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## A Caring Attitude and Academic Advising

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*The authors present an extensive summary of the literature to support their view of these inseparable partners in higher education.*

In the words of the award-winning advisor Gregory Scott Wells:

Do you remember the confusion, discouragement, frustration, and despair you experienced when you were seeking guidance from your advisor in college? Are you prepared and willing to give more thought, time, and energy than you can imagine? Are you willing to care for some people you really don't want to care for? Are you willing to face a veritable multitude of interruptions of all the other work you have to get done so that none of your advisees ever has to go through what you went through? (Advice, n.d., 391)

If you are not willing, perhaps you need an attitude check—especially with reference to your approach to academic advising.

Individuals agree that they like to associate with people who show a genuine interest in them. They like to be treated with compassion, with an attitude of “you are important to us!” Students at our colleges and universities are no different—they want and deserve to be treated with dignity and compassion. Gordon states that “Students will always sense the difference between an advising contact that is personal and caring and one that is hurried and impersonal” (Advice, n.d., p. 387). Students are the end product of the service we in higher education offer and, obviously, they pay a high price in time and money invested. College personnel have the responsibility of giving students the best educational environment possible, which should include the availability of outstanding academic advising and a genuine caring attitude toward the student—inseparable partners in higher education.

In the recent student retention survey conducted by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and by the ACT National Center for the Advancement of Educational Practices, a “caring attitude” makes a repeat performance. The WWISR (What Works in Student

Retention) study published in 1987 concludes that “The factor perceived to be the most important contributor to a retention milieu on the campuses of the responding AASCU institutions is a caring attitude of faculty and staff.” Forty-six percent of the respondents gave it a 5—the highest score possible. The WWISR report continues: “When asked to choose the single most important positive factor from these ten, a caring attitude of faculty and staff was mentioned by half of those responding.” A “caring attitude” was also the item having the highest average importance in the national retention survey in 1979, thus enabling the repeat performance in the 1987 survey (Coward, 1987, p. 23). The WWISR Survey asks respondents to evaluate negative campus characteristics linked to attrition; “lack of faculty care and concern for students” ranked twelfth as negative campus characteristics (p. 28).

Habley developed an Advisement-Retention Model with eight continuums to present an explanation of the critical retention role played by academic advising. The fourth continuum in the model emphasizes the role of a caring attitude with the label “High Concern for Student–Low Concern for Student.” Students who perceive faculty and staff as unconcerned with their development are more likely to leave the educational environment (Habley, Academic Advising, Advising Skills, n.d., pp. 30–31). On this same subject of persistence in college, Anderson reports that “Factors which tend to promote persistence include individuals who take a personal interest in students.” He, too, emphasizes the key role of advisors and other university personnel who relate to students as persons (Anderson, n.d., p. 259).

In his twelve-item “Scope of Advising,” Crockett lists the challenge to advisors to “Establish A Caring Relationship” as his first item in the sequence (Crockett, *The Four P's*, 1988, n.p.). In his twelve “Characteristics of the Effective Advisor,” the second entry states that the effective advisor “Demonstrates a concern and a caring attitude toward advisees” (Crockett, *Implementing*, 1988, n.p.). Agreeing with Crockett, Gordon (1988) has emphasized the campus-wide scope of a caring

attitude by suggesting ten "Campus Characteristics That Promote Retention." The first of Gordon's characteristics states simply "Caring Attitude of Faculty and Staff" (p. 110). Keller (1988) reminds us further that one of the critical attributes for advisors includes demonstrating "concern for each advisee." In Keller's views, the ideal relationship is one that is both non-judgmental and non-threatening. Respect for the student and concern for his or her welfare is paramount (n.p.).

Where, however, does this attitude begin in higher education? The first of the "Thirty Reminders for Effective Advising" (See Appendix A), publicized by the American College Testing Program, states, "Care about advisees as people by showing empathy, understanding, and respect." This challenges **everyone** directly involved in the advising of students as well as those in supporting roles, such as secretaries and other office personnel. The second reminder exhorts advising personnel to "Establish warm, genuine, and open relationships," while the third reminder states, "Evidence interest, helpful intent, and involvement." Advising personnel are entreated to "Be a good listener" and to "Establish rapport by remembering personal information about advisees" in reminders four and five, respectively. Of the seven "Strategies of Advisement" used by the office of Instructional Systems at Morehead State University (1981), the first encourages advising personnel to "Attempt to become acquainted with the advisee in as many aspects as possible," i.e., in informal, out-of-the-office situations. The second and third strategies challenge advisors to "Explore the objectives, interests, and motivations of the advisee," and to "Develop rapport with advisees." A sixteen-item "Advisor Perception Inventory" (See Appendix B) developed at Drake University and popularized by the American College Testing Program (1979) contains such statements as: "My advisor has been actively helpful and has been genuinely concerned about my welfare"; "My advisor listens to problems I encounter"; and "I would willingly share problems that I encounter with my advisor."

