with Mosaic and the Residential Experience to identify and share experiences to support holistic personal development with students.

Currently, Southwestern does not have the software program that can track, gather, and analyze student appointments, warning notifications, and degree planning all in one place. Software systems known as "students success platforms" have been created to address these issues. Using such a system would allow collection of student data to predict student characteristics (e.g., likelihood to persist, GPA's, need for resources) and institutional data to aid with course scheduling, track outcomes, and report results. In addition, these programs provide a space for faculty and staff to include notes on student interactions, communicate between stakeholders, and assign students to specific campus partners for assistance. Many programs include assessments that measure a student's risk profile (generally using non-cognitive assessments) at key times during the student's academic journey to initiate proactive outreach. The Office of Advising and Retention would provide supervision and oversight to the professional advising staff. In addition, the office will monitor the tracking software system and create reports for assessment.

### QEP PROJECT TIMELINE

