

Pitt's "Forge Your Own Path" Strategy

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PITT'S "FORGE YOUR OWN PATH STRATEGY"

Situated in the Office of the Provost, the "Forge Your Own Path" strategy mentoring and advising initiatives at the University of Pittsburgh aim to provide equitable, accessible, and holistic advising experiences for all Pitt students by ensuring they are supported with standard information and emphasizing an ethic of care through the power of advising and mentoring relationships. The strategy employs two main components: 1) providing professional development and training opportunities and 2) leading efforts for collaboration. Since its development, we have employed several methods to enhance transparency in the assessment of advising and mentoring practices University-wide. First, in 2019, we conducted Academic Advising Landscape Analysis with a goal of understanding current advising practices at the University of Pittsburgh. Then, in spring 2020, The Undergraduate Advising Training Needs Assessment Survey helped to launch the "*University of Pittsburgh Advising Certification and Training Program (Pitt ACT)*" a suite of online onboarding and training materials designed for faculty and staff at Pitt who work with undergraduate students in an advising and mentoring capacity. All of our efforts seek to provide more consistent and standard information for all units across the University.

Institutional Description

The University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) was founded in 1787 and is one of the oldest institutions of higher education in the United States. The University is part of the Commonwealth System of Higher Education and is a nonsectarian, coeducational, state-related, public research university. Pitt is the most comprehensive educational institution in Western Pennsylvania, enrolling approximately 25,000 undergraduate students. Through its five campuses, the University fulfills its commitment to student access by offering an excellent undergraduate experience across a range of aspirations, abilities and interests. The University system includes the Pittsburgh campus and four regional campuses at Johnstown, Greensburg, Bradford, and Titusville, Pennsylvania.

Program Development

A 2016 National Gallup-Purdue Index study found that “if graduates strongly agreed that they 1) had a professor who cared about them as a person, 2) had at least one professor who made them excited about learning, and 3) had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams, the graduates’ odds of being engaged at work more than doubled” (Gallup, 2016). Also in 2016, Pitt commissioned Gallup, Inc. to begin the first of a four-part research project and surveyed recent Pitt alumni about their experiences as undergraduates in the workplace. The survey found that one in ten Pitt graduates strongly agree that they had each of these experiences. While these findings are on par with other large public universities who report at 14%, Pitt’s “Forge Your Own Path” strategy was borne from the idea that we could do better (Gallup, 2016).

The “Forge Your Own Path” strategy at the University of Pittsburgh is led by the Undergraduate Studies, Academic Innovation Team in The Office of the Provost. The aim is to

prepare and empower students for lives of impact through educational experiences tailored to the specific goals and needs of each student (About, n.d.). Vital to the vision of this strategy is the integration of the rich expertise and network of the Pitt community with new and emerging technologies to provide customized, meaningful collaborations and experiences. This vision rests on the integration of four components: people, tools, information, and infrastructure (About, n.d.). **People** are at the core of this approach with the realization that advisors and mentors enrich student lives so they may discover and forge a path that uniquely suits their individual needs and aspirations.

In 2019, the fourth Gallup study used in-depth interviews and focus groups with recent alumni and current Pitt students to deepen leaders' understanding of Pitt undergraduate experiences. The Gallup studies have had meaningful impact on the development or enhancement of new and existing initiatives, programs, and resources at the University of Pittsburgh, including personalizing education, mentoring and advising, building a robust student toolbox, and providing additional resources for faculty, staff, and students. As Pitt seeks to strengthen the "Forge Your Own Path" strategy, the insights have informed a culture of caring and mentorship through a complex network of advisors, faculty and support staff as well as inform current and future technology to elevate these opportunities to a broader audience.

At Pitt, we recognize that advisors and mentors are among the most salient relationships students will form in their college years (Fox & Martin, 2017). Because students build trusting relationships with their advisors, the "Forge Your Own Path" strategy focuses on the Provost's Priorities (2022) of personalizing education and diversity and inclusion, which also align with the University-wide strategic "Plan for Pitt," (2022) values of academic excellence and inclusion.

