

Mason's New Coaching and Advising Roles and Outcomes Explained

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While the attainment for a college education continues to rise in the United States and Virginia has among the highest rate of educational attainment, college student demographics have shifted significantly. In fact, the number of “traditional” college students nationwide—those between the ages of 18 to 22 who and live on campus—has begun to shrink as students from a much broader spectrum of race, ethnicity, age groups, social and economic backgrounds, and career stages continue to increase.

Mason is at the forefront of serving this diverse and fast-changing student population. Mason students come from all walks of life, which is why they need a university that caters to the unique challenges they face, such as limited time, financial resources, or life responsibilities other than their education. Mason students can be single parents who are looking to better their family's life; middle-career adults trying to transition into another industry that provides more job satisfaction; recent high school graduates who work full-time to make ends meet; veterans who have been on multiple deployments and are adjusting to civilian life; or individuals who are responsible for the care of a family members—all of whom are looking to a university to understand their individual needs. And one of the greatest services Mason can offer these students is an individual who listens and provides guidance for all parts of their lives.

“Mason has a diverse student population. Many are transfer or first-generation students and their needs are beyond academic advising,” Provost S. David Wu said. “In addition to academic support and planning, they need guidance on how to plan finances, manage their time, and balance their commitments. They need well-thought-out and comprehensive support to achieve ultimate success and it is our responsibility to help them.”

Historically, student support networks have been siloed across different administrative departments and services, resulting in “the Mason Shuffle” with students often moving from office to office just to resolve routine affairs. About three years ago, the university envisioned a new model to assist students centered around their critical needs with the goal to streamline services and establish a support system focusing on student success. The first roll-out of this concept was the Mason Student Service Center located in SUB I, a fully integrated one-stop-shop for key student services, which opened in fall 2019. The next step is building a new model of student support that combines academic advising and college life coaching through the Mason Care Network.

Differences Between Advising and Coaching

College advisors have always played an important role helping students navigate the degree process. Historically, an academic advisor's role has included helping students register for courses and choose a major and monitoring degree progress. Increasingly advisors are still expected to take on those tasks, but also to handle a wider range of student needs—financial concerns, mental-health issues, career alignment, and

extracurricular opportunities. To aid Mason students with these and other concerns, the university will soon implement a revised academic advising and college coaching service.

“We are moving to a combined coaching/advising integration starting with all incoming students,” Rose Pascarell, vice president of University Life, said. “If we put the student experience at the center of our work, we know that students don’t separate out their concerns, questions, or the advice they seek, whether it be academic, co-curricular, or community resources. Our university structures tend to force that separation, and that’s what we hope to eliminate. Our hope is that a combined coaching/advising network will decrease obstacles and increase student success.”

What distinguishes coaching from advising is that coaching is a co-creative process to determine what success looks like for each individual and takes a proactive approach to both short- and long-term success. Coaches will focus primarily on a student’s first year at Mason, with ongoing ties through their academic career, and support the student across a wide breadth of topics and needs, including exploratory academic planning, major fit, engagement and well-being, goal setting, and initial career exploration. In addition to making sure students are aware of various resources and how to engage with them effectively, coaches will focus on building student motivation and comfort with asking for help. Finally, coaches will work with students to integrate what they learned so they can apply it to future situations and build skills for long-term success. The academic advisor will provide ongoing support more related to the student’s college and major area of study, encouragement for participating in Mason Impact opportunities, laying out a course plan to ensure student stays on track for milestones and graduation, and strategic career planning.

Streamlining Services and New Roles

How will students experience the Mason Care Network? Once a student is accepted into Mason, they will be assigned a coach who will build a fundamental understanding of their background, career goals, financial needs, or other important details relevant to their success at Mason and beyond. As students settle into a major, they will later receive coordinated guidance from an academic advisor who will provide support for discipline-specific academic needs.

The new model requires that all students meet with their coach during their first year. By creating a plan, getting support for choosing a major that aligns with their interests and career plans, and getting support and resources that are relevant to their lives in and out of school, Mason plans to start its student on the path to success.

As for faculty and staff, what is their role in this new reality?

“Coaching and advising are complementary roles,” Bethany Usher, associate provost for undergraduate education, said. “Some professional advisors will be trained in

coaching and will concentrate on supporting students who are new to Mason. Others will concentrate on supporting students in their programs as they get deeply involved in their majors and minors, and then make the transition to professional work after they graduate. Some faculty may train as advisors and others will concentrate on mentoring students in research or other Mason Impact activities, giving professional advice in their field and otherwise supporting their students.”

Presently, cross-functional teams with representatives across the academic colleges and other units are working to identify a shared training process and methodology that will be used with all Mason team members who coach and advise students, both in the onboarding phase and on continuing basis. Advisers currently receive opt-in training through the Mason Advisor Certificate (MAC) certificate and other ongoing opportunities sponsored by the Mason Academic Advisor Network (MAAN), and a first wave of coaching methodology training has recently occurred as part of the ADVANCE Program. As the process moves forward and the university develops a holistic training model, coaches and advisors will be cross-trained in student needs and technology.

How will technology help? Each interaction the student has with a coach or an adviser will be documented in an integrated software program that can track student appointments, collate and compare notes from previous coaching/advising visits, and identify students who need additional support or opportunities. The goal is to integrate technology so information about student progress and support can be shared by everyone who coaches or advises a student, reducing the “Mason Shuffle” and providing a seamless experience. This will require all members of the Mason Care Network to be cross-trained so students are getting consistent messages and are not “shuffled” between multiple offices to get their needs met.

The system itself is a collaboration between University Life, Undergraduate Education, and the academic units to ensure coaching and advising will be consistent for all students.

“All team members who coach and advise students will use common technology to support holistic case management and shared information to best support the students across our workstreams, and training on technology will be a part of onboarding,” Pascarell said.

Using the tools, students will be able to track their own progress, review information from their coaching and advising sessions, make appointments with their coach or advisor, and get directly in touch with the relevant person for help in answering questions.

Goals and Outcomes

In working with students to understand their strengths and challenges, as well as seeking and leveraging the support they need, Mason believes student success will be seen in a variety of areas: an increase in persistence, higher graduation rates, and a

stronger satisfaction with their Mason experience. The implementation of the new program ensures that no student falls through the cracks and is left on their own to navigate their academic career. There will be consistent quality of coaching and advising for all undergraduate students and standard training for all coaches and advisors.

“Our goal is that each student has at least one person who supports them across their Mason experience, working with them to reach their goals and complete their degree,” Sally Lorentson, associate dean of student life, said.

A previous interview with Sally Lorentson, associate dean of student life, and Dr. Sharon Caraballo, associate dean of undergraduate programs in the Volgenau School of Engineering, about the advising and coaching portions of Student Experience Redesign and how they will impact students can be [found here](#).