This proposed project will create two graduate assistantship positions with the Wayfinders program. The primary objective is to provide experiential education learning opportunities for two graduate students whose work will expand academic support services for undergraduate first-year and transfer students.

Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, in articulating their stated mission in serving The University of Arizona’s student population, have identified “setting our diverse and high potential students on the path to becoming innovative, adaptive learners, and disruptive problem solvers” as a desired outcome. This goal is targeted toward incoming students, although the sentiment is valid not only for new undergraduates, but for our graduate student population as well. The Wayfinders program, as part of the Advising Resource Center, has a shared mission of being committed to helping all students pilot their unique academic journeys while attending our university.

Wayfinders are some of the university’s most dynamic and engaging academic advisors who specialize in meeting with new students, first-year and transfer. The overarching goal of this relatively new program is to assist new students in understanding their academic options and how to effectively navigate the organization of the university. As an example, a student interested in biology will soon find there are at least two dozen program options in at least four different colleges. The landscape can be confusing to navigate, and there are countless similar examples for students interested in business, social sciences, humanities, and so on.

It is in this space that Wayfinders are available to support new students in appreciating the options and finding their academic home as soon as possible. This support begins when new students attend their orientation sessions, before they formally start attending classes, and continues throughout their time at the university. Finding the ideal academic fit is an evolving process, as students may change and/or add a second major in addition to declaring one or more minors. Wayfinders help students traverse this often overwhelming but ultimately rewarding educational expedition.

The graduate students selected for these positions will be individuals interested in further developing Wayfinders presence with key campus partners in the Office of Admissions and New Student Orientation, Residence Life, and the Student Resource Centers. Individuals with strong interest and previous experiences such as peer mentoring, student ambassadors, or other student service experiences will be ideal candidates, and we imagine attracting graduate students from the College of Education in the Higher Education or Educational Psychology programs. Under the guidance of the Wayfinders Program Coordinator, the Graduate Assistants will learn the importance and value of developing meaningful working relationships with key campus units. These crucial interactions will lead to an increased and on-going presence of Wayfinders through programming including the scheduling of drop-in hours, organizing panel discussions featuring faculty, alumni, and upper-division students, and coordinating advising-related workshops with campus partners. The Graduate Assistants will be encouraged to explore and develop opportunities that will expand academic support services for new students.
This proposed project will satisfy several initiatives that have been identified by the Fall 2019 Student Services Fee Summary, addressing areas of need for both undergraduate and graduate students. The Graduate Assistants will be working closely with advisors in providing academic support in educational planning for incoming and current undergraduate students, fulfilling the top identified initiative for undergraduates. The benefits include career preparation opportunities, on-campus job opportunities, and career-based experiential learning. Working side by side with professionals in higher education offers graduate students the chance to apply their growing knowledge base in a practical manner that will enhance their own educational experience while positively impacting the lives of undergraduate students through academic support.

Perhaps most significantly, our graduate assistants will be assisting in the development of a program that is rapidly gaining traction within the campus community. This experience will broadly expose these graduate students to a multitude of higher educational departments, providing invaluable networking opportunities that will be of benefit to their future careers. The two-fold nature of career preparation and providing academic support to undergraduate students make this a unique and worthy endeavor.

Wayfinders is currently working closely with Research and Assessment to measure our impact with students who participate in our programming events and workshops. The assessment of the success of the graduate assistantships will align with the expected demonstrable increase in campus partnerships and a concurrent increase in undergraduate student retention and graduation rates.

The longevity of this project will be predicated on meeting program objectives as defined by the above-mentioned assessment metrics. In a broader sense, the repeated identification of top undergraduate and graduate student initiatives in all the previous Student Services Fee Summaries has provided a blueprint for the success of this project. The commitment to meeting many of those initiatives is the strongest indication of the viability of the proposed graduate assistantships. This project addresses recognized student needs while enhancing the imprint of the Wayfinders program on The University of Arizona academic community. Our graduate assistants will have the opportunity to display the innovative and adaptive learning skills they have acquired throughout their educational careers, becoming the type of disruptive problem solvers who will positively improve the educational experience for generations of students to come.