

## **Academic Planning at SLU: Cultivating Intentionality**

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Critical to our practice of “advising as teaching” is the cultivation in students of the habits of purposeful intention in the design of their academic pursuits. The paradigm shift from academic advising to academic planning entails a crucial exchange of responsibility for students’ academic programs from faculty advisors to students themselves. A system of academic *advising* inherently puts the faculty advisor in the primary position. In this system, advisors lead students through the academic program where the attention of both faculty and students can tend to drift to the necessity of fulfilling graduation requirements. A system of academic *planning* encourages students to assume a primary role in their own academic pursuits, with the focus being on the students’ evolving understanding of their intellectual interests.

Our current system of academic advising at SLU *requires* only one meeting between advisor and student per semester. During registration, which usually begins around the tenth week of classes, students must meet with their advisor to discuss their course choices in order to obtain a PIN that will enable them to activate the electronic registration system, the Academic Planning and Registration system (APR). During these meetings, advisors and advisees might discuss the student’s progress toward graduation in terms of fulfilling distribution and major and minor requirements. Students might also meet with their advisor if they add or drop classes during the first week of classes,

withdraw from a class any time during the semester, or if they petition to the Academic Petitions Committee, since all of these actions require an advisor's signature.

While any one of these occasions might engender fruitful conversation between advisor and advisee, inherent in this advising system is the construction of the advisor/advisee relationship as one that is managerial in nature, attending to problems and processes on an "as-needed" basis. This model of advising falls into the category that Burns Crookston has referred to as "prescriptive," one which vests advisors with authority as problem-solvers and dispensers of advice.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, prescriptive advising limits students' ability to develop intellectually and personally because it does not ask them to think about their interests and direction beyond a specific problem or situation.

Crookston's recommendation, which has since been adopted by the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), is to think about advising as one might think about teaching. He proposes a model of "developmental" advising that gives advisors and students equal responsibility for addressing students' academic lives and puts at its focus questions about the broader learning process rather than simply problem solving. Thus, instead of an advisor asking "What can I do for you?" advisors and students might together consider such questions as "What should the student learn?" and "How might the learning take place?"<sup>2</sup> In his chapter "Advising as Teaching," Gary L. Kramer concludes that the elements of the model of developmental advising can "lead to student learning, rather than merely to advisors' supplying answers to specific questions; students' involvement in their own academic and career futures; and a collaborative planning that engages and motivates students to plan for success through strategic and quality efforts."<sup>3</sup>

The notion of academic *planning* here is not one that imagines that students know exactly which course of study or which career path to pursue or one that expects that students will create a specific plan and then follow it to the letter in the ensuing four years. Rather, this vision of academic planning requires students to think about their education, both curricular and cocurricular, in its broadest terms. Students who engage in this kind of work begin with goal setting (ranging from very general goals to goals that focus on a specific course of study geared toward a definite destination) and then work with faculty advisors to construct a plan that enables them to achieve these goals. Here faculty advisors serve as mentors or guides. They still help students negotiate the requirements for graduation, but that role becomes secondary to that of encouraging students to imagine their course of study in the context of the goals of the liberal arts education and to consider the implications of the specific choices they make in any given semester. While many advisors might be concerned that engaging in a more developmental model of advising is too complex in its nature, Richard Light, of the Harvard Assessment Project, argues that this is not necessarily so: “One of the most powerful contributions any adviser can make is simply to encourage each student, as early as possible, to make connections between what goes on inside and outside of class.... Advisors play a critical role in this context because ... most students don’t think of making the connections themselves.... [Implementing this form of advising] simply requires that a human being called an advisor make a suggestion to a young student. And it takes all of one minute.”<sup>4</sup>

The work of academic planning includes the process of reflection whereby at a series of specific moments, students take stock of the effectiveness of their plan as well as

revisit their goals and revise them as needed. Reflection is critical to intellectual growth; asking our students to engage in this work encourages them to pursue fuller understanding of their choices and nurtures in them a sense of the significance of the work they're doing. As John Zubizarreta has argued: "... more enriched learning is likely to occur if the student is encouraged to come to terms self-consciously over the duration of an academic endeavor -- for example, a semester course ... or the completion of a degree -- with essential questions about learning itself..."<sup>5</sup> At the heart of this process of reflection is constant attention to the questions "why are you here?" and "what is the value in the particular course of action you have chosen?"

