

**University of South Carolina Aiken**  
**Observations and Recommendations Regarding Academic Advising**

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**Introduction and General Observations**

This report reflects my observations and reflections prior to, during, and after a campus visit to the University of South Carolina Aiken on June 28-29, 2006. The primary purpose of this visit was to review the campus' academic advising program and to make suggestions for improvement. Because advising does not exist in isolation on any campus I have included some observations about related student services/programs as well as about the overall campus culture as I witnessed it.

I was very impressed with the University of South Carolina Aiken. As I indicated several times during the course of my visit, USCA reminded me very much of my own campus, the University of Southern Maine. The campus continues to grow in reputation as evidenced by the recognition it has received by external organizations and, more importantly, by students who attribute their attendance at USCA with programs that were noted to have particularly strong reputations in the region, e.g., education and nursing. Students also noted that the USCA campus was conducive to their learning; its small size was identified as a positive attribute and, in addition to strong programs, students also mentioned Aiken's high quality faculty and caring staff.

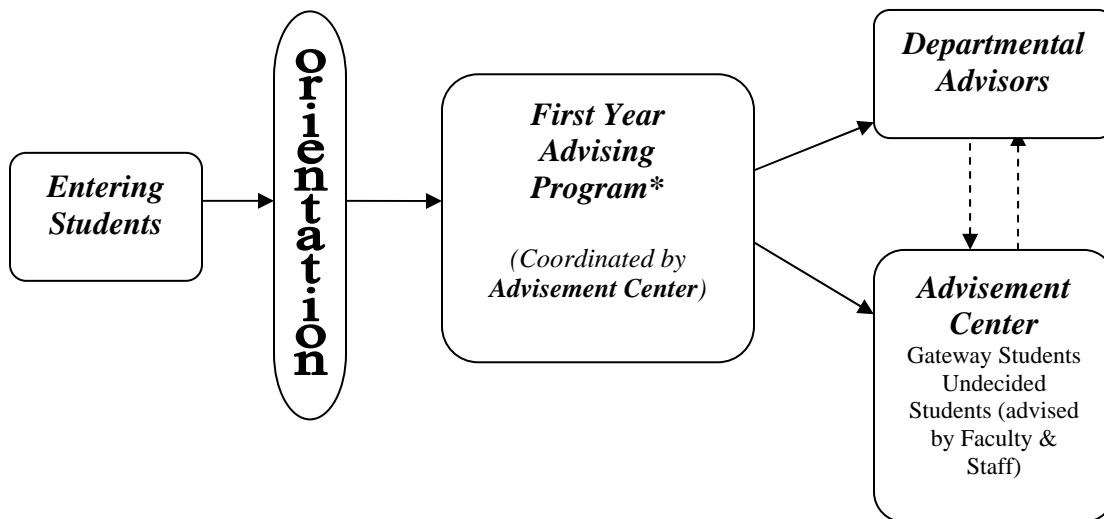
The faculty and staff seem very student-centered and very much interested in finding ways to continue to improve the university experience for all students. There is concern about the decline in USCA's student persistence and 6 year graduation rates and clearly an interest in finding ways to make improvements while acknowledging the myriad reasons that students might leave, including transfer, being under-prepared for college work, etc. Over the past year USCA has invested in the coordination of its academic support resources. The new coordinator of Student Success has done some remarkable work in providing the clarity of mission, goals, and objectives for the campus with regard to the first year experience and learning support services. It is my observation that USCA's academic advising program could benefit from similar clarity and coordination.

In addition to the faculty, staff, and students on the campus, I would be remiss if I did not mention the campus facilities as being a positive. As more and more campuses across the country try to develop 'one-stop' centers/locations for student services, the University of South Carolina at Aiken already has student service functions arranged in a user-friendly fashion. This is something that ought not to be taken lightly if reorganization is pursued.

