

# Executive Summary – A&S Pre-Major Advising Project

February 20, 2024

## Background

In Spring 2023, The College of Arts & Sciences (A&S) began a partnership with Huron Consulting (Huron) to evaluate and make recommendations about the future of undergraduate pre-major advising. The impetus for this engagement was a desire to understand how best to improve students' pre-major advising experience and gain clarity on what would be needed to resource these efforts. A&S promises to deliver a best-in-class undergraduate academic experience, but evidence tells us that current pre-major advising efforts are not keeping pace. While aspirations of pre-major advising among faculty are strong, our student experience does not consistently meet those aspirations. SERU data are clear that our delivery of pre-major academic advising falls well below our promise (Huron Report, pages 7-8).

## Objectives and Scope

Through our work with Huron, we sought to re-conceive our pre-major advising program to better support all students as they progress through their chosen academic path. Selected after a competitive bid process, Huron was tasked with taking stock of our current approach to pre-major advising, completing benchmarking, and developing an actionable plan to guide our decision-making about advising and related services and initiatives.

Specific activities of the project included:

1. Conduct an inventory and evaluate the College's advising services and resources, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and gaps;
2. Benchmark the College's advising efforts against peer institutions and current and emerging best practices in pre-major advising, including an overview of pre-major advising models and their pros/cons/costs;
3. Convene and consult an A&S committee (see Appendix A for committee list);
4. Recommend two to three models for further consideration by A&S; and
5. Model resources required for implementation and ongoing operations, considering the required staffing, technology, and operational support.

In developing their analysis and modeling, Huron undertook several discovery activities. They conducted a benchmarking survey and follow up interviews with a set of peer

institutions; facilitated focus groups with current faculty, advisors, staff, and students; and inventoried the set of student services that exist across the University as well as approaches to advising at the University’s other undergraduate schools. Further, Huron worked with us to develop principles (Huron Report, page 14) and key objectives of advising (Huron Report, page 13) to set the foundation for recommended models.

## Huron’s Findings

Huron’s discovery has revealed several important findings which must be considered in the development of any advising model:

1. Pre-major advising in the College is not working for either students or faculty. Students often do not get the information and guidance they require, and faculty feel that advising is an undervalued activity that needlessly takes up their time.
2. Our curriculum is very complex and challenging to navigate. Students need people who are experts in our curricular requirements to help them as they plan for their major and graduation.
3. Many students need to plan for more than one path through UVA; since nearly all first years begin in A&S, some of them are preparing to apply to other Schools. Some will transfer and others not, so their course selections must be done holistically with a view towards multiple potential paths.
4. The current network of advising both in A&S and across Grounds often creates confusion for both students and faculty who don’t know where to turn for additional assistance.
5. It is central to the mission of A&S that advising be directly connected to the teaching/curricular mission.

Based on their extensive work, Huron provided four models of advising: the Engagements model, the Expert model, a Hybrid Experience Lab model, and a Hybrid Advising Ecosystem model. Below is a brief explanation of each model. All models presuppose a supportive structure for specialized case management and escalation by dedicated professionals who provide expert levels of service and support.

### Engagements model

Purpose: The Engagements model leverages the Engagements curriculum to encourage an integrative and exploratory approach to academic advising. A group of Engagements instructors would serve as the primary advisors for students in their courses and would continue to do so until major declaration.

(Huron Report, page 19)

Strengths	Concerns
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is integrated into an existing course and program structure and builds on existing A&amp;S strengths.</li> <li>• It connects the purpose of advising to the purpose of a liberal arts education.</li> <li>• Instructors are part of a vibrant community of practice in the Engagements.</li> <li>• Easily understandable from the student perspective regarding both function and purpose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Engagements are in their first year of delivery at full scale, and there is some precarity in the funding and staffing of this curriculum.</li> <li>• Engagement advisors may have trouble balancing their instructional and advising roles, in addition to other responsibilities.</li> <li>• Instructors may be resistant to the necessary level of expert training and oversight regarding advising.</li> <li>• It would require substantial investment of time and energy to transform the Engagement Experience into something that truly meets the advising needs of all students.</li> </ul>
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**Expert model**

