

**First Year Advising Center  
Oakland University**

**NACADA Outstanding Advising Program Award Application**

**Institutional Description**

Founded in 1957, Oakland University (OU) is a public, four-year institution classified as a doctoral research university by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

OU serves 15,799 undergraduates and 3,510 graduate students in 280 academic programs. Nearly 78% of students come from the three metropolitan counties surrounding Detroit, with less than 8% of students coming from outside the state of Michigan. Predominately a commuter campus, only 16% of the total student population live in university-owed housing.

Nearly 14% of students identify as African American, Hispanic or Native American and 31.8% of students are first-generation. Forty-two percent of full-time undergraduate students receive need-based financial aid and 66% receive scholarships and grants averaging \$6,745 per student.

**Program Development**

In 2005-2006, Oakland University participated in the Gardner Institute's Foundations of Excellence self-study which focused on first-year student success. The creation of a centralized advising center for first-year students was among the recommendations of this study. Several years after the study was complete, Oakland University's President charged the Vice President of Student Affairs to establish the [First Year Advising Center](#) (FYAC) within her division by fall 2012. Several action steps were taken:

- Re-purpose several vacant positions in student success areas
- Absorb a current advising office serving undecided students
- Align Orientation and New Student Programs under the center's organization
- Modify existing space in the student services building to house a 19-member team

- Secure an additional \$389,404 in permanent funding and \$79,800 in one-time start-up costs

It was imperative to the First Year Advising Center's success that strong, collaborative relationships were formed with Academic Affairs, and specifically the professional advising units in each school/College. To that end, the following proactive measures were taken:

- Establishment of adviser liaison relationships with each school/College to assist with information sharing across units
- Full participation from FYAC advising staff on the campus-wide Professional Advisers Council and its committees
- Involvement of professional advising units in New Student Orientation
- Establishment of Orientation Faculty Advising Program to provide opportunity for faculty to assist FYAC advisers with advising at summer orientations
- Scaling FYAC technological enhancements so they could be utilized in all advising units
- Continuous sharing of FYAC outcomes with campus stakeholders through special reports

The First Year Advising Center opened its doors on September 4, 2012, and has welcomed over 18,000 students in the last seven years.

### **Goals and Objectives**

The shift to a centralized advising model has allowed consistency of service, structure, philosophy and expectation for all first-year students. In turn, this has led to meeting our main goal - increasing retention and credit accumulation of first-year students, leading to increased graduation rates.

Having a diverse team representing functional areas of academic advising, academic coaching, orientation, IT and communication, as well as six different student leader positions, requires a strong operational framework. Three main themes were established upon the center's creation to represent the core areas of focus and the foundation for all employees.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Student Learning Outcome(s)</b>	<b>Goal Communicated to Student</b>
Transition and Connection	Students will learn the benefits of using university resources and support services. Students will recognize multiple ways to connect to OU's campus community	Become involved in one extra-curricular activity
Major and Career Exploration	Students will identify their best-fit major and potential career and co-curricular opportunities.	Decide on a major by the end of first year
Academic Progress and Performance	Students will understand academic requirements needed to begin progress towards a degree.	Complete 28 credits (sophomore standing) and be in good academic standing at the end of first year

## **Program Description**

### ***Critical Features***

- Caseload model for advisers (averaging 300:1)
- Three mandatory advising appointments for every first-year student
- Embedded major and career exploration services facilitated by students' assigned adviser
- Robust non-advising services such as COM 1100 (first-year success course), college success workshops and academic coaching
- Trained student leaders that connect students to resources and technology
- Progressive utilization of technology
- Ever-changing communication strategies to engage students on multiple levels

### ***Strong Connections***

Students first experience the FYAC at New Student Orientation, the summer before the start of the fall semester. They are assigned to their adviser who serves as a constant resource throughout their first year and offers expertise across all majors offered on campus. Significant attention is given to ensure strong relationships are created and fostered with each student. This is accomplished by establishing rapport early on, being responsive to student needs and maintaining a student-centric philosophy.

During a student's first meeting with their adviser at orientation, they are provided an enhanced business card including the adviser's picture, direct phone number and email address. The same information is easily accessible on the FYAC website. Between orientation and the start of their first year, students are encouraged to come in for one-on-one appointments with their adviser to get to know one another, discuss concerns about college and/or to begin major/career discussions.

