

# **Suggested Practices for MIT Undergraduate Departmental Advising**

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## Introduction

We are attempting to identify many of the practices used in undergraduate advising throughout the institute, and to determine some commonalities and best practices across departments. The ultimate goal of this report is to outline those best practices and to provide recommendations to departments seeking to improve their advising practices.

We conducted interviews with department administrators from the following MIT departments: Chemistry (Course 5); Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (Course 6); Brain and Cognitive Science (Course 9); Economics (Course 14); The Sloan Business School (Course 15); Mathematics (Course 18); Global Studies and Languages (Course 21G); and Comparative Media Studies and Writing (CMS). These departments were chosen based on which department administrators responded to our emails and were available to meet with members of the CoE. However, we do feel that these represent a fairly representative range of department sizes and areas of study. We also spoke with representatives of the MindHandHeart Initiative, which is also currently working on improving undergraduate advising.

Our interviews were intended to get a general sense of how advising was run in each department, and then to determine the aspects of each advising system that were deemed to be successful within the department. Interviews included, but were not limited to, the following questions:

How many faculty advisors are in your department?

How does the advisor assignment process work in your department?

How does the advising process work in your department?

How, if at all, do your department's advisors support students in non-academic areas?

How do you handle students transitioning into your department?

What do you do when students have issues with their advisors? Is there a process for switching advisors within the department?

What are some strengths and weaknesses of advising in your department?

How, if at all, do you get student feedback about your department's advising system? How could we best get that feedback?

We then compiled the results of these interviews into a list of advising best practices, which are outlined below.

## Practices

### Stage 1: Assigning advisors:

- **Set up individual meetings with students after they declared (Course 5, 9, etc.)**

Pro: Students feel more welcomed. Their personal concerns and needs are taken care of. Departmental administrators can learn more about students to assign them most fitted advisors.

Con: It won't work for bigger departments or if students are not responding to emails.

- **Send out a form to acquire general information about new students (Course 5, 9, 15, etc.)**

Form content: Basic information, UROP, if the student has been to events of the department, FPOP, classes taken so far, topics they like to discuss with their advisors, career/ grad school; if there are several divisions within the department, which division the student wants to study.

Pro: Allows departments to learn more about students and match them to the right advisors (more information than just the folder from freshman advisor).

Con: Bad response rate. For example, Sloan mentioned that they don't have enough information of students to assign to fitted advisors. One potential solution is to make the form simpler but mandatory.

- **Give students a list of advisors and map them with one of their top choices**  
Providing students with the information is important
- **Match students to their UROP advisors or if they don't have urops yet, professors they want to work under**

This discussion came up when I was talking to Jillian from BCS about two problems: some students not reaching out to their advisors and when students do urops in labs sometimes professors don't even know that they exist. These two problems came together to become a potential solution for advising, that for students who have urops under their departments we can assign students' urop advisors to be their departmental advisors.

Even if a student doesn't have a urop, we can ask them to choose a professor they want to work under and match them to the professors of their choice.

A lot of students I know/ talked to have great incentives finding urops. Also professors whom students want to do research for usually can give good/ relevant academic advices and point them in the right direction.

It creates a more bonded relationship between students and faculties

\* However, students need to be aware that it is harder to switch advisors at the end of the semester.

- **Pair busy students with busy advisors (information gained from advisor forms sent out before the summer)**

Students who don't want to meet with their advisors except for registration day and be paired with advisors who think likewise.

Con: This can disrupt the advising culture and lose the whole point of having an advisor

- **advisors are only in charge of students of one year (Course 14)**

Ex: In the Economics department, there are three advisors this year: one sophomore advisor, one junior advisor, and one senior advisor.

This can be implemented in the bigger departments by having several advisors for each year. And it might even be a good idea because if an advisor has 30-40 students, it helps advisors be more focused on the students and give better advice. But the option of having the same advisor for three years should still be given.

Pro: Each advisor has a lot of experience about course selection or career advice for students of that year.

Con: It is hard to have a continuous relationship with one advisor.

### **Stage 2: Beginning of Fall semester**

- **Have a more casual first meeting with advisors**

Pro: Students feel more welcomed and would be more comfortable and willing to meet with their advisors.

