

Georgia Institute of Technology

# **Academic Advising Task Force Report and Recommendations**

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The Academic Advising Task Force (TF) was charged by the provost with making recommendations to improve advising programs and practices. The TF endorses Noel-Levitz's definition of advising as "an interactive process in which the advisor helps the student set and achieve academic goals, acquire relevant information and services, and make responsible decisions consistent with interests, goals, abilities, and degree requirements." All Tech undergraduates must have access to comprehensive, effective, and impactful advising designed to

- assist and guide students in their academic exploration, planning, and progress toward timely completion of their degree
- promote students' academic success
- help students articulate their future goals and tailor their experience at Tech to help accomplish these

The TF committee included academic advisors, academic faculty from the six colleges, and representatives from the following campus units: Center for Career Discovery and Development (C2D2), Division of Student Life, Office of International Education (OIE), Office of Scholarships & Financial Aid, and the Registrar's Office. Student insight was provided by members of the OUE Student Advisory Board, which includes leaders of academically-focused student organizations.

The Commission on the Next in Education (CNE) has also prepared a strategy and recommendations for Advising for a New Era. In the CNE report, advising spans a student's lifecycle from K-12 experiences that identify the student as a potential member of the Georgia Tech community, through post-graduation life-long learning. In contrast, the Advising Task Force has restricted its attention to the span of time between advising at pre-matriculation orientation (FASET) through to career and grad school-related advising around the time of graduation. Furthermore, the CNE report is divided into three timescales: short-term, medium-term, and long-term. The Advising Task Force has been charged with the current situation at Georgia Tech and immediate and short-term recommendations.

Georgia Tech's advising structure is currently decentralized and heterogeneous. Academic units hire, train and promote advising staff and develop independent advising protocols. This model allows advisors to develop expertise in their program's curriculum and departmental culture. Many talented and passionate professionals work in advising roles on campus, but the lack of a common model of advising and the variations in the delivery and types of advising services, as well as differences in resources available to advising units, have resulted in inconsistent advising experiences for Tech students. Advising caseloads range from as low as around 70 to more than 900 students; this variation, combined with unique departmental cultures, results in some advisors spending most of their time performing "prescriptive" advising tasks (primarily planning student schedules and answering registration questions), rather than engaging in developmental advising, which includes academic program planning as part of the collaborative and decision-making processes of guiding students as they define and work toward achieving intellectual, educational, career, and personal goals. Few advisors have the resources to identify, monitor, or work with students who are academically off-track or encountering academic difficulties.

Student access to advising services; the responsiveness and frequency of communications from advisors to advisees; advisor-initiated interventions for at-risk or off-track students; integration of academic and career advising; the timing or whether any required advising activities occur; and even the length of standard advising appointments vary by major. Communication between the various units involved in the advising ecosystem, (e.g., Schools, OIE, C2D2, Financial Aid, Dean of Students, Registrar), as well as

among the campus advisors, is often incomplete or inefficient, and contributes to a general lack of accountability. Campus-wide tools are available in principle (e.g. GradesFirst) but they are not used optimally or consistently, because there is no clear “owner” of advising technology on campus. Furthermore, the expectations and assessment for the 65+ academic advisors vary widely across campus, which makes it difficult to create a common advising culture. Tech also lacks standard training programs for new and continuing advisors. For many years, the only professional development opportunities for advisors have been through GTAAN, a voluntary organization that offers programming. At the present time, however, no more than half the advisors attend these informative programs. In addition to training for new and continuing advisors, broad participation in campus-wide conversations and continuous professional education are needed to sustain high-quality advising.

After reviewing previous advising self-studies and reports from other institutions, the TF broke into six subcommittees and conducted focus groups around the following areas: Overarching Goals; Advising Community and Coherence; Day-to-Day Technology; Analytics Technology; Inventory of GT Practices; and High-Impact Improvement. The following recommendations result from these efforts.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Ensure that all undergraduate students have equitable and accessible advising**

The foundation of good advising is the relationship between students and advisors. Students should feel encouraged to meet and work with advisors, and to view advisors as their primary campus resource.

