Recommendations of the Pre-Major Faculty Advising Working Group

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[Draft]

Working Group Members:

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INTRODUCTION

Two broad types of undergraduate advising are common at Emory College of Arts and Sciences (ECAS). The first type involves the advising of majors and minors. This occurs as faculty members with substantive expertise guide interested students through the curricula of their respective department or program, and in the process, show students the intellectual benefits of that program of study. The second type involves the advising of new undergraduate students prior to those students selecting a given major/minor. This occurs when ECAS faculty members and OUE staff guide students in a more general fashion rather than in a way that is tied to a particular major/minor curriculum.

The ECAS Faculty Senate charged members of this Working Group to “…make recommendations for how faculty should (or should not) be involved with pre-major advising…” In particular, the Faculty Senate asked that we make recommendations, on the one hand, to “improve the student experience,” and on the other hand, to “streamline/clarify faculty expectations around pre-major advising.” We took this charge to heart and, for the past academic year, we met regularly to address it. Among other things, the Working Group (1) reviewed past and current pre-major faculty advising models at ECAS, noting both their strengths and weaknesses; (2) reviewed data collected from students and faculty about the current system of pre-major advising (which included drawing upon a number of surveys conducted to that end); (3) investigated other models of pre-major advising at peer institutions; and (4) developed recommendations for faculty, professional advisors (e.g., those working at the Office of Undergraduate Education, “OUE”), and students. The context and recommendations that we provide in
the pages below represent (hopefully) a concise summary of the considerable amount of information that the Working Group members considered.

THE CONTEXT: PRE-MAJOR ADVISING AT EMORY

Challenges associated with pre-major advising are well-known, and as shown below, they are not unique to Emory College of Arts & Sciences. Currently, incoming students in ECAS are paired with faculty advisors that are drawn from all departments and programs. These new students arrive at Emory with intellectual goals that may change dramatically as they navigate the first year or two of their course work. While incoming students often desire a faculty advisor whose substantive interests match their own, the students’ interests can be evolving rather than fixed. In other words, what many students initially think that their respective major will be can actually give way to a very different major. Meanwhile, those same students are turning to pre-major faculty advisors for information on courses and major / minors for which the faculty may have no experience and / or expertise – as when a Chemistry professor is asked questions about a course in Comparative Literature. This type of advising, thus, differs from major/minor advising in that the overlapping curricular interests of student and faculty can be absent in pre-major advising.

These challenges are partly the result of the goal of pre-major advising, which is to integrate incoming students into the curriculum more broadly (e.g., the liberal arts) rather than into a specific portion of the ECAS curriculum (e.g., the major). Emory has addressed this goal in various ways. In the 1990s, it relied upon freshman seminars that linked incoming students to a particular faculty member, with students gaining 1
academic credit for those seminars. In the first decade of the 2000s, ECAS became more ambitious and relied upon the FAME program ("Freshman Advising and Mentoring at Emory"). Incoming students were randomly assigned to a group consisting of one faculty member, one staff member, and two student mentors. This FAME group met for six weeks (often via extra-curricular activities), with new students earning 1 academic credit. The strengths of this approach were that (1) faculty, staff, and mentor students worked together in advising incoming students; (2) faculty, staff, and mentor students were all paid (modestly) for their participation; and (3) each FAME group had funds to participate in activities together. The weaknesses were that (1) it was hard to recruit the necessary 80 faculty to participate in FAME; (2) it was expensive and unsustainable, even with but modest amounts of compensation paid; (3) it had no standardized content and, as a result, student experience could vary considerably from one FAME group to another; and (4) its extracurricular component could lead to a de-emphasis on actual advising done by FAME faculty.

In light of these weaknesses associated with FAME, ECAS embarked in 2010 upon a new model for pre-major advising – known as PACE ("Pre-Major Advising Connections at Emory"). Three to four incoming students are now assigned to most ECAS faculty, with the requirements that incoming students meet with their respective faculty advisor at least two times during the Fall semester of their first year (once in August and once in October). These students also are enrolled in PACE 101, earning 1 academic credit in the process while taking a standardized curriculum offered by ECAS staff on such things as the GER requirements. This PACE model also involves a component that occurs in the summer prior to new students’ arrival – devoted to
orientation, as well as to scheduling their classes for the Fall semester in consultation with OUE staff and others.

The current PACE model has a number of strengths. First, it continues a desirable element from FAME in that OUE staff and others are working in conjunction with ECAS faculty in terms of advising incoming students. Indeed, as these staff have taken on the summer tasks of helping students select their Fall course schedule, as well as instructing them on GER requirements in PACE 101, student meetings with their PACE faculty advisors can focus on other matters. Second, PACE involves a much broader swath of ECAS faculty than did the FAME model with its 80 faculty members. Finally, when it works, which is rarely, the matching system in which PACE tries to link (in a general sense) students and faculty does well.

