

IMPROVING ACADEMIC ADVISING: STRATEGIES FOR TRAINING FACULTY ADVISORS

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Abstract

New faculty members are often unprepared for advising students. Most graduate programs offer no training in academic advising, so new faculty members typically learn how to advise “on the hoof.” While many universities make available training in such mechanics as curricular requirements, course sequences, prerequisites, grade-point average requirements, and graduation requirements, advising can and should be much more than a review of the rules printed in the catalog. In order for advising to become an opportunity for rich mentoring of students, advisors must learn to understand the motives and circumstances of their students. Case examples are one tool for teaching new faculty members how to exercise their advising responsibilities effectively and with clear, open communication between student and advisor. By discussing how to respond to the incidents represented in case examples of advising, new faculty members gain confidence that they can handle unexpected situations when they arise. This paper presents five very brief cases that illustrate advising situations that demand creative, ethically-grounded problem solving. None of the cases has a single, “correct” solution, so the cases provide a basis for interactive discussion of possible options, of underlying principles, of available resources, and of judgment processes.

KEY WORDS: Academic advising, faculty development, new faculty, ethics

INTRODUCTION

Academic advising is critical to student development, yet most faculty advisors have little if any training in advising. Experienced advisors educate new advisors informally, through anecdotes and narratives describing their own experiences. Case examples are one means of formalizing, disseminating, and improving this process. People who are new to advising are sometimes nervous (and occasionally terrified) by the prospect that they will face challenges that they are not prepared to handle. Case examples compress into a few, succinct narratives experiences that might take an individual advisor years to acquire through personal experience. Discussions of cases can help new advisors gain confidence that they can deal effectively with unexpected challenges and opportunities.

This paper will present five brief cases. Each is based on either a real incident or an amalgam of several real incidents, and care has been taken to report the incidents accurately, to avoid the kinds of embellishment and exaggeration that often occur with the successive retelling of anecdotes. While not deliberately selected to provide training in ethical judgments or in administrative practices, each case does involve ethical issues, as do most situations that pose substantive challenges to advisors. Keith-Spiegel, Whitley, Balogh, Perkins, & Wittig [2002] provide excellent cases targeted at ethical issues, and Bennett [1983] provides cases specifically targeted at administrative issues in departmental management.

In the cases presented here, the focus is exclusively on issues that arise between students and faculty members in their role as academic advisors.

The chosen cases are specifically designed to serve as a basis for group discussion. Because the cases are brief, several can usually be discussed in a one-hour session.

PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE IN FIVE CASES

Some of these cases are situations that the authors encountered in their roles as department chair and as advisor. While all of the cases involve students and faculty advisors in a psychology department, the issues involved in the cases are by no means unique to psychology, and they arise in other disciplines as well. While some advising matters are specific to particular programs, particular universities, and particular cultures, the cases presented here can be applied to many institutional and cultural settings because the relevant advising issues are defined by the discussants.

The purpose of these cases is to provide new advisors concrete practice in thinking through the ways they might handle an unexpected challenge. Each case involves an unusual situation, and the cases are not intended to be representative of the encounters instructors typically have with students. Instead, the cases are intended to serve as practice exercises, helping advisors learn how to identify and apply the relevant principles to the practical demands of particular situations.

In each case, details of the cases have been modified to obscure the identities of the people involved.

Case A: A Family Affair

Jennifer is a freshman business major at a comprehensive university. She is currently enrolled in an introductory psychology course and has talked to her professor, Dr. Norman, after class about some of the concepts presented in the course that have particularly interested her. In her most recent conversation with Dr. Norman, she expressed interest in switching to a psychology major. A week ago, Jennifer emailed Dr. Norman asking to see him during his office hours to talk about her major, and replied to confirm the appointment.

When Jennifer arrives at Dr. Norman's office, she is unexpectedly accompanied by two other people, who turn out to be her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lovatt. Before Dr. Norman can greet Jennifer, Mr. Lovatt steps in front of her and introduces himself and his wife. Dr. Norman's small office is crowded with piles of books and journals, and so he scrambles to find another room big enough for all four to sit and talk comfortably. Dr. Norman, looking at Jennifer, asks how he can assist her today. Mr. Lovatt answers that Jennifer is thinking about a psychology major, but that students today have to pick a major that will ensure that they can find a job that will allow them to make a good living. He explains that Jennifer did very well in her high school business classes and had gotten rave reviews for her performance in her high school internship in an accounting office.

