

## **AC 2008-1982: DEVELOPMENT ADVISING – EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES; WHAT ARE APPROPRIATE, CARING LIMITS?**

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## **Developmental Advising – Exploring the Boundaries What are appropriate, caring limits?**

### **Abstract**

It is generally recognized that developmental advising is a key component for student retention and academic success. Yet faculty advisors may feel inadequately prepared to do such advising for what they think are very good reasons. Academic advisors in engineering have backgrounds in technology, industry, and curriculum but may forget that they have developed life skills from which students can benefit. Student needs can readily extend beyond academic topics and provide a considerable challenge to effective advising. This paper explores the territory between student personal issues that faculty worry about having to address and curriculum matters dealing with course selections and prerequisites. Effective student advising demands that the entire range of issues be addressed, yet faculty are hesitant. Faculty can and should shoulder only a part of the burden but could benefit from viewing the advisor-student relationship as an opportunity to help the student acquire life skills.

What the authors have found to be true to a great extent is that a major need of students is to simply talk, to talk to someone who cares. Engaging students in conversation and taking them seriously is essential. Frankly, students seldom have an expectation that someone will “make everything better.” They are not that unrealistic. Students do, however, benefit from talking to someone who has been where they are in the academic process and navigated it successfully as well as someone who can teach them critical thinking skills to address problems, be they academic or personal. Faculty need to be able to differentiate what students are communicating into two broad categories, academic and nonacademic. Issues dealing with the nonacademic, “stuff of life,” category may need to be referred to those with greater expertise but the faculty member may be able to help the student critically think through their issues by focusing on their goals. Hence, the effectiveness of the faculty component of advising can be vastly improved by the processes of listening, helping, and, when appropriate, referring students to the proper resources on campus.

Several actual case studies are presented that faculty have encountered during student advising. The paper will present different potential outcomes to the cases and suggest the suitability of faculty advising approaches. An analysis of the ramifications of these approaches will be given. It is expected that a faculty who has studied these cases before encountering them will be better prepared as an academic advisor.

Why bother? Why not just settle for an advising focus on what courses to take? Students come to college not just for knowledge in their chosen major. The purpose of college is growth, both professionally and personally. One without the other is a defeat for the entire educational process.

## **Introduction**

This paper represents 75 years of combined experience in the areas of advising, counseling and teaching in higher education. The authors wrote it from an experiential perspective and have incorporated material from relevant research, personal observations, and professional workshops and discussions on the topic of developmental advising. Many faculty view effective advising as more of an art form than a prescribed method of interaction with students. As such, faculty generally do not feel equipped to perform what is commonly referred to as developmental advising. According to Crookston, developmental academic advising “is concerned not only with a specific personal or vocational decision but also with facilitating the student’s rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills. Not only are these advising functions but...they are essentially teaching functions as well.”<sup>1</sup> Frost suggests that “developmental advisors rarely make decisions for students....Developmental advising emphasizes process, not product.”<sup>2</sup> In essence, developmental advising focuses on helping students identify life goals while acquiring skills and attitudes which promote intellectual and personal growth. In the process, students become effective professionals and mature decision makers in a way that is uniquely theirs. This is a different way to consider and do advising.

If faculty advisors could reflect for a moment on what academic skill sets the quintessential student would possess upon graduation, most would picture a mature decision maker who has the capacity to apply the knowledge he/she gained in classes to solve problems, benefit humankind and expand the knowledge base in their chosen field. Utilizing a developmental advising model has the potential to produce the same scenario in the area of life skills.

### **Effective Teaching Methods Set the Stage for Developmental Advising:**

Prescriptive academic advising generally focuses on courses to take, the meeting of prerequisites, staying on track, etc. It is normally a stiff, formal process that is definitely essential but may miss the mark in addressing the needs of many a student.

