

### ***Making Your Studies Meaningful***

Sometimes you really connect with your advisor, but horror stories also abound. It may have been during the first time you registered for courses, when so much was thrown at you that ibuprofen and a nap would have made better sense. It may have been while you were trying to add a course, and you spent 2 days being sent from one office to the next—getting the grand tour of the campus—simply so the staff could fix the registration software malfunction that initially froze your registration data.

It may have been during that time of year when the next semester's schedule books come out, and you sat searching for that spectacular array of courses that would satisfy general education requirements, department requirements, and let you sleep until 10 a.m. It may have been when you were sitting at the registrar's desk being told about the courses that would not quite fit the requirements, or when the dean told you that your sad story was like all the rest and that you'd be around an extra semester. Maybe it happened in another unique circumstance, but at one point it happened: You decided that the college advising system isn't providing you the services promised to you during orientation.

On the bright side, your advisor always seems amenable to signing your course request and giving you a minute or two during the enrollment flood, so when asked, you can always say that you have seen your advisor at least once a semester. Academic advising always seems like a three-ring circus during course registration time.

Now, after your less-than-satisfactory experience, we come along and spout off this worn-out cliché: Good academic advising can be the cornerstone of a solid and personally rewarding college career. In some instances, it can save your academic life. It can help you search out and put to use the resources and educational possibilities that a college or university has to offer.

You're thinking: That's all well and good, but who is going to work this little miracle? Why, you are! You see, like everything else on a campus, advisors (i.e., consultants) are resources not ultimate authorities. They give advice (i.e., give an opinion). They don't have to live with the program of study you devise: You do. That means you have the responsibility for creating your program of study.

Scary word, "responsibility." For all practical purposes, most faculty members, advisors, and academic administrators have the attitude that students are responsible for making and living with their own academic decisions. Sure, schools vary, often tremendously, in the amount of latitude they give students in required general education and departmental courses, electives, and curricula. However, the only way you can know how much latitude you are afforded is to take the responsibility to become informed. Academic decisions are only a few of the many important choices you must make. Just don't assume you've acquired all the necessary information because you probably haven't figured out all of the angles, and some of these angles may be very difficult to see.

Having a good perspective on campus resources and knowing what they can and cannot give you with regard to your academic decisions are important. What can you expect from your departmental advisor, the career development and placement center, the counseling center, and the like? What does it mean to "stop out" or "drop out?" How do you prepare to look for the 80% of the jobs out in the real world that are never advertised?

You need to begin by thinking about what academic advising is and what you should expect from your academic advisor. Most advisors know a lot about their specialty. In some cases, their specialty is the rules, and in some cases their specialty may be their research fields, but they don't know all that you need to know to make the academic decisions that will affect you personally. This is not a failing of your advisor; it's simply a reality. There is more to academic advising than filling out a program request form and helping you register for courses. Most advisors realize that the process of negotiating their college system can be trying at times, and it's made all the more trying by the demands put upon you by the system. Many students coming to college feel that they

***Making Your Studies Meaningful (continued)***

are obliged to declare a major or a field of concentration as incoming freshmen, but most freshmen are not ready to make that kind of commitment. About 80% of all undergraduates change their majors two or three times before they graduate, and that's not surprising. Because of the wealth of choices offered to college students, it would be unusual for any incoming student to have a good handle on what she or he wants to study. Even the best high school counselors can't communicate all the opportunities that a college has to offer.

Because most undergraduates don't know what they want to do, close to 50% will not graduate in 4 years. Even those who are fairly sure about their direction may need longer than 4 years to finish their degrees.

You might need to stretch out school because you are working and cannot take a full semester course load. You might have personal or family problems that necessitate that you stop out. You might have troubles dealing with the system. You might find out a bit too late that you haven't fulfilled a requirement. You might finally find the field of study that's perfect for you but not until the end of your junior year.

Indecision is an important part of being an undergraduate, but good advising can be critical in helping you through those decision-making construction zones. By admitting indecision from the start, you may find yourself ahead of the game. Just talk to some of those juniors or seniors you think have it all together. You might be surprised to discover that they still have the same questions that you have. Through good advising, you can learn to direct confusion into asking and answering the questions that clarify goals.

You need to get a handle on how advising fits into the scheme of your academic life and how you can help your advisors help you. There is more to any campus than any advisor can hope to talk with you about, but with the help of advising services you can learn to make college work for you. To begin, think about the following:

1. You can and ought to use self-advising as a way to take advantage of your campus. Learn the rules that govern your curricular choices; know how your extracurricular choices can complement your academic choices; find the resource people who can help you think through your situations; understand fully the choices that lie before you.
2. Your accomplishments on campus are limited only by your imagination, your desire to do something with your education, your ability to ask the right questions, and your ability to find the people who can answer those questions.
3. Don't take the prescriptions of curricula and fields of concentration without questioning their application to your plan. Take the initiative to discover how the parts of your major fit together and how they apply to your intellectual development, career goals, overall personal development, and satisfaction.

Traveling is as important as arriving. By putting yourself into a community of learners you ought to be shaping an environment that gives you the best chances for enlarging your personal and professional growth, exciting your intellectual curiosity, stimulating your capacity to wonder, and giving you a broader and newer perspective on the world and your place within it. Your education, then, can be the adventure it's supposed to be.