## Observations about Academic Advising

The organization and delivery of academic advising can take many forms. The major structural models include centralized approaches in which all academic advising takes place in one location throughout a student's career, decentralized models in which students are assigned advisors within units which may include departmental advising centers, and shared models in which advising takes place within an advising center (for particular populations of students) and within departments for those with declared majors. These models are clearly not 'pure forms'; meaning hybrids emerge to accommodate the particular context of a campus. At USCA, the model appears to be a Total Intake Model in which all entering students are advised through the First Year Advising Program, a program coordinated by the Advisement Center. First Year Advisors are volunteers and represent academic and non-academic areas at USCA. To the extent possible, students are assigned First Year Advisors from their major areas of interest. At the end of the first year, students are assigned to advisors within their major departments; these advisors may or may not have been their first year advisors. Undecided students work with a variety of faculty and staff members but technically remain under the organizational umbrella of the Advisement Center until a major is declared. Gateway students are advised through the Advisement Center until they have completed Gateway requirements and are then transitioned to their department of interest.

*Student Flow in Academic Advising at USCA  
(Modified Total Intake Model)*



*\*First Year Advisors are first connected with their advisees during the Orientation Program.*

Virtually all of the potential organizational models for the delivery of academic advising have positive attributes and points of concern. The model currently in place at USCA is no different. The positive attributes of this model include:

- Students are connected at the point of entry (i.e., orientation) with a concerned individual who will serve as their academic advisor during the critical first year of college. The intentionality of this approach is clear and front-loading support has been shown to positively influence a student's decision to remain at an institution.
- In the USCA model, faculty, staff, and administrators all have the opportunity to serve as first-year advisors. This approach serves as a professional development opportunity for those who are not normally engaged with students at the programmatic level and serves to bridge any real or perceived 'chasms' between and among campus constituencies. This approach has the benefit of ensuring that retention is everyone's responsibility--all members of a community contribute, in some way, to the student educational experience.

Potential points of concern in this model include:

- Unless carefully coordinated, the transition between first year advising and advising within the departments/majors can be problematic for the student.
- Students who have an intended major are not always advised by advisors with expertise in the area in which they have an interest.
- Some students who are not ready or academically prepared (and may never be) for their intended major are transitioned to a departmental advisor after their first year. This is of particular concern in high demand professional programs such as business and nursing. These students require additional support and guidance (such as career development) that might best be addressed outside of the department, perhaps through the use of professional academic advisors.
- Having all members of a campus community eligible to participate as first year advisors has the potential of diminishing the professionalism of academic advising, unless the selection process and advisor development are carefully designed and implemented.

At the end of the day, regardless of the organizational model in place, what holds academic advising together and accounts for its effectiveness is the extent to which there is a shared understanding of what academic advising is as expressed through a campus statement of mission, goals, and outcomes for student learning. Also important is an understanding of the critical points of transition in the student experience where connection with an academic advisor would provide support.

Academic advising at USCA could benefit from intentional work to ensure a smooth transition for students who experience a change of advisor after the first year and an enhanced advisor development program. To move in this direction, however, the campus needs to identify with whom coordination of academic advising for the campus rests. Once identified, that person can lead a campus-wide discussion in order to clarify the mission, goals, and outcomes for student learning and the delivery of academic advising at USCA.

### **Recommendations for USCA's Academic Advising Program**

While there appears to be a need for coordination and clarity to bring cohesion to academic advising at USCA, it is important to note that a philosophy of advising that treats it as more than merely synonymous with course registration is part of the cultural fabric of USCA. For example, when asked during one large group session to reflect on what students should learn as a result of participating in academic advising, participants generated a number of outcomes within a short period of time. These included:

*Students should learn:*

- *How to make decisions (including goal setting).*
- *To understand the connection between majors and careers.*
- *To take responsibility for their own learning and accept consequences.*
- *To value the advising relationship as a partnership.*
- *To make informed decisions about themselves.*
- *To understand the value of higher education.*
- *To be able to realistically monitor their progress.*

The translation of philosophy into practice is always challenging, particularly in a student support service area. Faculty, staff and students spoke about the importance of the relational components of academic advising yet seemed to always link advising with the registration process, i.e., meeting with an advisor to pick out classes for the next semester, etc. To make the transition from scheduling to advising will require additional conversations, but clearly the philosophical underpinnings to embrace and act upon a more holistic view of academic advising are there. The ideals expressed during this large group discussion could benefit from being codified such that campus consensus about them can be pursued.

From the discussions, there emerged three particular points at which academic advising at USCA could benefit from coordination, clarity and cohesion: 1) the role of academic advising in the orientation process, 2) the transition between first year advising and advising in the department/major, and 3) the role of the Advisement Center on campus. Each of these areas is discussed below with some specific recommendations for improvements that emerged from discussions with the campus community and reading of materials.