Developmental advising is a different way to consider and render advisement. Based on the authors’ observations, every day faculty members impart knowledge in the classroom to students and try to teach them how to think through the critical elements of a problem and discern the appropriate material/formulas to utilize in order come to the best solution for a given situation. In essence, these faculty members are helping students learn by layering the curricula in such a way that the student’s knowledge base grows and he/she eventually emerges as a mature functional professional capable of standing on his/her own. In that vein, King states that “Developmental academic advising is both a process and an orientation. It reflects the idea of movement and progression. It goes beyond simply giving information or signing a form.”<sup>3</sup> Raushi also suggests, “to advise from a developmental perspective is to view students at work on life tasks in the context of their whole life settings, including the college experience.”<sup>4</sup> “Crookston believed that higher education provided opportunities for students to develop a plan to achieve self-fulfilling lives and that teaching included any experience that contributed to the student’s growth.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, somehow faculty do not realize

that the teaching methods they use in the classroom, which they expect and hope will culminate in the development of outstanding professionals, are the same methods that they could use to expand the effectiveness of academic advising and increase students' life skills.

Faculty have the expectation in the classroom that students will learn material most effectively if it is introduced at the appropriate time and in the right context. They expect junior level students to exhibit greater problem solving skills than freshmen and for juniors to have the capacity to utilize the sum total of their education and academic experiences to be more autonomous and independent. Developmental advising is based on the premise, "that the relationship itself is one in which the academic advisor and the student differentially engage in a series of developmental tasks, the successful completion of which results in varying degrees of learning by both parties." Frost also suggested that, "developmental advising understands advising as a system of shared responsibility in which the primary goal is to help the student take responsibility for his or her decisions and actions."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the developmental advising approach could play a significant role in students becoming life-long learners.

### **Listening is Advising:**

Effective developmental advising begins with listening. It may be helpful if faculty could view the student in the same context as a friend who needs some advice or mentoring, someone who needs to talk in addition to needing to listen. There is no training needed to be a friend and if one has experienced life, he/she has something to offer as a mentor. Most people have no difficulty giving advice to a friend or sharing their knowledge and expertise with a friend but somehow taking on that role with a student many times causes faculty advisors stress that is unjustified. One of the seven principles that Winston, Ender, and Miller propose to be essential to reaching the goal of development advising states that, "Advising requires the establishment of a caring human relationship—one in which the advisor must take primary responsibility for its initial development."<sup>7</sup> John Gardner wrote, "Students need mentors and facilitators. They need, in the words of Carl Rogers, 'authentic professional human beings who are worthy of emulation.' They need models who exhibit professional behavior, a sense of commitment and purposefulness, and a sense of autonomy and integrity in a world that generates enormous stress. Students cannot be told how to do this; authenticity cannot be transmitted through lectures."<sup>8</sup>

It is important that, above all, advisors must be faithful to the students. This forms an overarching principle to guide the decision making process and the interactions faculty have with students. Smith wrote, "Crookston proposed that a reciprocal relationship between advisor and advisee was essential. He reasoned that a relationship built on trust and openness allows for interactions and discussions that will foster student development."<sup>9</sup> Kadar suggests that students often view advisers as friends and may seek the advice of the adviser on non-academic matters. "Students may feel more comfortable telling their advisor/friend about problems with personal aspects of their lives such as relationships and family matters."<sup>10</sup> Alexitch found faculty/student interactions "increase the intrinsic value the students place on learning."<sup>11</sup>

The theory of Mattering vs. Marginality put forth by Schlossberg states that if students believe, whether right or wrong, that they matter to someone else, that they are the object of someone else's attention, and that others care about and appreciate them, they are far more likely to persist and succeed. If students do not feel anyone cares about them or their success, if they feel ignored by the mainstream and not accepted, they will feel marginal, and, therefore, are much less likely to succeed in college.<sup>12</sup> The Boyer Commission notes, “an idea that cannot be fully articulated is an idea that is not fully formed and, therefore, cannot be realized.”<sup>13</sup>

We would suggest that advising is a love of something, a deep concern for the welfare of “the other.” As such, it is not possible to define it in terms of dos and don'ts. But it is definable in terms of intent, of direction. There must be a guide to the intent and the direction – be faithful, be caring of the students.