In earlier thinking about how we practice advising at SLU, it was this notion of the developmental potential of advising that shaped the design of the APR system to include a site for a "working list" and to require that students get a PIN from their advisor to initiate the registration process. Much of the conversation the Registration working group had around the issue of the PIN was how it would function differently than the signature required of advisors in the old registration process. The question was how to ensure that the PIN would not simply serve as an electronic advisor's "signature," but would move the advising process forward by creating an opening for conversation between advisor and advisee. The Registration working group decided to use the PIN in conjunction with the creation of a space conscientiously entitled a "working list." Thus the working list was not a list of "the four courses I must have this semester" but a space for students to lay out a variety of possibilities, a menu of course options that one might then discuss with one's advisor. In addition, the Registration group extended the academic planning time for students and advisors from one week to two. In the old

registration system, having only a single week to meet with advisees made it difficult to have meaningful conversations about course choices. The hope with both the working list and the extended academic planning period was that students and their advisors would have the time not only to address the issues around course choices for that particular semester, but that they could begin to consider longer term academic planning as well. For example, a student might list ten courses that look appealing and he or she might then discuss with the advisor such issues as the connection between these choices, which combinations of courses might be taken together, or when the student might take the courses. The positive nature of the feedback about APR in general and specific feedback about the value of the “working list” and the longer academic planning period suggest that this change provided a good first step toward cultivating in our students the habits of “purposeful engagement” critical to a system of academic planning.

To move beyond the first step of APR to a more developmental mode of academic planning requires a more systematic approach to academic planning in general. Our plan is to ask students to engage in series of five reflective exercises over the course of their academic career at SLU. [See appendix.] The first is an “exploratory goals essay,” which asks first year students in the summer prior to matriculation to consider SLU’s “Aims and Objectives” statement and to set goals for themselves that are generated in the context of thinking about the University’s mission as a liberal arts institution. In this instance, the essay is an attempt on the students’ part to seek the sources of their academic interests and to determine where those coincide with courses and programs offered at SLU. Writing the essay is not simply a matter of rehearsing a personal statement from a college application. Rather it is the means or process by which students will come to know, or at

least learn to ask themselves, why they want to be *here*. Done in conjunction with creating a “working list” for fall courses, the “exploratory goals essay” has the potential to shape a more meaningful selection of initial courses. At the end of the first year, students will be required to revisit the goals essay they wrote in the summer in the form of a letter to their advisor. In this “goals revision” exercise, students would assess the relevance of the goals they set for themselves in the previous summer in light of their experiences and who they’ve become in the intervening time.

As students move beyond the first year, it is imperative that we provide them with occasion to continually reflect back on their goals and to project forward in their planning. A critical opportunity for reflection comes during the sophomore year when students declare a major. In our current system, this important decision is marked by the perfunctory transactional exercise of having a card signed by the new advisor and the chairperson in the major department. The “major declaration” reflective exercise asks that the process of choosing the major includes careful consideration of the rationale for that choice in the form of a letter to the prospective advisor. The goal here is to lay the groundwork for intentional engagement with the major. As students gain more experience in their major, the key work of the junior year would be creating the “SYE prospectus,” a formal proposal to the advisor about how they will spend their senior year. In this instance students must imagine the senior year as a culminating experience, a means of bringing together four years of study, cocurricular activities, and/or experiences at SLU. This would not necessarily mean incorporating the sum total of one’s activities into a single project, but rather would provide the occasion for considering the relationships between these activities and making decisions about which elements to focus on and to

integrate in meaningful ways. The final reflective exercise is one that necessitates “looking back” to assess experiences and accomplishments. This final reflection asks students to focus on a single experience or series of experiences as a means of taking stock of their career at SLU.

Given that an important element of a developmental model of advising is the collaborative relationship between students and advisors, the use of reflective exercises becomes all the more significant when students share them with their advisors. Note that while the reflective writings are addressed *to* the academic advisor, they aren't necessarily designed *for* him or her. The exercises are primarily for the students themselves, a way of encouraging and cultivating reflection as a key component of the academic planning process. While advisors will read and perhaps even comment on the various documents their advisees produce, they won't assess them in any way. Rather, the advisors' role in this process is to encourage and guide students along as they do the work of academic planning. Asking students to engage in reflective writing and asking advisors to read such documents fosters better communication, more thoughtful dialogue, and ultimately more meaningful interaction between advisors and advisees.

