

So You're Now a Student Adviser

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Congratulations! Your department chairman has just designated you as an adviser to communication or journalism majors. On second thought, you're beginning to wonder how you ever got into such an arrangement.

At least, you're now entering an entirely new area of expertise and detail which you probably never thought you'd need. And you're fearful — perhaps correctly — that you'll never have another free moment. But there's also the likelihood that you'll soon recognize that few other activities can be so rewarding.

Pre-Advising—That All Important First Contact

Often it's overlooked that one of the most important aspects of advising is the time spent talking with parents and high school students. We might call that "pre-advising," and it gives you the opportunity to explain requirements, acceptance rates, courses offered, extra curricular opportunities, and employment potentials.

In many cases, expectations are unrealistic. At my university, we train communication "generalists," not "specialists." So if a prospective student wants to be strictly a news photographer or an on-air broadcaster, we recommend he or she look elsewhere. Such an approach requires honesty and diplomacy — and may lose you a student — but it avoids many problems in the future.

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We explain that our particular strong point is preparing students with a background of history, theory, research methods and practical application in the areas of written, oral and visual communication so that they can fit in a wide spectrum of employment opportunities. We also tell parents and applicants of the varied types of communication positions held by our graduates and why we feel that our approach is sound.

We also tell them why a department called "Communication Arts" is in the College of Agriculture and not Arts. The few times we forget, the visitors themselves ask the question. We review the history of the former "Department of Extension Teaching and Information" from its inception and the advantages and disadvantages of its present location. What some view as a disadvantage (our students have to take some biological and physical sciences to meet college requirements) often turns out to be an advantage when being interviewed for a job. We also stress the fact that the total university's many and excellent courses, faculty and facilities are available to our students.

As you can imagine, both parents and prospective students are anxious to learn everything they can to help them compare programs and universities for this important step into their future. Their decisions often are complicated by the fact that youngsters often are not sure what they want or need so they welcome any assistance we can provide.

A good job of pre-advising makes the later job of the faculty adviser that much easier if the student does enroll and is accepted into the department.

Of course I give all prospective students a copy of the "Cornell Countryman" (produced by our majors), a folder promoting our recent graduates which our department publishes annually, and a list of required courses for Communication Arts majors. In addition I set up appointments with everyone else on campus they may want to visit.

Even if these prospects decide not to apply to Cornell or are not accepted, hopefully they go away with a good feeling.

Why My University Has Advisers

For many years the faculty at my university has felt that a strong advising system is an important part of its commitment to undergraduate education. The size and diversity of

the university requires that students have a knowledgeable person to go to for help and advice.

While universities no longer have the "in loco parentis" attitude of earlier years, it remains important that students know that there is someone to whom they can go for consultation and help — someone in whom they can confide and who has their best interests at heart. There are a great many pressures on students today — from parents, peers, studies, extra-curricular activities — and it's helpful for them to know that an adviser is available when problems do arise. In talking with new students soon after they have been admitted, some of the first questions they ask are "who is my faculty advisor?" and "how can I make contact?" Parents, also, are relieved to know that our advising system is well-developed and that their son or daughter will be assigned to an adviser right from the start.

Today, about 350 faculty members serve as advisers for the 3000 undergraduate students. In addition, the Office of Instruction provides support for the advising system.

Perhaps the college's attitude toward advising is best illustrated by the statement found in the Adviser's Handbook:

"The faculty...recognizes that students need information and advice to make intelligent decisions while they are in college. Personal contact on a one-to-one basis is an important way to identify individual differences and needs of students. The faculty members believe that they can and should be an important source of information and advice on both academic and personal matters. Thus, they consider advising to be an important and integral part of the undergraduate program."

Responsibilities of Administration

The Office of Instruction houses the complete files on the progress and academic records on each student. Those records are the last word in determining whether or not a student has completed the requirements necessary for graduation. I have found it a good idea to get to know the people in that office on a first name basis. Their help can be invaluable and they have all the answers on procedure and policy questions.

Many of my seniors have saved themselves and their parents a great deal of grief by making a check on their

standing at the beginning of their final year while there is still time to make any needed adjustments.