We suggest faculty advisors begin with an advisor's pledge, such as: “To the best of my ability, I will guide and nurture, and demand behavior and performance that is tolerant of and encouraging of students' professional and personal growth.”

The following tenets represent the authors' understanding of what works for effective advising and is based on extensive personal experience.

#### Tenets of Effective Academic Advising

- Be faithful, be caring of the students
- Have students interests at heart in the advisor/student relationship
- Extend advising to the classroom; advising is not limited in function, location, time, etc.
- Utilize a developmental advising approach according to Winston, Ender and Miller:<sup>14</sup>
  - Academic advising is a continuous process with an accumulation of personal contacts between advisor and student – these contacts have both direction and purpose.
  - Advising must concern itself with quality-of-life issues, and the advisor has a responsibility to attend to the quality of the student's experience in college.
  - Advising is goal related; the goals should be established and owned by the student and should encompass academic, career, and personal development areas.
  - Advising requires the establishment of a caring human relationship – one in which the advisor must take primary responsibility for its initial development.
  - Advisors should be models for student to emulate, specifically demonstrating behaviors that lead to self-responsibility and self-directedness.
  - Advisors should seek to integrate the services and expertise of both academic and student affairs professionals.
  - Advisors should seek to utilize as many campus and community resources as possible.

## Case Studies – Practicing Developmental Advising

It is important to remember that developmental advising is not about answers and solutions. Academic advisors are not expected to solve problems; many problems are not neat and for many, solutions may not exist nor may advisors be the appropriate person to assist the student. The need to respond is not as great as the need to listen, to care, to simply be there, to lend respect.

These scenarios are actual examples and very representative of what the authors have experienced while advising students. Pseudonyms are used in the scenarios but the gender and age of the students is real. The specific examples occurred during what was supposed to be nominal academic advising sessions. It is also important to note that two of the authors are faculty with administrative duties and two are advisors in the university's TRIO Program which engages in intensive intervention with students who are first generation college students, low-income or disabled and who are considered to be at high risk of dropping out. One faculty author meets with all students from five undergraduate programs who are experiencing academic difficulties. As advisors, all authors' basic methodology of interaction is to engage the students in discussion.

Can we (should we) identify some markers of the following different scenarios? To what degree is an advisor responsible for identifying problem areas that are presented in these cases? There seems to be a moral obligation that supersedes the advisor's job description; perhaps we might view our role as faculty advisors as "in loco parentis" here. It would appear that referrals to the campus counseling center are common to most of these cases – or are there other appropriate forms of intervention?

### Drug user

Joe comes to his advising appointment late and disorganized ( similar traits you have observed in the classroom). He seems to lack focus and is unable to concentrate during the appointment - Did you notice these characteristics? Were you looking for them? Should you be looking for them? - After noticing this, you look at his eyes and they have a distant, reddened, faraway look. You come to believe that Joe is in an altered state - What should you do? What is your responsibility? Should you ask him directly about this? What does the law allow you to do?

- Communication to Joe – Joe you seem pretty unorganized and distracted lately. What do you think is causing that?
- Given the response of the student - Are you comfortable with the way your life, classes are going at this point?
- If not – What do you think needs to happen/what do you need to do to be where you want to be. Are you aware of services on campus that may help you work through the issues that are blocking your ability to meet your goals?
- Give student direction and encouragement to seek out support systems. Offer to allow Joe to use your phone to make the initial call to counseling. At least, give him the number and name of a counselor.
- If the response to his comfort with his life is "yes" – The advisor may need to state that they are concerned that Joe will not be successful if he continues down the

current path. Don't push or prod. Remind Joe of his academic goals and responsibilities and ask him what his plan is to achieve them.

### Gambler

Jack comes to his advising appointment after his meeting with the academic probation board. His grades are falling. You pull his course record and notice about a 1.5/4 grade point drop from the beginning of his second year to the end of his third year. Over this same period of time, you (and/or other faculty) have noticed that when he comes to class, he is on an internet gambling site on his laptop computer. He tells you that due to money problems he will need to drop back to part time so he can work - Should you bring up his gambling? What should you do?

