Grinnell College-Academic Advising and Disability Services
External Review

FINAL REPORT—submitted on December 7, 2013

By the Review Team:
Claire Forrest ’13, Kate Gluckman, Minna Mahlab, Jane Martindell (Kenyon), Abby Trout, and Roger Vetter

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Our work as a review team began on Sunday, October 7th with introductions and general process questions. On October 8th and 9th we met with a number of different constituents who either work in, work with, or use the Academic Advising Office and Disability Services. We heard from faculty, staff and students, and have attempted to represent their comments accurately and consistently within this report.

Following our observation period, we condensed our observations into four major thematic areas: Disability Services staffing, suspension and probation procedures and policies, the academic difficulty report (ADR), and peer tutoring and mentoring. Each member of the committee was charged with elaborating on a theme by identifying pertinent observations, and creating clear and concise recommendations and commendations. These ideas came both from our time spent in talking with faculty, staff, and students, as well as conversations had by the committee during and after our observation period. We believe that our major thematic areas align with the Academic Advising Office’s 2012 self-study and the growth areas that were self-identified.

It must be noted clearly that our report suggests minor changes to an office that we believe is doing a tremendous job at serving and educating students at Grinnell. The Academic Advising and Disability Services staff members are exceptional professionals who strengthen our students’ academic abilities, promote inclusion and diversity at Grinnell, and support and enhance the College’s mission on a daily basis. We heard praise for this department from each of the groups we spoke with and believe strongly that Academic Advising and Disability Services deserve much praise for the work they are currently doing.

We are excited about our recommendations and are hopeful that they are useful to the Academic Advising and Disability Services staff in their exploration and promotion of their goals and areas of focus. Certainly, we hope to have provided additional support for personnel growth within the department.
As a review committee, we feel fortunate to have been involved in this process and hope we have completed the task set before us. Our goal was to provide useful information to assist you as you look towards the future. We have found much to be proud of in the work that you do and wish you the best of luck in your next steps.
I.) The need to hire a coordinator of disability services

Observations

Faculty
1. Coordinated oversight of disability services and support: Both faculty and staff, while praising the services already provided, strongly articulated a need for additional resources and a more coordinated support structure for both students and faculty. With three different people each supporting different parts of the puzzle, it was not always clear who the “go to person” should be for specific needs. If faculty and staff are unclear about the process, they could only imagine how students felt trying to navigate the system.

2. Training and support for faculty: Because of increasing numbers, and complexity of disabilities, faculty feel the need for training, guidance, support and general information about students with disabilities. More information specifically was requested about Universal Design, how to incorporate the technology required for specific student needs more seamlessly into their classroom, and best practices for supporting students.

3. Information flow: While faculty understand that some information is difficult to share up front, they felt that knowing more about specific students in their class would be extremely helpful. At times faculty have specific exercises planned, and learn only as the student enters the room that the student will not be able to fully participate in the lesson. This has been frustrating, and embarrassing for the student.

4. Need for a full time coordinator of disability services: While everyone praised Joyce for her extraordinary support of students, faculty, as well as almost every group we spoke with, felt that the job was now too big, and required too much specific expertise for someone also holding major responsibilities in other areas. We will address this more fully under recommendations, but faculty felt that the addition of a disability coordinator would allow their other concerns to be addressed more effectively.

Staffing and Structure
1. Reporting structure: The fact that the three people most responsible for delivering support and education for disability services fall under three different reporting structures was deemed a problem. While all three individuals work well together, the fact that they all report to different areas made coordination of efforts more difficult. Communication between Academic Advising, technology, and campus accessibility needs to be improved and more transparent.
2. Professional qualifications and level of training: The field of disability support now requires a high level of training, specific to disabilities and disability law. Interpreting documentation and diagnosis as well as determining what specific accommodations are required by the specific documentation/diagnosis requires significant training and expertise. While supervision of this area at one time could be done by a generalist, those days are long gone. Legal ramifications, as well as student needs and demands simply require a coordinator with documented expertise in the disability area.

