Pilot Proposal
Center for Exploratory Students

Created by the
Center for Students in Transition Implementation Team
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Overview
This report outlines a pilot program for the *Center for Exploratory Students*, aimed at providing services and interventions for students in transition at the University of Minnesota. The pilot is a step towards implementing the model described in the original report *Toward a Center for Academic Planning and Exploration* (2008) submitted to the Student Services Advisory Committee in April 2008. The Implementation Committee proposes the following recommendations for a 2009-2010 program pilot for a center for students in transition

**Executive Summary**

**Recommendation 1: Leadership**
The committee recommends hiring a permanent director for the Center as soon as possible. Ideally, this person will be in place by the summer of 2010 to ensure the continued success of the pilot and participate in the hiring and creation of the permanent center. In the meanwhile, temporary leadership duties should be assigned.

**Recommendation 2: Allocate Pilot Space**
For the pilot to be viable there needs to be a physical space dedicated to delivering pilot services. The committee recommends using unallocated space in Appleby Hall during this transition period. This allows for a central and visible location for student referrals and is close to the location for the future site.

**Recommendation 3: Pilot Service Delivery**
The committee recommends providing to varying degrees each type of service outlined in the original report. The core service of the pilot will be the individual student appointments. The individual appointment is an opportunity to create a tangible action plan tailored to the specific needs of each student to guide them through the decision-making process. This intensive process of assessment, multiple meetings and action-plan development provides a level of service beyond the University’s current capacities. Additional services include individual assessments, including a general intake questionnaire; a resource library; leveraging existing workshops and classes; and exploring a peer mentoring component.

**Recommendation 4: Staffing the Pilot**
It is essential that the pilot have dedicated staff to implement the services outlined above. As the primary pilot staff, the committee recommends assigning four current academic advisers and/or career counselors to serve a 50% appointment for the duration of the pilot. These positions will provide individual student appointments and develop innovative strategies for service delivery. This model allows a unique professional development opportunity for staff, a range of campus involvement and more diverse styles and perspectives regarding effective service strategies.

**Recommendation 5: Students Served through the Center**
There are three primary ways students can access the pilot services for the first year:
- **Referrals:** advisers and student services staff may refer students to the center
- **Targeted Group:** Current students who are at sophomore status and have not yet declared a major. These students will also include students who were denied secondary admission into a major or college.
- **Walk-Ins:** students may self-refer to the center

**Recommendation 6: Steering Committee**
A steering committee of key stakeholders from across campus should be established to oversee the pilot and Center’s future direction.

**Recommendation 7: Future Direction**
The committee recommends that the University consider moving towards an assigned cohort of exploratory students identified at the point of admissions to be advised through the Center.
Highlights from Original Report:  
*Toward a Center for Academic Planning and Exploration*

The following highlights provide a brief summary of the original report submitted to the Student Services Advisory Committee in May, 2008. Additional highlights throughout the report are italicized.

The original report proposes the establishment of a center in order to achieve two aims critical to advancing excellence in undergraduate education and the achievement of our University retention and graduation objectives:

1) To provide targeted, “high-touch” academic transition support for those individual students and undergraduate cohorts (totaling more than 3750 students during the first year) that will most benefit from such assistance.

2) To provide and/or coordinate campus-level engagement opportunities for students in academic transition. The mission of the Center is to assist students in transition to move from ineffective or unstructured academic exploration to structured opportunities facilitating development of the knowledge, skills, and habits necessary for successful and engaged educational planning that will put them on the path to graduation. (p.3)

**Population Served**

In order to maximize the University’s return on investment, we recommend the Center focus its cohort support efforts on those transitioning student groups most likely to benefit in measurable ways from the efforts of a centralized campus unit. Although many cohorts might be considered for such support, our analysis indicates three groups should be selected at the outset:

- Strongly Undecided Students
- Transitioning Students (undergraduates considering options between/among Colleges)
- Competitive Major Students

Because many students who might benefit from participatory exploration of their educational options are not included in the student cohorts above, our working group feels it is also important for transitioning students to have an opportunity to self-identify and access Center services designed to guide undergraduates through the stages of career and major exploration by means of engagement opportunities and reflection. We also believe college and campus support units should have the opportunity to refer undergraduates who might benefit from the Center’s services.