**Academic Advising and Orientation.** At USCA, the orientation program serves as a significant socialization mechanism, that is, it is a way to help students feel more comfortable with the campus and positive about their choice to attend USCA. It is also a time during which students meet with their first year advisors, register for classes for their first semester of study, and learn a bit more about what it means to be in college. In this regard, orientation at USCA serves multiple purposes; at once it is a final step in the admissions process and, simultaneously, the first step in the transition to college. These philosophies have the potential to be competing, but they do not necessarily have to be so. The feedback from faculty and others in academic affairs indicates that there is a strong desire to place more emphasis on the role of orientation as the first step in the transition to college. Since academic advising plays an important role in facilitating student academic success, it is important to ensure that advising has a prominent role in the orientation program. Thus, it is important to:

- ***Continue to strengthen the role of academic advising in the orientation program.*** It is my understanding that this year's program reordered events to put academics and academic advising at the beginning of the program rather than at the end. These efforts and discussions should continue to ensure that a balance is achieved between these philosophies of orientation—it doesn't have to be either/or, it can be both. The programmatic objectives that have been developed for orientation (as indicated in the evaluations) are clearly stated. Institutional goals and outcomes for academic advising need to be identified in order to frame the discussion about what constitutes 'balance'. These institutional goals and outcomes would guide program development, i.e., what opportunities need to be provided during orientation to facilitate student learning, and serve as vehicles through which to gather assessment and evaluation data to be used for improvement.

**Advisement Center and the First Year Advising Program.** The Advisement Center is a multi-service center for students, with academic advising being one of those services. In this regard, the Center has established itself as a technical processing and information resource center. This Center also coordinates the First Year Advising Program. I was struck by the observation that this Center does not seem to play as large a role in the campus coordination of academic advising as it could and/or should. As a centralized unit, the Advisement Center could serve as the area with the primary responsibility for coordinating academic advising at USCA. It did not appear that this responsibility was vested in this Center, or at least one that it viewed itself as serving. For example, the Center could address issues related to refining the First Year Advising Program such as exploring some of the concerns about student transitions, working with departments to design and deliver responsive advisor development programs, and serving as the primary campus resource for information related to academic advising, to name a few. The technical demands on the office, such as making advisor assignments, distributing advising files between and among departments, processing changes of major, etc. has, given current staffing, the result of leaving this office little time to engage in the process of academic advising and to provide campus leadership for it.

- ***Strengthen the role of the Advisement Center in coordinating academic advising on this campus.*** A way to begin to do this is to directly connect the Advisement Center to the Student Success initiative. This is further explicated in the **Summary and First Steps** section of this report.

***First Year Advising Program.*** As noted in Dr. King's report of March, 2004, the First Year Advising Program is a good first step in developing an academic advising program at USCA. Embedded in this program are overarching goals that ought to be included in an academic advising program and clearly the values of those who are involved are in sync with those espoused by NACADA through its Core Values. (Commitment to Students, Commitment to Institution, Commitment to Profession, Commitment to Higher Education, Commitment to Self) The work of the current Assistant Director of the Advisement Center in designing informational workshops for first year advisors is viewed as positive by the campus and now needs to be expanded. Some first year advisors mentioned that their lack of understanding of specific program requirements limited their ability to be as helpful to students as they could be. This issue was echoed by students who indicated that first year advisors were not always in the major area of interest and, for some, this was problematic, particularly if the first year advisor was not familiar enough with a student's intended major to provide appropriate guidance and direction. Students who indicated they had a connection with their departmental advisors early on said they were satisfied with academic advising; those who came in as intending to pursue majors in high demand areas noted an interest in meeting with an advisor in their major areas. There emerged two important issues in the First Year Advising Program: the first related to the need to expand the advisor development program and the second to the need to address the advisor transition between the first and second year.

- ***Expand the advisor development program to include information, conceptual, and relational aspects of academic advising.*** Developing a set of outcomes for the advising process would be invaluable in this regard for those relate directly to what advisors need to value, know, and do in order to perform the role well. For example, it was noted by several that there is a concern about students who have career/major aspirations that are not consistent with their personal skills and/or interests and abilities. How can advisors and/or the First Year Advising Program serve as an important 'bridge' between student aspirations and reality for them? If USCA desires to continue to support the current structure of the First Year Advising Program, strengthening the professional development program is essential to ensure that the delivery of academic advising is consistent and the integrity of academic advising is maintained.
- ***Consider restructuring the first year advising program to ensure that students are connected with advisors from their major areas of interest early on in their careers.*** This type of restructuring moves USCA from a Total Intake Model to a Split Model for academic advising (see Appendix A) While the First Year Advising Program tries to connect students with advisors from their major area of interest, the volunteer nature of the program sometimes—and perhaps more than is desired—precludes this from happening in all cases.