3. Communication: Communication about job duties within disability services needs to be more clearly communicated to the campus community and prospective students. This overlaps a bit with our first point—overall coordination is difficult with different areas taking on different responsibilities for services. A point person that all campus community members, as well as parents and prospective students acknowledge as the go to person for ALL services would be extremely valuable.

**Students & Technology**

1. Promptness: Students are frustrated with the amount of time it takes to receive the technological accommodations they request.

2. Keeping updated on new technology: Students are frustrated by the College’s lack of knowledge of certain technology, especially if this technology was something the student used prior to entering Grinnell.

3. Assistive technology staff: Students are frustrated that only certain I.T. staff members were trained in assistive technology.

**Commendations**

1. Students are grateful for the accommodations and services that I.T. has been able to provide them.

2. Though improvements could be made, students praise I.T for its efforts and report that the current system is working okay under current circumstances.

3. Faculty were appreciative of Joyce’s support.

4. I.T., Academic Advising, and campus accessibility work well together and have a strong relationship and regard for one another.
Recommendations
Hire a Coordinator of Disability Services: The consensus of every group we met with strongly supported the hiring of a specialist in disability services to coordinate the program at Grinnell. Some of the specific needs highlighted included:

- Provide expertise in areas of documentation, diagnosis, and disability laws and regulations;
- Provide a central point person to ensure collaboration between technology and academic advising needs, while giving students a stronger sense of support;
- Creation of a professional development program for faculty and staff;
- Coordinate and define how temporary disabilities can be supported; and
- Provide a seamless system that students can navigate effectively.

While everyone we talked with praised the work currently done by the Academic Advising Office, all felt that there simply weren’t enough resources available, and the demands of the position had outgrown the capacity to meet the needs. The increasing number of students entering college with disabilities, the level of complexity of the these disabilities, the explosion of technology supports available, and the legal ramifications involved in ensuring compliance with all federal regulations all point to the increasing demands that have been placed on those coordinating support. The greatest dissatisfaction we heard was from students-they need more, and their frustrations are growing. Because the demands are so great, there is often a time lag that is just unacceptable for them in terms of setting up accommodations and gaining access to technology support.

While the cost of a new position is high, and difficult to accomplish in tight budget times, the cost of NOT providing adequate support is even higher, for students, faculty and the entire institution.
II.) The Academic Difficulty Report (ADR) and how it’s used across campus

Observations
The observations that follow chronicle comments made by various constituencies with which the review committee had contact. Collectively, they reveal a range of opinions about the structure, operation, and effectiveness of the ADR system. In general, during reviews such as this people tend to articulate perceived shortcomings more readily than they acknowledge strengths.

1. Current ADR system is mostly managed manually – taking up too much of Ann Isgig’s time.

2. Frustration was expressed by multiple constituencies with the process of identifying and putting into operation effective software to enhance the mission of the ADR system.

3. Although the current system facilitates efficient communication of academic issues to students, advisors, and other student services personnel, many wish that the initial reporting of an academic problem could reach first responders (e.g., academic advisors, the Triage team) more quickly.

4. Triage Team is quite satisfied with the current system.

5. Wide spectrum of faculty utilization of the ADR system – some use it all the time, some not at all.

6. Some faculty members are unsure of what happens once an ADR is submitted—does Academic Advising contact the student or not? Who else is notified about the situation?

7. Faculty expressed desire for a central technology that tracks students but with tiered access.

8. Uncertainty amongst the faculty about what actions should be taken with a report and if there should be some sort of tiered system of reports (e.g., some as a warning and some as actionable).

9. Faculty conveyed frustration with the slow response of some students in following up with issues raised on the ADR.
10. Some students expressed issues they had with the ADR letter—they disliked its color (yellow), its impersonal tone of voice, they sensed it conveyed a message of indifference and some even felt it made them feel stupid.

