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DEVELOPMENTAL ACADEMIC ADVISING

Do Handicapped Advisors Have An Advantage?

The author discusses how his gradual loss of vision had unexpected favorable results in his advising activities. Based on these personal experiences and his further research, he offers academic advisors practical suggestions for increased professional effectiveness.

From birth through college, I had perfect eyesight. During my college years, ophthalmologists determined that I had a rare eye disease which would lead to blindness. Over the next fifteen years, I experienced progressive vision loss: first, my visual capacity changed from good eyesight to legal blindness, then to functional blindness, and, finally, to total blindness. I have worked as a college professor and academic advisor for many years, including each phase of the development of my handicap. During those years, the nature and quality of my relationships, interactions, and experiences with my advisees changed; at first noticeably, then remarkably, and, finally, dramatically.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a description and a possible explanation of these changes within the context of developmental academic advising. The explanation of these changes is based on an examination of the relationships between the author's personal experience and insights available from the literature on developmental academic advising; research on the impact of student-faculty relationships on educational and developmental outcomes; and the body of experimental research on the relationship between counselor effectiveness and the handicapped or able-bodied status of counselors.

Developmental Academic Advising: Ender, Winston, and Miller (1982) defined developmental academic advising as "a systematic process based on a close student-advisor relationship intended to aid students in achieving educational and personal goals through the utilization of the full range of institutional and community resources." This student-advisor relationship is "one of the few educational experiences involving a one-to-one relationship with an institutional representative that all students are required to share." The student-advisor relationship provides a unique opportunity to facilitate total student development within the environment of an academic institution. Reviews of student development theory can be found in Drum (1980) and in Widick, Knefelkamp, and Parker (1980), while some of the most widely cited student development paradigms are those of Sanford (1962), Chickering (1969), and Perry (1970).

Developmental academic advising is similar to what Kramer and Gardner (1977) referred to as "Level B" advising. "Through interaction with the advisor, the student advisee is able to observe, identify with, copy from, or rely on a sympathetic, and hopefully empathic, adult." Sanford (1962) stated that the developing student needs "models of adult emotional behavior

in people with whom he has day-to-day relationships. . . . Much more is contributed when members of the faculty reveal themselves as human beings."

Student-Faculty Relationships: Endo and Harpel (1982) distinguished between formal and informal student-faculty interactions. Formal interactions involved traditional discussions of program requirements and career planning. Informal interactions take place when faculty "have a more friendly relationship with students and exhibit a personal and broad concern with students' emotional and cognitive growth." The results of their study indicated that (a) after controlling for student background characteristics, the frequency of student-faculty interaction is significantly and directly related to intellectual, personal, and social outcomes for college students; and (b) student-faculty interaction "characterized as informal had the greater impact on these student outcomes."

These findings reinforce the earlier work of Terenzini and Pascarella (1978, 1980). The results of both of their studies indicated that after controlling for student background characteristics, the frequency of informal student-faculty interaction is significantly and directly related to academic, intellectual, and personal development. More specifically, Terenzini and Pascarella (1980) stated that "students' perceptions of the quality and impact of informal contacts with faculty . . . and their perceptions of faculty interest in and concern for students . . . had the largest positive beta weights with the personal development and intellectual development scales, respectively."

The Advising-Counseling Boundary: One way of viewing the concept of developmental academic advising is to think of it as broadening the role of an advisor so that it extends to the boundary of the role of a campus counselor. Although the academic advisor is not a counselor and should not try to do the work of a counselor, when advisor-student interaction is focused on a personal problem of the student, the nature of this interaction may be similar to some counselor-student interactions. In fact, one of the many advantages of a developmental approach to academic advising is that in pursuing the total development of the student, the advisor is more likely to be in a position to recognize the need of a given student to meet with a campus counselor, and to encourage the student to do so.

College Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Able-Bodied Versus Handicapped Counselors: Mallinckrodt and Helms (1986) studied the relationship between (a) student perceptions of counselor "expertness" (skillful-unskillful), "trustworthiness" (genuine-phony), or "attractiveness" (friendly-unfriendly); and (b) counselor status as either **able-bodied**, obviously handicapped without self-disclosure (wheelchair), obviously handicapped with self-disclosure (wheelchair), or nonobviously handicapped with self-disclosure (visual impairment). The results of their study indicated that student perceptions of disabled counselors, with or without self-disclosure, were significantly more favorable than their perceptions of able-bodied counselors on one or more of the counselor-effectiveness dimensions. Mallinckrodt and Helms stated that the "positive ratings may have been due, in part, to subjects' assumptions that the disabled counselors had, in the course of some potentially difficult life experiences, become experts at coping or perhaps had become better able to empathize with the problems of others."