- Communicate to Jack – I noticed a 1.5 point grade drop in your GPA over the last year, what has changed about the way you are studying or preparing or in your life that may be causing you to drop so drastically?
- Give Jack a moment to reflect and if he mentions money problems then ask him what has changed financially – There is counseling available that can help you to develop a budget so you can perhaps identify where your money is going.
- Given the fact that Jack is a junior and if developmental advising has been taking place of the course of his tenure, there should be enough of a rapport to allow him to disclose personal information.
- Again the faculty advisor has an opportunity to help Jack develop life skills and judgment by helping him break down the problem into the critical aspects of the issue and offering information on support systems when appropriate.

### New first-time parent

Jim requests an advising appointment to see you. During your meeting, he tells you that his girlfriend has just had a baby. He seems distraught and wants to talk further with you about this situation. He tells you that his parents, who are paying for his school, would not be supportive of this development. You do not feel comfortable talking to Jim about this personal situation - How far should you let the conversation go? What, if any, advice should you offer? Does your school have a counseling center that he could visit? Is recommending the school's counseling center an appropriate course of action?

- Communication to Jim – Life can throw us curve balls which can seem like the end of the world but they are usually manageable if we think through our options. Let's take some time to think through areas of your life right now in which you have some control so that you can devise a plan to continue your education and meet your goal of graduating.
- Do you still want to graduate?
- What types of support do you need given the situation to ensure you can continue your studies?
- If the faculty member can take some time to talk out the critical elements of Jim's problems, he/she may be able to increase Jim's capacity to develop solutions to the issues that may block his academic success and as a result, Jim could gain life skills.
- Concluding statements to Jim – Jim, I am concerned that this issue will block you from being successful academically and though I am willing to listen, I feel you may

need to talk with someone who can help you connect to support services here on campus and in our community.

### Eating disorder

Mary is a great student. She has been at the top of every course she has taken from you. Unfortunately, she is suffering from an eating disorder that no one knows about - What signs should you be aware of that might give you a clue to her disorder?

- This is a situation that may be far outside the expertise of faculty because individuals who are experiencing mental illness are excellent at hiding their disorder.
- More than likely a faculty member will not discern an eating disorder but in the outside chance that they do – The faculty member should express their concern for Mary’s health and ask her what she thinks is causing it. If the student discloses her disorder, the faculty advisor should ask Mary if she is concerned about her behavior and the effects it will eventually have on her health and her ability to be successful in her academic program. The advisor should suggest that counseling could help her sort out the reasons she is experiencing an eating disorder and decide on the best course of action for her to meet her goals.
- The faculty member may want to offer their telephone and the number of Counseling Services to increase the chance the Mary might actually call.

### Sexual predator

On the television news you see one of your students caught in a news program sting operation – What are your obligations to the student? What are your responsibilities to the greater student body and to the university?

- Assuming that the student somehow returns to school, it would appear that the faculty advisor should involve the Dean of Students to communicate the school policy regarding sexual harassment and illegal activities to the student.
- The role of the academic advisor is to get the student back on an academic track.
- If the student brings up the situation, then the faculty advisor can choose to listen or own up to their lack of comfort with the subject but be willing to refer the student to counseling.

### **Conclusion**

When thinking of appropriate developmental advising boundaries, faculty must decide which personal issues they have the appropriate expertise to address effectively and safely. Most of the case studies, though developed from actual events, would not fall under the expertise of a faculty advisor since many include situations with individuals who are suffering from mental illness and/or addiction. However, a faculty advisor has an obligation to care for the students and a responsibility to inform them of support mechanisms on campus that are available to them. The faculty advisor cannot make a student take advantage of services nor can they disclose personal information to other professionals at the college unless the student poses a danger to him/herself or to others. The faculty advisor can let the student know he/she cares. In many situations faculty advisors forget that they once traversed an academic system and have, along the way, developed life skills. Only when they engage students in a conversation on a personal level is there the opportunity for them to share their knowledge and effective



life strategies. These teachable moments, when shared with students, have the potential to expand students' ability to make choices that can help them reach their academic and life goals.

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