- Students must be able to easily and accurately identify their assigned academic advisor: Advisee/advisor assignments must be clear, up-to-date, and accessible to students, advisors, and other Institute staff.
- Campus must adopt and require use of a common advisor appointment scheduling tool that supports appointments and records of meetings. All advisors should use this, as well as staff who meet with students in OIE, C2D2, CAS, Registrar’s Office, and Financial Aid. Common records will increase efficiency when working with students, especially when information needs to be shared across organizational boundaries.
- All students must be able to use online scheduling tools to make appointments with advisors. Offering regular walk-in advising services for quick questions and during high-demand registration periods is appropriate, but appointments must also be available throughout the semester in order provide dedicated time for developmental and intrusive advising. (Advising extends beyond the basics of prescriptive work—it is not just for course scheduling and registration questions.)
- Campus must mandate and support standard ranges of student-advisor ratios to ensure that advisors are able to perform their advising and other professional responsibilities. For full-time academic advisors (typically Academic Advisor I/II), the recommended advising caseload is around 300-400 advisees. For those who have additional responsibilities, such as supervision, scheduling, teaching, recruitment, event planning, and program administration, or for advisors specializing in “at risk” interventions, caseloads should be adjusted accordingly. Some units will need to hire additional advisors or reassign workload of qualified academic professionals and staff to meet these needs.
- Where units use tenure-track faculty as advisors, these faculty advisors’ roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined and communicated to advisees. If faculty advisors are not adequately trained and cannot provide comprehensive developmental and intrusive

advising, as well as accurate and timely advice about academic requirements, policies, and procedures, then professional advising staff must also be available to students. Rather than attempting to fulfill all advising roles, tenure-track faculty are best utilized as “mentors” to guide students in exploration of research, career, or professional options, including choosing particular concentrations/threads and upper-level courses in their majors.

- All faculty and staff with advising responsibilities should be evaluated as advisors as part of their annual performance review. Those conducting the evaluation must have access to student feedback, and must understand campus expectations for advisors and advising.
- Campus must provide centralized advising for students interested in exploring academic options or changing majors. It is unrealistic to expect all advisors who specialize in their unit’s academic curricula and program options to also have the time, expertise or resources to engage in this type of generalized major and career exploration. There needs to be an open and welcoming unit on campus where students can seek counsel in support of their explorations. This may require additional personnel or reallocated resources.

## **2. Aligning Academic and Career Advising**

As advising should support students as they identify and progress along a path toward educational, professional, and personal goals, it is key that academic advisors at Georgia Tech have the ability to integrate career advising in their practice.

- Develop a career advising essentials program for academic advisors facilitated by C2D2 and better define the partnership between career and academic advisors. This program should include professional training in basic career advising, as well as a toolkit of online and campus resources to address common career concerns, with the goal of providing greater integration of major exploration with career planning. C2D2 is in the process of developing initiatives that should be explored and supported.

## **3. Centralized Services and Support**

Georgia Tech’s decentralized advising model is not unusual, but our lack of key centralized services is a current weakness.

- Establish and staff an advising center, under the VP of Undergraduate Education (VPOUE). This center would serve as a walk-in resource for students for quick answers to frequent questions (e.g. what form to use, with whom to talk about specific issues) and to help students schedule advising appointments. Advisors in this center would also be able to meet with students to provide general advising to all students in the process of exploring or transitioning between majors. This will require additional professional advising staff or reallocated resources.
- The VPOUE advising center should provide general direction, support and resources to coordinate the following campus-wide services:
  - assessment of advising
  - advisor training and professional development
  - coordination of advising interventions for at-risk students
- The VPOUE advising center should serve as a central point for advising reporting data and technology. The recommended position dedicated to supporting technology and to analytics and data should report to the VPOUE and work closely with the Director of Undergraduate Academic Advising.

#### **4. Advisor Training and Professional Development**

In order to provide high-quality and consistent advising to all students, Georgia Tech needs a formal, standardized training and professional development program for all who serve as academic advisors. Many academic advisors at Georgia Tech believe that their skills are under-appreciated and are concerned that they are not granted access to professional development opportunities by their supervisors.

- Financial resources must be dedicated to support the development, delivery, and assessment of advisor training and professional development, which will be ongoing, and will include both mandatory and supplementary training and professional development options, meeting the needs of onboarding, new, and veteran advisors.
- Because certain levels of participation and compliance should be expected by advisors and their supervisors/academic units, OHR will need to include these expectations in job descriptions, and this participation should be included in annual performance evaluations and as consideration for raises and advancement.
- Appropriate training and resources should also be provided for supervisors of advisors, peer advisors and their supervisors, and faculty mentors/advisors to ensure consistent quality.
- In addition to centralized training, resources and collaboration must be available to support departments as they develop unit-specific training.
- Accountability for and tracking of advisor training and professional development needs to be augmented at every level (department, OUE, and Institute).

#### **5. Establish Common Practices and Standards**

While there is no reason for Georgia Tech to abandon its decentralized advising model, all members of the advising community should adhere to common practices and standards which are based on best practices and tied to campus goals and priorities.