Self-disclosure about a nonobvious handicap, such as visual impairment, was associated with significantly higher student ratings of the effectiveness of handicapped, relative to able-bodied, counselors. The research stated that "both obviously and nonobviously disabled counselors might be able to make productive use of . . . self-disclosures as a means of potentially enhancing their therapeutic effectiveness."

The results of the Mallinckrodt and Helms study both supported and supplemented the results of earlier studies in this area. For example, Mitchell and Allen (1975) found that college students rated a disabled counselor significantly higher than a nondisabled counselor on subscales of "empathy," "level of regard," "unconditional regard," and "congruence" (counselor perceived as emotionally and perceptually consistent and open to client communication). Mitchell and Frederickson (1975) found that college students preferred disabled to nondisabled counselors, suggesting that this was "due to an enhanced ability to understand and empathize. . . ." Another interesting finding was that students preferred a blind counselor for the "more personal, serious, and/or threatening" problems. Brabham and Thoreson (1973) found that both able-bodied and handicapped students preferred handicapped counselors for discussing personal problems. The researchers explained that the "disabled counselor is perceived as having greater credibility when he discusses another's problems. . . . His understanding of another's problem is considered enhanced by his own disability."

A Case Study of the Author's Experience as Both an Able-Bodied and a Handicapped Academic Advisor: My years as a college professor and academic advisor have included a period of good eyesight (Phase 1), a period of legal blindness (Phase 2), a period of functional blindness (Phase 3), and a period of total blindness (Phase 4). I have always believed in, and have tried to apply in practice, the concept of developmental academic advising, although prior to the 1980s, I was unsure of the terminology now used to describe this approach to advising.

Phase 1: During the period of good eyesight, I worked with about 25 advisees, an average load in my college. I rarely encountered a student who wished to leave his or her advisor and switch to me. My advising load was fairly stable as graduating seniors were replaced by a similar number of new freshmen and transfer students assigned to me. Although I made a conscious effort to express to students my interest in their feelings about personal and social concerns as well as educational matters, students rarely shared their personal concerns with me.

Phase 2: During the period of legal blindness, the number of my advisees and the nature of my interactions with them began to change "noticeably." When legally blind, I was still highly mobile, could read printed material with one eye if I was very close to it, and could use the blackboard without difficulty in class. In general, I did not "act" or "look" blind. Except in one-to-one situations where reading and writing were required, self-disclosure was usually necessary before anyone would realize that I was legally blind.

Advising sessions were usually one-to-one interactions in which one of two things frequently occurred: (1) my advisees, after observing my need to place my nose right on the college catalog to verify a requirement or write on a registration form to record some information, would make a simple statement such as "You need glasses." Since glasses could not improve my eyesight, I used some self-disclosure about my visual impairment to explain why my reading and writing behavior was unusual. (2) In anticipation of the probable thoughts, feelings, or questions in the minds of my advisees, I would sometimes engage in some unsolicited self-disclosure about my visual impairment.

In most cases, my limited self-disclosure would encourage students to ask more detailed questions to which I would respond with more self-disclosure. In response, students would often mention a friend or relative who had some type of handicap. More often than in Phase 1 the discussion would then turn to some personal problem of that student. One other noticeable change in this period was that my advising load began to increase as students began to ask the Registrar's office and me to officially switch from another advisor to me.

Phase 3: During the period of functional blindness, the number of advisees and the nature of our interactions changed "remarkably." When functionally blind, I could no longer read printed material, and relied extensively on professional and volunteer readers, taped materials, and speech-synthesized word and data processing systems. I was still able to get around without a cane, but had to wear dark glasses. I could still use the blackboard, but with some difficulty; and I was unable to identify my advisees unless I was very close to them or they spoke with a familiar voice. Most people were aware of my visual impairment without any verbal self-disclosure on my part.