**Commendations**

1. Ann Isgig’s commendable work with the ADR system is acknowledged and greatly appreciated.

2. The ADR system, though it needs improvement, provides a valuable service to students encountering academic difficulty by opening channels of communication with their advisors and with Academic Advising personnel.

3. Staff and faculty alike acknowledge that the ADR system is “saving academic live.”

4. The ADR system works very well for the Triage Team, which in turn provides a valuable service to students experiencing sustained and particularly complex episodes of academic difficulty.

**Recommendations**

1. It was widely agreed that faculty need to know more about the Triage team and other responses to the ADR. Faculty seem to think that the ADR data falls into a black hole. Understanding how the data are used will clarify why the data are important and hopefully encourage faculty who currently do not report to change their practices. We know that Academic Advising has worked with faculty previously and conducted presentations at faculty meetings about the ADR. We recommend that Academic Advising staff make these presentations regularly (annually or bi-annually) so that use of the ADR becomes more transparent.

2. The ADR software, as noted earlier, is outdated and labor intensive. We recommend that the current software be completed or that commercial software for reporting be obtained. This recommendation triangulates with other needs on campus, particularly those of the alumni office, to have better and more complete tracking of students throughout their time at Grinnell and beyond.

3. Related to the previous recommendation, we urge that a wider view of students be taken with regard to the ADR. Currently, some members of the Triage team also serve on the students of concern committee, which helps to inform both. Bringing in other data, as is appropriate, specifically from student employers regarding work habits and
schedules and the health center regarding health concerns would help build a more holistic picture of the student.
III.) Academic suspension, withdrawal, and probation

Observations

1. Although the Committee on Academic Standing (CAS) is responsible for putting students on probation, strict probation, or suspension, the Academic Advising staff and Registrar are responsible for the students as they prepare to return to the College for the following semester.
   a. Students on probation or strict probation are required to fill out an Academic Improvement Plan. This plan is filed at the Registrar and is sent to the Academic Advising staff as well as the faculty adviser.
   b. Students returning from an academic suspension are required to fill out an Academic Performance Agreement. This agreement is filed at the Registrar and is sent to the Academic Advising staff as well as the faculty adviser.

2. Faculty members expressed some confusion regarding the College’s policies with probation, strict probation, and academic suspension.
   a. Members of the faculty commented that communication with Academic Advising is not always as timely as they would like.
      i. These comments align with some of the faculty’s frustrations with the Academic Difficulty Reports.
   b. While faculty advisors applaud the use of the Academic Performance Agreement and the Academic Improvement Plan, they don’t feel like there is a great deal of accountability for the students.
      i. The original copy of these forms are housed within the Registrar and a copy is kept in the Academic Advising office in order to monitor students’ progress.
      ii. This protocol is a brand new initiative, starting this past Fall 2012. Thus, there has not been time to understand the concerns with the system nor make changes.

Commendations
We heard positive responses regarding the use of the Academic Improvement Plan and the Academic Performance Agreement from faculty members, as well as members of the Academic Advising Staff.

1. These forms are student-centered action plans that provide support for academic improvement, while keeping responsibility for success with the student.
2. A recent change in policies regarding student accountability with these forms has been met with wide approval and has resulted in an increase in student completion of these forms early in the semester.

**Recommendations**

1. We encourage a reconsideration of the policy that states that students returning from suspension must take a full course load. (We recognizing that this is not an academic advising issue, but thought it worth noting.)
   a. This policy seems to set the student up for continued academic challenges. Perhaps if there was a lighter course load, new study skills could be honed and instilled, preparing for a larger course load in the near future.

