



## **University of Pittsburgh**

### **Advising Certification and Training Program (Pitt ACT)**

Submitted to NACADA (The Global Community for Academic Advising)  
And Winner of the 2023 Outstanding Advising Program Award

**Prepared by:**

April Belback, Associate Vice Provost for Student Success and Advising

Jennifer Cooper, Instructional Designer for Academic Success Initiatives

Brett Soltysiak, Project Coordinator for Student Success and Advising

## **UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH**

### **ADVISING CERTIFICATION AND TRAINING PROGRAM (PITT ACT)**

At the University of Pittsburgh, advising and mentoring are integral to the University's educational mission. We advocate for collaborative and holistic advising interactions.

The **University of Pittsburgh Advising Certification and Training Program (Pitt ACT)** is 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 program structure is based on six foundational competency areas informed by the NACADA core competency model and a working group on advising training, a diverse team of advisors, staff, and administrators. Pitt is committed to helping advisors and mentors build networks and grow in the profession, and Pitt ACT is one key resource that assists advisors and mentors in refining their skills and advancing their professional development. The program, which began in 2019, launched its first course in September 2021 and has since enrolled more than 275 advisors and mentors from around the university community. Pitt ACT was developed in alignment with the University's "Forge Your Own Path" Strategy and commitment to student success. The Program could not be successful without a University-wide collaboration between academic units, resource content specialist partnerships, and advising systems integration experts. In this manuscript, we outline the University of Pittsburgh institutional description, the Pitt ACT Program development, goals and objectives, program description, evaluation, results and impact, and potential for adaptation by other institutions.

## **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.

## **Program Development**

In 2019, the Office of the Provost completed an *Academic Advising Landscape Analysis* with the goal of understanding current undergraduate advising practices across the institution. Pitt's undergraduate academic advising structure is a decentralized, satellite model, where each school, college, or division within the institution has its own approach to advising and advising takes place in the undergraduate colleges, schools, advising centers, and specialized support offices (Habley, 1983). Among the many key takeaways from the landscape analysis included that advisors, mentors, and administrators were enthusiastic about the opportunity for Pitt to create a suite on onboarding and training materials and to provide some standard information for all advisors across the University (Belback, 2019). Additionally, it was noted that a centralized toolbox of resources was needed to ensure that every advisor and mentor at Pitt could have access to vital information (Belback, 2019). Thus began the **University of Pittsburgh Advising Certification and Training Program (Pitt ACT)** project, 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. Developed in alignment with the University's "Forge Your

Own Path” Strategy and commitment to student success, the main goal of the program is to provide standard resources for all advisors and mentors. At Pitt, the Office of the Provost advocates for collaborative and holistic advising, mentoring, and student success practices to prepare students for lives of impact through educational experiences tailored to their specific goals and needs (About, n.d.). To launch the program, the team was awarded an internal seed grant to develop a large-scale collaboration with academic units across the University.

### **Goals and Objectives**

An important next step for the Pitt ACT Project was an *Undergraduate Advising Training Needs Assessment Survey* (Belback & Soltysiak, 2020). In May 2020, 233 advisors and mentors from units across the University completed the survey, based on the NACADA core competency model’s foundational elements for effective advisor training programs and practice: conceptual, informational, and relational. Topics were grouped into these three areas and participants were asked to rate each for levels of importance, responsibility, and competency. It is meaningful to note that 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. In fact, participants were asked to rate (on a scale from 1-10) how important they thought an online advising certification and training program would be to their work and 80.8% rated a 5 or higher. Therefore, the needs assessment informed the Pitt ACT project goals and objectives in creating an online training program for advisors and mentors across the University:

- Collaboration across the University would be key to the creation and implementation of the program.

- Advisors and mentors are on the front lines in student success and some of the most salient relationships students will form in college. They need updated and timely information, including campus resource referrals. The program would address this need specific to the Pitt community.
- Advisors and mentors are increasingly asked to utilize more technology for their practice and providing this training is vital to their success. This program would address this for the Pitt community.
- Pitt students, advisors, and mentors alike crave consistency in policy and resource information across the University. This project would provide access to this information in an equitable way for all.
- Pitt students often transition from one college, school, department, or unit to another or seek additional majors, minors, certificates, or support in more than one place. Providing access to this resource information through this project for all advisors and mentors and their students would be vital for student success.
- The online training program is one way for advisors and mentors to gain concepts, knowledge, and skills. The need to continue to offer additional opportunities for the campus community to learn, collaborate, and network was clear.
- Advisors and mentors seek to gain best practice knowledge about the profession and practice of advising, learning more about approaches in the field. The program would seek to connect advisors and mentors with this information.

## **Program Description**

The Pitt ACT Program could not be successful without cross campus collaborations, a tie to the NACADA core competencies, and a clear understanding of the benefits to advisors and mentors at the institution.