**Unique Features and Benefits**

- Addresses current unmet student need
- Provides additional student services professionals to focus attention on students most in need of support to reach institutional goals
- Makes visible a commitment to undergraduate student success at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
- Provides a model of integrative services addressing the multiple needs of the individual student
- Establishes a collaborative staffing model

**Principles to Guide the Operation of the Center**

1) All services are designed and offered to be helpful to the diverse needs of all the students enrolled at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus. All undergraduate students will have access to the Center’s services, although as described, some subpopulations of students will be especially recruited.

2) Services are to be designed on a partnership model, so that multiple resources of the University can efficiently be brought to bear upon each individual student. Opportunities for partnership will be especially important among the various services housed in the building, so that the vision for the building can be realized.

3) Services are to be designed in a way that increases overall campus effectiveness in helping undergraduate students succeed. Staff structuring (see section below) will facilitate staff development across the campus. The research mission (see below) will similar enhance staff development across the campus. Furthermore the proposed partnership model will ensure sharing of good practices across departments and colleges.

4) Services are designed to be attractive to students. Considerable effort will go into “marketing” these services to students and to the campus at large, with the result that students will want to engage in these services, since there will develop a general consensus that good things happen in “that building” to the students who go there ready to do their part.
Purpose of the Pilot:
The goal of the pilot is to develop innovative and effective strategies that provide the foundation for the full Center. The focus is on offering the desired services outlined in the original report to assist transitioning students.

Guiding Questions for the Pilot:
- What strategies are most effective with different populations in transition?
- How do student motivation and accountability affect the delivery of services?
- To what degree does the Center provide a value-added service to the undergraduate experience?

Current Challenges:
The recent economic situation has posed significant challenges to fully realizing the vision outlined in the original report. This pilot program is based on the assumption that there are limited resources available at this time to support a new initiative, yet the purpose and need for this type of center is still relevant and necessary to enhance student success on the Twin Cities campus. In addition, the opening of the Science Teaching and Student Services Center in fall 2010 places a sense of urgency to this work. Although the timing for this initiative is difficult, a pilot program offering the desired services for transitioning students prior to opening the new building will be invaluable.

Research:
The Implementation Committee chose to review four institutions who have successfully implemented a center similar to our proposed model. The institutions are listed below with a brief statement as to their selection, followed by a summary of the key take-aways from this analysis: (see Appendix A for a full comparison)

- University of Texas at Austin, highly regarded advising services and in the process of building a similar service
- The Ohio State University, peer-institution and recent gains in undergraduate retention
- University of Cincinnati, Exploratory Services recognized by the National Academic Advising Association as a top program for special populations
- Indiana University, peer-institution with a slightly different approach that may provide an alternative

Each of these institutions represents a slightly different approach to working with students in transition, referred to by all four as exploring students. Three of the four institutions allow students to self-select “exploring” during the admissions process (the Indiana model will be addressed later). From this, they are assigned a primary adviser based in exploratory services and allowed to transfer out once a major selection is made. The benefits were identified not only for the students but also for advising staff in the center that desire their “own” students. This approach differs from the U of M proposal in that we have been strictly focused on a referral-based service. Regarding location within the university structure, these centers represent three approaches. One center is a stand-alone college, the second is a unit within a college but serving all students and the third is housed as a service under enrollment management.

Indiana University is unique in that it has most first-year students admitted into University Division. Rather than separating out the undecided students, Indiana provides resources for these students and advisers online to help them navigate the decision-making process. This allows any academic adviser to work with transitioning students as part of their existing caseload.

The committee also recognized the value of consulting with programs comprised of similar type of structures within the University of Minnesota, mainly the University Honors Program (UHP) and the SMART Commons. UHP is a central unit that advises students outside of the collegiate model. They have implemented a shared staffing model with college advisers and a shared budget model that may provide helpful information as the Center moves forward. The SMART Commons initiative is similar to the Center in that it is a committee-developed model, which then went on to hire a director to run the department. Because of the current budgetary constraints, it will not be possible to hire a director in the near future. The SMART Commons model leveraged the work of the committee and key stakeholders, identified existing services as early pilots and assessed the
impact of the early pilots on student success. Other helpful models that have demonstrated campus success include the Learning Abroad Center and the Health Career Center.

