

To: Dr. David Rabiner, Director, Academic Advising Center and
William Wright-Swadel, Director, Career Center
From: Kristina Smith, T' 19
Re: Academic and career advising for underserved students

Students pursuing less-popular degrees and postgraduate plans feel undersupported

Pre-medicine and pre-law students are resourced with dedicated advising networks and career-oriented support from their academic support systems. Students seeking direct entry into the management consulting, technology, and finance fields benefit from large alumni networks and on-campus visits from corporate recruiters. However, students pursuing many other trajectories, including post-undergraduate academics and frontline careers such as teaching, social work, and public health work, lack formal, well-advertised advising resources. Their advising is limited to faculty and staff who have experience in their career fields, who are sometimes difficult to identify.

First-generation students face additional barriers to advising regardless of career trajectory

Many first-generation students arrive at Duke without the familial and community advice that teaches them how to navigate college and pursue the networking and engagement opportunities that facilitate other Duke students' successes in academic and career planning. This can put us at a competitive disadvantage for internships, entry-level jobs, and graduate school admissions. While the Office of Access and Outreach has made strides in offering opportunities to first-generation students, they have often been limited to topics such as personal financial wellness and successful entry into the college academic and social environments. First-generation students, regardless of whether we pursue pre-professional career preparation, postgraduate degrees, or frontline work, need academic and career advising designed to help us overcome the barriers of navigating complex institutions facing us in college.

Look to the Sanford School's Embark program for ways to enhance existing University resources

The Sanford School of Public Policy offers an innovative solution to some of these concerns. The [Embark program](#) provides networking and career navigation strategies to students who aspire to work in policy positions. Many public policy majors enter consulting and finance positions after they graduate, but Embark offers structured support for students who choose other paths. Embark brings networking opportunities directly to students (instead of expecting them to pursue them on their own), and it has a Sanford staff member dedicated to the success of students who participate in it.

Next steps

I will reach out to your offices to arrange a meeting to discuss concrete ideas for improving academic and career advising for first-generation students as well as any student pursuing careers and academic pathways that deviate from the perceived norm at Duke. I suggest we invite Suzanne Valdivia, advisor for the Sanford Embark program, and Justin Clapp, Director of the Office of Access and Outreach, because they have experience in developing such solutions. I look forward to working with you and your colleagues to improve academic and postgraduate outcomes for all Duke undergraduates.