The Office of Instruction also has the final say on what transfer credits will be accepted by the college and which summer credits can be counted toward a student's degree.

While most of the policy on grades and grading is voted on by the faculty, its formulation and implementation is another responsibility of the Office of Instruction. It explains obscure points and defines terms as well as keeps up the frequent changes in the rules. The personnel often suggest alternatives to help both the students and advisers. In most cases a phone call solves the problem. However, when problems are more complicated they will often drop what they are doing to consult with the concerned adviser. On certain occasions they meet with the faculty to discuss new policies being considered or specific interpretations pertaining to the departments' curriculum, such as if Communications Arts wants to substitute a new writing course for a previous college requirement. A representative of the Office of Instruction reports to each college faculty meeting as part of the program of keeping everyone informed and sits in on the various committees on curriculum and student and academic affairs.

From an adviser's standpoint the most helpful information piece is the "Advising Handbook" which contains well indexed sections on the College, the undergraduate program, the advising system, and academic program advising.

The handbook also has helpful information on student loans, minority advising, petitioning, transfer credit and everything else you always wanted to know about advising but were afraid to ask.

In addition the office periodically publishes an information letter called "Teaching Update" with an attractive format and easily identifiable masthead. It features new course information, teaching awards, calendars, and other miscellaneous information or instruction.

At the beginning of each semester the office conducts brown bag seminars to help new advisers get started. The session begins with a presentation followed by informal discussion and ends with a question-answer period. This presentation is being considered for use in the next training program.

Responsibilities of the Department

The department's attitude and the priority given to student advising is very important. If good advising isn't recognized or encouraged there is little incentive for already busy faculty members to devote the time necessary to do an effective job.

In our department a faculty member is appointed to supervise the assignment of advisers. The aim is to match advisers' expertise with student interests and to see that advisers are distributed equally among the faculty.

Although each freshman is assigned an adviser before he or she arrives on campus, changes are permitted at any time a student feels it will be in his or her best interest.

It is also the department's job to set particular course requirements for majors and to see that they are carried out. If conflicts arise from scheduling, change of emphasis, or other adjustments the student must petition the faculty for permission to make any changes.

The department also supervises special programs, such as awards and internships, through selection committees. They evaluate the performance of eligible students and match them with established criteria. Each adviser must see that his or her students are aware of these opportunities and encourage them to apply when applicable.

It is important to re-emphasize that the attitudes of the department chairman in particular and the faculty in general toward student advising are the determining factors in how effective the program will be. In my opinion, it is difficult, if not impossible, to have a strong department with a weak advising component.

The Adviser's Responsibilities

Having an individual faculty member assigned to them means a lot to most students, especially when they feel the adviser has their interests at heart. Here are approaches we use at Cornell:

The first priority of every adviser is to keep the student's academic house in order. Is he or she registered for the right courses? Were the correct procedures followed? Is the student at the point necessary to meet the college and department requirements? Has the student selected electives relevant to career or other interests? Of course, grades

are important and any problems in that area should be worked on with the student early before they get out of control.

When minority students have trouble with course work there are special staff members to provide counseling.

Each advisee's folder should be kept up to date for easy referral so that any irregularities or problems can be corrected.

Many students want and appreciate information and tips on career preparation while others are interested in going on for graduate study. If the adviser doesn't feel adequately prepared to help in these areas he or she should know where the student can obtain the needed guidance. Summer jobs and internships are also important to most students. Jobs providing relevant career experience are especially in demand. Our office has established an internship policy and appointed a person to coordinate information about employment opportunities for both majors and graduates. This person works closely with the College Career Office.

The emergencies that complicate the lives of most students are another concern. Problems like locating a dentist on a weekend or informing professors that a student has been taken ill or called home suddenly become familiar tasks. Incidents such as suspected cheating on exams or plagiarism also cause occasional headaches. Even though emergencies can't be predicted they must still be handled to the best of the adviser's ability.

What About Student Concerns?

Ever since universities dropped the "in loco parentis" attitude students have been left for the most part with the responsibility for their own actions (or too often, lack of action).