**Departmental Advising.** After the first year, students with declared majors are advised by faculty members within respective departments; in several cases, this advisor is the same as their first year advisors. Workload issues related to advising are of increasing concern for faculty members; such concern is related to the 4/4 teaching load and the apparent growing importance of research/scholarship in the promotion & tenure portfolio. Some suggested optimal advising loads of no more than 20 per faculty member; some indicated less than that. There was also concern expressed in several groups regarding the imbalance in advising loads between and among faculty members. Some departments are service departments and thus, the faculty members do not have many, if any, advisees with whom they work (beyond the first year). All of these issues swirl around the central notion regarding the reward and recognition for academic advising at USCA. There is a perception among some that the reward for doing a good job in advising is having more advisees; and the reward for doing a bad job is having fewer advisees, i.e., those who do well are rewarded with more work.

- ***Review advising loads and identify ways to support high demand departments and engage faculty in service departments in academic advising.*** Find ways to support high demand departments and engage faculty in service departments in academic advising. A number of options might be explored, including the use of peer advisors, using professional advisors within high demand areas (e.g., education, business, and nursing)--these can be housed within the respective departments or within the Advisement Center--or making use of retired faculty members. This latter suggestion emerged from discussions with members of the Academic Council. Appropriate professional development remains critical to any of these alternatives.
- ***Institutionalize a reward and recognition program for academic advising.*** The establishment of an annual advising award is clearly a positive step in this direction. How academic advising is considered in those areas most important to faculty, such as the promotion and tenure process are also important discussions to have and decisions to make. Having a meaningful reward and recognition program for academic advising can also serve as a mechanism through which faculty who teach in departments without majors or with a small number of majors might be encouraged to advise.

### **Summary and First Steps**

Improvement and development of the academic advising program at USCA should be guided by two distinct, yet interrelated steps:

- Identify a champion for academic advising at USCA who will provide the leadership to bring clarity and cohesion to the campus program and strengthen the Advisement Center. Consideration should also be given to adding staff to the

Advisement Center; minimally a professional academic advisor and a support staff member to assist with the multi-service functioning of the Center.

- Establish a Work Team to develop a comprehensive academic advising plan for the campus. The campus plan is, in reality, an assessment plan that begins with the identification of a campus mission, goals, objectives (programmatic), and outcomes for student learning as well as the delivery of academic advising. What follows in such a plan is the identification of the kinds of opportunities to learn that ought to be provided, the mapping of the opportunities across the student experience, the identification of benchmarks and, of course, the gathering of evidence that can be used to support improvement.

These two steps are further explicated below:

***Recommendation #1: Clearly articulate the responsibility for campus-wide coordination of academic advising at USCA.***

The Advisement Center, through its coordination of the first year advising program, serves part of this role. It does, however, need to be strengthened in order to serve a more robust function on campus. A collaborative model between Academic Affairs and Enrollment Services could work in this regard, thus preserving the multi-service function of the office and supporting an expanded campus role. Consideration should be given to having the Advisement Center be an integral part of the student success initiatives by placing it in a reporting relationship with the Coordinator of Student Success.

- *To position the Advisement Center to expand its advisor development program particularly with regard to the training of first year advisors, consider adding an additional professional academic advisor and additional administrative support to the Advisement Center.*

***Recommendation #2: Establish a cross-divisional/functional Work Team to put together a Campus Advising Plan. Particular issues to be addressed by this Team include:***

- Review of the current advising system that includes the development of a 'student flow' model that traces the academic advising experience of students and identifies points of transition and concern.
- Articulation of a university-wide philosophy and concept of academic advising that includes a statement of mission, goals, and outcomes for student learning and advising delivery.
- Discussion of the organizational and delivery model that is most appropriate for USCA and identification of strategies to implement that model. Who advises is a critical question for which there appear to be some competing views on campus and one that needs to be discussed within this Work Team.