PILOT RECOMMENDATIONS
The Implementation Committee proposes the following recommendations for a 2009-2010 program pilot for a center for students in transition.

Recommendation 1: Leadership
The committee recommends hiring a permanent director for the Center as soon as possible. Ideally, this person will be in place by the summer of 2010 to ensure the continued success of the pilot and participate in the hiring and creation of the permanent center. Without the option of hiring a permanent director at this time, the committee recommends appointing a shared model of leadership between an individual from central Undergraduate Education and an individual from a collegiate unit. These two staff will coordinate the continued development and implementation of the Center and continue to garner support across campus from key stakeholders.

Recommendation 2: Allocate Pilot Space
For the pilot to be viable there needs to be a physical space dedicated to delivering these services. The committee recommends using unallocated space in Appleby Hall during this transition period. This allows for a central and visible location for student referrals and closely mirrors the location for the future site. Space for the start of a resource room and two offices for private appointments are essential.

Recommendation 3: Pilot Service Delivery
The committee recommends providing each type of service to some degree to allow innovation and creativity in service delivery prior to the establishment of the Center.

Individual Student Appointments
The goal in individual sessions will be to develop an individualized academic action plan. This will allow the student to create exploratory goals and objectives based upon enhanced self-understanding. Follow-up appointments and referrals will be required to determine the viability of identified preliminary major choices. The goal, reached over the period of several intensive sessions—each building upon the previous meetings—will be an action plan that can be incorporated into GradPlanner and other planning tools and activities. In a sense, the advisor will create a highly structured and rigorously personalized syllabus blending educational and developmental goals that will require ongoing accountability from the undergraduate.

The opportunity to meet individually with the Center staff is pivotal to the pilot’s success. The committee felt strongly that to launch a pilot without this essential component of the future Center would deem the pilot futile.

Prior to meeting with an adviser, the student will be asked to complete an assessment addressing their general needs and level of motivation. The individual appointment is an opportunity to create a tangible action plan tailored to the specific needs of each student to guide them through the decision-making process. This intensive process of assessment, multiple meetings and action-plan development provides a level of service beyond the University’s current capacities. The individual appointments will also provide valuable qualitative data regarding the issues and concerns of this population that may have been overlooked.

Courses and Workshops
The option of launching a course pilot is not possible with this short of notice. Given that, the approach will be to utilize existing courses and workshops that may help students in transition. The committee generated a listing of relevant courses currently being offered that may effectively serve this population (see Appendix B). The pilot can leverage existing workshops offered by career services, collegiate units and the University Counseling and Consulting Services. Additional workshops may be identified as student needs arise.

Assessment Tools
Students will take a general intake assessment to serve as a guide for the individual appointment. One option to explore is the success of the Health Career Center’s “Planning for Medical School” WebCT course that provides initial information to students prior to meeting with a counselor. This educational opportunity has the prospective pre-medical student do some background work in acquiring knowledge about the field of medicine and the application process for medical school. The student is then able to maximize the staff time to work on their action plan for medical school. Utilizing online assessment tools and establishing a close partnership with UCCS will provide an opportunity for in-depth personalized assessments useful in the decision-making process. There will need to be an initial investment in resources to establish these online tools. These resources should include curriculum design consultation and audiovisual support for course development with video, and photos.

Resource Library
The future Center will house a comprehensive resource library that leverages the combined resources of the career center, student engagement, and materials aimed at assisting students in transition. The pilot will begin the process of building a resource library with online tools, books and other materials that may assist students through the decision-making process. These resources may be used in conjunction with the individual action plan and also made available for staff and students from across campus. Materials deemed useful from the pilot will be carried over to the new resource library.

Peer Mentoring
This aspect of the Center may be difficult to pilot during the first year. To conduct a quality peer mentor program requires extensive training and expertise that may not be possible during the initial stages. As a pilot is established, the feasibility of a peer program should be revisited once initial programmatic features are established.

Recommendation 4: Staffing the Pilot
The proposed Center will be staffed by a core of professional “generalist” advisors. These advisors will specialize in acquiring the broad-based knowledge to work with students with the full range of interests that can be satisfied at the University. In addition to the core staff, our proposed model envisions that a second set of professionals in the Center at any given time will be individuals with split appointments between the Center and collegiate and departmental advising offices.