### **Collaborations**

First, to begin the project, a working group for advising training was appointed by the campus directors of advising committee. This group, representing administrators, faculty, and staff from academic units across the University, developed the curriculum for the project. As a guiding member, a strategic partnership for the project was formed with the University Center for Teaching and Learning to provide expertise in instructional design and assessment. This was especially important because the course modules are housed in Canvas LMS (Learning Management System).

All new undergraduate advisors and mentors at Pitt are encouraged to take the training upon the start of their employment and as part of onboarding. However, anyone in an advising and mentoring role is also welcome and encouraged to take advantage of the opportunity as the course provides a collection or toolbox of resources ongoing for their advising practice. Thus, it was important to work closely with the registrar's office and Pitt IT (Information Technology) for advisors to gain access to important Pitt advising and student success technologies within the University systems for use in the advising and mentoring workflow. Of course, access to these systems is dependent upon a person's role at the University, not merely on completion of Pitt ACT Foundations Level. Systems access includes: 1) PeopleSoft/HighPoint Campus Experience, the student information system, 2) EAB Pathways, the student success and advising platform, and 3) Suitable, the Catalog of Opportunities. Also, as part of the access workflow, the course

included the first unified onboarding FERPA training for all advisors and mentors at the University.

To make the enrollment process as simple as possible, advisors (or supervisors) complete an online form to be registered into the Canvas course. Then, upon completion of the course and assessments, participants complete a verification form. Last, the advisor is issued a certificate and then technology partners are notified to grant the appropriate access.

### **Competencies**

The working group began by creating comprehensive outlines which contained a summary of important content, materials, and knowledge essential for advisors at Pitt. This was built based on six key competency areas, aligned with the NACADA core competency model:

1. Advising at Pitt
2. University Policies and Procedures
3. Academic Programs and Requirements
4. Technology for Student Success
5. Campus Resources
6. Advising Profession and Practice

It was decided to utilize Canvas to deliver the content in four asynchronous courses. These courses included a Foundations Level and three additional levels, each exploring the competency areas more in-depth. Once enrolled in the Foundations Level, advisors can decide to progress to each next level. For each module in each level, content is developed with subject matter experts from across the university. Resources and materials are carefully curated with experts from various departments so that the tools and expertise advisors need is provided in

easily accessible courses. Access to the courses continues after completion and materials can be accessed from the Canvas Dashboard at any time.

Each of the six modules in Pitt ACT courses includes a list of learning objectives and intended outcomes. Content is delivered in a variety of ways, including video, interactive instructional tools, asynchronous discussion boards, and supplemental document downloads. Reference material links to various websites and departments across the University allow advisors to obtain resources quickly for students and learn more about the services available to support a student in their success.

### **Program Benefits**

There are many benefits of Pitt ACT for advisors and mentors across the institution. First, dependent upon role, after completion of Foundations Level, which includes training on FERPA and introductions to student success technology, a new advisor will gain access to University systems in the mentoring and advising workflow. No matter in which college, school, or unit an advisor is located across the institution, the program is in the Canvas LMS such that all advisors have equitable access to the resources and information. More importantly, taking the training can refine specific skills as an advisor and mentor at Pitt and help advisors contribute to their ongoing professional development, as they grow in their profession. The training also helps advisors and mentors connect with each other across disciplines and units to build networks as the training includes active discussion boards and question prompts.

The competency areas that were identified not only build the foundation of Pitt ACT, but they also guide the Mentoring and Advising Workshops offered each semester. The recordings of the workshops are also integrated into relevant topical areas within the Pitt ACT courses. Pitt ACT does not replace the unit-specific training that advisors need to learn for their school,



college, or unit. It is intended to give an overview of what advising means at Pitt. However, for advising directors, department chairs, and supervisors, it takes much of the “first steps” off their plates to help onboard new staff and faculty to the role of advising and mentoring at Pitt.

### **Program Evaluation**

Since the launch of Pitt ACT in September 2021, more than 275 advisors and mentors from around the institution have been enrolled in the Foundations Level course from many different departments and units across the University. Some evaluation of the program takes place within assessments for each module and reflection questions built into the course. From these prompts, one advisor said, “After the training I felt like I had gained better knowledge of the tools at my disposal, and I think the discussion boards could help foster a community among new advisors.” Another advisor summarizes a sentiment heard quite often, “I have been at Pitt for about six years. This would have been extremely helpful in my first few months when I was searching for this type of information. Thank you to the many collaborators who pulled this information together.”

In October 2022, a survey was conducted with 21 advising administrators, the purpose of which was to evaluate how helpful the Pitt ACT Foundations Level course was in supporting their advisor on-boarding and training. Then, a second survey was conducted, which focused on advisors that completed the Foundations Level course. The survey asked them to reevaluate their level of competence in the three NACADA core competency areas initially outlined in the *Undergraduate Advising Training Needs Assessment Survey*. 32 advisors and mentors participated in this *Pitt ACT One-Year Assessment* (Belback et al., 2023).

