

Interviews with Classroom Faculty about Advising Students, Spring 2002

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Interviews were held in April 2002 with 28 members of the faculty. The stratified random sample included 8 from humanities, 10 from social studies, and 10 from science. The 8 assistant professors, 10 associates, and 10 full professors represented 15 departments, all of which advise both majors and tutees. There were 17 males and 10 females interviewed. There were no correlations between responses and either division, rank, or gender.

Good Advising Encounters

Interviewees were asked to tell a story about a good or successful advising encounter. The types of stories told show what kinds of things happen in good advising relationships.

- Matching a student with an outside opportunity, such as a summer internship or a graduate program.
- Increasing a student's self-confidence and awareness of opportunities.
- Mediating between a student and a classroom professor, usually by convincing the student to talk to his or her professor.
- Helping overly focused students to broaden their curricular choices.
- Supporting a student who is going through personal difficulties, by listening, providing information about support services, and by advocating for the student within the college.
- Helping students uncover their own interests and priorities, by helping them think about why they like or dislike a certain subject, the advantages and disadvantages of a certain major, their reasons for considering graduate study, etc.
- Convincing students to challenge themselves, by urging them to complete Phi Beta Kappa requirements, take a course that the student will find difficult, attend off-campus study in a very unfamiliar environment, etc.
- Helping a student sort out the logistics of a program, such as fitting in off-campus study or planning a double major.

Unsuccessful Advising Encounters

Here, each adviser was asked to tell a story about an unsuccessful encounter, which revealed the types of things that make advising difficult.

- Students who won't challenge themselves, such as those who avoid taking any mathematics, or avoid courses with heavy reading or writing loads, or those who take less than a full credit load simply so they won't have much work to do.
- Students in academic difficulty who refuse to get help, or those who drop courses if they start getting lower grades.
- Students who won't take advice and make poor choices, refusing to try possibly helpful strategies such as rebalancing a course load or taking things in a different order than the student had planned.
- Students who won't plan ahead and don't get organized, ending up not completing their own curricular goals.
- Students who think they should get special treatment, asking for the usual procedures to be waived without a clear reason, or proposing independent work as a way of avoiding having to meet any departmental requirements.
- Professor/adviser role confusion, when being a demanding professor conflicts with being a supporting adviser to the same student.
- Students who don't want to be advised, never wanting to hear the adviser's views on anything.
- Students who misinterpret advice, and then blame the professor for something s/he never said.

What Good Advising Requires

Advisers were also asked what good advising requires of them.

- Knowing about the student: their goals, background, personality, strengths, weaknesses, views, biases, assumptions about life and about education, values, academic record, activities, what they've figured out and what they need help with. The point of this knowledge is so the adviser can figure out what makes sense for that student as an individual, rather than just fitting everyone into a general model, to gauge accurately students' reactions to things they encounter here, and to help them fit what they want to do academically with all the nonacademic things they also want to do.
- Knowledge of Grinnell's programs: the details of programs and departments, requirements, timing needed to do different things, options available (curricular and extracurricular), so the adviser can suggest things that would respond to the student's individual talents and interests. Accumulate information heard from other students to use with future advisees.
- Have a genuine appreciation of the liberal arts. Encourage them and show their value, explain why students should want to learn about other fields, make sure the student gets a good liberal arts distribution. One person reported giving enough preparatory structure to the advising process that students arrive at meetings already having thought about things like studying a balance of subjects and acquiring a balance of skills.
- Knowledge of the world outside Grinnell (this is where one respondent said we often fail, especially when we are not replicating ourselves by sending students to graduate school). Need to match students with opportunities in the wider world. Make students aware of, and encourage them to seek, wider opportunities. Tell them about opportunities they've never thought of. One person suggested making the student think, from the very first semester, about what they want to know and be able to do when they graduate.
- Establish good rapport with the student so s/he will talk openly. Then be a good listener, pay attention and make sure of understanding what the student says. Must be willing to ask the student questions. Also, help the student learn to listen to him or herself.
- Take a genuine interest in the student; respect them, care about them as people. Must want what's best for them, and be able to know the difference between one's own wants and regrets, and what applies to them. This includes being willing and able to care about people without always liking them very much. Should want the student to realize who they are and what they can be. One suggested that it helps to start by assuming the best about students, that their intentions are good, that problems are real and not just due to laziness.
- Use one's knowledge of the student to think about how appropriate the student's goals and plans are for them. Try to see the world from the student's perspective, while maintaining one's own standards and values and making them explicit to the student. The adviser should make the student both secure and insecure, get them to confront both their strengths and their weaknesses. Sometimes it's necessary to say things the student doesn't want to hear. Must be willing to be frank, and not gloss over a student's weaknesses or unrealistic plans. Try to be both persuasive and flexible, while recognizing the limits of one's own effectiveness.
- Time. Staying in touch with students during the semester, preferably face to face. Also energy, tact, good social skills, and being well organized.

One respondent remarked that for good advising to work, something is required of the student also:

- The student must have an open mind and take an interest in what the adviser has to say.

Advising Challenges

The following were given in response to a question about what challenges they face as advisers.