Aiken, Barr, and Lopez (1976) encourage advisors to "Demonstrate personal warmth, respect, and genuineness related to problems presented by the student." They urge advising personnel to have personal discussions with students and to encourage students to reach their potential (p. 18). Metz and Allan (1981) indicate that "A good advisor attempts to understand student concerns from a student point of view." He/she listens constructively to advisees and attempts to hear all aspects

of expressed problems. In addition, the good advisor uses time effectively with advisees—keeping aside a regular schedule to meet the needs of assigned students, to provide the very best educational environment possible (n.p.).

Taking into consideration the above discussion, what are some simple suggestions for advising personnel? Award-winning academic advisor Alfonso challenges advisors to "Be sure to have a warm welcome by having that 'multimillion-dollar' smile to greet your students." The warm welcome and happy smile environment "... helps to ease up their anxiety" (Advice from the Experts, 1988, p. 386). It costs nothing, yet it means everything! The advisor must have an office secretary who exhibits a friendly attitude. Bostrom indicates that anyone with advising responsibilities must never react to a student as though the student is an interruption of office work. The student, after all, *is* the office work (Advice, n.d., p. 380). Wetzel familiarizes himself ahead of time with the names of the new students so that "... when we meet it is not a matter of learning the name, only which students to identify with that name" (Advice, n.d., p. 385). Similarly, Alfonso encourages advisors to "Remember the first names of your advisees so that they will feel more at ease during the advising session" (Advice, n.d., p. 386). The advisor's office itself might be decorated or arranged for the comfort of those who enter, because often the distressed student will begin the discussion by commenting about various aspects of the office. The room arrangement should not allow the desk to stand as a symbol of authority to the advisee. Harris suggests that the advisor assume the basic posture of involvement by facing the student squarely, which transmits the message that "I am available to you" (Harris, n.d., p. 324).

The efficient advisor and advising office should care enough for advisees and have enough pride and concern to work as efficiently and error-free as possible. Alfonso states that students need correct information in order to be fully aware of alternatives available to them in deciding courses of action (Advice, n.d., p. 392). Agreeing, Bostrom indicates that "More students are given inaccurate information on important issues than I care to count..." University life and academic programs are too complicated for guess work. Besides, giving the student accurate information and sound advice without intimidation helps to establish rapport (Advice, n.d., pp. 380, 385), and reduces later advising hassles for both the student and the advisor. However, if mistakes are made, admit them, and be willing to review the situation good naturedly.

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If an advisee has a question, answer the question. Linnell states, "Never let an advisee leave your office without either answering their question or referring them to a resource where they can explore their individual needs" (Advice, p. 385). Trumpeting Linnell's view, Bostrom states, "The Shuffle Stops With Me. No student will leave my office without getting help in some way." Bostrom continues by saying that if he cannot help a student, he does not "shuffle" the student off to a series of stops on campus, but rather identifies the problem, locates the problem solver, and assists in arranging an appointment for the student (Advice, n.d., p. 380).

Letters, cards, and notes should remind advisees that the advisor and other personnel are available for whatever assistance is needed or for whatever questions need to be answered. Wells indicates that he reaped great rapport benefits by dropping his students notes of encouragement (Advice, n.d., p. 386). At Houston Baptist University (HBU), a quarterly communication called a "Hi Card" is mailed to all undergraduate students. In addition to a "general attitude check" and "how are things going" information, the postcard-size Hi Card contains an invitation to "... please drop by my office and visit with me and allow me to assist you." The student response to the Hi Card has been overwhelmingly positive (Ford, 1987, p. 11).

Wetzel (Advice) shows that he cares about his students and that he is a visible, interested, accessible advisor by seeing his advisees frequently and on an informal basis. One of his effective techniques is scheduling walks down the corridor to the departmental office or to the mailroom to coincide with the breaks between classes when students are leaving or arriving. "This allows a student also to bring matters to my attention or to discuss briefly problems or questions without the need for a formal appointment" (Advice, n.d., p. 385). Wells agrees, for he likes to show his care and concern by visiting students "basically on THEIR territory" (Advice, n.d., p. 386). Alfonso encourages advisors to be approachable, flexible, and accessible (Advice, n.d., p. 387).

