

***Want Good Advising? Take the Initiative!***

What is good academic advising? For openers, it isn't what most people think it is: a competent bookkeeping function that tracks your progress toward graduation or a semesterly consultation with your advisor about course selection. In its broadest sense, academic advising should involve an assessment of your personal values, a plan for attaining intellectual fulfillment, an investigation of career direction, and a look at the real world from objective and subjective positions. In a large sense, academic advising should lead you to ask: "What does all this mean to me?" Advice givers and their resources should help you learn how to answer this question.

Good academic advising is aimed at giving you the skills to answer the key question: What does this all mean to me? It's like all good educational experiences and all well-taught courses. It's a process that helps you learn to plot your path through college. It should help you orchestrate courses, resources, and other opportunities into an educational experience personally fit for you and one that seduces you into becoming personally involved in and responsible for your own learning. If your advising experience resembles something like being plugged into courses and being processed through the system in a manner akin to how your computerized forms are processed, it could be better.

However, you know that you aren't going to walk into very many offices on campus and find the type of advising you need to address the effect of your choices on your life. From the thousands of times we've talked to students we hear the same lines: "All our advisors do is tell us what courses we need to take. It's like a one-shot, 15-minute appointment, and they never seem interested. The whole darn place seems like it doesn't care; it's so impersonal." Because you don't get everything you need in one sitting with one advisor, you assume, without warrant and often foolishly, that this situation is the full extent of the service available, right? Well, it isn't. You see, another line we get when we ask, "Why are you taking this course?" or "Why are you in that major?" is often like "My advisor told me to take it," or "It's marketable, isn't it?" You have some kind of blind faith that what you are told to do is all there is to do, and you tend to believe what you read in the course and curriculum blurbs without taking the time to wonder if you want to be that generic student that this curriculum guide is designed to serve. Someone is putting one over on you. After all, if all you get from your advisors is a repeat of the course catalog information, why bother seeing them at all? You can read as well as they can.

The only thing you're going to get from your college programs catalog is a bare scheme of curricula, and its presentation will hardly tell you what you need to know. On most large campuses, for instance, you can study literature through several departments, such as English, Chinese, French, Russian, and comparative literature. However, do any differences exist between these tracks, and if they do, what are they? Do they offer different opportunities to utilize the resources of the campus, and will your career marketability be affected if you choose one track over another? For that matter, what does a person with a bachelor's degree in literature do after graduation?

Consider another example: Is the best route into medical school through traditional science? What nontraditional programs offer a route that is more attractive and offers better alternatives than the standard premed curricula? If such programs exist, how do you find out about them? You won't be able to answer these questions by consulting your college programs catalog. More important, you don't want to wait until your last year of college to begin to search out the answers.

So, what do you do?

First, you need to understand the role of advising and advisors in your academic life. You are responsible for the academic choices that affect your education. Don't assume that the advice you receive represents the only, correct, or beneficial alternative for you. All that academic advisors can do, at their best, is advise from the perspective of their personal and professional experiences, but their professional experiences do not necessarily give them a comprehensive view of your institution. For example, departmental advisors know about their own departments' requirements, but they aren't paid to know every detail of the campus. Still, many have underground networks of

***Want Good Advising? Take the Initiative! (continued)***

people who can give them information about nondepartment opportunities, and you can access this information, but only if you take the time to sit, talk, and ask. Remember that when you talk with an advisor you are receiving consultation. Advisors are not there to tell you what to do; they are to give you information to help you make a decision. The appropriate synonym for “advise” is “recommend” not “command.”

Second, faculty and professional advisors are not the only advisors with valuable recommendations. Take advantage of parents’ and friends’ knowledge and pay attention to information you read, see, or hear. You cannot make a good decision until you learn how to determine what’s going on around you.

Third, large universities can be big, impersonal places, and they will stay that way if you sit back and expect to maneuver through your degree like a customer moving through a buffet line. Smaller schools have their own problems: How do you maximize the relatively few resources available? Think about the difference between getting a degree and getting an education: The two are not necessarily the same, and how you pursue these options will determine whether you become a victim of the system.

If you receive inadequate services and support, you may not have made the effort to discover the offerings at your college. You need to find and create your own community, consisting of deans, faculty members, counselors, residence hall staff, and advisors with whom you can talk on a casual and personal basis and who can give you the inside road map to your campus. This will take time and effort, but the benefits will be worthwhile. With a good set of personal contacts, you will discover that most of your academic goals can be accomplished, and you can open up fields of study for yourself that are hidden beneath the surface of curricular requirements.

Finally, it’s up to you to know the rules, requirements, and resources of your campus. If you don’t understand the reason for a requirement or a rule, or if you have unanswered questions, you need to ask for assistance, and you need to keep on asking until you get answers that make sense! Each college differs in how it handles rules, exceptions to rules, the substitution of courses to meet requirements, and other such issues. Don’t assume that you know everything about any rule, constraint, or restriction until you check the information, and then double-check it. Many times you will find the hidden loopholes that allow department heads and deans to make exceptions to rules, and often you will find someone who will help you accomplish your objective. However, you will never know about these possibilities if you sit passively and make assumptions about the information you think you know. If you are not active, the system, with absence of malice, is going to do a number on you.