Goals and Objectives

A new role was created and a Director of Undergraduate Advising and Mentoring was hired in April 2019 to work collaboratively with professional and faculty advisors and mentors University-wide to implement and improve advising, mentoring, and student success practices. Pitt employs a decentralized, satellite model of organizational advising structure, where “each school, college, or division within the institution has established its own approach to advising” (Habley, 1997, p.39). Thus, Pitt recognized a need for institutional change in order to provide more standardization and collaboration to eliminate gaps in student success.

Thus, the main objective of the mentoring and advising initiatives for the Academic Innovation Team, “Forge Your Own Path” strategy is to provide consistent and standard information for all units across the University and regional campuses. Our goal is to provide a more equitable, accessible, and holistic advising experience for all Pitt students by ensuring they are supported with standard information and emphasizing an ethic of care through the power of advising and mentoring relationships. There are many ways in which this strategy is operationalized, all of which include championing greater collaborative efforts University-wide towards student success in the four components of people, tools, information, and infrastructure.

Program Description

The “Forge Your Own Path” strategy mentoring and advising initiatives have two main components: 1) providing professional development and training opportunities and 2) leading efforts for collaboration.

Professional Development and Training Opportunities

The Office of the Provost Academic Innovation Team “Forge Your Own Path” strategy provides professional development and training opportunities for mentors and advisors across the

University of Pittsburgh and at our regional campuses. In 2018, the Mentoring and Advising Summit was launched to share ideas about ways to help students succeed. With a focus on inclusive excellence for the event, the advising and mentoring community at Pitt has been challenged to think more deeply about embracing “different ideas, critical perspectives, challenges, and lived experiences” (2022 Mentoring and Advising Summit). As additional needs from the community emerge, the team offers professional development through the Mentoring and Advising Workshop Series, one of several opportunities advisors and mentors have to convene and learn about relevant issues.

In fall of 2021, we launched the Foundations Level of Pitt ACT (University of Pittsburgh Advising Certification and Training Program), a suite of online onboarding and training materials designed for faculty and staff at Pitt who work with undergraduate students in an advising and mentoring capacity. The main goal of the program is to provide standard resources for all advisors and mentors across the University. The modules were developed based on competency areas identified by the Workgroup on Advising Training, a diverse team of advisors, staff and administrators, and on the NACADA core competency model (2017). At Pitt, a new academic advisor will gain access to important technologies within university systems for use in the advising and mentoring workflow, including our student information system and student success platform.

Collaborative Efforts

The Office of the Provost Academic Innovation Team “Forge Your Own Path” strategy also leads efforts in collaborating with mentors, advisors, and administrators to discuss best practices and share information. First, the University Undergraduate Advising Committee (UUAC) was launched with the aim of enhancing advising and mentoring at Pitt by sharing

ideas, best practices, and information with representatives University-wide. This dean-appointed committee meets once per month. Next, The Pitt Mentoring and Advising Community Circles (PMACC) are groups of undergraduate mentors and advisors across Pitt who share a common interest or experience. The goal of the PMACCs is to build professional networks, communities, and knowledge around a common interest or experience in advising and mentoring undergraduate students. Each PMACC also has a specific goal statement in relation to that community's interest or experience. We have four PMACCs at Pitt: 1) new advisors and mentors, 2) staff, 3) faculty, 4) FGLI (first-generation and limited-income advising). Last, we have made a strategic communications plan to ensure advisors and mentors are provided with updated and timely information. This includes curating a list-serv for announcements, sending newsletters, and an annual report. Additionally, we redesigned our website to include an “Advisor Toolbox” and provide resources and referral information for undergraduate advisors and students.

Program Evaluation

Since the development of the “Forge Your Own Path” strategy, The University of Pittsburgh has employed several methods to enhance transparency in the assessment of advising and mentoring practices University-wide. Assessment methods are based on NACADA’s foundational elements in their core competency model for effective advisor training programs and practice, the outcomes of which are conceptual, informational, and relational (2017).

First, the Director of Undergraduate Advising and Mentoring conducted an **Academic Advising Landscape Analysis** in Spring 2019, with the goal of understanding current advising practices at the University of Pittsburgh. A data collection tool was created using Excel. First, a content analysis was conducted via website and advising material reviews. Then, a set of questions were developed for individual meetings with undergraduate advising units University-

wide. From a review of the information, important themes emerged, and key recommendations were offered which helped to inform actionable steps for the Academic Innovation Team.