2. Based on our conversation with the faculty, we encourage the Academic Advising Staff, in collaboration with the CAS and Registrar, to educate/re-educate the faculty on the processes surrounding probation, strict probation, and suspension.
   a. Identify the role of academic advisor in preparing the student to return to campus and in promoting academic success after a tough semester.
   b. Clarify how the Academic Improvement Plan and Academic Performance Agreement are used with students and what role the academic advisor plays in keeping the student accountable for this plan/agreement.
IV.) Peer tutoring and mentoring
Although the review team did not have the opportunity to interact with the tutors themselves we did hear about this service throughout our review days. Additionally, Academic Advising employed more than 70 tutors and mentors last year that served a large portion of Grinnell’s student body. For these reasons, we thought it appropriate to address our observations.

Observations

Obtaining a Tutor/Mentor
1. Students expressed that they felt it was unclear for which classes they could have a tutor. They knew science classes have tutors, but weren’t sure about the other types of tutors. They also weren’t sure how to go about the process of getting matched with a tutor.

2. Students realized that they do not tend to ask for a tutor until late in the semester, and because the tutor matching process can take a while, this is a challenge when the student is panicked.

3. Students thought it was difficult to obtain tutors in certain departments. They were unsure if professors in those departments could give out names of tutors or not.

4. Certain classes offered multiple sections but only one section offered a mentor. Students thought that the students in the mentored section had an unfair advantage over students without a mentor.

Staffing Attention to Tutoring
1. Hanna is the main staff member supervising and training this large group of student tutors and mentors, with help from Ann Isgrig to approve timecards.

2. Training of tutors is done by Hanna on an individual basis and consists of one, 30-minute meeting, meaning that Hanna invested over 20 hours training tutors.

3. When a student expresses that she would like a tutor Hanna either tries to identify one at that time or pulls from a pool of students that she has previously gathered.
   a. This process is met with varying results. When Hanna tries to gather tutors beforehand, she often needs to rely on faculty to give her a list of students they would recommend, which is not returned by some departments in a timely manner or at all.
   b. At times this works very well, at other times it delays the process even further.
4. With the large size of the tutor and mentor program, the large number of student tutees it currently supports, the amount of time it takes to identify and train tutors, and the high demand for tutor support by students, this all seems to require time, energy, and attention beyond what one part of one person’s position can provide.

**Tutors/Mentors as Student Employment**

1. Some tutors started their employment but then dropped out because sporadic student requests for tutors meant the hours worked were inconsistent.
   a. This exacerbates the difficulty and energy already spent in finding the tutors as well as time used to train them.

2. As previously mentioned, students indicated that some tutors are not showing up for appointments or the students get frustrated in cases when the tutor does not return emails about meeting time and other questions.
   a. It seems likely that tutors receive little to no supervision, again likely due to the high number of tutors and limited personnel.

3. Hanna mentioned a lack of funding drove much of the training and supervision (i.e., not enough funding for more in-depth training or personnel time for supervision).

**Commendations**

1. Students really appreciate the tutoring system and think it is helpful.

2. Students really love the mentoring. They expressed that they wished they could have more of it, and possibly mentors in other subjects.

3. Hanna commented that the tutoring relationship with the Economics department is quite strong and could be looked to as a model for other departments.

4. Students appreciate Hanna’s efforts to match a large amount of students with tutors.

**Recommendations**

Tutoring at Grinnell outside of the sciences seems to have a series of complicated processes that requires additional staff attention. Hanna is managing the tutors as best she can in light of her many other duties and the fact that she’s split between two offices. However, it seems that some of the issues students face in terms of obtaining a tutor may be linked to and compounded with some of these complicated processes. Some of our recommendations are to:
1. Explore online matching programs that help students see the tutors available and those tutors’ schedules. This would allow students to sign up online, in order to connect students to tutors more quickly.

2. Identify a centralized space that tutors can occupy for training and holding their appointments. Having tutors frequent one area may make it easier to: [a] disseminate information or training to tutors via handouts, signs, etc. that could be placed in tutor mailboxes that reside in that area; and [b] non-verbally communicate to students the tutoring resource and where they can learn more about how to sign up for a tutor.

