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Academic Advising Offers Students Smooth Transitions

May 12, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Very few students come to college with a clear path carved out in their minds. Many questions loom in front of them – What classes should I take? Is my major the right one? What do I need to graduate?



Chandra Shipley

Illinois Wesleyan University's Academic Advising Center, located in Holmes Hall 110 (1312 N. Park St., Bloomington), is a center point for students to get questions answered, and a key resource for all advising on campus.

"An adviser is an advocate for the students," said Chandra Shipley, director of Academic Advising at Illinois Wesleyan. "The goal of advising is to help make the college experience smooth and to offer guidance with academic challenges and choices."

Located in Holmes Hall, the Center provides advising both by appointment and on a drop-in basis. Shipley works in conjunction with faculty academic advisers throughout the campus to help students stay on target toward graduation with a major that reflects their aspirations. "Along with a faculty adviser, Chandra is another voice to help students review her or his options in light of their strengths and goals," said Interim Provost Frank Boyd.

Academic efforts for students with special needs are also handled at the Advising Center, said Shipley, from offering testing facilities to classroom arrangements for students with disabilities.

The Center is also helpful to students who are looking for opportunities beyond graduation. Shipley works with faculty advisers to coordinate **graduate fellowships**. "There hasn't really been a place on the website where students can find all the fellowships with which we work until now," said Shipley. "This is another resource for them."

Staffed by Shipley and a part-time assistant, the Center works in collaboration with the Dean of Students Office to help students make the most of their academic careers, offering **Academic Skills** Series workshops that give students tips on everything from time management to taking effective notes. "Advisers can't make decisions for students when it comes to classes, any more than we can take a test for them," said Shipley. "What we can do is provide a roadmap to solutions."

The Advising Center is a new endeavor at Illinois Wesleyan, founded two years ago with a grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation. Previously, all students were assigned a member of the faculty as a first-year advisor, then students would shift to a faculty member in the department of their chosen major to advise them throughout the rest of their academic career.

Shipley, who became director in 2010, is a resource for faculty advisers who work with sophomores, juniors and seniors. Her office now oversees the First-Year Advising Program, and provides training for faculty members who choose to be first-year academic advisers. "First-year advisers are an important resource for students who are making the transition from high school, and need help adjusting to the academic rigors of a college environment," said Shipley.

The Advising Center also assists with a smoother transition from first-year to sophomore year for students who are undeclared, said Boyd. “The Center is another resource for students who have questions or challenges throughout their academic career, especially for students who are unsure of their path,” he said.

The Center made a difference for junior Matt Bascom, who came to the Advising Center when he was a sophomore. “By using the Academic Advising Center, I was able to create a schedule that I couldn’t be more happy with and solidify my choice to become an environmental studies major,” he said.

The new Center reflects the changing needs of students in the realm of advising, said faculty member Roger Schnaitter, who served as the University’s associate provost during the development of the Advising Center. “There has been a move away from what is called ‘prescriptive advising,’ where a faculty member simply helps students plug classes into a form that will get them to graduation,” said Schnaitter, noting that over the last several decades, advising has moved toward building a long-term relationship between adviser and advisee. “Now there is an understanding that there is a shared responsibility in what is called ‘developmental advising,’ which looks to develop the student as a person who can make choices. It is a skill we hope will serve students throughout their lives.”

Shiple said she loves to meet with students, whether it is to speak about classes, or other challenges they might face. “It isn’t always a question about classes that brings students to the Center,” said Shiple, “and we want them to know they are always welcome.”

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