- Gathering knowledge about the student: getting them to come in and talk, gaining their trust so they will reveal enough of what the adviser needs to know in order to give good advice.
- Gathering knowledge about Grinnell: learning the system here (especially since most faculty have major advisees before going through the tutorial training).
- Advising students having academic difficulties: addressing underachievement and poor study habits, when to encourage students to take subjects in which they are not very talented, helping students accept when their expectations are not in line with their abilities

- Working with unfocused students: those who do not want to make any decisions, who keep changing their minds, who want the adviser to choose courses for them; getting students to give some overall coherence to their individual curriculum.
- Working with overly narrow students: those who have a single interest or want to avoid some curricular area.
- Getting students to challenge themselves: to take more upper-level courses or study an area the student finds difficult, to follow through on a well-distributed curriculum the student has previously agreed to.
- Getting students to think beyond college: how to focus on life and career planning without the student feeling pressured to pursue a particular track.
- Role confusion: finding the line between being academically supportive and demanding, and finding the line between academic and personal advising.
- Paying adequate attention to all students: remembering details when there are many advisees, remembering about the students who don't keep showing up with problems, and remaining flexible rather than applying the same goals and advice to all students.
- Student attitude problems: students who don't want advice, those who are inflexible about considering alternatives, those who are always in crisis mode.
- Conflicting faculty expectations: when there are philosophical splits within a department on how students should organize their programs and whether they need a balance of types of courses

Mapping the Dimensions of Advising

SUCCESSFUL	UNSUCCESSFUL	WHAT'S NEEDED	WHAT'S HARD
match student with outside opportunity	students who won't plan ahead or get organized	knowledge of the world outside Grinnell	getting students to think beyond college
mediate between student and classroom professor			
help overly focused student to broaden	student who avoids certain subjects	have genuine appreciation of the liberal arts	working with overly focused students
support student with personal difficulties	be a demanding professor while being a supportive adviser		role confusion
help student discover own interests and priorities	students who can't make decisions/choices	knowing about the student; build good rapport; take genuine interest in the student	gathering knowledge, gaining students' trust; working with unfocused students
convince students to challenge themselves	students who won't challenge themselves		getting students to challenge themselves
help sort out logistics of student's program	students who think they should get special treatment	knowing Grinnell's programs and policies	student attitude problems
build student's self-confidence and awareness of opportunities	underachieving students who won't get help		working with students in academic difficulty
	students who don't want to be advised; who won't take advice and then make poor choices; who misinterpret advice		student attitude problems
	students with unrealistic goals who won't reconsider them	evaluate whether student's goals are realistic; be honest	working with students in academic difficulty

		time and energy	paying adequate attention throughout the year
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Advising and Mentoring

All but five individuals made a distinction between advising and mentoring. Two kinds of distinctions were made, and some individuals mentioned both of them. (Those who said advising and mentoring were the same were describing the first type below.)

(1) Mentoring as Facilitating Overall Personal Development

Here advising is very circumscribed, and consists of helping them meet the expectations of the college, suggesting alternatives and encouraging them to explore. You shepherd their academic program. It largely focuses on course choices, more straight academics. Expectations are pretty clearly defined.

Mentoring is more encompassing. Some describe it as a form of parenting, using the phrase "in loco parentis." It requires being a role model and talking to them about life, sharing in their personal growth. It can include helping them with study skills, class interactions, showing them how to deal with particular circumstances. It may or may not be academic. It's a more connected position, with more responsibility, more invested in the relationship. It's more about life in general, concerned with the whole person, helping them with the non-academic things in their lives. The mentor and student become personally close, and the mentor provides a model of how to have a fulfilling life. It takes more time and includes more informal interaction, such as going to see them perform in sports events, plays, concerts, etc. It's a more personal and more mutual relationship. It's general positive modeling, with fluid expectations.

(2) Mentoring an Incipient Colleague

Here advising is helping the student do what the student wants to do, when what they want is something different from what the professor does.

Mentoring of this type happens when the professor and the student have an intellectual affinity, and the student comes to the professor having already defined themselves as wanting to do what the professor does, and wanting to learn about it from that person. They share the professor's academic interests and professional goals. The mentor sees them through over time, showing them how to do something the mentor knows well, providing a model of what a scholar in a particular field is like, how one acts and thinks. It has a stronger focus on a particular subject area. The mentor engages with the student at a deeper level, in a more sustained, developed, and intense relationship. Ideally, both people find themselves growing. It's more hands-on, helping the student emulate what the mentor does. This is done with majors, and it takes place day to day, in upper-level classes or in research projects. The mentor sees the student fairly regularly and the two work on a specific set of skills. It generally happens in the context of some kind of project.

How Mentoring Arises, Who Needs it, and What it Requires

Some students need/want mentoring and some don't. Someone who wants to be mentored will seek it out. It's more organic [than advising] and related to personalities; it cannot be planned. The second kind of mentoring specifically depends on the student being seriously interested in that particular subject. Either kind works by both parties knowing what they want from the relationship and being willing to give it. Mentoring is not an institutional responsibility; it arises out of relationships. It's very important that both parties be able to choose each other.

Other Information

First-year advising is seen as harder than major advising because it encompasses more issues. Everyone has unofficial advisees: usually from classes, prospective majors, or seeking career advice. Everyone does some career advising.