A typical advising session now included many new features. When it was necessary to verify a program requirement, I directed the student to the appropriate place in the college catalog and I asked him or her to read the section aloud to me. At that time I kept both paper and computer files for each advisee. The advisee was asked to record on paper much of what I entered into my speech-synthesized computer about his or her academic record. At the beginning of an academic requirements and pre-registration advising session, we reviewed together the student's record in the computer file. The student watched the monitor while listening to the robotic verbalization of the record while I just listened to "HAL," the talking computer. I always asked the advisee to watch carefully for any typing mistakes I might make in data entry or in "reading" the record with HAL's help. In the course of these activities, we (the advisee and me) really became a "team" in our concern for the student's academic, vocational, and personal development.

Inevitably, students would ask me questions about how I managed to do my job with my obvious handicap. I responded with some self-disclosure and examples that expressed my belief that most handicapped persons can do nearly everything an able-bodied person can do; however, it is necessary that they find alternative and innovative methods of accomplishing the same tasks. During this period, my advisees would often talk openly with me about their personal feelings and problems without any prompting from me, and they began to visit me more often to discuss a problem or for what appeared to be just a friendly chat. It became more and more common that I was able to identify students who needed the help of the campus counseling center or the learning skills center. It no longer seemed necessary to try to "talk them into it." To my surprise, my suggestion alone seemed to be sufficient encouragement.

My advising load doubled and then nearly tripled during this period, as students began switching from other advisors to me. Finally, I had to talk to the Registrar because I wanted to have a small number of advisees so that I could maintain an appropriate and helpful relationship with each individual. We agreed to set a moratorium on the assignment of advisees to me until most of my upper-division students graduated. It was during this period that our academic dean placed my name in nomination for the national academic advising competition co-sponsored by the National Academic Advising Association and the American College Testing Program. I was a recipient of one of their Certificate of Merit Awards later that year. All of this seemed quite incomprehensible to me, since personally I was convinced that I was becoming a less effective advisor during those years.

Phase 4: During the period of total blindness, the nature of my advisor-advisee interactions changed "dramatically." When totally blind, I began to travel about with dark glasses *and* my cane. I was still quite mobile, but very slow, and it was obvious to everyone that I was functioning while quite blind. Using my usual support systems plus some new ones, each day was just "another day at the office." The academic requirements and pre-registration aspects of advising sessions were similar to those of Phase 3. However, many of the other features of advising interactions in Phase 3 increased in frequency and intensity in Phase 4.

Students' curiosity about my handicap and how I did my job intensified. In answer to their questions, I self-disclosed or shared my experiences and feelings, and facts about my unusual methods for doing my job.

Concurrently, my advisees more often came to see me and, without any prompting, spoke openly about their private feelings and concerns about general matters of personal development or specific critical problems involving serious emotional or drug-related difficulties. Advisees of other faculty colleagues began to do the same thing. When I asked them if they had talked with their own advisor, they said that they didn't feel comfortable doing that. During this period, I became increasingly well acquainted with our campus counselors and their office staff as I more often arranged appointments for students to meet with counselors. Again, it surprised me that students were so willing to follow my advice and begin work with a counselor.

Discussion: The title of this article poses the following question or hypothesis about effective developmental academic advising: "Do handicapped advisors have an advantage?" All else equal, are handicapped advisors likely to be more effective than their able-bodied counterparts? Research results in several related fields and the evidence provided by the case study presented in this paper support this hypothesis.

This analysis is intended to highlight some of the behaviors which may characterize handicapped advisors and which appear to be associated with advisor effectiveness. These behaviors can be identified, learned, and applied by able-bodied advisors as part of a program to enhance effectiveness of developmental academic advisors.

Handicapped advisors have expressed to students, either automatically or through self-disclosure, that they have experienced problems.

They have modeled and shared with students the difficult but achievable goal of **learning to cope**.

They have revealed to their advisees that **they are human beings**.

They have established in the minds of their advisees the perceptions that **they care** about them as individuals and have a **capacity for empathy**.

Through human relations training programs (advisor development programs) in which both advisors and advisees participate, advisors can learn to communicate to their advisees that, just like the more obviously handicapped, they also have experienced difficult problems, have learned to cope, are equal as human beings, have the capacity to care, and have the capacity for empathy!

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