It is essential that the pilot have dedicated staff to implement the services identified for the pilot. The staffing levels outlined in the initial report are not feasible, but the staffing structure proposed can still serve as a guide for the pilot. This structure consists of two types of roles: a generalist, with a broad range of knowledge working directly in the pilot Center and staff from various colleges and units with expertise in their area serving as a network of support for referrals and consultation.

Generalists
For the pilot program to be successful, it requires two FTE* serving as generalists for the Center to provide individual coaching and more intensive attention that go above and beyond the current capacity of existing student services (see initial report for further description of the model for individual appointments). Details of this role include:

- Split the current funding for two FTE into 4 positions of 50% appointments. Providing opportunities for multiple staff, rather than two, allows for more diverse styles and perspectives regarding effective service strategies. The appointment allocation of 50% provides a more intensive experience for individual staff members to focus on center activities. Exceptions may be made for 30% appointments to provide colleges and units the flexibility they need based on their staffing models.
- The staff would be selected from current academic advisers and career counselors. During the pilot stage, it will be important to determine the most effective skill base for working with the undecided student population. Staffing models at other institutions vary between advising skills and career counseling skills, so this mixture of expertise provides an opportunity to determine foundational skills for the future Center.
• The structure is intended to provide enhanced professional development opportunities for academic advisers and career counselors. It utilizes the expertise of experienced staff and provides them the opportunity to gain additional skills and enhanced networking across campus.
• Current advisers and career counselors would have the opportunity to apply for these positions with consultation with their supervisors. Directors of Student Services from each college would be asked to nominate individuals who meet the outlined criteria and whose 50% release time could be supported for the duration of the pilot.
• The team would work two days a week providing direct services to students from the Center location. There would be a common half-day weekly session to continue to review and develop effective strategies for the group of students. This time will also be used for continued professional development opportunities.
• Central funds will be reimbursed to the home unit to replace lost staffing time, including salary, fringe benefits and Enterprise fee. The Office for Undergraduate Education will work with Human Resources to assure that the current hiring pause does not serve as a barrier to replacement hires.
• See Appendix C for a full job description

**Collegiate and Departmental Network**

The other necessary component of the staffing model is a network of advisers and staff within the colleges and student service units across campus that is available for referrals and consultation. Within the colleges, these may be advisers who currently work with perspective students or internal transfer students and see exploratory students as a natural extension of their existing caseload. A network of staff from the Office for Equity and Diversity, University Counseling and Consulting Services, and other student service units will be important contacts to support students’ decision-making processes. This network will allow the Center to utilize the expertise necessary as students identify specific needs.

**Administrative Support**

Additional staffing support will be needed in the area of administrative support, communications and technology development. The committee recommends hiring a student employee to help with administrative assistance. In addition, there will need to be start-up assistance for a web page and general assessment tool as well as communication support for promotional materials.

**Pilot Coordination**

The pilot will need leadership and coordination to assure its success. Without the option of hiring a permanent director at this time, the committee recommends appointing a shared model of leadership between an individual from central Undergraduate Education and an individual from a collegiate unit. These two staff will coordinate the continued development and implementation of the Center and continue to garner support across campus from key stakeholders.

**Recommendation 5: Students Served through the Center**

There are three primary ways students can access the pilot services for the first year:

• Referrals: advisers and student services staff may refer students to the center
• Targeted Group: Current students who are at sophomore status and have not yet declared a major. These students will also include students who were denied secondary admission into a major or college.
• Walk-Ins: students may self-refer to the center
**Recommendation 6: Steering Committee**
A steering committee of key stakeholders from across campus should be established to oversee the pilot and Center’s future direction. The steering committee will serve as a conduit to broader campus issues relating to transitioning students and assist with strategies to address potential barriers. The steering committee will meet regularly throughout the duration of the pilot and through the transition to the full Center.

**Recommendation 7: Future Direction**
After reviewing the literature and comparable institutional models, the committee recommends that the University consider moving towards an assigned cohort of exploratory students identified at the point of admissions to be advised through the Center. This model has proven successful as a retention initiative and popular among students and parents at other institutions. Although our current funding structure and accountability measures are not complementary to this option, the gains by the institution as a whole may be worth a shift in perspective. Although the committee was in support of such a structure, the specific charge and condensed timeline of our work did not allow further consideration.