## Results and Impact

The findings from our evaluation methods of Pitt ACT have helped to inform the development of the program and important next steps. First, based on the results of the advising administration survey (Table 1), it is clear that Pitt ACT Foundations Level had a positive impact on training and resource availability, but there is an opportunity to expand the level of adoption of this program to various advising departments.

**Table 1**

*Pitt ACT Advising Administrator Survey Results*

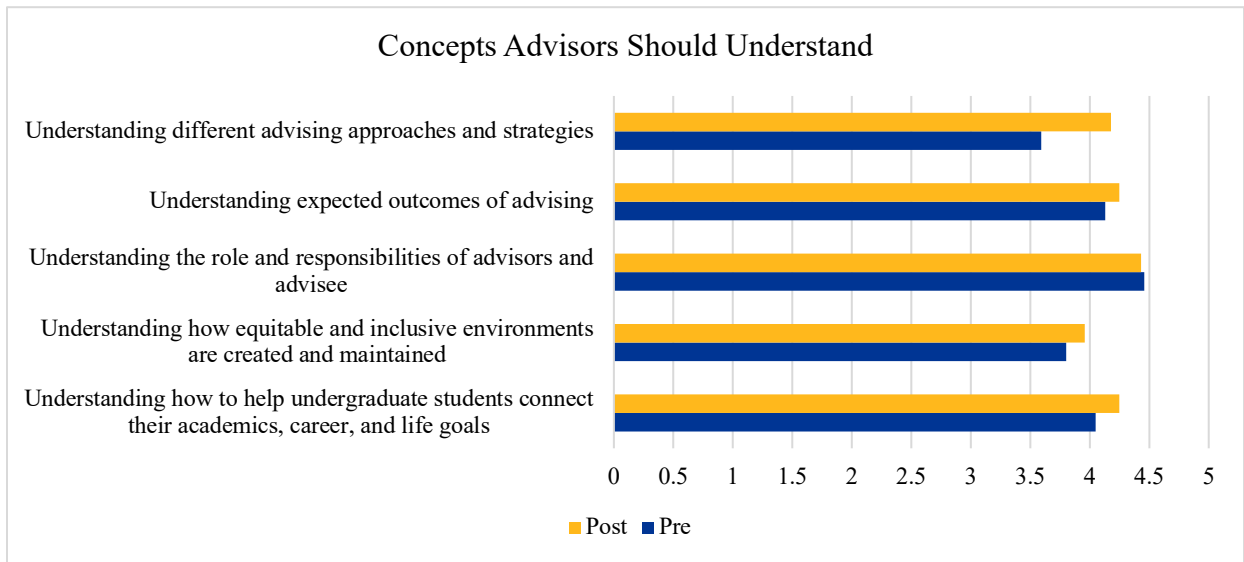
Survey Question	Agree (%)	Somewhat Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Pitt ACT Foundations has reduced the amount of training that I must conduct in my own unit	20	46.67	20	13.33
Pitt ACT Foundations has improved how effective advisors are in their advising practice	26.67	33.33	40	0
Pitt ACT Foundations provides comprehensive resources for advisors to reference	73.33	20	6.67	0
The advisors on my team have found Pitt ACT Foundations valuable in supporting their advising practice	46.67	46.67	6.67	0

Since this survey, more details were shared about the course content and the benefits of participation during a UUAC (University Undergraduate Advising Committee) meeting. Additionally, content was presented during the workshop series (January 2023) and at the annual Mentoring and Advising Summit (March 2023) about the ongoing development and impact of the program.

The *Pitt ACT One-Year Assessment* also provided some helpful insights. The following (Figures 1, 2, 3) outlines the growth of each NACADA core competency component from the *Undergraduate Advising Training Needs Assessment Survey* (pre) to the *One-Year Assessment* (post), based on self-assessment.