One means by which to incorporate reflective writing into a more systematic approach to academic planning is through the use of electronic portfolios. For almost two decades, faculty and students in institutions of higher learning throughout the nation have used portfolios as a site to showcase best work (determined through a careful process of *collection* and *selection*) and as a site of *reflection* on that work and on broader questions of academic and vocational purpose.<sup>6</sup> More recently, institutions have turned to the electronic medium to enhance the portfolio project because of its interactive and

integrative abilities. More specifically, electronic portfolios (or “eportfolios”) immeasurably improve the ability to store and share work -- which can include papers, images, PowerPoint presentations, and videos, among others -- immeasurably, thus enhancing the portfolio’s usefulness. Ultimately, the eportfolio has the potential to encourage self-assessment that deepens students’ understanding of what they have learned and of the place of that learning in their broader academic planning.

In the fall of 2005 we will launch a pilot electronic portfolio project at SLU. Some three to five FYP colleges will require students to use Angel eportfolio in lieu of the traditional paper portfolio usually required in the FYP. As they do with the paper portfolio, students will archive papers and other assignments from the course. In addition, while individual colleges might tailor the use of the eportfolio to their own course needs, each college will use the eportfolio as a site of reflection as students strive to achieve the learning goals of the FYP through specific assignments. Further, students will use the eportfolio to engage in academic planning and assessment. While traditionally, the portfolio has been a site of collection, selection, and reflection, we propose to add the element of *projection*, the thinking ahead that incorporates goal setting and planning as outlined above.<sup>7</sup> In the pilot project, each student will respond to the reflective exercises designed for goal setting and longer term academic planning at the beginning of the semester, and to the reflection upon and revision of goals and plans at the end. Outside of the FYP, we will also have a number of major advisors using electronic portfolios with sophomore, junior, and senior advisees. In these cases, students will address the reflective exercise that is appropriate to their current academic situation. In the end, the goal is to

assess the project at the end of the academic year, to revise as needed, and work toward full implementation of electronic portfolios within the next couple of years.

As a faculty we often express the desire for more engaged and more serious students, students who will take advantage of all the university has to offer them, students who will make our world a better place in which to live. Ultimately, we cannot expect that those students will materialize out of nowhere, or that our current students will become all of these things on their own. It is our job to compel our students to be better, to challenge their complacency where it exists and the thoughtlessness with which many approach their liberal arts education. In its “Aims and Objectives” SLU proposes to “provide an education that fosters in students an open, inquiring and disciplined mind, well informed through broad exposure to basic areas of knowledge; an enthusiasm for lifelong learning; self-confidence and self-knowledge; a respect for differing opinions and for free discussion of those opinions; and an ability to use information logically and to evaluate alternative points of view.” At the root of these goals lies thoughtful reflection, and that kind of intellectual maturity that must be consciously cultivated. While this cultivation occurs in a variety of ways across the curriculum, it has its greatest potential and its broadest application in the academic planning process.

Faculty interested in helping to shape the future of academic planning at SLU are encouraged to incorporate either the reflective advising prompts or the electronic portfolio into their work with advisees. Given that both of these projects are in the pilot phase, an individual advisor’s work with the prompts or with eportfolios can be open to interpretation and as flexible as possible. Advisors should feel free to contact Liz Regosin, Director of Academic Advising, for assistance with either project. Faculty

engaged in other advising practices that contribute to the cultivation of student intentionality in academic planning are also invited to share their work with Liz.

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<sup>1</sup> Burns Crookston, "A Developmental View of Academic Advising as Teaching," *Journal of College Student Personnel* vol. 13, (1972): 12-17.

<sup>2</sup> Martha K. Hemwall and Kent C. Trachte, "Academic Advising and a Learning Paradigm" in *Advising and Learning: Academic Advising from the Perspective of Small Colleges and Universities* (NACADA 2003), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Gary L. Kramer, "Advising as Teaching," in *Faculty Advising Examined* (Bolton, Massachusetts: Anchor Publishing Co., Inc., 2003), 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> "Listening to Students: Richard J. Light Talks to Charles C. Shroeder," *About Campus* (July-August 2002): 19.

<sup>5</sup> John Zubizarreta, *The Learning Portfolio: Reflective Practice for Improving Student Learning* (Bolton, Massachusetts: Anchor Publishing Co., Inc., 2004), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Yancey, "Digitized Student Portfolios" in Barbara L. Cambridge, ed., *Electronic Portfolios: Emerging Practices in Student, Faculty, and Institutional Learning* (American Association for Higher Education 2001), 15-20.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Skidmore College's "Reflection and Projection" assignment, a part of the First Year Experience.

