Open Minds and Open Doors: Advising at a Small Liberal Arts College

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My *alma mater* has an undergraduate population of 30,000; in campus offices, I was known by my nine-digit ID number. In high school, I had been an A student. I completed work on time, drafted well-organized papers, and in the comfort of a small classroom, did not hesitate to jump into a discussion. However, amidst a sea of faces in my freshman-year lecture hall, I kept my hands planted firmly by my side, fearful of the critical gaze of those around me. Advisor office hours seemed to be reserved for those students who had courage and self-confidence to speak up when they had an idea and knew when to ask for help. I switched my undergraduate major with the aid of an online system that checked my credit totals and curricular requirements. I never spoke with an advisor during my four years on campus, nor do I recall being assigned one.

I loved my college experience for its thriving extracurricular life and menu of course options. But in four years, I had come away with little connection to faculty or staff and a limited understanding of how I could have benefited from an advising relationship. I have no doubt that many college students face the same struggle. They do not know how to seek advising, or they are unaware that it could truly make a difference in their educational path.

Currently, I am an advisor at a liberal arts college of fewer than 700 undergraduates. We have an open curriculum with no course requirements and a mission that focuses on intellectual risk-taking and a self-designed education. Class sizes reflect the emphasis on close student-faculty relationships, and course syllabi highlight that attendance and participation are never optional. While students can make use of office hours, meaningful conversations often occur in the dining hall or common spaces where students and faculty congregate.

When students step onto our campus in their first year, they are assigned both a faculty advisor and a staff advisor. Advising is considered integral to the college experience. I knew that my role would reflect this aim—to address students' whole experience on campus and challenge them to engage with their education from Day One. Advising seemed to have no boundaries. However, I have learned that the reality of fostering a culture that values advising as a collaborative and integral process, while garnering students' investment in this process, is a daunting challenge.

Building the Advising Relationship

Students are overwhelmed with new commitments and adjustments in their first year of college. Without the incentive of a required first-year course, it is difficult for them to realize the importance of advising beyond registration. They don't think they need to see an advisor, and frankly, papers and projects seem much more important in the later weeks of their academic term. These students have sought out a school with no requirements and don't want to feel pressured to forge a relationship that they have not chosen for themselves. This led me to wonder, "How can I engage in proactive advising without seeming pushy?"

During my initial meetings with advisees, many are surprised by what I already know about them. Having read through their admissions files, talked with the admissions staff, and worked with students on course pre-registration, I come to know about their high school literary prizes or a student's gap year with Americorps, for example.

At the same time, two things consistently surprise me during the initial conversation. First, the student sitting in front of me is usually vastly different from what I might have imagined based on their application files. Second, it is impossible to predict whether a student is ready for the conversation on academic advising as they may be resistant to talking about their academic goals, or to sharing much at all. There have been moments of silence during which I have been tempted to ply them with questions about their reasons for pursuing particular courses. But students can sense when they are being rushed and when they are not being heard. Therefore, I allow the conversation to focus on their priorities at that time: hometowns, new roommates, or their orientation experience.

My questions vary depending on where students direct the conversation, but I make sure to listen, smile when appropriate, and sit directly across from them. If they trust that I want to know beyond just their academic interests, they will be more likely to return when they face a hurdle in their academic life or in their transition to college. A successful initial meeting may spark more meetings in the ensuing weeks or months, when we can focus more on students' academic goals, progress, and challenges.

Students who may benefit the most from advising—those who struggle to participate in class or complete written assignments—are often the ones least likely to respond to an invitation to meet with an academic advisor. For those students, my informal interactions seem to make the biggest difference. I've run with groups of students on nearby trails, attended their performances, and organized study breaks. When those students see me around campus, there's a glimmer of a smile or an earnest wave of acknowledgement, that signifies to me the value of small encounters as much as more formal ones.

Learning from Mistakes

Some students choose open-curriculum institutions because the notion of requirements hearkens back to their memories of the rigidity of a high school

schedule. The idea of educational exploration in college is freeing and thrilling, and perhaps it provides them with self-motivation they need to be successful. With freedom of choice, students who were afraid of math in high school opted not to take statistics in their first term; those who struggled with writing avoided courses with long papers.

However, as the term began and registration selections transformed into hours of class time, studio work, and papers, it became apparent to many students that they needed to experience hurdles in order to realize the value of a broad base of courses. For some, fewer boundaries help build character. For others, the lack of boundaries may be terrifying and consequently, those students may opt to transfer to a school that offers a more traditional set of rules and requirements.

I realized by the term's end that I had learned more about a student through his or her course choices than from their admission files. A student's ability to navigate and learn from his or her choices informed me about their level of self-awareness. The conversation that followed at the end of the semester after a failed course or a stressful period of final papers was an opportunity for us to reflect on lessons learned and how next semester could be different.

Creating a Culture of Advising

The dialogue between advisors can be just as important as that between advisors and students. If we cannot begin a dialogue about the ways in which we advise and how we can improve our advising, then we are not successfully modeling the learning process for our students. Recently, I worked with a group of faculty members to present a program to help first-year students gain a better understanding of how to navigate their course of study. While it was a small event, it was refreshing to see what could be accomplished through a conversation that shared our varied opinions and experiences. Time may not allow for advisors to meet regularly to discuss particular issues or challenges in their work. Nonetheless, by opening the door a little to welcome each other in, we would move toward a truly community-based approach to advising.

Building a network of advisors may mean that you must initiate the conversation about advising on campus. Depending on your campus culture, it may be more appropriate to do this informally, such as through a lunchtime chat, or more formally such as in an open forum or committee. These conversations will better prepare advisors to help the diverse range of students who come through their office door, for even at a small campus, there are students who are afraid to raise their hands.