

## 2021 NSSE Academic Advising Module Open-Ended Response Summary

### Overview

St. Olaf administered the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the Spring of 2021 to first-years and seniors. In addition to the base survey instrument, we chose to add an optional module on academic advising. Of the 678 first-years and seniors who responded to the survey, 290 answered the following open-ended question on the Academic Advising Module: “Regarding academic advising, who has been the most helpful and in what way?” Amongst the respondents, half (145) were first-year students and half were senior students. Out of all the responses, the figure most commonly listed as being helpful in terms of academic advising was academic advisors (33.8%). The second most cited figure was professors (29.7%), some listed specifically by name, and others listed generally (i.e. “my professors”). Out of the first-year respondents, the most commonly listed figure again was academic advisors (35.8%), followed by professors at the college (23.4%). For the senior student population, this trend reversed with 35.8% of students favoring a professor, or professors, while 31.7% listed their advisor. Other figures commonly listed amongst all respondents were family and friends (17.2%), online resources/personal research (6.6%), peers/upperclassmen (5.5%), TRIO SSS advisors/staff (4.8%), and Piper Center staff (3.8%). Again, there were differences between first-years and seniors in these response categories. First-years tended to list family and friends, peers/upperclassmen, and TRIO SSS staff more often than seniors, while senior students were more likely to list the Piper Center and online resources/personal research as their most helpful resource for advising.

### Professors and Academic Advisors

Within their responses, students had the option to explain why the person they chose had been helpful to them. About half of respondents chose to do so. Reasoning was generally similar for students who listed advisors and for students who listed professors; subjects having to do with course planning, general advice, planning and resources, and behavior towards students came up often for both. Reasons did seem to depend on class year, however. For first-year respondents who preferred their advisor, students overwhelmingly listed course planning and general advice, planning and resources as the reasons their advisors were helpful to them. One example of this is shown in a student’s comment: “My assigned advisor was the most helpful because he helped me decide on courses to take and gave me good advice.” For first-year students who listed professors as being the most helpful, reasoning was based most often on the professor offering: information that was specific to their intended major or career path; positive behavior towards the student (welcoming, invested, open); and general advice, planning and resources. Another first-year wrote, “My professors have been very helpful- specifically those that are in the field that I am

planning on pursuing. They have been very open and easy to approach and are always willing to discuss future plans with me.”

Senior respondents' reasoning varied from first-years', especially with regards to their advisor. For seniors who listed their advisor, top reasons included: positive behavior towards the student; information specific to major or future career path; and knowledgeability. For example, one senior stated, “...I have built up a really good relationship with (my academic advisor), and she is in the biology and health professions departments, which is really applicable to my future plans. Whenever I meet with her she provides really useful information to me, and our conversations are always really enjoyable.” Most students who mentioned that their advisor had information specific to their major or career path were on a more specialized track such as nursing or pre-med. For seniors who listed professors, reasons most often cited included: general advice, planning, and resources; opportunities (including research, internships, and jobs etc.); and development of career path/major.

### **Family/Friends and Peers/Upperclassmen**

The third most common category of responses was family/friends. First-year respondents cited that their family and friends were helpful because they had strong knowledge of the respondent, and because they were able to offer guidance and advice. One student explained that their friends and family helped them, “...by knowing me, my interests, and listening to my concerns about my future plans and offering support.” Senior respondents were less likely to list family and friends as being helpful to them with 15% of responses falling into this category (compared to 19.3% for first-year respondents).

Another similar response for students was peers/upperclassmen. Respondents often distinguished the category of peers/upperclassmen from the category of friends, using the word “peers” for students that they have the same classes with or who are on similar academic tracks. Friends, on the other hand, might be peers but might also be other students or people outside the school who do not share the same major or experience as the respondent but are able to offer general advice. The term upperclassmen emerged for any student who was older than the respondent. First-year respondents cited that their peers and upperclassmen were able to offer relevant information and reliability because they had gone through, or were going through, the same situations as the respondent. One student wrote, for example, that upperclassmen peers, “know what needs to be done and have advice on what they would have done differently.” Senior respondents were less likely to mention peers (3.4% compared to 7.6% of first-years). Those who did also mentioned that peers/upperclassmen had relevant and reliable knowledge, with one student describing how they “... received the most help by collaborating and talking with fellow students because we understand each other's situations and desires to fulfill our future aspirations.”

## **TRIO SSS and Piper Center Staff**

First-year and senior respondents both listed the TRIO SSS staff and program in general as being helpful for reasons such as emotional support; academic support and planning; and for displaying positive behavior towards the student such as getting to know them and checking in on them regularly. One senior student wrote: “My TRIO SSS advisor has taken time to get to know me, my needs, my family situation back home, and how all of that impacts my academic experience. They have spent the last four years investing in me, rooting for my success, and doing everything they can to help me achieve my dreams.” This quote emphasizes these students’ need for personalized support, especially for those that face additional challenges. There were several comments from students with learning disabilities who echoed this sentiment, feeling that they were better accommodated when their advising figure understood their situation.

Senior respondents were more likely to list Piper Center staff as being helpful to them than first-years were (5.5% compared to 2.1% of first-years). Senior students cited reasons including finding opportunities and post-grad planning as being the most helpful aspects of the Piper Center to them.

## **Online Resources/Personal Research**

About 6% of respondents listed online resources/personal research as being the most helpful in terms of academic advising. About a third of these responses listed just “myself” or “personal research” with little explanation. Another third mentioned online resources such as “google” or “the internet”. The last third listed college resources such as DegreePath or the course catalog. Some seemed satisfied with this method of advising themselves, while others seemed to imply, or state explicitly, that the resources they had been given elsewhere were inadequate. For instance, one senior student wrote, “Myself, because my advisors have been very unhelpful.” Seniors were more likely than first-years to report online resources/personal research as being the most helpful in terms of academic advising (6.8% versus 3.2%) They were also more likely to list only themselves as being helpful.

## **Negative Feedback**

As mentioned previously, several students referenced figures that were not helpful in terms of their academic advising or stated that no one had been helpful. About 9% of all respondents answered in this way. Senior respondents were about twice as likely to do so (7.6% compared to 4.1% of first-years). The most common figure to be specifically mentioned as unhelpful were academic advisors. These respondents seemed to find that advising figures with whom their

relationship formed naturally were able to offer better advising support than someone assigned to them. One student mentioned that this was “more personalized.” One student said simply that, “Professors that are not assigned to advise me have helped me the most,” perhaps finding the forced nature of the relationship to be the most limiting aspect of seeking advice from their assigned advisor.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, students seemed to value personalized, relevant information very highly. They appreciated when their advising figure of choice knew them well, was accessible to them, and made advising conversations enjoyable by being open and welcoming. Students with specific needs or challenges felt most helped when their advising figure understood this about them and could help accommodate their unique situation. Advising seemed to be effective for many students when it began as, or became, a more informal connection in which students felt comfortable to discuss a variety of topics. Comments such as, “(my professor) is ALWAYS willing to help and meet with students, whether it is for class material or advising or job/research/internship or even just to chat,” stress the importance of impromptu and informal advising. Students on a specific track (e.g., nursing or pre-med) valued concrete advice on how to achieve their goals and course planning that would allow them to complete their degree efficiently. Many students who did not find these traits in their advisor or professors were able to form relationships with other advising figures on campus or off campus such as peers or other St. Olaf resources such as TRIO SSS. Others students felt compelled to work things out for themselves, using online resources and their own planning skills to chart a course through their college career. For the most part, this was not students’ preferred method of guidance; it occurred instead out of necessity if they did not find adequate resources to meet their needs.