Con: Some professors might be busy or travelling and can't arrange it.

- **Give students instructions about how to start a conversation with advisor and what types of questions to ask**

This can be integrated into orientation/ booklets for the incoming freshman.

- **Give advisors a checklist for certain meetings with their advisees (Jillian Course 9) (sample included):**

It doesn't have to be just the reg day meeting. We can also give advisors checklists to incentivize them to have more meetings with their advisees. Ex: drop date meeting, future career meeting, short term goals meeting. Based on the future career meeting can give students more relevant resources, recommended reads, opportunities etc.

### **Stage 3: During the Semester**

- **Advisors should check on students' well-being more often**

Very nicely handled in smaller departments. In bigger departments, students who are struggling, if don't ask for help proactively, situations won't get noticed until late in the semester. For example, it is nice to have advisors meet with advisees before drop date.

- **Host departmental events for students and faculties (not necessarily between advisor and advisees) Event ideas: Undergraduate openhouse to welcome students to the departments, monthly lectures by faculties to introduce their work/ classes, have students organize events**

Ex: Chem cafe, guest lectures (course 5); acm dinner with professors (course 6); students faculties mixers, career events, A lunch voucher for student to take advisor to lunch.

- **Have a student advising board to give feedback about advising (Sloan)**  
Students volunteer for the advising board. Three meetings a semester. 12 students.

- **Each department should have a go-to person who can answer or point students to the right direction if students have any questions**

I believe this is the job of departmental advisors but I put it down just in case some departments don't have this practice. However, I also believe that for bigger departments there should be more people allocated for this

- **Switching advisors is not difficult according to many departments but I'm not sure if students know about this or not, should probably let students know**

Suggestions and opinions from academic administrators - what information do they want, what do they want to change, what do they think of the current system

Suggestions:

- **Want a feedback system for advising**

Currently only have senior survey

If there is a new evaluation system, need to think carefully about how to do it so student would be comfortable to write evaluations and how to ensure privacy of advisors. One way is to have the evaluations sent to the departments only so things can be handled internally. But we also want students to see the evaluations so they can receive more information about advisors. There were also negative feelings about having numerical ratings for advisors. But similar to subject evaluation should be fine. The other way is to have evaluations public, but instead of publishing direct quotes use summaries. Not just negative feedbacks can also be positive specific comments.

Have a two way evaluation system, advisors also get to evaluate advisees.

Questions should include: what did you want from your advisor, and did you get it, what do students want to improve on

- **Automatic notifications/ notification system for advisors if students are struggling**

- **Understand what students want from advising**

Just academics or outside of academics

Choosing classes, just audit, or just someone nice

- More information about students for advisor assignment process

Opinions:

- **Upperclassmen advising is better than faculty advising. Faculty advisors should only take care of registration.**
- **Students don't reach out to advisors.**
- **Low attendance rate for events with advisors/ faculties**

1. Problems to tackle:

- Advisee to advisor ratio in bigger departments: 1 advisor has 30 students.

**Observations:**

**\*Some departments faculties are required to be advisors, some volunteers (sloan), some have consensus that faculties should advise students (BCS)**

**\* Students busy low response rate to events, advisors**

**\* Students would express interest in better relationship with advisors but not actually allocate time in real life**

**\* Departments are introducing joint majors to increase number of students**

**\* advising for double majors: better system, assignment process, assign advisors early**

**\* Departmental administrators do audits for students and send the audits to advisors**

**\* Interestingly, I met an undergrad student from Yale and learned that at Yale students need to find their own advisors each year.** This practice definitely ensures that students get matched to the advisors they like and students have greater motivations to develop relationships with their advisors. But the finding process could be hard for students, causing students to not have a match by the deadline.

### Conclusion:

Personally, the value of an advisor for me is that my advisor is a professional in a field I'm interested in for a long time and I can talk to him about my professional goals and ask him to point me in the right direction. This is very a very valuable and unique resource you can't get by talking to upperclassmen. Of course upperclassmen give other types of advice such as course selection and finding internships.

Through talking to the departments, there are other things I noticed:

For example, one time when I was meeting with my advisor I asked him if I'm interested in AI would studying brain and cog sci be helpful. I also asked for his advice when I was choosing between internship offers.