

Judy Williams and Claire Wiley

# Academic advising

## A unique role for campus librarians

**T**he role of librarian on a college campus is ever-changing. Many changes are initiated from within the library, such as starting a digital repository or choosing to offer a new service, while other changes come from outside the library. One of the most significant changes to the role of librarians on our campus has been the addition of academic advising duties. Librarians now serve undeclared students as they begin their studies at Belmont University, guiding them through various major and career options until they declare a major and are assigned a disciplinary advisor. While this charge originated from outside the library, it has become a truly integral part of each librarian's role on campus.

The concept of librarians as advisors to undeclared students is not unprecedented, although it is a recent development and is not widely practiced. In a 1990 essay Kathy Sisoian and H. Palmer Hall discussed typical reasons librarians are asked to serve as advisors, campus politics that come into play, and the importance of administrative support.<sup>1</sup> Ten years later in 2000, Paul Studdard detailed advising undecided students at Millersville University, where university faculty were asked to volunteer to advise this group. He noted many ways that librarians can benefit from serving in this role, describing it as a "rewarding and enriching experience."<sup>2</sup> Courtney L. Young drew parallels between academic advising and information literacy by comparing national standards for each.<sup>3</sup>

In 2013, Robert Flatley and others from Kutztown University presented a case study

on the librarians' transition from voluntary to mandatory advising duties.<sup>4</sup> These sources present the benefits of advising, for both students and librarians, and the challenges librarians in this role might face. In this article we build on this foundation by providing a practical overview of our experience as librarian advisors.

### How it began

In June 2011, the faculty librarians at Belmont were asked to participate in academic advising by working with undeclared students, those who entered college without having declared a major. Prior to 2011, a team of disciplinary faculty served the undeclared students. The librarians were looking for ways to more fully participate in faculty responsibilities on campus and our associate provost felt that it would be appropriate for us to share advising duties as equal partners with other faculty advisors. It was also advantageous for the university, as librarians are 12-month employees who are on campus during summer orientation programs.

A team of three librarians began the undeclared advising program. While hesitant about embarking on this new adventure, once we got started, we quickly realized that librarians are an excellent fit for working with

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undecided students. Our skills as research service providers translate well to the advising arena. Our training in conducting the reference interview prepares us to ask appropriate questions of students and determine their underlying feelings about course selection and possible career paths.

### **What we do**

Academic advising at Belmont takes place several times during the academic year. There is an orientation for new students during the summer, a brief orientation at the beginning of each semester, and a dedicated advising period during the fall and spring for the upcoming semesters. In addition, librarians spend a significant amount of time reviewing advisee schedules and preparing for advising appointments.

- **Summer advising.** All incoming freshmen and their parents are invited to a two-day orientation program, known as Foundations, during the summer prior to their first semester on campus. Sessions are held throughout the month of June. An important component of Foundations is a two-hour group advising session for undeclared students, led by the librarians, which concludes with online registration for fall classes. Advisors circulate within the group, “adopting” two or three students as their own advisees and working closely with them. A similar one-day session is offered for transfer students.

The university’s general education curriculum, known as the BELL Core, provides a wide variety of options for creating a freshman’s first schedule. All freshmen are required to take First Year Seminar, a challenging course that prepares students to become lifelong learners. Most are also required to take First Year Writing, a freshman-level composition course. We use these two courses to begin building a schedule and add introductory courses of interest to the students from other areas of the general education core.

Librarians approach conversations with new students in much the same way as we would begin a reference interview with a student. We encourage the students to think

about the subjects they enjoyed in high school and why those were their favorites. This reflection can be a starting point for the selection of their first college courses. Conversely, we ask the students to tell us about subjects they do not enjoy, or fields in which they could not see themselves working. With this information, we can narrow the options and help the students to begin the discernment process that will eventually lead them to declaring a major. Because librarians work with faculty from across disciplines, we possess a wealth of knowledge about course content and teaching methodology, particularly in the First Year Seminar and Writing courses, in which we provide an information literacy component.

For transfer students, we review the credits they have transferred to see where they fit into the BELL Core and which courses the students still need to take. The reasons for the transfer can inform the advice we give to these students, in terms of suggestions for courses outside of the general education core and referrals to appropriate faculty members. Students are encouraged to contact their advisors with any questions that arise before they return to campus in the fall.

- **Beginning of term advising.** Prior to the beginning of each semester, one day is allocated for advising those students who either were not able to attend Foundations in the summer or have recently been admitted to the university. The advising and registration component is similar to what was offered during the summer.

- **Fall and spring advising.** During fall and spring semesters, individual appointments are offered during a two-week advising period. During the meetings, we review our advisees’ current schedules, ask how the semester is progressing, and whether the students have come to any decisions about a major. We look at the students’ degree audits through Degree Works, the university’s degree auditing system, to see what general education requirements are still needed. The advisors can create sample degree plans with areas in which students are interested,

so they can see what various majors look like. We then assist the students in selecting courses. Some students appreciate a visual of their optimal schedule and construct it on paper; others like to discuss possibilities and create schedules on their own following the appointments. We suggest having backups for all courses so that students are prepared if any of their choices are filled. The students register on their own with librarian advisors available by email.

Librarians keep in touch with advisees throughout each semester, checking in to see how they are doing, requesting that they come by for an appointment if there is anything that appears as a red flag, and giving suggestions for changes to schedules as they see fit. Notes are kept in the Degree Works system to document conversations with students, advice and instructions given, and schedule plans. When students are ready to declare majors, librarians assist them with the proper forms and direct them to their new major departments.