3. While some attendance and other performance issues are not uncommon amongst employees, increased supervision or an alternative form of tutor accountability may curb some of these problems.
   a. Offer tutor supervisor and trainer as a possible position for the Residence Life Coordinator (RLC) 25% outside area duty that is already a part of the RLC position. Or perhaps fold it into one of the two RLC academic advisor duties.
   b. The addition of a coordinator of disability services will free up time for other personnel to help with the tutors.

4. Explore having more mentors in more courses and sections. We realize that a relationship was built in order to explore this as an option in the Economics and Music departments, so we recognize that this probably could not be done quickly. However many students mentioned their appreciation of the class mentor. Additional mentors may also decrease some of the tutor availability, supervision, training, and performance issues.
   a. We recognize that this is also a hope and goal of Academic Advising and that they requested a budget increase for this current academic year in order to support the expansion of the mentor program. They did not receive that budget increase and thus cannot promote or expand the mentor program further with their current budget. We recommend the College consider increasing the Academic Advising budget in order to better support this highly utilized and desired support service for students.
CONCLUSION

The entire review team was impressed with the breadth of services provided by the Academic Advising Office and with the dedication and the commitment of its entire staff. The office’s commitment to their mission—to assist Grinnell students in finding success in their academic endeavors—is pursued with great vigor and at a high level of professionalism. While many of their services and programs are understandably designed to help students who are confronting short or long term academic performance issues, they also mount programs geared to students not facing such burdens but who nonetheless seek self-improvement. We find it a very positive sign that the staff members of this office are dedicated to continuously seeking to improve and innovate their programs and services to keep at pace with college’s shifting student demographics. The College’s student body has grown significantly over the past ten years and is much more diverse in almost every conceivable way, from numbers of international students, domestic minority students, first-generation college attendees, students from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds, and, very significantly, greater numbers of students with disabilities. Even without enrollment data, it is evident to the review team that, with the growth of the student body in general and of the above mentioned constituencies in particular, the demand on the Academic Advising Office has increased significantly. We do not see how the current staff of the office can continue to provide the volume and quality of service that they currently do without extra staffing.

First and foremost, a new staff member is needed who will bring to the team a high degree of experience and training in disability services. That Joyce Stern has been able to cover these needs to this point while wearing many other hats in the office is remarkable, but the College should not become dependent on this “above-and-beyond-the-call-of-duty” from this one administrator. The students with disabilities that the review team met with made it clear to us that the College has a long way to go in improving the services. We need someone in Academic Advising who keeps abreast with the latest disability research, can inform and coordinate with I.T. about the most effective software to help students with a variety of disabilities, interact with faculty to answer their questions about students with disabilities, and interface with other administrative staff charged with building access compliance and redesigning classrooms to make them more friendly to students with disabilities. We are aware that a coordinator of disability services has been requested a number of times, and we encourage the College to act on it as soon as possible.

Two other Academic Advising Office responsibilities that are generating increased pressure on staff are the managing of Academic Difficulty Reports and the student tutoring and mentoring program. Again, because of the increased size and changing nature of the student body, these pressures are not going to abate any time soon. Currently, initiatives to find partial solutions to
the staff workload in these areas through software are not advancing fast enough. We encourage the Academic Advising Office to re-double their efforts in finding appropriate software solutions for these programs, and the administration to support these efforts appropriately. Academic Advising might also explore some staffing solutions from within Student Affairs by requesting some involvement of RLC’s in the managing of the tutor/mentor programs.

There is no broken wheel to be fixed in the Academic Advising Office. The office has an appropriate mission, well thought out programs, and a superb staff. While the review committee heard constructive criticisms from every constituency with which it met, these very same individuals also praised the office for saving students’ academic lives. However, it is not possible for this dedicated staff to keep up with the academic support needs of an enlarging and diversifying student body. The review committee encourages the administration to invest in the future of this valuable office.