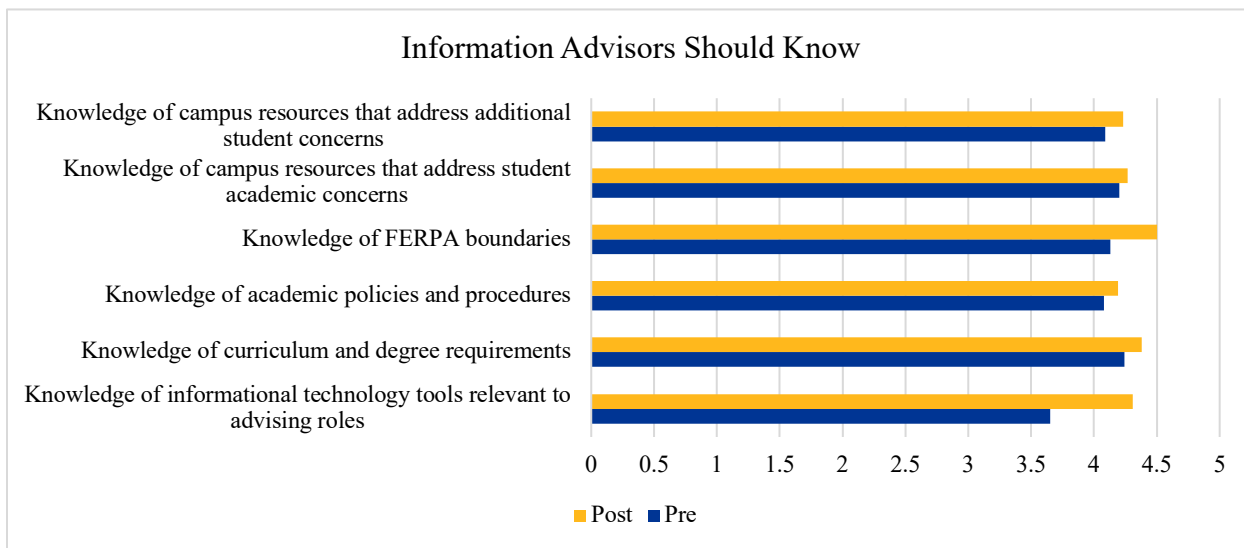
**Figure 1**

*Growth in the Conceptual Component*



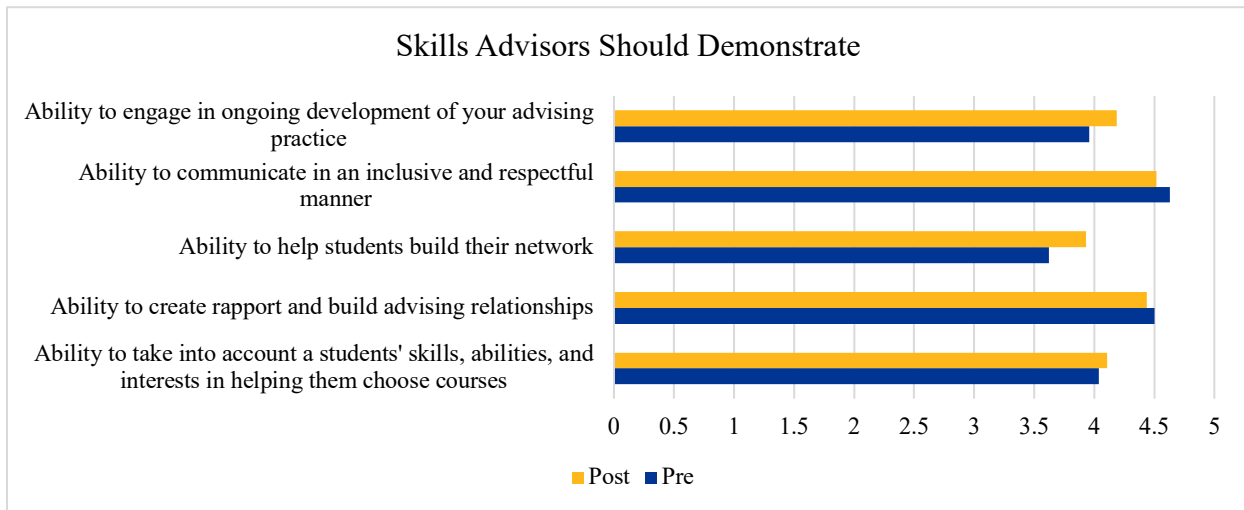
**Figure 2**

*Growth in the Informational Component*



**Figure 3**

*Growth in the Relational Component*



Based on these survey results, competencies in the conceptual and informational components show important improvements in nearly all areas. Though some improvements can be seen in the relational component, there are certain areas that advisors feel less competent in. Thus, there will be a focus on these specific competency areas in the future workshops and professional development opportunities.

**Potential for Adaptation by Other Institutions**

As discussed, the Pitt ACT Program evolved from a University-wide commitment to advising and student success as an integral part of the educational mission. The content creation and program adoption can easily be replicated at other institutions. First, it is important to establish key University-wide partnerships across the organization that go beyond academic units. Within these partnerships, important conversations should occur, guided by the institutional advising mission and the NACADA core competencies to help identify existing resources and essential content. Second, institutions should identify the method of delivery of the training and length of the training course. For Pitt, the program was best suited for an

asynchronous online course delivery because it offers flexibility for the variety of different departments across the University. Last, this program is one key resource of many out of the Office of the Provost that assists advisors and mentors in refining their skills. When part of a suite of initiatives offered to advisors, it supports a holistic approach to advancing professional development.

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