

# Academic Advising and Teachable Moments

March 01, 2008

As I write this, it's near the end of the semester, and yet another academic advising period has come and gone. For many busy faculty members, advising time conjures images of extended office hours, multiple meetings with frazzled advisees, and hectic schedules added to the normal routine of classes, research, and administrative or service responsibilities. Although academic advising is frequently underemphasized in yearly faculty activity reports and unappreciated in rank and tenure decisions, it is an integral and necessary part of most faculty positions. Granted, effectively advising students takes a considerable amount of energy, but the potential rewards often outweigh the costs and it is frequently a mutually beneficial exercise for everyone involved. For faculty, the opportunity to enrich undergraduates' college experiences in a venue outside of the classroom can provide a welcome addition to routine academic responsibilities. For students, regular and consistent interaction with a faculty member throughout their academic careers can help them feel more connected to the university during their college years and beyond.

The ways in which psychology departments handle advising have been historically quite varied and faculty may meet students at different stages, at either the beginning or midway through their college careers. Lunneborg and Baker (1986) originally outlined four different models for handling advising:

**The Central Model.** In some universities and departments, faculty members do not advise, as a central office on campus handles advising.

**The No-Faculty Model.** In other departments, undeclared majors are advised in the central office at first, then later in a departmental office supervised by one faculty member within the major.

**Part and All Faculty models.** In other, mainly smaller departments, individual psychology majors are assigned to a specific advisor from the beginning of their college career or after declaring the major.

## Advising Styles

For both students and faculty, some advising styles are more effective and fulfilling than others, depending on their advising goals.

*The Hurried Form-Signer.* These advisors are frequently too busy to talk with advisees. They are available to sign forms and identify errors in course selection, but have little time for anything else, expecting advising appointments to last less than 10 minutes. This type of advising is typically the easiest in time and energy expenditure, but rarely provides positive advising for students.

*The Detached Authority Figure.* These advisors are not concerned with building rapport or listening to students' needs. They function as an all-knowing source of wisdom regarding courses, career options, or requirements for the major. Students can take or leave their advice. This style is more informative than the form-signer approach, but also rarely provides the guidance that students often need or want.

*The Substitute Parent.* These advisors hover over their advisees and attempt to make decisions for them. They may become overly involved in students' personal lives and are always available and nurturing. However, students may fail to learn how to actively control their own career trajectories and frequently have difficulty making their own decisions.

*The Mentor.* These advisors provide accurate information and help students identify all possible options for growth and development at each stage of their academic careers. They are available, actively listen, and allow students to make their own decisions and support those decisions, even if they disagree with them. These advisors guide students and simultaneously provide opportunities for independence and personal growth.

*The Trail-Guide.* Over the years, my personal philosophy of advising has evolved into what I consider the "trail-guide" approach, a style most closely aligned with the Mentor. The college years are an exciting, formative, and life-altering journey for most students, providing a critical set of experiences and opportunities that build the foundation for their lives and facilitate their pathway to self-actualization. Regardless of students' individual directions and levels of dedication to achieving their goals, it helps to have at least one person continually present along the way who can guide them on their individual journeys, pointing out pitfalls, providing information about possible pathways, and supporting their professional development.

### ***The Relationship Between Teaching and Advising***

Regardless of the particular model your university uses, it is important to develop effective advising skills (Ware, 1999). Good advising requires applying effective teaching techniques to the individual advising context (see Appleby, 2001). Good advisors are available to their students, care about their advisees' welfare as much as their classroom performance, and encourage students to engage in active learning, self-reflection, critical thinking, and decision-making within a broader context than the classroom. These skills are often emphasized in class settings, but may be even more valuable as students seek advice and make career-altering decisions about courses, internships, graduate schools, employment options, and research opportunities.

### **Advising and the Teachable Moment**

Given the similarities between advising and teaching, it should come as no surprise that advising provides teaching and learning opportunities similar to those found in the classroom. Although specific definitions of teachable moments are elusive, they usually center around spontaneously generated situations in which we seize on an opportunity to help students enhance their understanding of a concept, theory, perspective, or idea (see Perlman & McCann, 2002, for a brief discussion).

After many years of advising undergraduate and graduate students, I have come to realize that the academic advising context produces a large number of teachable moments. Students seeking advice typically have questions that they hope faculty members can answer. Frequently, these questions relate to broader issues than those arising in the classroom, and, more often than not, they are unrelated to course material. By adopting an organic approach to advising, we can seize upon these non-classroom teaching opportunities and help shape our majors' career trajectories and perspectives on college life.