PACE also has its weaknesses. First, attempts to match the substantive interests of incoming students with faculty advisors are not successful most of the time – and the considerable effort that this matching requires does not seem worth the minimal returns it delivers. Second, although PACE involves the bulk of ECAS faculty, a smaller percentage of faculty actually take on the lion’s share of advising. Third, the first meeting time for faculty with their PACE advisees occurs at a time that is difficult for many faculty – a day prior to the beginning of the Fall semester and the academic year. Fourth, the first faculty meeting with PACE advisees is often less constructive than is the second meeting; that is partly due to the fact that students have a better sense of Emory and their academic goals by the time of the October meeting. Fifth, there is no clear definition of what faculty members should be doing during these PACE advisee meetings – and any “faculty training” on that point has not proven effective. Finally, while the PACE advisee
relationship with faculty lasts until a given student declares a major, many of these students do not meet with their PACE faculty advisors after their first semester at Emory.

Shari Obrentz reached out to her counterparts at eight of our peer institutions to assess whether or not those difficulties associated with PACE are unique to Emory (i.e., American, Brandeis, Brown, Duke, Johns Hopkins, Northwestern, Rice, and Vanderbilt). All of them reported similar difficulties. Among other things, they noted the following: (1) It is difficult to match incoming students with faculty advisors based on interest or any other factor. (2) It is hard to recruit a sufficient number of faculty advisors in the academic areas with the highest demand. (3) Without coordination and centralization, advising is not consistent in terms of its quality, thereby reducing student satisfaction with it, and training of advisors is also difficult in the absence of centralization. (4) Those at our peer institutions report that professional advising is often preferred (such as done by our OUE personnel), but they are understaffed in terms of the number of professional advisors (as is the case at Emory). Mindful of these difficulties that other universities face with pre-major advising, the Working Group moved forward in terms of crafting recommendations.

RE-CONSIDERING PRE-MAJOR ADVISING AT EMORY

Before making recommendations, the members of the Working Group spent time inspecting various aspects of the PACE model. On the one hand, we noted particular commonalities among new students at Emory. Surveys of PACE students revealed that, when it comes to pre-major advising, students primarily want the following: (1) course recommendations; (2) help on selecting a major / minor; (3) verification of whether their
respective course schedules are “good” ones; and (4) information on GER / graduation requirements. In terms of their meetings with faculty advisors, about two-thirds of these students find meeting with a faculty advisor somewhat or very useful – and about 70% of them think that meeting with a faculty advisor should be required. Thus, on the one hand, incoming students are seeking very “transactional” type of information and, on the other hand, they are seeking contact with faculty advisors. Yet, that contact with their pre-major advisors is mostly limited to the Fall semester of their first year – leaving a notable dearth of advising from faculty until they declare a major / minor. Given that requirements to meet with pre-major faculty advisors work fairly well in the Fall semester, requirements for such meetings would be helpful in subsequent semesters.

When considering various sources of information (e.g., survey, experience) regarding how faculty view these PACE advisee meetings, it became apparent to the Working Group that faculty members preferred not to deal with that transactional type of information. Indeed, the members of the Working Group developed the view that faculty advisees should not be responsible for making specific course recommendations, for checking the status of students and their GER requirements, or for discussing pre-professional advising (e.g., business, law). There is a certain gap, then, between what incoming students want and what their pre-major faculty advisors should be expected to offer.

That gap, however, is already being filled – but it has not always been labeled as “advising” in the process. Indeed, the PACE orientation session and PACE 101 take care of much of the transactional type of information to incoming students. In our view, then, ECAS should make clear to incoming students that they will have a team of pre-major
advisors, which includes but is not limited to faculty. With professional advisors playing an important role in this team, then faculty advisors can also focus on such things as (1) welcoming incoming students to college life; (2) explaining why the liberal arts are important; (3) discussing how to be academically successful in general; (4) connecting with students interested in their academic areas; and (5) referring students to relevant substantive resources. Given that the timing of the first pre-major advising meeting is difficult for many faculty, we think that departments / programs may find it useful to have those first meetings occurring in small groups of faculty advisors with their respective pre-major advisees.\(^1\) That would be an effective way to welcome students to Emory while also “de-stressing” the meeting for both faculty and student alike. Using that first meeting to establish a connection, then, would presage the second meeting in which faculty advisors have historically played a larger role, particularly their discussions with their pre-major advisees about the possible plan of study that students are envisioning in October.

The professional advisors, furthermore, can be used to span the transition from pre-major to major/minor advising. Indeed, they could be the student’s “Advisor of Record” for four years, working with students in terms of navigating GERs and other transactional types of information that occur early and later in the undergraduate experience at Emory. The “later” includes the requirements for graduation. Advisors of Records could thus work to ensure that their students are on track for graduation well before the last semester of their fourth year.