Regulations are sometimes not clear or are misunderstood by students and they look to their adviser to straighten things out. Our catalog lists thousands of courses so advisees want some guidance as to what they should take, which courses are good and which if any they should avoid. We can also dispel rumors from peers about certain faculty members being too tough or teaching a "gut" course. The adviser's experience and background are especially helpful in recommending electives.

Most majors want advice on extra curricular activities and how much time they should allot to them. In some cases they don't want to be told to wait until after their freshman year, yet we would be doing them a disservice not to caution them to take it easy in the beginning.

While many people seem to think college students don't have a care in the world except what to do Friday night, advisers know better. Cornell has counseling and crisis centers to help troubled students, but the adviser is often the first to sense when something is wrong. Pressures can come from grades, parents, peers, extra curricular activities, athletics, social life, and uncertainty of direction.

When students feel their adviser is a friend and confidant, and an academic consultant, they will mention their problems before the crisis stage. If a problem goes beyond the adviser's expertise then additional help can be sought.

Advisees should be encouraged to drop in periodically just to chat, despite the fact he or she might not have an appointment, for it's only in this way that the desired empathy can be developed.

Have You Got What It Takes?

To solve all the problems a student might have would probably take a Solomon, but with these seven qualities below you can probably be one of the best advisers:

Empathy—The ability to look at things from the student's viewpoint. Although some problems may seem absurd to an adviser, the students involved probably are very concerned.

Availability—Office hours are a good idea but don't limit student contact too narrowly. As mentioned earlier, problems don't come on schedule (although it might seem that way). Students like to know you're approachable. And don't forget to attend special student functions—a responsibility that goes with the territory.

Knowledge—Courses, requirements and regulations are constantly changing so you must keep up with them to do your job properly. It takes time to read the often voluminous correspondence put out by the various committees and the administration, but it's important to keep up to date. Lack of such knowledge has penalized many an innocent student.

Honesty—Being tough when it's needed may be uncomfortable for both of you, but it often helps. You can usually tell whether or not a student is really trying. By the

same token a pat on the back for improved grades or a special award is worth the added effort of a letter or phone call. Too often we forget to do that.

Expertise—Keeping up on your field or special area of communication is another responsibility. Students want and appreciate help in preparing for that all important first job. Advice on preparing a first rate portfolio and where and how to get interviews can make job hunting much easier for your advisees. Working closely with the college and university career centers is helpful.

Commitment—Getting to know your advisees as individuals, not just names on a folder, should be a priority. The advisers students talk about most are the ones who don't stop talking with students when office hours are over. And as mentioned earlier, it is the department's commitment to advising (or lack of it) that sets the tone for the individual advisers.

Good Students—None of us advise in a vacuum. It takes students, and today's crop seems to be the best yet. When one of your advisees wins two top awards in one year, as one of mine recently did, you know it came from talent, desire, and hard work. Even so, a small part of that success rubs off on you.

Is It Worth It?

After discussing the headaches and problems of helping twenty advisees survive the rigors of a college education each year, you may wonder if it's worth it.

But every once in a while you receive a news release telling of an ex-advisee who finished graduate school or was promoted to an important job. Or a familiar face appears in your doorway and asks, "Remember me?" After an hour of reminiscing and asking, "What ever happened to So-and-So?" they end by saying how fondly they remember "the good old days" and how helpful you were in getting them through.

And there are the letters from graduates telling of all the interesting things they are doing and asking us to keep stressing that one's students should get all the samples they can while they're in school because they followed that advice and were picked for a job over forty other applicants.

Reviewing Your Own Procedures and Philosophies

After you've put all these things together you soon realize how important and rewarding advising can be. You may even decide that it is all worth the worry and effort you've given it.

In my opinion, students need and deserve the best we can give them. If you have any responsibility toward students, I urge you to review your relations with them, your procedures for helping them, and even your philosophies about them. You might begin by asking yourself:

1. Does my school have an "adviser of the year award" to encourage improved counseling and help to students?
2. How does my system compare with that at Cornell or other schools? Is it better; emphasized less; can it be improved?
3. What is the average number of advisers per faculty member at my university? Does it seem reasonable? Too large? Too small?
4. Finally, who can best serve as an adviser? Should we make use of lecturers and non-teaching faculty?