<p>Purpose: The Expert model is a professional advising model. Staff are hired into advising roles where their sole responsibility is pre-major student advising. They are part of a community of practice that focuses on professional development, advising standards, and operational effectiveness. (Huron Report, page 25)</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is straightforward and easy to understand for students and for faculty.</li> <li>• Staff are completely focused on advising.</li> <li>• Staff are explicitly trained as academic advisors and will serve as a first point of contact for students seeking other advising resources across the University.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Concerns</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruiting and retaining staff may be challenging absent clear career growth opportunities.</li> <li>• There is no curricular integration which decreases a student’s contact with academic advising.</li> <li>• This approach to advising may be perceived as more transactional than relational.</li> </ul>

**Hybrid Experience Lab model**

<p>Purpose: The Hybrid Experience Lab merges aspects of the Engagements model and the Expert model. Dedicated advisors deliver Advising Labs groups of students who are their advisees during the currently unscheduled one-credit Engagement Experience. These advisors are not Engagement instructors. (Huron Report, page 30)</p>
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Strengths	Concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advising is integrated in a curricular experience for students. This increases both contact time and opportunities for the creation of meaningful engagement.</li> <li>• A shared curriculum for the advising lab ensures all students receive consistent information and hands on experience in a classroom setting.</li> <li>• Advisors are part of a community of practice to focus on advising excellence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual Engagements faculty are responsible for programming the Engagements Experience (non-contact time credited to the student).</li> <li>• Significant operational challenges would ensue with scheduling additional contact hours within the Engagements.</li> <li>• Different components may be perceived as disconnected, complicated, and not worthwhile, ultimately decreasing success.</li> </ul>

### Hybrid Advising Ecosystem model

<p>Purpose: The Hybrid Ecosystem is very similar to the Hybrid Experience Lab model in merging aspects of the Engagements with elements of the Expert model. In this Ecosystem model, dedicated advisors deliver Advising Labs with groups of students but also act as a concierge, directing students to other resources across Grounds. In practice, this model does not differ substantially from the Engagement Lab model. (Huron Report, page 36)</p>	
Strengths	Concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advising is integrated in a curricular experience for students. This increases both contact time and opportunities for the creation of meaningful engagement.</li> <li>• A shared curriculum for the advising lab ensures all students receive consistent information and hands on experience in a classroom setting.</li> <li>• Advisors are part of a community of practice to focus on advising excellence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual Engagements faculty are responsible for programming the Engagements Experience (non-contact time credited to the student).</li> <li>• Significant operational challenges would ensue with scheduling additional contact hours within the Engagements.</li> <li>• As above: it may be difficult for students to see a connection between their class and the lab occurring in a particular week.</li> </ul>

### Major Challenges

All models require recruiting, hiring, onboarding, developing, managing, and retaining approximately 24 FTEs (though these may not strictly be new hires, depending on specific model implementation and usage of existing personnel and programs). The size of this group is larger than most A&S academic departments and reaching this scale would

require dedicated efforts of a team that does not yet exist for this purpose. Further, there is presently no dedicated workspace for these individuals; we are exploring options for shared workspaces with access to private meeting space. This will need significant cooperation from multiple offices across Grounds.

Although this project is focused on pre-major advising, it has allowed us to identify areas for improvement in our Academic Affairs and Academic Operations efforts. Overall, we seek a culture that is student-centered learning activity rather than policy-focused compliance activity; this will require a significant change management effort and clarity of message from the highest levels.

Finally, a detailed transition plan will need to supplement the adoption of any model; we must continue advising students as we transition to a new end-state. It is likely to take more than two years to fully implement a new advising model. This transition period will be one of dynamic learning and assessment regarding curriculum, space allocation, and staffing strategies.