Exemplifying a helpful attitude in deeds and actions can make or break an advisor's reputation. The word can be spread almost instantly about the type of person an advisor is and the type of office he or she runs. Is the advisor helpful? Is the student treated with compassion or disdain? Is a red carpet rolled out or is a thorn bush posted? Thomas writes, "... my college life was plagued with unfeeling and uninteresting advisors who unnecessarily added to the difficulty of obtaining my degrees." Thomas

continues by giving his version of the famous golden rule as follows, "I told myself to never fall into that way of behavior and to always put myself in the shoes of the advisee..." (Advice, n.d., p. 382). The Ford paraphrased version states, "Do unto your advisees as you would have had your advisor do unto you" (Ford, The Faculty, 1988, n.p.).

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## **Appendix A Thirty Reminders For Effective Advising**

1. *Care about advisees as people by showing empathy, understanding, and respect.*
2. *Establish a warm, genuine, and open relationship.*
3. *Evidence interest, helpful intent, and involvement.*
4. *Be a good listener.*
5. *Establish rapport by remembering personal information about advisees.*
6. *Be available; keep office hours and appointments.*
7. *Provide accurate information.*
8. *When in doubt, refer to catalog, advisor's handouts, student handbook, etc.*
9. *Know how and when to make referrals, and be familiar with referral sources.*
10. *Do not refer too hastily; on the other hand, do not attempt to handle situations for which you are not qualified.*
11. *Have students contact referral sources in your presence.*
12. *Keep infrequent contact with advisees; take the initiative; do not always wait for students to come to you.*
13. *Do not make decisions for students; help them make their own decisions.*
14. *Focus on advisees' strengths and potentials rather than limitations.*
15. *Seek out advisees in informal settings.*
16. *Monitor advisees' progress toward education goals.*
17. *Determine reasons for poor academic performance and direct advisees to appropriate support services.*
18. *Be realistic with advisees.*
19. *Use all available information sources.*
20. *Clearly outline advisees' responsibilities.*
21. *Follow up on commitments made to advisees.*
22. *Encourage advisees to consider and develop conversations for future reference.*
23. *Keep an anecdotal record of significant conversations for future reference.*
24. *Evaluate the effectiveness of your advising.*
25. *Do not be critical of other faculty or staff to advisees.*
26. *Be knowledgeable about career opportunities and job outlook for various majors.*
27. *Encourage advisees to talk by asking open-ended questions.*
28. *Do not betray confidential information.*
29. *Categorize advisees' questions; are they seeking action, information, or involvement and understanding.*
30. *Be yourself and allow advisees to be themselves. (The American College Testing Program, 1979, p. 4.138).*

**Appendix B** The Advisor Perception Inventory

INSTRUCTIONS: Student, please give your impressions of your advisor by responding to the statements below by circling the appropriate letters at the right. Since your responses will be used in HBU's faculty evaluation procedures, please answer each question with thought and sincerity. You do not need to sign your name.

ADVISOR'S NAME \_\_\_\_\_

- |                                                                                                 |    |    |   |   |   |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|----|---|---|---|----|
| 1. My advisor has been readily available for consultation.                                      | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 2. My advisor has been actively helpful and has been genuinely concerned about my welfare.      | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 3. My advisor has served as a resource person for me.                                           | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 4. The spirit and practice of continuous self-evaluation has grown through my advisor.          | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 5. My advisor listens to problems I encounter.                                                  | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 6. My advisor knows when I do not follow his/her conversation.                                  | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 7. Major points of my meetings have been summarized by my advisor.                              | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 8. My advisor has helped me with personal problems.                                             | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 9. My advisor has taken an interest in me that extends beyond our meetings.                     | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 10. My advisor and I spend most of our time discussing academic problems.                       | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 11. I believe my advisor has helped make the transition into Houston Baptist University easier. | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 12. I believe my advisor anticipates needs that I have.                                         | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 13. I would willingly share problems that I encounter with my advisor.                          | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 14. My advisor has introduced me to various service organizations on campus.                    | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 15. I enjoy meetings with my advisor.                                                           | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 16. My advisor has been well-prepared for each meeting.                                         | NA | SA | A | U | D | SD |

Thank you for your assistance.

\_\_\_\_\_  
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(The American College Testing Program, 1979, p. 4.168.)

|                 |                   |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| *Not Applicable | Undecided         |
| Strongly Agree  | Disagree          |
| Agree           | Strongly Disagree |