

MEMO  
March 2, 2009

To: Ted Schatzki  
College of Arts & Sciences

From: D. Stephen Voss  
Director of Undergraduate Studies  
Department of Political Science

Re: PS Faculty Advising

The Political Science department currently enrolls 452 undergraduate majors. College records show that 267 of those students have already completed at least 60 credit hours, and therefore have advanced far enough in the curriculum to take advantage of disciplinary and/or career advice. At the same time, only 13 faculty members (plus one lecturer) hold primary PS appointments, including five who are assistant profs trying to compile tenure-worthy research records and five who hold significant administrative burdens inside and/or outside the department. The College's decision to relieve us of the task of nuts-and-bolts advising therefore was not merely a faculty convenience, nor even just a way to address student complaints about poor service. For the Political Science department, Dean Hoch's policy change repaired a situation that was untenable, one that left students greatly dissatisfied and significantly undercut faculty research productivity. We must be respectful of the lack of adequate resources when deciding what the PS department feasibly can do, and be careful not to replace one untenable advising system with another.

The best way to adapt to these strained resources, we think, is to develop a system of faculty advising that is not coercive, one that permits students to decide for themselves whether they would like exposure to faculty advice. One of the most unpopular features of our old nuts-and-bolts advising system was that students could not register for classes without being processed by a faculty member, that the advice was mandatory. Students thanked me by the dozen when I added an "electronic advising" option so that their could get their "holds" lifted without having to schedule an appointment. Thus, an advising system that operates on a voluntary basis is not simply an unfortunate compromise mandated by limited resources; it also accommodates the varied needs and preferences of a diverse student body.

That being said, we also recognize that some students who would profit from faculty advising – who, indeed, would appreciate receiving it – may not seek it if left to their own devices. They may be too intimidated, may feel that it's "not their place" to pop up at faculty members' offices and ask for advice about their futures. They may have busy schedules, and not be willing to do the work necessary to identify which faculty member most closely shares their interests. Establishing a voluntary system of faculty advising therefore comes with a parallel responsibility: We need to lessen the student's "information costs" so that they experience as little friction as possible when attempting to obtain advice, and we need to make the seeking of that advice tempting so that students will be willing to seek it out.

To reflect these priorities, the Political Science department proposes to set up a faculty advising plan that consists of the following three components:

- A **"Meet the Profs" series**: As Director of Undergraduate Studies, I have worked with the officers of our disciplinary honorary society (Pi Sigma Alpha) to start a series of lunches during which students can drop by and meet one of our faculty members in a relaxed setting, on a casual basis (see attached). The purpose is to demystify faculty members who otherwise might be intimidating to students, so that majors can see that their professors are regular people who

earnestly wish undergraduates to succeed in life, and also so our majors can learn about the sort of work we do, what our classes are like, and other such information to help with their own curricular and career choices. The first meeting will have pizza and refreshments funded by the PSA budget (which means we have to be concerned about too much enthusiasm as well as too little!). But it is not fair to ask the honors students to keep funding snacks for everyone, nor can we rely on the departmental budget permitting this sort of outlay, so we likely will have to drop the inducements after the series gets off the ground.

- **Better reference materials:** Currently the departmental Web page describes each faculty member's research interests and the professional advisers on our floor are slowly learning what each faculty member does. However, the information on the Web page is primarily intended to present us to the world, and in particular to the disciplinary research community, so it is not organized in a fashion that would be especially useful to undergraduates seeking advice. Nor is it reasonable to require the professional advisors to make all the connections between what we do and what students might wish to ask about. Therefore, we propose expanding the reference materials available to students (as well as to the professional advisers) so that these materials directly connect common topics/careers to the particular faculty members most able to give advice on them. We propose encouraging student visits with some trepidation, given that our faculty size in the subfield of interest to a plurality of our students (Judicial Politics) has sunk to a pathetically small level (one untenured faculty member), our faculty size in the field most useful to students interested in other regions of the world is little better (two untenured faculty members), we no longer have any full-time experts in political thought, and our faculty size in the field of second-greatest interest to majors (International Relations) is also embarrassing (three primary appointments, only one tenured), especially given the obligations placed on IR faculty in graduate training and by the International Studies program. (Only in the field of American politics – of interest to future politicians, consultants, and policymakers – have we come anywhere close to maintaining a research faculty of functional size.) So once again, we need to fear not only student apathy, but also the possibility that students might respond enthusiastically to any invitation to receive advice.
- Finally, we propose maintaining the **Internship Director** position, approved by the College but currently unfilled because our lecturer (Christopher Rice) has temporarily taken over the duties of the office. The administrative requirements of our internship program, both in terms of the supervision and in terms of having a clear contact for outsiders wishing to sponsor interns, requires centralizing responsibility in a single person. The general internship program, as well as the specific legislative internship program, seems to be functioning well. Deciding to continue it, though, means a commitment either to renewing the PS lectureship indefinitely or to maintaining the terms under which the directorship was originally established (i.e., the biennial 1-credit legislative internship seminar being counted as a full course for purposes of calculating teaching load, and the director being guaranteed the PS 399 summer teaching assignment each year).

These proposals have been presented at departmental faculty meetings and, either implicitly or explicitly, our faculty has consented to them. Topher Rice is also exploring the usefulness of NetworkBlue as a way to supplement our advising system through Internet networking. The truth is, though, that I believe an ideal advising system would ask students to express a particular subject interest upon declaring a PS major, so that soon afterward they can receive by email a faculty advisor assignment. If the main barrier to undergrad mentoring is inertia caused by students perceiving that it's inappropriate to go to a faculty member and take up time discussing their futures – which I believe to be the case – then the way to overcome student passivity is to let students know that they “belong” to a particular faculty member and that it is acceptable (if not expected) that they will approach this person for advice. Should our departmental size ever come close to approaching the numbers found at all of the benchmark PS departments, or even the numbers found at the University of Louisville (which isn't a Ph.D.-granting department), that sort of policy might become feasible. It just is not feasible now.