## Benefits and Impact

A goal of A&S undergraduate advising is that students feel empowered to plan their academic pathways, understand their academic requirements and how to meet them, access resources in a timely and transparent manner, and develop a sense of belonging in a complicated place. While adoption of any of these models will help us address the major findings in the Huron report, any decision will also require trade-offs. Financial analysis indicates that all four models have roughly similar incremental costs, though certain models may allow for cost savings by utilizing existing personnel and structures, for example, allowing the participation of existing exceptional faculty advisors that have a proven record of commitment to advising.

Further, a new model for advising that is student-centered will provide an accurate, consistent, and equitable experience for our students. Properly resourcing the advising effort with motivated and qualified individuals will greatly enhance students' academic experiences as they navigate a complex curriculum.

## Specific Supporting Recommendations

Regardless of the model selected, there are several key recommendations from the Huron report and related discussions.

1. **Create an Advising Community of Practice:** Expert Advisors in or out of a lab structure will be part of a cohort who are trained, assessed, recognized, and promoted based on their performance. These advisors will be supported within a formal community of practice designed to elevate the delivery of advising to an increasingly heterogeneous student population. Advisors will be the student's primary advising point of contact until they arrive in a major/department.
2. **Articulate an approach to pre-major advising that centers students through the provision of accessible and equitable advising from matriculation through entry into a major.** This recommendation addresses the core motivation behind our engagement with Huron: prioritizing the student experience with a focus on integrated undergraduate student advising, explicitly recognizing advising as part of our teaching mission, and positioning advisors as individuals who support both immediate (e.g., course registration advice) and long-term (mentorship) student objectives.
3. **Create a cohort of Advising Fellows so that students receive pre-major advising from people whose primary job role is advising.** This recommendation addresses the problem of a mutually unsatisfying experience with randomly assigned faculty advisors, addresses confusion over whether students talk to a faculty advisor, a departmental advisor, or an association dean; additionally, it supports learning, training, and professional development of advisors.
4. **Hire a Director of Advising to lead the Advising Fellows in a community of practice.** This new leader will ensure accountability, evaluation, assessment, and cohesion across advisors.
5. **Reimagine current Academic Affairs resources to support the new approach to pre-major advising.** Reorganize existing workflows and student advising responsibilities so that they are transparent, easy to navigate, and provide students with human and material (informational) resources to ensure timely progress towards their degree.
6. **Optimize Academic Operations to better support implementation of the new model and operations of Undergraduate Affairs.** The success of a new model requires not only an investment in people but a commitment to investing in communications, simplifying processes, and fully implementing technological innovations to streamline operations directed towards student success.

## Conclusion

The investment of time and resources to understand undergraduate advising in the College of Arts and Sciences occurs at a perfect moment at the University of Virginia. The College has implemented its path-breaking First-Year curriculum, the Engagements; the University is making substantial investments in student-centered advising technology (e.g., Stellic), and the landscape of academic choices and opportunities for students at the University of Virginia continues to evolve. Huron's work provides a broad perspective to help us understand the varied advising needs and challenges faced by our pre-major student body and helps develop strategies allowing us to deliver holistic and effective advising. The models developed by Huron explore four dynamic ways to consider delivering the advising experience; each comes with its own set of risks and benefits. The next steps include decisions about relevant evaluation criteria and a deep dive into implementation strategies.

## Appendix A

### Advising Committee Members

Jenn Bair, Associate Dean, Social Sciences

Judy Giering, Interim Associate Dean for Undergraduate Student Services

Kerry Grannis, Associate Dean and Chief of Staff

Keisha John, Associate Dean, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

David Leblang, Interim Associate Dean for Undergraduate Experience & Strategic Initiatives

Jess Manson, Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Programs, Biology

Kate Neff, Senior Lecturer of Spanish and Spanish Language Program Director

Bo Odom, Director of Academic Programs

Brian Paljug, Undergraduate Curriculum and Enrollment Manager

Janet Spittler, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Director, Engagements Program