STUDENT ADVISORY COMMITTEES

In most departments, the DUS organizes and chairs an advisory committee that includes students and that meets at regular intervals during the year to review aspects of the department’s undergraduate curriculum as it affects both majors and nonmajors. If you are not the chair of this committee, you are an important member of it. The functions of the departmental student advisory committee vary somewhat from department to department, but typically the committee advises the department on such matters as ideas for new courses and programs, proposals for improvement of instruction or advising in the department, and suggestions for changes in the requirements of the major. Although its composition and size also vary, the committee normally includes both senior and junior members of the faculty as well as undergraduates. It is advisable, particularly in large departments, for the undergraduates to be drawn both from majors and from nonmajors. Through this committee, and through contact with individual students, with the chair, and with departmental colleagues, the DUS is in a unique position to formulate both short-range and long-range plans for the curriculum.

While the role of the student advisory committee may vary from department to department and from year to year, the DUS and the department should note that every department must have such a committee. All major programs were directed, by vote of the Yale College Faculty in 1966, to organize a student advisory committee at least once every four years; in 1979 the faculty amended this legislation and recommended that the student advisory committee meet at least once a year. The text of the Course of Study Committee’s proposal on student advisory committees voted by the faculty in 1979 is informative about the expected nature of these committees, and is given in full below. This policy still stands.

In February 1966 the Yale College Faculty, on motion of the Steering Committee, approved a proposal recommending the establishment in each major program of a student advisory committee consisting of majors and appropriate nonmajors “to advise the faculty on the effectiveness of its curriculum and to assist the faculty in improving it.” Matters which the proposal suggested that such a committee might consider included “the scope and sequence of course offerings, the requirements of the standard and honors programs . . . ; the usefulness and interest of specific courses to nonmajors, the role of the Senior essay, the amount of choice on course selections available to students within the major, standards of expected student performance and of grading, etc.” A student advisory committee was not formally to be consulted concerning the teaching performance of individual instructors, nor was it to be asked to evaluate candidates for promotion. But it was expected that “the existence of a committee of students with regular channels of communication to the faculty should increase the amount and perhaps the quality of the informal and casual information on teaching performance on which departments already rely.” Finally, as the proposal said, “a committee would be expected to express its own views on subjects of its own choice as well as on questions suggested by the faculty. The committee should also serve as a channel through which solicited or unsolicited opinions of other students could be expressed.”

Over the years most departments and programs have appointed such committees and there is broad agreement that they have given useful advice on a wide variety of matters concerning undergraduate instruction in general and on the structure and requirements of the major in particular. Last year the Course of Study Committee polled all Directors of Undergraduate Studies concerning the usages of the various departments and programs relating to student advisory committees, and as a result proposes to the Yale College Faculty that it reaffirm the general principles of its legislation of 1966, amending it in the following ways:

1. The proposal approved by the Faculty in 1966 stipulated that student advisory committees be composed entirely of students and that the chairmen of such committees be students. Experience has demonstrated that some of the most successful committees have included members of the faculty as chairmen, and the Course of Study Committee accordingly recommends that the composition and structure of each committee be left to the determination of the individual departments and programs.

2. The legislation of 1966 proposed that student advisory committees be appointed “from time to time (at least every four years).” The usefulness of these committees has been demonstrated to be such that the Course of Study Committee recommends that they meet at least once annually.

3. In some departments with few majors, student advisory committees have not been appointed because in the nature of things there is frequent contact between students and faculty members and frequent informal conversations among them concerning the curriculum. The Course of Study Committee believes, however, that there would be considerable value in establishing a specific time and place for an occasional structured discussion of the department’s instructional program, and recommends that in small departments and programs that do not already have advisory committees such a discussion be formally scheduled each year with interested majors and nonmajors.

4. The proposal of 1966 recommended that the advisory committees include students not majoring in the department. In many cases this practice has fallen into disuse, and the Course of Study Committee reaffirms the recommendation that nonmajors be members of these committees, particularly when such students compose a substantial fraction of a department’s enrollments.

In spring 2014, the Yale College Council proposed to the Dean of Yale College that undergraduate students become more involved in an organized and formal way in the advising of fellow students in their own major or considering their own major. This proposal was discussed both by the Teaching, Learning, and Advising Committee (http://yalecollege.yale.edu/academics/committees/teaching-learning-and-advising) and by the Committee on Majors (http://yalecollege.yale.edu/faculty-staff/advising-resources/handbook-directors-undergraduate-studies-yale-college/course-stud-1), as well as by the incumbent DUSes at their monthly meeting. The consensus of these groups was that departments or programs that were interested in making such an addition to the advising resources
available could experiment with such a program. In no case would these peer liaisons displace the DUS or his or her faculty colleagues as the official advisers for students in the major. They cannot, in particular, review course schedules for the term, authorize waivers or other exceptions, or officially assess progress towards completion of the major. They would be expected to be most useful for giving fellow students a sense of the experience of majoring in a particular field and practical advice on navigating the requirements and electives in a department or program. In many cases, a DUS who chooses to exercise this option might wish to combine the function of the Department Student Advisory Committee with this peer advising initiative. It is up to the DUS to select and make known the names of department peer liaisons. Department peer liaisons are unpaid; they may make themselves available through e-mail, informal meetings, or “office hours” in a departmental lounge or other suitable space. The Yale College Dean’s Office will assess the merits of this initiative in 2017.