As the academic year begins, students are regularly contacted by their adviser to encourage the completion of their mandatory appointments and to share information about university deadlines and procedures, such as add, drop and withdrawal. Knowing first-year students often have questions outside of scheduled appointments, the FYAC hosts several "drop-in hours" each week for students to discuss concerns in-person. In addition, trained student leaders called FYAC Assistants (FA) are available 35 hours per week to respond to quick questions or schedule appointments via Google chat. FAs also staff a computer lab connected to the office and can assist students with change of major forms, navigating university technology platforms and learning how to utilize campus resources.

Half of OU's first-year students commute to campus, so it is essential to be flexible with how students may need to receive services. Google Meet is used regularly as a convenience to students who are not physically on campus but need to have a "face-to-face" meeting with their adviser. Google Meet allows advisers and students to see one another and also share computer screens for easy access to information presented in advising sessions.

Developing strong relationships with students is at the heart of the First Year Advising Center. Being available and responsive in all the ways noted above has led to 95% of FYAC students completing their required appointment in both the fall and winter semesters.

## ***Innovation with Technology***

Inventive utilization of existing campus technology is central to the success of the FYAC. Being the only advising unit on campus with a Senior Systems and Data Analyst on staff has allowed us to leverage opportunities that would not be realized without in-house expertise.

In 2013, the university purchased Banner Relationship Manager (BRM). Realizing the multiple features of the system, the FYAC spearheaded a task force to implement OU's first shared notes system for all advising campus-wide. The ability to enter notes in one location and have them accessible across campus revolutionized the way we serve students and communicate across multiple units.

Transforming the university's early alert system, Faculty Feedback, has been another monumental accomplishment for the FYAC. The previous "mid-semester evaluation" system was a reactive approach that yielded no positive student success outcomes. Existing technology was re-purposed to allow faculty to submit pre-determined "issues" – not grades – for struggling students in the first six weeks of the semester. Focusing on student behaviors, such as "not attending class regularly" or "difficulty with pre-requisite material," provides the student specific information on areas of concern. The system not only communicates the noted issues to the student, but also auto-populates suggestions to mitigate the concerns, such as referrals to campus resources or online tutorials. In addition, the Faculty Feedback process has engaged FYAC advisers and student support services staff across campus by allowing them to see, in real-time, the students who are most at risk.

The university's purchase of Argos Enterprise Reporting has changed the landscape of the FYAC's operation over the last four years. The FYAC was fortunate to be the first department on campus to begin use of this technology and has continually paved the way for application across the university. All FYAC staff have immediate access to multiple real-time reports – from caseload management to enrollment reporting to orientation reservations. Nearly all reports, after being tested in the FYAC, are broadened in scope for use in advising campus-wide.

Recently, we launched an adviser-focused dashboard, called the Academic Advising Toolkit, which centralizes information from multiple sources into one location. The toolkit provides advisers a holistic picture of a student by incorporating information about curricula, academic history, financial indicators, advising interactions, Faculty Feedback and much more into an easy-to-navigate “one stop shop.” The toolkit, paired with Degree Works, are able to answer nearly any question an adviser may have about a student. In addition, a color-coded adviser alert system and the integration of the campus-wide advising notes system will be incorporated into the toolkit by summer 2019 to make student data even more accessible.

### ***Proactive Interventions***

New students are often unaware of the pitfalls they may experience as college begins. It is essential for advisers to take proactive measures that could minimize students’ struggles and/or provide quick support in getting them back on track.

After summer orientation, we host the College Success Series in collaboration with faculty and other campus partners such as Career Services, The Tutoring Center and the Office for Student Involvement. The series is comprised of workshops on topics related to academic skills, on campus employment and extra-curricular involvement. While the series is open to any new student, advisers encourage participation based on individual needs and a students’ academic history.

Additionally, Argos technology allows us to automate daily “burst reports” to advisers that focus on student progress. Advisers receive reports specifically related to credit accumulation and Faculty Feedback concerns. They then immediately connect with the student via phone to encourage scheduling additional appointments or registering for academic skill workshops. Our newest service, an in-house academic coach, is available to any student for more in-depth support.

