

Quality Improvement Plan for Academic Advising at UMKC

Prepared By:
Inta “Maggie” Tolan, Ed.D.
Consultant

Director, Academic Programs & Alumni Affairs
Dept. of Public Management & Policy
Georgia State University

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Executive Summary

In June 2009 Dr. Maggie Tolan, a consultant from Georgia State University was hired to provide expert advice on UMKC's revision of its University Student Success Support Systems, namely, academic advising. Sections of the report include findings and recommendations.

The strengths recognized at UMKC were notable. First and foremost, the campus climate and data clearly illustrates UMKC's commitment to students and its goal of improving student retention. UMKC has expanded its recent efforts to conduct satisfaction surveys that can aid student affairs practitioners, faculty, staff and senior leadership with increased opportunities to develop realistic and measurable goals to enhance student learning, retention and satisfaction. While the university continues to experience substantial leadership changes across the institution, it was quite apparent that both sides of the UMKC "house" (academic affairs and student affairs) are willing to be at the same table having frank dialogues about what is best for their students and for their future as a public institution of higher education within the city of Kansas City as well as within the University of Missouri system. The campus seems open to the idea of change as long as that change leads to improved student satisfaction, retention, and enhanced learning.

While many recommendations put forth by this improvement plan range in scope, complexity, immediacy and cost, there were three major areas that UMKC needs to address with priority as they are having widespread impact on how successful academic advisors can be in their roles and also how successful students can be navigating the administrative channels of UMKC. The first of these areas is how course scheduling is managed across the campus. The Noel-Levitz survey illustrated that this factor was one of the most frustrating issue for UMKC students. UMKC not only needs to implement a common schedule clock to be used by all colleges, but the clock must also be *enforced* to ensure that students can successfully build schedules across disciplines. Similarly, each college should work in earnest to develop, at minimum, a 2 year course schedule that can be posted on their departmental website, so that students can map out their course schedules and build course plans that ensure a timely graduation. The cost of standardizing and enforcing these very important enrollment tools is minimal and yet can yield the greatest opportunity to accomplish quick and substantial improvements in student satisfaction and graduation rates.

The second area where UMKC can dramatically improve lines of communication to students and also drive students to services that can improve their success is to revamp departmental websites for *continuing* students. For example, both the Noel-Levitz and the 07-08 Senior Survey data illustrate that students worry about whether their paid tuition/degree will actually have a return on investment (a job), and yet the university's Career Services office received the highest "no opinion" rating for their services (inferring that students have not utilized the office). UMKC departments should be encouraged to hold discussions about what a successful resource/advising page should include, and these conversations can lead to other discussions about advising and career development models. Does it make more sense to use faculty service time to provide career mentoring and developing a calendar of professional development opportunities for students, or is sitting in an office during limited office hours advising on graduation requirements, DARS reports, etc. a better use of their time? How does the department support academic achievement and what tutoring resources can be made available for high failure classes required in their programs? Questions like these will lead to a re-alignment of service priorities for advisors, faculty, and student affairs professionals supporting academic units.

The third umbrella area to address at UMKC is how to improve synergy, communication and strategic evaluation in the academic advising community as well as between the two houses of academic affairs and student affairs. As pressures rise to improve student retention rates, conversations about how to satisfactorily support undecided/deciding and change of major students must take place, which requires determining the right resources and advising teams best suited to ensure the success of these student populations. Under the auspices of these conversations, UMKC must take direction on creating a common general studies core across the undergraduate majors. The implementation of DARS, while simplifying some aspects of academic advising, will also shift work loads and priorities within academic advising units, and standardized/systematic approaches must be established to ensure the efficiency of this new tool. It is imperative that new advisory groups be established at senior levels, mid-level, and staff levels to ensure policy changes are communicated and vetted to ensure successful implementation.

While the full improvement plan outlines recommendations based on immediate, short term and long term timelines, a summary of those suggestions are:

- Develop, implement and enforce a common scheduling clock for courses
- Create comprehensive advising and career service webpage templates for departments to implement
- Clearly identify and communicate tutoring resources available on campus
- Establish three advisory groups to improve communication, policy effectiveness, and brainstorming among staff advisors, faculty, academic leadership and student affairs.
 - The senior level group would be charged with developing/reviewing policies in the undergraduate/graduate catalog, discussing data needs, and spearheading retention efforts. Membership would include academic leaders from within the colleges and senior student affairs leaders responsible for key units (Admissions and Registrar most notably), and would be facilitated by the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs.
 - The mid-level advisory group would have Directors of Academic Advising, as well as student affairs leaders from DARS, Registrar's Office, and Undergraduate Admissions/Orientation. Their areas of responsibility would include discussing ways to create a more seamless university, develop comprehensive advising and referral models, and also discuss policy issues that need discussion at the senior level.
 - The third advisory group would be an academic advisor council, which would encourage participation from all advisors across campus, regardless of role, and the group can discuss "best practices", build referral networks, talk about the professionalization of academic advisors, and also suggest training opportunities.
- Adhere to National Academic Advising Association's (NACADA) recommendations to maintain a 350:1 student advisor ratio when possible, with accommodations for lower ratios when dealing with undecided/deciding students.
- Implement mid-term or early warning grading requirements for all high D, F, and W rate courses across campus.
- Develop a common general studies core across UMKC to ensure fluidity and applicability of credits as students change majors.
- Develop consistent models across campus for compensating/evaluating faculty who serve as academic advisors (release time, impact on annual evaluations, etc.).
- Conduct student surveys to determine when students want classes in each major (both prospective and continuing students)
- Ensure that each academic department posts a projected 2 year course schedule on the web
- Consider implementing a common name for all college academic advising offices/units across campus, to improve student understanding about where they should go (regardless of what

college they move to) for academic advising and to also clarify the difference between academic assistance versus student affairs units.

- Consider moving the Advanced Preparation Program into a newly created college or stand alone academic unit that specializes in working with undecided students as well as at-risk students. The resources needed to academically support and advise these two student populations, without bias towards a particular program or college, is critical to their success as well as the success of improving their retention.
- Fund additional staff positions within larger colleges to anticipate increased workloads related to DARS.
- Minimize the use of walk-in advising hours except during peak times (week before school, pre-registration). Student satisfaction rates improve dramatically when students know they have an assigned time to meet with an advisor and are not hurried.
- Fund a cross-campus staff position charged with training academic advisors to ensure the quality of advising as well as to ensure professional development opportunities.