Dr. Norman congratulates Jennifer and says that he remembers she had mentioned after class that she was thinking about changing her major. Jennifer speaks hesitantly, explaining that she doesn't find her business classes engaging, though she can and does do the work, so she has earned respectable grades. Though she did a good job in her high school internship, the experience brought her to realize that she would not particularly enjoy working in an accounting office. On the other hand, she really enjoys thinking about the ideas presented in her psychology class and finds herself discussing the course with her friends so much that they have begun to tease her for her one-track mind. She realizes she does not yet know much about psychology, so she is not sure what area of psychology she would most like to study. Her eyes sparkle as she explains how fascinated she is with the theories about cultural determinants of attitudes, and she is currently thinking that social psychology might be where she finds her focus. Mrs. Lovatt interrupts her to say that in today's economy people are very happy just to have a job, let alone a well-paying job, and that no one should expect to like a job all the time—that is why people are paid to work! Mr. Lovatt adds that if Jennifer became a CPA she would be assured of a job, and her financial future would be secure. She could then read all the psychology books she wanted in her spare time. Her father looks at Dr. Norman and says that everyone he has talked to says that you cannot get a job with a bachelor's degree in psychology. He adds that he has two other children that will be entering college soon and that he cannot afford to pay for graduate school for Jennifer. Jennifer doesn't respond, but looks down at her hands in her lap.

Case B: Aiming High

Shaquille, a first generation college student, has been highly successful in her classes, including one taught by Dr. Ling, her advisor. She has achieved A's in most of her classes in her major, and is known within the department not only as a hard worker, but also as a creative, critical thinker. She writes papers that are unusually well organized, she develops interesting ideas, and her exposition is clear. She is often the leader in class discussions and demonstrates a level of understanding more typical of graduate students. In a meeting with Dr. Ling just prior to her final semester before graduating, Shaquille explains that she plans to take a job as a manager of the small Cash Advance store where she is currently employed part-time. She says that she likes the fact that she has been promised a promotion and will be making \$33,000 a year, which is more than her mother makes. She asks Dr. Ling to write a letter of recommendation supporting her application for full-time employment and promotion.

Case C: Realistic Aspirations?

Dr. Denver is a faculty member who prides herself on her caring and effective advising. She is meeting today with Paul, a senior whom she has advised since he was a first-year student. During his first year at the university, while driving to visit a friend, Paul was sideswiped by a semi-tractor-trailer on an icy stretch of freeway, and his car rolled twice before landing in the median strip. He was hospitalized for several days, and he was unable to complete that semester's classes. He took the next semester off, too, to recover. When he returned the next year, he declared himself to the Disability Services Office, with letters from his physicians indicating that the automobile accident had resulted in a closed head injury, and with diagnoses of both an attention disorder and a reading disability. Paul readily, openly, and comfortably identifies himself as a "person with disabilities."

Paul has been able to pass most of his classes with the accommodations recommended by his doctor and therapist: textbooks converted to voice, as well as a reader and extra time during examinations. He works regularly with his advisor to develop strategies for success, and he consults diligently with his professors throughout the semester in each course. In the past year, he initiated a campus club for students with disabilities. Developing the club from nothing, he wrote a well-crafted set of by-laws, recruited members, and gathered slates of officers and faculty advisors. The club is a clear success.

Paul has also successfully participated in an independent research study. He is personable and well-liked by his professors and advisor. His grade point average has steadily improved. However he has retaken a required statistics course twice and still has not passed the course. His most recent statistics professor called Paul's advisor, indicating that Paul sought help several times a week with the class, and expressing doubt that Paul would ever be able to pass the class. Dr. Denver has also noticed that after a successful semester, Paul shows a tendency to register for a very challenging course load for the next semester, then to withdraw or get poor grades in one or two classes.

Paul has asked to meet with Dr. Denver today specifically to discuss applying to graduate school. He wants to enter a highly competitive pre-professional graduate program. Dr. Denver doubts whether Paul will be able to succeed in such an environment, and she also believes that his grade record would make it very unlikely that he could gain admission to the program. At the same time, she admires Paul's accomplishments and his persistence, and she does not want to discourage him from further accomplishments or from aiming high as he sets goals for himself.

Case D: Life Intrudes on the Ivory Tower

Danielle has recently transferred from a community college to a comprehensive university. She has met twice with her advisor, Dr. Raines, once at transfer orientation, and a semester later to get a signature on a registration form. In both of these meetings, Danielle sat with her eyes cast downward, and she said virtually nothing. Dr. Raines is an outgoing and friendly person, generally seen by students as warm, accessible, and non-threatening, but she strained during her meetings with Danielle to prompt her to speak. At their last meeting, Danielle wanted simply to get a required signature then to leave, but Dr. Raines invited her to sit a talk a few minutes. Dr. Raines asked, "How are things going," and Danielle replied, "Oh, they're fine." Despite several more attempts to get Danielle to talk a bit more, Dr. Raines was unsuccessful in finding an opening that worked.

Several days later, Dr. Raines was talking casually with another student who mentioned that Danielle was unable to do as much as the other students toward a group project because Danielle is the sole caregiver for her mother, who has a severe psychological disorder and is unable to work or, for that

matter, to live independently. Dr. Raines asks the student what she knows about Danielle's home situation, and the student explains that Danielle and her mother live together, and Danielle is responsible for managing the household as well. She also works at a mall 20 hours a week (and sometimes more) to supplement their income.

