

# ANALYSIS

## Upgrading York's ineffective advising system

By MARK KEMP

observed," said a volunteer advisor, "a lot of scared first year students who were anxious and worried about what was ahead. A lot of them were very thankful for my help." This observation was echoed by other participating advisors in the new First-Year Advising Programme of the Faculty of Arts. Long overdue and very welcome among York's rapidly expanding student body, the programme aims to reduce the alienation and confusion often felt by a first year student entering a huge seemingly impersonal university environment.

For some, the frustration of not being able to feel connected with the institution they study in stand between them and success in post-secondary education. More than a few freshmen find themselves wondering "What am I doing here?" and "Why do I need a university degree anyway?" and it is this uncertainty over the meaning and value of university that was inadequately addressed. A wide range of personal or career-oriented problems that need dealing with on a one-to-one basis, are addressed in the new programme, while the perennially sluggish academic advising system has been given a healthy shot in the arm.

The inefficiency of the old advising system—or in many cases, the lack of one—was most evident in its impersonal spring pre-registration shuffle. Advising appointments, in or on one-at-a-time, wait-in-line basis generally did little more than get study lists signed. The beleaguered clerical staff coped with the overwhelming mechanical end of it, while professors recruited as advisors often didn't know all the ins and outs of their own department, never mind the others which students might require information about. And who has ever fully understood the General Education or breadth requirement? Not a few students have found themselves in third or fourth year short a Natural Science or basic departmental requirement for their major.

Not only course selection and rule-checking need attention, however. As another of the new volunteer advisors reports: "I found that many of the students' concerns were basic ones; e.g. where can I find this building?" The anxieties of the first year university student range from the logistics of navigating the campus to a lack of support at home, to shyness in seminar situations; and it is crucial not to give these individual problems short shrift.

"All first year students come to York with questions, even if they

don't know it," says Mark Webber, Associate Dean of Arts and one of the co-ordinators of the new advising programme. "And it's not so much course selection advising, it's 'What am I doing at University?'"

Webber and many of his colleagues believe that academic advising is issue of the greatest concern in our universities. The new student must establish realistic expectations for his stay in University. With the increased influx of students each year, including new graduates from secondary school and mature students returning from the workplace, many of them expecting university to train them for high-paying jobs, the university faces the challenge of demonstrating its inherent value, its long-term rather than short-term benefits.

York Recruitment Officer Diane Gibson, discussing the preliminary advising given Grade 13 students who are considering university, says that attempts are made to dispel common illusions. "University equips people for life, not necessarily for a job," she says. Recruiters emphasize getting the most out of the university life, and recommend early contact with staff and familiarization with the campus. In the new programme, first-year students will be assigned to small advising groups (12 in each) as soon as they have been admitted to York.

The first-year programme was tested with a small "pilot project" last year in the Faculty of Arts. In cooperation with two colleges, Vanier and Founders, about 300 new students were chosen for advising sessions. For September 1987 the programme was organized to cater to all of the incoming wave of Faculty of Arts freshmen, or approximately 3500 students. According to Webber, 1987-88 is the "de-bugging year," and the programme should be completely in place by next September, with the administrative knots untangled. 400 volunteers—faculty members and senior undergrads (usually Dean's Honour Roll students)—have offered their services this year, and it is felt that this number will increase next year, as the needs increase and more faculty members decide that they want to be more than a name on a door. Three group meetings are formally planned for the academic year, in September, November and February; and the advisors are also available for individual appointments.

Advisors have the use of each advisee's high school record and York study lists, as well as lists of referrals in case information is

needed outside their own area of expertise. Advisors themselves are requested to attend seminars and to make use of a handbook covering the principal questions they will have to answer—adding and dropping, petitioning, financial aid, university resources, career counselling, or any number of personal problems that plague first-year students.

Although the concept sounds a bit like a "Big Brother" programme, it is designed to, as faculty advisor David Thompson puts it, "humanize but at the same time keep it academic." But there are obvious problems with such a system of advising. For example, since it is optional for students to participate in it, a large percentage are still going to rely solely on the old system for March study-list signing. The development of computerized registration should relieve the chaos a little, but there remains the problem of those 50 to 60% of students who don't feel they need individual advising, and who are here to get their degree as

quickly as possible and get a job. The inevitable result is students who find themselves in their last year scrambling to make up necessary credits, or wanting to go on to Graduate School without the necessary spotless record. One advantage of this one-on-one "mentoring" at the ground floor level is to get people to think ahead, to keep their options open.

One of the students who benefited from the pilot project last year said that when she arrived at York she thought she knew exactly what she wanted and what she had to do to get it: a BBA that would entitle her to a fairly well-paying job. When she quickly became disillusioned with the Co-ordinated Business programme, and decided to try the pilot advising project at her college, she learned that what the university could offer her and what she was interested in were much different than what she had originally believed. She has now switched to a BA in Linguistics and is doing well in a wide range of electives.

Arts appears to be the only Faculty that has initiated this type of programme, and at the moment it only deals with freshmen. A system addressing the advising needs of students in the other Faculties, and of upper level undergraduates, is still desperately needed. It is hoped that success in the first-year programme will encourage the development of a more comprehensive advising system.

It is too early to determine the success of the new programme, especially since its progress was disrupted by the strikes at Canada Post and at York, and the resulting poor turn-outs at the planned first meetings. The second meetings, scheduled for this week have reportedly enjoyed a more enthusiastic response, with about half of the advisees agreeing to attend. As Webber says, "Even if only one or two of my twelve advisees use and benefit from the programme, I will feel it is a success." That will be one or two more students than had an adequate advising service before; and it might be one or two students who will change their minds about dropping out of university, or who will avoid arriving at the end of three or four years of study, with a degree requirement outstanding.

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