- Discussion of advising loads. Reasonable academic advising loads for full-time professional academic advisors range between 200-300. This is clearly not appropriate for faculty advisors nor is it appropriate for those who have administrative responsibilities in addition to academic advising.
- The role of academic advising in the orientation program.
- The recognition and reward structure for academic advising (even though much of this discussion is school/college/department based for faculty).

The USCA mission, goals, objectives and outcomes for academic advising can then be used by each respective unit (Advisement Center, Academic Departments) to guide the development of their own academic advising mission statements, goals, programmatic objectives, and outcomes for student learning and advising delivery. The Council for the Advancement of Standards for Academic Advising Programs should be used as a guide in these discussions as these standards outline the goals, objectives and outcomes for academic advising programs. This information can be reviewed at the following site:

[http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/Research\\_Related/CASStandardsForAdvising.pdf](http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/Research_Related/CASStandardsForAdvising.pdf)

***Work Team Leadership and Membership.*** Because academic advising is an integral part of student success it is recommended that the Work Team be co-chaired by the current director of the Academic Success Center and a faculty member. Having the director of the Academic Success Center serve as co-chair of this Work Team has the effect of more closely aligning academic advising with the student success initiatives on campus---which it should be.

Representation on this Work Team should also include representatives from Enrollment Services (including the director of the Advisement Center), Academic Affairs, and Student Development, and students, to name a few. The director of Institutional Effectiveness or his designee should also be a member of this Work Team; representatives from this office can assist the Team in developing an assessment plan which includes identifying outcomes and measures through which to gather evidence about them.

## **Appendix A**

### **Moving toward a Split Model of Delivery for Academic Advising at USCA**

Comments from those in academic affairs and from students suggest that it might be in USCA's interest to move from its current Total Intake model to a Split Model for the delivery of academic advising. The leap is not a huge one. The First Year Advising Program has already been moving in that direction with regard to its advisor assignment process. To the extent possible given the volunteer nature of the First Year Advising Program, students are assigned a first year advisor from their major department of interest and undecided students are not dispersed as widely among all first year advisors. The heart of the 'Split Model' commits itself to ensuring students are advised by those with the most expertise to do so.

- ***Students admitted to majors should be assigned first year advisors with expertise in their intended major departments.*** While this is currently the preferred method, given the volunteer nature of the First Year Advising Program, it is not always the case that it can be achieved. Two possibilities to facilitate this approach are:
  - One approach would require that departments identify advisors to serve in these roles; in some cases, the preference might be for all faculty members to participate in advising newly admitted students.
  - Another way to approach this is to strengthen the current process which intends to utilize a liaison program within the Advisement Center in which first year advisors work specifically with particular majors and have, as a requirement for participation, the responsibility to work closely with specific departments and become the advising 'expert' for this department. The structure of the current liaison-type program would need to be reviewed to determine its effectiveness in achieving its intended outcomes and strengthened to ensure transparency and clarity of the roles and purpose to advisors and students.
- ***Students admitted without a declared major should be assigned a first year advisor by the Advisement Center.*** Currently, undecided students are assigned first year advisors by the Advisement Center. These advisors are identified from among the volunteers and are provided with additional professional development to be able to work holistically with undeclared students. As previously noted, the benefits of having faculty, staff, and administrators involved in academic advising are maintained. While USCA seems to have a relatively stable cadre of volunteers to serve as first year advisors, the question as to whether or not this system provides the best possible academic advising structure for undeclared students—by definition a high risk population--needs to be explored. Consideration

ought to be given to having professional advisors specifically hired to work with students without a declared major and housed within the Advisement Center. This is the approach that is often used in the advising centers on campuses using this model and provides program consistency that volunteer programs often do not do. Discussions about role similarities and differences between academic advising and career advising might also prove useful at USCA. A good reference work is Virginia N. Gordon's (2006) recent Jossey-Bass publication, *Career Advising: An Academic Advisor's Guide*.

In sum, in reality the Split Model (see diagram below) is more reflective of the intentions for advising at USCA. The current program intends to connect newly admitted students with advisors from their major areas of interest; although this is not always the case. This model also assigns responsibility for advising specific populations of students (e.g., undecided students, Gateway students, students who are not qualified to declare a particular major) to the Advisement Center. This latter sub group is depicted by the dotted line to the Advisement Center.