• **Training.** Before we became advisors, no formal training was offered, but as librarians, we were not shy about asking questions and finding answers. We sought out training from others on campus, beginning with the Registrar's Office, where we learned how to use Degree Works. One librarian took the lead in asking questions and finding out information and volunteered to attend regular meetings of a "swat team" of advisors and administrators, during which the most recent orientation sessions and course availability were reviewed.

We attended a number of general education workshops and established regular communication with the directors of General Education and the Office of New Student and Parent Programs, so as to be kept in the loop about orientation issues. We also made contact with various departments to ask if they would meet with us to talk about their programs, what we should tell undecided students about them, and which courses students were permitted to take without being in the major.

## Where are we now

We recently completed our fourth year serving as academic advisors, and the first cohort of undeclared advisees has just graduated. We have started to gather data on retention and graduation rates of undecided students who began their college careers as our advisees, and to compare those rates with those of undecided students prior to our involvement in the advising program. We hope the data will reflect successful transitions to academic paths for these students. Librarians have learned a great deal about interacting with undeclared students, the curriculum, campus policies and processes, and countless other areas. Most importantly we have learned a new way to use our skills to contribute to student success on our campus.

## Conclusion

The librarians have embraced their roles as academic advisors and expect to continue this responsibility. We have established many positive and lasting relationships with students, who turn to us for research assistance as well as scheduling advice. Our advising work has brought up new and interesting questions about students and unique avenues to learn about their needs. We have discovered a similarity between the needs of students who are unsure about their future career paths and those of students who are unsure about how to begin a research project. Specifically, we have explored Carol Kuhlthau's foundational model of the Information Search Process and how it can be applied to undeclared students.<sup>5</sup> Advising creates another opportunity for librarians to add value and contribute to student success at their institutions, one of the top trends identified by the ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee.<sup>6</sup> As enrollment at our institution grows, in turn, the number of undeclared advisees will grow. We look forward to continuing in this role on campus and improving our efforts each year.

## Notes

1. Kathy Sisoian and H. Palmer Hall, "The *(continues on page 559)*

professional librarians. However, convenient, proactive online chat services could reverse the trends. This paper provides results of a study of reference question complexity following implementation of a proactive chat service. The study reveals changes in the complexity of chat questions, which may have implications for staffing online reference services.

• Merinda Kaye Hensley, Sarah L. Shreeves, and Stephanie Davis-Kahl. "A Survey of Campus Coordinators of Undergraduate Research Programs." *Abstract*: Interest in supporting undergraduate research programs continues to grow within academic librarianship. This article presents how undergraduate research program coordinators perceive and value library support of their programs. Undergraduate research coordinators from a variety of institutions were surveyed on which elements of libraries and library services they valued, and where libraries could improve and develop services for undergraduate researchers and their faculty mentors. This article seeks to present a critical perspective on library support for undergraduate research programs from an important external constituent group of faculty and administrators. The data and recommendations can further conversations and aid collaboration between librarians and their campus colleagues.

## C&RL online forum on student success

Did you miss the *C&RL* Online Forum on "Library Usage and Student Success" on October 28? If so, you can still read the source articles and view the archived session through the *C&RL* Online Fora page at <http://crl.acrl.org/site/misc/fora.xhtml>. Since 2013, hundreds of *C&RL* readers have participated in online fora on topics such as undergraduate research programs, international and area studies programs, library assessment, and mentoring programs for academic librarians.

Is there a recently accepted *C&RL* pre-print that you would like to see further discussed in an online forum? If so, send your idea to *C&RL* Social Media Editor Sarah Steiner at [sksteiner@email.wcu.edu](mailto:sksteiner@email.wcu.edu).

## Notes

1. Brian Kenney, "Where Reference Fits in the Modern Library," *Publisher's Weekly* 262, no. 37 (2015), accessed October 11, 2015, [www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/68019-for-future-reference.html](http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/68019-for-future-reference.html).
2. Anthony S. Chow and Rebecca A. Croxton, "A Usability Evaluation of Academic Virtual Reference Services," *College & Research Libraries* 75, no. 3 (2014): 309–61, doi: 10.5860/crl13-408.
3. Kenney, "Where Reference Fits in the Modern Library." ❧

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Librarian as Academic Advisor" in *The Librarian in the University: Essays on Membership in the Academic Community*, ed. H. Palmer Hall and Caroline Byrd (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1990), 159–65.

2. Paul Studdard, "Academic Librarians as Advisors: Working With Students to Plan Their Futures," *C&RL News* 61, no. 9 (2000), 781–2.

3. Courtney L. Young, "Incorporating Undergraduate Advising in Teaching Information Literacy: Case Study for Academic Librarians as Advisors," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 34, no. 2 (2008): 139–44.

4. Robert Flatley, Michael A. Weber, Susan Czerny, and Sylvia Pham, "Librarians and

Mandatory Academic Advising at a Mid-Sized Public University: A Case Study," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 39, no. 6 (2013): 582–87.

5. Claire Wiley and Judy Williams, "Librarian as Advisor: Information Search Process of Undecided Students and Novice Researchers," *NACADA Journal*, 35 (forthcoming).

6. ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, "Top Trends in Academic Libraries: A Review of the Trends and Issues Affecting Academic Libraries in Higher Education," *C&RL News* 75, no. 6 (2015): 294–302, <http://crln.acrl.org/content/75/6/294.short?rss=1&source=mfr>. ❧