- All advisors of First-Year students (first-time undergraduates and transfer students) should meet with them at least once during the students' first year at Tech, in addition to providing advising at FASET.
  - This can be accomplished through advisors' participation in GT 1000 and small group advising, as well as individual appointments.
  - Ideally, students should meet their assigned advisor at their FASET advising session, where they should also become familiar with advisor/advisee expectations.
- Advisors should require advising appointments for students on Academic Probation and Warning, as well as those who have term GPAs that have significantly dropped between semesters.
- Advisors should monitor students for academic progress within their academic program, and require advising appointments for those who are off-track or appear to face barriers to making progress toward their degree; these progress indicators include excessive numbers of W's and other markers for potential academic risk factors. \*
- As part of the training program, advisors should be provided with resources and key open-ended questions for use in common types of advising: first-year meetings; academic planning; Midterm Progress Report advising; Probation and Academic Warning advising; potential change-of-major/exploratory advising; etc.

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\* We will need to develop analytics, technology and reporting to enable advisors to do this kind of identification and monitoring, and follow-through, some of which will be tailored to specific majors.

- Campus should establish common practices for change-of-major processes (timing of approving forms, whether COM advising is available during specific periods of registration), access to major exploration advising, and guidelines for departmental standards.
- Campus should provide guidelines for standards that departments should follow for Institute-wide processes such as petitions and readmissions.
- The Director of Undergraduate Academic Advising, in consultation with the Academic Advising Council (AAC), should be charged with making recommendations for common practices. The AAC, convened by the Director of Undergraduate Advising, consists of the President of GTAAN and one senior/lead advisor from each college (with a second representative from the College of Engineering).

## **6. Technology, Data, and Analytics**

Georgia Tech's advising can only become more effective and efficient by improving and expanding the use of technology. Advisors need access to data that is more comprehensive, customizable, and user-friendly.

- Many routine processes (e.g. change-of-major forms, grade mode, minor, grade substitutions, FCAs) are paper-based, resulting in student "run-arounds," confusion, and general inefficiency. These paper-based processes must become automated to increase efficiency, communications, and accountability for all involved.
- The Institute must invest in a digital document management system to provide storage, work flow triggers, and efficient access.
- Advisors currently rely on academic standing categories and manual review of transcripts to attempt to monitor "at risk" students. The Institute must create reporting structures to more effectively identify "at risk" students so that advisors can provide timely intrusive advising.
- Advisors currently use 3-4 different programs to access all the information necessary to advise students; they currently have no easy way to know whether students are also working with staff in Financial Aid, OIE, the Registrar's Office, and other units. Technology and reporting tools must be integrated and streamlined for both students and advisors.
- Information on academic programs is available in inconsistent formats; some majors do not offer suggested 4-year plans; most programs lack Academic Maps. Students therefore rely on advisors to provide basic, prescriptive advising. Campus requires more dynamic and interactive tools to empower students as they navigate degree pathways and optional curricula.
- Advisors need to be able to share relevant student information with units engaged with student wellbeing (Counseling Center, Stamps, and Disability Services).
- The Institute should invest in a position dedicated to educational/curricular data analytics and supporting legacy technology (GradesFirst, GT Reports, training, etc.) in order to support advising across campus and encourage campus-wide buy-in and use of common systems.

## **7. Assessment and Evaluation**

As campus defines the goals, learning outcomes, and common practices and standards for advising, annual assessment and evaluation processes of advising must evolve accordingly.

- Assessment must occur at the Institute level, within each advising unit, and for individual advisors. Although academic units and advising supervisors will have responsibility to conduct their own assessment, common resources and training must be provided to support these efforts across campus.

- Assessment of advising must include qualitative and quantitative data, student feedback, and data analysis. The goal is to set benchmarks to drive improvement.

### **Next Steps**

There have been several Georgia Tech task forces, action teams, and ad hoc committees in the recent past. A common criticism and concern is that there is a campus perception that recommendations languish unread and unimplemented. It is imperative, therefore, that the implementation of the TF recommendations be based on deliberate planning, budgeting and prioritizing. The best practices from our recent experiences (e.g. the consolidation of recommendations performed by the 2018 Path Forward Action Teams) should be adopted so that the Office of the Provost identifies clear responsibilities, budget opportunities, and constraints.

In particular, we recommend the following immediate actions:

- The Institute should articulate a clear mission and vision for advising across campus. We must begin by answering the following basic but foundational questions: What is an “advisor” and what do academic advisors at Georgia Tech do? What should students, parents, supervisors, and other stakeholders expect from advisors? The answers to these questions will help to shape training and professional development, communications, and assessment.
- The informal student feedback solicited by the task force should be augmented by more intentional assessment, which should involve sample-based surveying and/or focus groups of typical undergraduates in all majors.
- A comprehensive list of “red flags” used to identify at-risk students should be drawn up and should drive the acquisition and evolution of IT support relevant to advising. Members of the task force have prepared a draft list that comprises over 50 student-specific data points and trends.