

Statement to the Faculty Senate on Undergraduate Advising developed by the Department of Earth Sciences submitted by Senator Melissa Dieckmann

The Office of Institutional Research recently completed a report analyzing one-year retention rates and six-year graduation rates of first-time freshmen based on declared major; students who are identified as undecided when they enter ECU have significantly lower first-year retention rates and graduation rates than those who declared a major when the statistics were collected. In a legislative environment where student persistence and retention are important indicators for accountability, quality advising of all students, especially the undeclared students, is critical.

A good advisor is a mentor, someone who takes the time to discuss the student's academic life, to determine if and how a student is struggling in his/her college experience, to encourage a student to explore ideas that may be challenging or to engage in study that he/she finds interesting. A good advisor takes time throughout a student's college experience to challenge, inspire, encourage, instruct, and sometimes even comfort. The Department of Earth Sciences feel that this is a job best done by or in conjunction with faculty members who work integrally within the academic structure of the university. There are many dedicated faculty in our university who are good advisors, but they serve in this capacity at great sacrifice to themselves and to their departments.

In the past, undeclared advising was primarily handled by faculty throughout the university who received three credit hours of release time to advise these at-risk students. Several of our departmental faculty members have attempted to serve in this capacity in recent years and have found the climate for implementing such an arrangement extremely unfriendly – one administrator suggested to a department member that receiving release time to advise undeclared students was a departmental negotiation. However, this service activity does not directly benefit the department, but does benefit the university as a whole, and should not be a departmental issue, nor should the department have to choose to “sacrifice” FTEs for the sake of good advising of undeclared students.

Once a student declares a major, the situation becomes even more insidious. Instead of receiving release time, a faculty member receives a minimal “headhunter’s fee” for each student, and in many cases, the faculty’s advising load can be a huge burden. Programs with small numbers of faculty require that some program advisors have more than 50 students to advise per semester even in small majors. For large degree programs, the number of advisees to attend to each semester sometimes reaches into the hundreds. The task of scheduling students for meetings while teaching four courses per semester is daunting, and in many cases becomes so complicated that students are sometimes required to miss classes in which they are enrolled in order to be advised for classes they will take the next semester; this seems counterproductive. But the complications to students are small compared to the time and energy required by a dedicated advisor to mentor these students throughout their program.

Therefore, it seems that good advising requires a system where each advisor has a manageable number of student advisees and where the faculty member is fairly compensated, either financially or in release time (e.g., 3-credit hour course overload pay or 3-credit hours of released time per 25 students), for the effort that they bring to this service. I am encouraged that I hear many more positive comments from students about their advisors than I hear complaints, and I

think this lends credence to the supposition that most advisors choose this service out of a genuine interest in and concern for their students' academic success. However, these good advisors also look like death warmed over from midterms to finals because of having to juggle all of their regular responsibilities and somehow manage an unwieldy number of students, each with a minimum of three crises per semester. High-quality, effective program advisors and undeclared advisors are essential to the productivity and effectiveness of the university, and as such, they need to be given the resources and time at an institutional level to serve the university in this critical way.