

What's an Advisor to do?

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As we all know, academic advising is currently under intense scrutiny by institutions of higher education all over the country. Conferences devoted to the subject abound, as do controversies about the best systems, methods, personnel, and so forth.

In my own readings and discussions, I have discovered no general agreement or consensus as to precisely what academic advisors should do. Therefore, I offer the following proposition as a working definition:

Academic advisors should be impartial but enthusiastic in their commitment to make available to advisees the maximum amount of accurate and relevant factual information (both written and oral) bearing on academic matters, on the basis of which accurate and relevant factual information students should be encouraged to make rational academic decisions and accept full responsibility for them. This proposition may seem stilted in style and general in content, but every word I have weighed and measured carefully.

First, academic advisors must remain *impartial*; that is, they grind no axes, push no pet courses, win no popularity polls. Their function is to assist their advisees — not air gripes or swell enrollments and/or egos. They must resist internal impulse or external pressure (from departments, individuals, or thumbscrews) to publicize particular courses or programs, or favor individual students, inevitably at the expense of others equally deserving consideration.

Impartiality by no means involves or implies indifference, however. Effective academic advisors enthusiastically commit themselves to advising as a vital component in the educational welfare of all students. Beginning advisors usually start out full of enthusiasm, but soon develop zeal-leaks and martyr complexes when they discover how difficult the job is and how (traditionally) thankless. Unfortunately, the complexity is inescapable and goes with the territory. The thanklessness is, however, finally being alleviated on enlightened campuses. Nothing stimulates enthusiastic commitment better than rewards — either spiritual or material. Both almost guarantee it. Rewards of any kind remain the exception, though, and the general rule remains that academic advisors can expect to be blamed for everything and credited for nothing.

The infinitive *to make available* was substituted consciously for an initial choice of "to supply," but the subtle distinction may well exist only in my own mind. I want to convey my conviction that academic advisors should avoid spoon-feeding their advisees. Advisors are not the source of all wisdom, nor can they be expected to encompass all the tributaries. They should not have to recite (over and over) every word in

the college catalogue (even though they probably should be able to); instead, they should direct students to specific sections or pages so they can read for themselves. Referrals to other campus offices and individuals should be customary and frequent. No advisor can be all things to all freshmen. Like Ralph Emerson, advisors should advocate and encourage self-reliance.

With the phrase, *maximum amount of accurate and relevant factual information bearing on academic matters*, we come to the heart of the discussion. "Maximum" surely needs no gloss; obviously, we want to be as thorough as possible in pointing out necessary considerations in every academic decision — whether involving a course, a curriculum, or a major. Opinions, however, are not facts. The opinion, "Professor Easy is an easy grader," may appear relevant to a freshmen, but is less compelling to a sophomore who has failed his course. That "everybody gets an 'A' in Epistemology 115" may be stated as a fact and may even (alas!) be accurate, but I cannot conceive of any academic situation in which it would be relevant. So-called "gut courses" are lucrative for the institutions offering them but can serve only as expensive transcript decoration for students ill-advised enough to take them. I can see no educational justification for them whatsoever. The statement that "an English placement test score below 65 requires a freshman to register for English 101, *Refreshing Rhetoric Review*," is a fact at Alma Mater U., is accurate, and bears on an important academic matter; but it is not relevant unless the freshman being advised has such a score. And advisors cannot know their advisees' pertinent data unless they have records. Students either will not remember their own scores or will not remember accurately. Advisors *must* have up-to-date records on each student. Regulations governing academic probation and suspension are not relevant to a potential or actual honor student. Premedical requirements are not usually germane to a student interested in majoring in German; advisors must obtain, maintain, and consult the student records. Test scores and previous grades in these records are not, of course, absolutely reliable indicators of future performance, but they sure beat judging by looks or hunches.

Should academic advisors never express opinions, then? Yes they can and should, when asked, but only when accompanying these opinions with appropriate disclaimers of infallibility. This is where the advising comes in. A concerned advisor properly can advise a weak student to avoid highly competitive, challenging premedical science courses. There is a risk involved, though. I so advised an incoming freshman last fall and quickly received an irate telephone call from his mother, flaying me for discouraging her son and stunting his education. Advisors also are asked frequently to recommend electives. They should not hesitate to do so — again, of course, basing their suggestions on the student's background, not their own (nor their own courses). This procedure is also fraught with peril. In a reckless moment, I mentioned to one advisee that she possibly might enjoy Introductory Philosophy as an elective. She followed my advice but stormed back in to see me in mid-semester, sobbing that she hated that course and that I had ruined her grade point average, consequently her future. Of necessity, I have developed a scientific and philosophical detachment about such encounters — and the scars hardly show. To be an academic advisor is to live dangerously. *C'est la guerre.*

Before leaving this section of my working definition, I wish to comment on the phrase, "**bearing on academic matters**," which we should construe strictly. It is fashionable these days for academic advising to get confused and/or combined with career counseling, psychiatry, ministry, astrology, and witchcraft. It is as much as (and more than) I can manage to know (or know where to find in print) the academic rules, regulations, policies, offerings, procedures, etc., without trying to become the Renaissance Person complete with reliable data on future employment prospects for all liberal arts majors. When my advisees regularly ask me what kind of a job they can expect with a liberal arts degree, I quickly consult my ever-ready crystal ball and promptly reply. "The world is all before you, where to choose . . . and Providence your guide." In other words, with apologies to John Milton, I don't know. **And** I don't think anybody else knows either. I sincerely believe, however, that students seeking a general, yet purposeful, education can develop free, flexible, well-stocked minds which will ultimately enable them to adapt to any number of future career opportunities. In the meantime, I deal in academic matters.

The last part of my working definition — about encouraging students **to make rational academic decisions and accept full responsibility for them** — formally says that advisors should help their advisees and function as responsible adults. To Shakespeare's famous tripartite divisions (slightly altered to fit the context) of those who are born mature, those who achieve maturity, and those who have maturity thrust upon them, I would add a fourth category — those who remain permanent adolescents. In my observation, most undergraduates fall into either the second slot or the fourth. As an academic advisor and as a member of society, I dearly love to eliminate or at least significantly decrease the number in the latter by proportionately increasing the ranks of the former.

The most (perhaps the only) rational academic decision students can make is to enroll in the most challenging and rewarding (in terms of learning, not grades) courses they can handle. When the inevitable moments of decision arrive, however, students themselves must make the agonizing choices, not advisors, who can and should inform, advise, urge, and encourage, but not coerce. They should think with, and not **for**, their advisees. If and when mistakes occur and predicted undesirable consequences eventually (or even sooner) ensue, students must refrain from blaming anything and everything — especially that perpetual scapegoat, "the system" — except themselves; and advisors must refrain from self-righteous assertions of "I told you so!" We should exercise similar restraint, of course, in counseling students how to evade the consequences of their own actions or lack thereof. Far too many students spend most of their time and energy in seeking to do just that. Continued success in such evasion only can guarantee their retention in the ranks of my fourth category above — the eternally irresponsible. Academic advising alone, of course, cannot cure this pernicious condition, but it certainly can strive to combat it.

There you have it, then: my personal, probably unorthodox, assessment of what an academic adviser should try to do. As I see it, academic advising involves common sense, a willingness to allow as well as to help students to mature and to think for themselves.

Perhaps my best conclusion is to invite you to read — now we have considered it in discrete statements — my proposition on advising once again as a whole (see pg. 9).