Focus2, a career/major exploration tool, is also used proactively with students at orientation and throughout their first year. Students who are undecided or unsure of their major are encouraged to take

the assessments within Focus2 and then to follow-up with their adviser. In the FYAC, academic advisers also serve as career advisers to provide consistency for the student and are equipped to help students understand how career goals may align with multiple academic pursuits.

As students complete their first year, each is individually assessed to determine their eligibility for release from the First Year Advising Center to the professional advising unit in their school/College. Students who are in good academic standing and have identified a best-fit major are transitioned to their new advising unit in early May. Again, proactive attention is provided during this key transition. Through partnerships with advising offices across campus, the FYAC works to create unique handoff documents to keep students informed as they enter their sophomore year.

From the student's first interaction with the FYAC at New Student Orientation through their eventual release to a new advising unit, the FYAC is committed to building strong connections and utilizing innovative technology to proactively assist students at every turn.

### **Procedures Used in Program Evaluation**

FYAC leadership engaged with the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment at the time of launch to establish quantitative metrics to use for program evaluation. First-year retention, attainment of sophomore standing (28 credits) and graduation rates have been the foundation of the program's evaluative measures.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) includes a question on the "quality of interactions with academic advisers." Since Oakland University administers this survey every 1-2 years, this question has been included in the FYAC's overall program evaluation. FYAC leadership has also created a comprehensive student survey administered after every student's winter required appointment that measures the FYAC's student learning outcomes and student satisfaction.

The data on all three evaluative measures noted above is reviewed, at minimum, each year and is used to refine services, improve staff training and establish new initiatives.

## **Results / Outcome**

### ***Quantitative Metrics***

The focus on retention and credit accumulation within the first year has had a compounding effect on continued retention over subsequent years and has led to record-breaking graduation rates. In fact, just a few years after the launch of the FYAC, Oakland University completed a 2025 Strategic Plan that outlined an ambitious target for a six-year graduation rate of 55%. The efforts of the FYAC served as a springboard for the first FYAC class of 2012 to achieve this ambitious target seven years ahead of the 2025 vision.

- **First Year Retention: Increased 4%** (73% to 77%)
- **“On Track” at Beginning of Second Year [28 credits earned]: Increased 18%** (48% to 66%)
- **Four-year Graduation Rate: Increased 14%** (15% to 29%)
- **Five-year Graduation Rate: Increased 15%** (34% to 49%)
- **Six-year Graduation Rate: Increased 12%** (43% to 55%)

*10-year historical average pre-FYAC compared to average since FYAC opened in 2012*

*Data available at [oakland.edu/oira](http://oakland.edu/oira)*

### ***National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE)***

Historically, Oakland University rated below our peer institutions on the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) in relation to “quality of interactions with academic advisers.” However, in 2016, 56% of first-year students rated their interactions with academic advisers as “excellent” or “near excellent,” well above our peer institution average of 49%.

### ***Student Learning Outcomes***

Since 2012, 10,438 student surveys have been completed and the results showcase the correlation between the themes woven throughout the FYAC experience and the positive results on student learning.



<b>Student Learning Outcome</b>	<b>Question on Student Survey: “As a result of my interactions with the FYAC:”</b>	<b>Percentage of Strongly Agree/Agree</b>
Students will learn the benefits of using university resources and support services.	I am more knowledgeable about campus resources.	98%
Students will recognize multiple ways to connect to OU’s campus community	I am more knowledgeable about ways to become involved on campus.	91%
Students will identify their best-fit major and potential career and co-curricular opportunities.	I feel confident in my major choice.	97%
Students will understand academic requirements needed to begin progress towards a degree.	I have a better understanding of General Education requirements.	99%
	I have a better understanding of requirements for my major.	99%

**Potential for Adaptation by Other Institutions**

While overhauling advising structures may not be feasible at other institutions, there are many elements of the First Year Advising Center that can be adapted:

- Establishment of coordinated themes, learning outcomes and student goals that are communicated widely to students and the campus community
- Caseload model and required advising to an entire population, or sub-set populations
- Proactive collaboration with orientation team to create seamless orientation experience
- Partnership with data / IT staff to create robust reporting on student success metrics and identification of off-track indicators
- Dedicated staff member to focus on communication strategies, consistency of message and branding of initiatives/department
- Embedded career counseling available within academic adviser positions