## Appendix

### Advising Prompts

**I. Exploratory Goals Essay** (*First Year, focused writing about initial goals. This would occur in the summer before first year, during the advising period for registration. Students will have read the Aims and Objectives statement. This essay in its nature is an attempt on the students' part to seek the sources of their academic interests and where those coincide with courses and programs offered to them at SLU. Writing this essay is not simply a matter of rehearsing a personal statement from a college application. Rather, writing the exploratory essay is the means or the process by which students will come to know why they want to be here.*)

SLU's "Aims and Objectives" statement explains that: "St. Lawrence seeks to provide an education that fosters in students an open, inquiring and disciplined mind, well informed through broad exposure to basic areas of knowledge; an enthusiasm for life-long learning; self-confidence and self-knowledge; a respect for differing opinions and for free discussion of those opinions; and an ability to use information logically and to evaluate alternative points of view."

- 1) What aspect of the broad liberal arts mission brought you to St. Lawrence?
- 2) What do you hope to accomplish while you're here beyond the immediate goal of earning a diploma?
- 3) Which among the many courses of study available at SLU interest you at the moment?
- 4) Which among the many cocurricular opportunities at SLU might you be interested in pursuing?
- 5) What are the sources of these interests from your pre-SLU experiences?

**II. Goals Revision** (*End of the second semester of the first year. This assignment asks students to revisit the goals essay they wrote in the summer in the form of a letter to their advisor. The letter is an appropriate rhetorical device in this instance because it gives the students a clear sense of audience that helps them to understand their purpose in writing the assignment. They can count on some shared knowledge with this audience of their learning experiences in the first year. The ultimate aim of the letter is to get students to reflect on the goals they set for themselves over summer and to assess the relevance of those goals in light of their experiences and who they've become in the intervening time. Given that students often do not have FYS with their FYP advisor, crafting this letter offers students the opportunity to reconnect with their advisor. We could imagine training mentors to conduct letter-writing workshops.*)

Reread the original goals you sketched out last summer. Do you still recognize the person who composed the original essay? How is he or she different from the person you've become in the meantime? What are the agents or sources for those changes (think:

courses, teachers, mentors, cocurricular experiences...) Write a letter to your FYP advisor, who knew that former self, about the person that you've become.

**III. Major Declaration** (*Writing a letter about declaring a major moves us beyond the perfunctory transactional exercise of having a card signed. This assignment asks students to consider why they've chosen a particular major and to offer a rationale for doing so. The goal here is to lay the groundwork for a more intentional engagement with the major.*)

Compose a letter to your prospective advisor about choosing that particular major. (cc prospective department chair and current advisor) List the courses you've already taken in that department. In addition, describe formative learning experiences in those classes and outside of them that helped to lead you to this decision. Make an effort to explain how this major might relate to your cocurricular and/or vocational interests.

**IV. SYE Prospectus** (*Junior year. This is a project that will potentially take some time to plan and execute. It takes the form of a formal proposal to emphasize the seriousness with which one might approach the senior year and an SYE as a culminating experience.*)

Your senior year allows you to integrate many of the academic and cocurricular experiences you've had at SLU. As you think about this final year, imagine a project that would allow you to pull together your interests and to work closely with a faculty mentor. You might think about how your goals have evolved since your first year at SLU. Talk to your advisor about how this project might look.

Write a formal proposal to your advisor about how you will spend your senior year. What sorts of choices will you make in your senior year that will bring together your current interests and passions both inside and outside the classroom? What courses or academic projects do you plan to undertake that reflect a kind of culmination of your four years of study? What sorts of co-curricular activities will you be involved in that both complement your academic work and prepare you for the path you envision yourself on after graduation? Look back at the first reflection you wrote as a first-year student. How does this plan for your senior year reflect your growth and evolution at SLU?

Specific issues to consider addressing:

- If you are engaging in an independent study or honors project, write a prospectus for that project that describes it in significant detail.
- If you're taking a senior seminar, explain in some detail how the work you will do in that course will represent the culmination of what you've learned in your major and beyond.
- Explain the significance of your co-curricular activities, either in terms of your academic pursuits or other passions you have.

**V. Looking Back** (*Sometime during the second semester of the senior year. As students finish up SYE or other significant projects and engage in making plans for the future, it's a good time to think back and to assess their experiences and accomplishments. This final reflection asks students to focus on a single experience or series of experiences as means of taking stock.*)

Write a letter to someone who has had significant impact on you while you've been at St. Lawrence. Think back on your time at SLU and how it has affected who you are today. Complete the following: "There's something I need to tell you..." The "something" can be about a single thing like a book you read or a class you took that changed the way you think or an experience that influenced you in some significant way. It might be about a number of these things combined. Write about how this "something" affected you the way it did and why it did. Think about it in relation to the goals you set for yourself early on. Did you accomplish all you set out to do? Knowing all that you do, how might you revise those goals now?