One action item from the landscape analysis was to develop more standard assessment practices for advising to aid in providing crucial feedback to advisors and advising leadership. Thus, in Spring 2020, The **Undergraduate Advising Training Needs Assessment Survey** was sent to the University community to better understand faculty and staff training needs for advising. A total of 223 participants completed the survey in its entirety, representing 19 different colleges, schools, and three regional campuses. Topics were grouped into these three areas and participants were asked to rate each for levels of importance, responsibility and competency.

Results and Impact

The findings of the assessment methods of the “Forge Your Own Path” strategy have helped to inform actionable steps for the Academic Innovation Team. First, a report from **Academic Advising Landscape Analysis**, conducted in Spring 2019, was presented to academic units and was made available on the new website. For each college/school/advising center, the following data were collected:

Headcount data	Advisor/student ratio
Number of advising personnel	Advising model description
Student success, resource, and referral information	Description of advising training
Advising assessment	Academic exploration
Connections between advising and career	Advising at Orientation practices

After a review of the information from the website content analysis, advising material review, and individual interview meetings, important themes emerged:

- Each unit has some training in place, but the majority do not have capacity to employ regular opportunities.
- There was a desire for a more holistic and proactive approach to career and academic exploration.
- Student resource and referral information is managed locally and each college/school/center approaches in from a different vantage point.
- Transition points (from one academic or support unit to another) can be confusing for advisors and students.
- There are many different roles University-wide in the space of advising, mentoring, coaching and counseling.
- Each school/college/advising center approaches advising at Orientation differently.
- The assessment of advising was managed locally.

Then, in Spring 2020, the **Undergraduate Advising Training Needs Assessment Survey** was launched and 233 faculty and staff mentors and advisors from departments across the University and three regional campuses participated. The survey was based on NACADA's (2017) core competency model's foundational elements for effective advisor training programs and practice and fall under three major areas: concepts advisors should understand, information advisors should know, and skills advisors should demonstrate. Topics were grouped into these three areas and participants were asked to rate each for levels of importance, responsibility and competency. For *every topic*, the levels of importance and responsibility were scored higher (respondents indicated these topics are important and part of their responsibility) than the level of competency (respondents indicated they did not feel as competent about these topics), thus illustrating the need for an advising training program for undergraduate academic advisors and

mentors at Pitt. One respondent indicated, “I’m thrilled to see you’re using the NACADA Academic Advising Core Competencies. NACADA is a wonderful, invaluable resource for academic advisors and they have done a lot of great work on the history, theory, and practice of advising.”

Respondents also shared considerations for training at the University-level. The following themes emerged:

- Collaboration across the University for training opportunities is important to advisors
- Connecting advisors to campus resources and information is vital to their success
- Pitt-specific advising and mentoring technology is meaningful to advising training
- Ensuring a balance between University-wide consistent information and departmental referrals should be key to any training opportunities

Both of these University-wide assessments methods have informed the “Forge Your Own Path” strategy mentoring and advising initiatives priorities at Pitt.

Implications for Practice

In collaboration with the Center for Teaching and Learning, the data from the **Undergraduate Advising Training Needs Assessment Survey** helped to launch “*University of Pittsburgh Advising Certification and Training Program (Pitt ACT)*” a suite of online onboarding and training materials designed for faculty and staff at Pitt who work with undergraduate students in an advising and mentoring capacity in fall 2021. The following considerations for the project and implications for advising practice at Pitt have only strengthened since the landscape analysis was conducted:

- Providing advisors and mentors with standard, consistent, and timely information, including how and when to refer students to campus resources.

- Maintaining an online “Advisor Toolbox” resource to ensure equitable access for all Pitt students, advisors and mentors.
- Offering additional training programs and opportunities for the campus community to learn, collaborate and network.
- Providing resources for advisors and students to better understand their academic choices is vital because academic exploration work is difficult and important to retaining vulnerable populations of students. Thus, we launched a degree finder website and continue to build out this resource.

The team continues to build on the Pitt ACT competencies levels and collaborate with campus partners to create future levels of the training program for advisors and mentors across Pitt. In closing, through assessments and increased conversations with advisors and mentors University-wide, it has become clear that standardization is a critical component to ensuring effective institutional processes that enhance student success. The “Forge Your Own Path” strategy will continue to work toward short- and long-term improvements in supports for advisors and mentors through our focused priority of collaboration.

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