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\(^1\) Some faculty have requested that this first meeting be held later in August or early September. Despite its disadvantages, the current date does mark a time when most all of the incoming students are on campus simultaneously.
Like our peer institutions, then, we are stressing the important role of professional advisors, and like our peer institutions, we also stress that ECAS is understaffed in terms of the number of professional advisors it has. Moreover, we find attractive two solutions devised by our peer institutions. Duke University has “Directors of Academic Engagement” who serve as connectors to the liberal arts. They advise incoming students broadly in terms of substantive areas – such as the arts, humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. Such professional advisors, thus, offer an important clearing house of information as students gravitate toward a particular area, doing so in way that spans and links majors/minors. Meanwhile, Vanderbilt University also has a select number of its recent PhD graduates serve as professional advisors while teaching (providing them with a post-doc in effect). These professional advisors thus bring a renewable familiarity with the institution that would serve well incoming undergraduate students.

Members of the Working Group also noted that, in emphasizing this network approach to pre-major advising, the components of the summer orientation sessions and of PACE 101 need to be bolstered, with ECAS faculty playing a role in that. For instance, it would be helpful for particular faculty to prepare materials detailing what the liberal arts entails and the benefits that they offer. Likewise, as incoming students encounter the full range of majors / minors available at Emory, it would be helpful to have faculty in those majors / minors create succinct materials that illuminate what they are and do (e.g., videos, presentation slides). That media-based information could supplement the helpful feedback that student mentors already provide. In fact, we would like to see student mentors incorporated more directly into Orientation and PACE 101. With such changes, we think it important to have an advisory board that provides a sustained point of contact.
between professional advisors and faculty pre-major advisors. This advisory board could also lead efforts to formulate guidelines for what faculty members could and should cover in their pre-major advising meetings, doing so in order to help faculty rather than to regulate them. Likewise, we think it would be beneficial to strengthen ways that feedback can flow back and forth between professional advisors and faculty advisors. We also think it important to use information taught in the orientation sessions as starting points for students when meeting with their pre-major faculty advisors.

With the above points in mind, we of the Working Group make the following recommendations:

**Recommendation Regarding Faculty Advising**

Retain Pre-Major Faculty Advising system with modifications

- Advising should be presented to students as a “network of advisors” not as one point of contact
- Faculty should not be assigned as the “Advisor of Record” (leaving that to the professional advisor) but should be involved with pre-major advising as part of the network of advisors
- Work with Faculty Advisory Board to create clear guidelines for what faculty should and should not do during “pre-major” period [see below]
- The first meeting in August between PACE faculty/students could be done in a small group of faculty members with advisees and the second meeting in October can be a one-to-one meeting
Additional required advising (pre-major and pre-graduation) is to be provided by professional advisors

Create a New Student Programs Faculty Advisory Board

- Review content in Emory Essentials, Orientation and PACE 101
- Lead the way in formulating guidelines regarding what faculty could and should discuss in their pre-major advising meetings
- Allow faculty to provide more feedback regularly to OUE and PACE program

Retain Department / Program Faculty Advisors for Majors / Minors

**Recommendations Regarding Professional Advising**

**Hire Additional Professional Advising Staff to Cover Needs of Pre-Major Students**

- Students would be assigned to a professional advisor who would remain the Advisor of Record throughout the students’ Emory College careers
- Analyze data to determine how many professional advisors will be needed

**Call the Summer Pre-Registration Guide Meetings “Pre-Registration Advising”**

- To be led by OUE staff over the summer
- Will hold additional meetings with students before students meet with their faculty advisors

**Use Peer Leaders More During Orientation and Beyond**

- Support the Pre-Registration Advisors during Orientation Meeting
- Attend specific weeks of PACE 101
Require Advising beyond the First Semester

- Required meeting during spring of first year
- Required meetings during the second year
- Required meeting semester before student graduates

Create Connections between Professional Advisors and Faculty

- Possible new position similar to Directors of Academic Engagement (connectors)
- Possible use of PhD Graduates to serve as additional professional advisors

**Recommendations Regarding Student Activities**

- Create an advising module/checklist for first semester as part of PACE 101 assignments
- Flip the checklist given to pre-major faculty advisors into an assignment for first year students to complete before meeting with faculty
- Create opportunities for more introduction to the Liberal Arts
- Work with faculty to create a session for PACE 101 for Fall 2019 that introduces the purpose of a liberal arts education and helps students identify the disciplines within the liberal arts, as well as where departments / programs fall
- Possible Liberal Arts panels during Orientation or Fall semester

Create Ways for Students to Explore Departments

- Departments create PPTs or virtual presentations for New Student Programs website