

## Advising Workshop Report

Catherine Owens

On Tuesday, November 29, 2005, fourteen AUI staff and faculty members gathered in Room 04 in Building 10 for a follow-up discussion about advising and pre-registration at AUI. This session was graced by the attendance of the University President, Dr. Benmokhtar, the Dean of Student Affairs, Dr. Belfekih, the Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr. Dahbi, and the Director of the Language Center, Dr. Lahlou. The other key administrator at the meeting was Ms. Ouanaim, Director of Enrolment Services, who was able to provide helpful input on how her office is either constrained or effective in implementing policy, dealing with students, and supporting faculty on this issue.

Many positive proposals were put forward to address the problems noted in both the advising system and the pre-registration process. It may be helpful to report on these separately.

Advising

As follow up to the prior Advising Workshop on Nov. 15, 2005, this session confirmed that the two different types of advising previously discussed (developmental advising and course selection advising) were indeed separate issues, needed separate kinds of support, and were required at different times throughout the students' academic life here. If this separation can be formalised, the advising process could be greatly improved.

As the President said, the mission must be clarified: faculty need to be certain of what advising is, and how it forms part of their job. In support of the advising task that the President expects all faculty to take on, we must develop an Advising Handbook for both students and faculty, as well as training for teachers to become expert advisors. The President was also adamant that tracking students' performance through their degree plans is one of the key responsibilities of the advisor, and that this attention to their advisees' academic progress or failure would form a better early warning system than we presently have to identify students at risk. Additionally, well-trained advisors should be able to prevent the incidence of uncompleted credits for graduation, something that can happen when students are not properly advised.

Another proposal for the improvement of advising is to set up an Academic Advising Unit, a permanently staffed office which would also take responsibility for Quality Assurance, Testing, and Career Development. This unit would ideally manage the student's course selection process and would work in tandem with faculty advising to provide a seamless route through the bureaucracy. As course selection will eventually become an online task, it needs to be seen as simply one step, not the dominant focus, in a student's academic planning and development.

## Pre-Registration

With the experience of pre-registration fresh in people's minds, some of the discussion revolved around how it worked, where it went wrong, and what could be done about it. The attendees experienced relatively few problems with the pre-registration system, although there were faults with on-line access, on-line accuracy of course availability and student records. This contrasts with the many complaints by faculty whose experience with the on-line system was very negative, very time-consuming and very frustrating. These faculty members did not attend the session, but preferred to send emails documenting their problems to the workshop organizer.

A set of proposals for improvement to the pre-registration system focused on the development of the proper on-line program. This program needs to be complete with all course data, updated, and contain accurate student records, displaying immediate and necessary courses for the student to take and showing pre-requisite constraints further along the student's degree plan. A purpose built system like Banner<sup>®</sup> was suggested, which would have to be supported by training and programmed compatibility to AUI needs. The Dean of Student Affairs admitted that a student records and enrolment software package was being examined for potential purchase, but this was not going to happen immediately.

Specific suggestions for improvement included the development of a handbook for faculty on the actual step-by-step process of pre-registration, along with all the requisite support information, such as who to go to for permission, how to calculate academic standing, where to find placement test results, etc. Another idea, which seemed to win favour, was the extension of the pre-registration week to 2 weeks, to give students more time to complete the process.

A further suggestion that would support a new on-line process of registration is to streamline the course sequences and reduce the number of pre-requisites, or rationalize them. Currently, the possibility of programming a system with all the constraints of pre- or co-requisite courses, academic standing, special permission and combinations thereof appears extremely complex. With a review of course sequences and a standardized eligibility to enroll, more and faster choices could be made accessible to students on-line.

## Enrolment Policy

The requirement that students declare a major at the beginning of their academic career seems counter-productive to many AUI faculty. They recognise these problems with the requirement:

- It is an unnecessarily onerous decision to force on many unprepared 17-year-olds, who just don't know;
- The resultant change from major to major throughout their first 2 years here, causing degree plan re-routing, loss of time and money;
- A bureaucratic dilemma for everyone from the student to advisor to enrolment services

Add-Drop week needs re-thinking. The number of students changing, adding and dropping courses and sections throughout the first week of class is unsustainable. Constraining add and drop eligibility by a schedule conflict is suggested.

A suggestion was made that early semester (i.e., 1 through 4) course selection be made by the program coordinator, such that students get no choices in the courses they are enrolled in, with choices left to them only in terms of the class schedule. The opposite suggestion was raised that students choose their courses but leave timetabling up to a computer scheduler.

A suggestion that pre-registration week be replaced by 2 or 3 days of registration immediately before the semester begins was rejected due to the contention that pre-registration data is needed for semester scheduling of courses. However, a closer look at the calendar of semester planning events shows this:

1. Next semester course offerings are sent by schools to enrolment in the sixth week of the semester.
2. Pre-registration for the next semester takes place in the thirteenth week of the semester.
3. Pre-registration numbers are often incomplete, as some students simply do not pre-register.

Therefore, how can semester planning be reliant on pre-registration? Current practice is to base next semester's course offerings on the previous semester of the same period, i.e., Spring 2006 looks like Spring 2005.

## Conclusion

With the on-going need for a coherent system of student records, degree plan routes, graduation requirements and course availability, the only possible solution is a computerized program that can be modified to take into account all AUI constraints. In order to implement that system, a university wide curriculum review can identify the best sequencing and need for pre-requisites. With that established, an office for Academic Advising and other student support services can be activated to ensure smooth operation of the system. This office will ensure that advising by faculty can remain at the level where it is most effective: discussing students' career objectives, study plans, academic interests, potential for finding satisfaction in the programs they choose, and other developmental issues with the student.