Danielle has never mentioned her home situation to Dr. Raines. Dr. Raines wonders whether she should discuss Danielle's home and work circumstances with her, and, if so, how she might raise the topic without pushing Danielle further into protective silence.

Case E: "I am going to sue."

George, a generally genial and outgoing student, appears at his advisor's office without an appointment, and with an uncharacteristically angry demeanor and tone of voice. The student has met with the advisor each semester since declaring his major, and the advisor has reviewed the major with George and helped him select courses. The student plans to graduate at the end of the semester. The student himself completed the paperwork to apply for graduation and submitted it to the registrar's office. A few weeks later he received a letter explaining that while he had completed all the General Education requirements as well as the requirements for the major, he had not completed the minimum number of credits required for a degree. He tells the advisor, "You never told me about this." Moreover, the student has accepted an attractive, well-paying job under the presumption (of both the student and the employer) that the student would graduate at the end of the current semester. The student is so furious he can barely speak, but he sputters, "I am going to sue you for ruining my life." "What," he asks the advisor, "are you going to do to fix this?"

A COMMON FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSION

All the cases are designed to generate common discussion once the case is concluded. To encourage generalization and potential transfer, each of the cases is written in such a way that the same set of questions can be addressed in group discussions of the cases. The questions are designed to encourage discussants to articulate the abstract principles that underlie each case, as well as the generalizable tactics appropriate to resolving the problems presented by each case.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the issues involved in this case, and how do these same issues appear in other (less extreme) guises?
2. How should advisors deal with situations that involve these issues? If you have been faced with similar issues, how have you dealt with them?
3. What advising/teaching opportunities are inherent in this situation?
4. What are the risks inherent in this situation?
5. What resources (most importantly, other people) are available to the advisor in dealing with this situation?
6. What is the best possible outcome for the student? For the instructor? How might these (best possible) outcomes be achieved?

NO SINGLE RIGHT ANSWERS, BUT SEVERAL WRONG ONES

The cases described above could all be successfully handled in various, widely differing ways. A great deal of the utility of a group discussion of such cases lies in the in concrete discovery of how many different approaches there are to the kinds of difficult situations represented by these cases. New faculty members, in particular, find it reassuring that there are many different ways to handle such situations, and different people may well select different approaches, depending on knowledge, background, personality, and time available. Group discussion also facilitates the introduction of best practices.

While there are many different, appropriate ways to approach the situations described in the cases, it is not the case that every possible approach is a good one. Indeed, each of the cases has within it one or more "traps," where an advisor might overstep what is appropriate in a well-meaning but misguided attempt to assist the student. Advice to students with disabilities in the United States, for example, must be compliant with both the letter and the spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act legislation. An advisor

threatened by a lawsuit needs to be careful and accurate in what he/she tells an angry student. Advisors can provide students with necessary and useful information, but they should not, and in some cases, cannot make decisions for the student without breaching legal or cultural boundaries, or putting the intellectual and personal development of the student at risk.

CONCLUSIONS

The majority of the cases described above are unusual incidents in that they describe situations that occur infrequently, but each is a situation that reappears, if not annually, at least several times a decade. While the cases are based on situations that are relatively uncommon in advising experience, they nevertheless can be valuable to faculty members, particularly those who are relatively inexperienced teachers.

First, while the cases themselves are a bit unusual, the issues they involve arise frequently in less extreme form. The cases encourage analysis of the underlying principles, and the "high contrast" nature of extreme cases facilitates identification and articulation of underlying ethical, pedagogical, and advising principles.

Second, advisors, particularly those with relatively little experience, often fret excessively about their own abilities to handle unanticipated situations in their advising sessions with students. Sometimes they approach their advising far too defensively, with a fear of spontaneity and an excess of structure and control. Case examples such as those described above are one means to help such advisors see that they can handle surprises, and they can even recover successfully when they make mistakes. If an advisor understands that she or he can deal with "worst case scenarios" such as those described in the cases, then that instructor may become less defensive and more open in advising style.

Third, while experienced advisors usually have a concrete sense of the institutional and collegial support that is available to help them, new advisors, by contrast, often believe, erroneously, that they must deal with unexpected problems in isolation. Embarrassment or fear of negative evaluation may discourage such advisors from seeking the support and assistance that is available to them. Because case examples are not personally threatening to the people who read and discuss them, they become a means to convey the degree of institutional and collegial support that is available at one's home institution.

Fourth, the concreteness of cases that are based on actual episodes makes discussions of ethical and pedagogical principles especially vivid, engaging, and memorable. The fact that the cases are based on real episodes, reported as accurately as possible, gives them a credibility that is not shared by artificial anecdotes, no matter how amusing and entertaining. Advising experiences should be shared. An incident that contributes to one advisor's development can also be useful to others. Group discussion of a brief case example is an engaging, enjoyable, provocative, and non-threatening means to share a meaningful advising experience.

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