The Student Affairs Office is where questions can find answers — even during a pandemic

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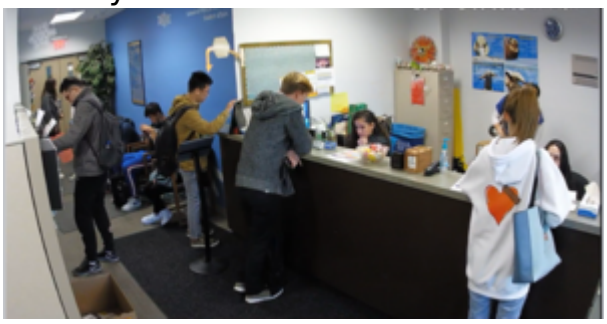

Photograph of the front reception area of the Student Affairs Office on a typical day.
Picture Credit:
Physical Sciences Student Affairs

The Physical Sciences Student Affairs Office in Rowland Hall 134 is where people with questions can go to find answers. The doors open at 9a.m., and students walk in wondering about how to enroll in a class, and faculty walk in wondering how to construct a class that students will want to take. Don Williams, the director of the office, wants to make sure good answers find the questions that people have, because he knows that a bad answer can send someone down the wrong path. He also knows that a good answer can help get someone off a path that's taking them nowhere.

There are about 11,000 walk-ins who visit the office every year, and during busy enrollment times the office can see 200 student visits in one day.

Williams remembers one of those students, who walked in soon after he first started working in the office back in 2006. She dressed all in black, and Williams thought she looked depressed. "I got her to open up and explain what was really going on," he says. "It was a lot of personal issues and things." Her grades were suffering, she

was about to be disqualified from the School, and Williams told her so. “I had to be very firm with her,” says Williams.

That moment, when Williams gave the student a firm answer that he thought would resonate with her, is what he says is the trickiest part about working as a counselor. “The most challenging part of talking to students is being able to figure out ‘Who am I talking to right now?’” Williams asks. “Am I talking to the student that wants me to deliver bad news in a soft and gentle and easy ‘here you go’ way? Or am I talking to the student that I need to be very, you know, up front and firm with, and tell them what to do? How do I deliver something to them that doesn’t send them over the edge?”

Right now, because of the pandemic, giving answers to students in a way that resonates with them is much harder, because Williams and his team of four counselors and five undergraduate peer advisors cannot work with students face-to-face. Now, the Student Affairs office is empty, and it looks like the people who were there got up and left in a hurry. St. Patrick’s Day was on March 17, and decorations from the holiday still hang around the office’s front reception area.

The staff and the peer mentors of Student Affairs left the office in the pandemic’s wake — but they are all still available to chat with students online. In fact, the Physical Sciences Student Affairs Office is the only academic unit on campus to offer online advising.

But things were not always that way. Williams, who graduated from UCI in 2004 with a B.S. in Chemistry and a B.S. in Biological Sciences, started working in the Student Affairs office as a student mentor when he was just a junior. Back then, instead of registering for classes online, students still had to call the office to sign up for classes. And Williams worked on a typewriter, not a computer. “I was on a typewriter filling out forms for students, cataloguing things into an access database,” he says.

Williams’ typewriter remained in the Student Affairs Office long after the staff transitioned to computers, and it still had instructions written by Williams in 2002 on how to use it taped to the side. Williams would look at the typewriter, and it would remind him of how things in the office have changed over time.

But one of things that stays the same, even though the office is now entirely online, are the questions that people have.

The student dressed in black eventually came back to visit Williams in the office, and things were different for her. She wore bright colors, she had beads in her hair, she was close to graduating, and Williams feels that part of her change started when she first visited his office. “Such a cool transformation,” Williams says. “That feels good as a counselor.”

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