One of my most salient encounters with a teachable moment happened a few semesters ago with a sophomore advisee. As we discussed his fall semester courses for his upcoming junior year, he was

visibly excited about delving into the upper-level psychology curriculum. However, I realized that he had one general education course left — in fine arts. He had clearly saved his favorite core area for last.

Me: “Well, it looks like you still have an art class left to take.”

Advisee: “I hate art.”

Me: “Hmmm, what don’t you like about art?”

Advisee: “I don’t really know exactly, I just know I can’t stand it. Do I really have to take it?”

For a few seconds, I pondered: Why *do* we require undergraduate students to complete the general education curriculum including the fine arts area? Does knowing about art enrich psychology majors’ lives or create better psychology graduates? After those few seconds of reflection, I realized that our advising conversation had transformed into a clear teachable moment.

So, as they say, *carpe diem*. I took a deep breath and seized the opportunity to discuss the reason for the art requirement. We talked about general and specific knowledge and how they both relate to the well-informed college graduate and world citizen. We discussed the presence of art in everyday life as a form of self-expression for humans. I pointed out that self-expression is fundamental to human psychology and suggested that viewing, hearing, or feeling art enhances our aesthetic experience of the world. I suggested that at least one area of art might be interesting to my advisee. How about music?

Photography? Art history? Theater appreciation? Performance or dance? And here, the usefulness of the teachable moment emerged even though all those artsy options were listed in the university catalog; my advisee’s schema of the art requirement had previously included only painting or drawing, both of which were of zero interest to him. He came to our meeting dead-set on avoiding “art,” but by the end realized that his schema of art had been a bit narrow. Ultimately, my advisee decided on American Popular Music. And during our next advising meeting, I asked him how his semester was going. He informed me that it was going well and mentioned that his music class was his favorite course that semester. I was thrilled that our teachable moment had been transformed into a positive semester-long experience for my advisee.

### **Maximizing Advising Effectiveness Through Teachable Moments**

Depending on the size and structure of your program, you may only see your advisees two or three times per year for advising meetings. That means advisors have limited time to expand on teachable moments during advising. But they do arise, so it’s best to be ready for them when they happen. Below are several specific opportunities which could arise during advising’s teachable moments.

#### ***Clear Up Misconceptions About Psychology***

Often, the first teachable moments emerge early in the advising relationship. Many students declare psychology because of information they’ve gleaned from television shows, movies, books, or magazines. They may have impressions that psychology only encompasses applied fields within the discipline and may be unfamiliar with the broader, interdisciplinary and academic areas of psychology. They may not realize that psychologists conduct scientific research, or that a graduate degree in psychology is a requirement for certain types of jobs. One of the first questions I ask my new advisees is, “What do you want to do with your psychology degree?” Depending on the answers offered — which more often than not include something along the lines of “helping people” — I seize the teachable moment and to outline the realities of the discipline, the broad array of career options, and specific strategies and directions for reaching various career goals.

### ***Fine-Tune Realistic Professional or Career Goals***

Some colleges and universities have a formal course dedicated to students' professional and career development. For others, these courses are not available, so students may have limited access to career information about psychology. In the latter situation, advisors can step in to bridge the knowledge gap. Typically, this teachable moment emerges in the latter half of students' undergraduate or graduate careers, as they begin preparations for entry into the job market or graduate school. It may start with a student asking questions about the graduate school application process. Or it may arise when students begin assessing their GPAs and resumes. Often, I spend most of my advising sessions with students in their junior year discussing career directions, rather than pointing students toward particular course options. These teachable moments often lead to students realistically assessing their future options and fine-tuning their plans for reaching their goals.

### ***Enhance Student Strengths***

All students have individual strengths and areas for improvement. Academic advisors are in a unique position in the university community to see the spectrum of advisees' lives inside and outside the classroom. As both faculty mentors and psychologists, we are especially attuned to the unique knowledge base, skills, abilities, and personalities of our advisees. An important part of advising involves paying attention to students' academic and interpersonal strengths and recognizing when a particular course, lab experience, internship, or academic minor may help them. Often, teachable moments during advising can arise when advisors listen to their students talk about their favorite classes or interests. One of my advisees a few years ago raved about her industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology class. Based on her obvious interest, I suggested that she add a business minor and seized the moment to discuss the overlap between the two disciplines. She had never considered that option before, but quickly added the minor, later graduated, and successfully entered a PhD program in I/O psychology. Adding business courses had only reinforced her interest in the subfield.

### ***Be Ethical and Maintain Appropriate Boundaries***

Occasionally, students will reveal information within the advising meeting that is beyond the scope of our ability to help them. This revelation may involve a negative personal experience, a physical or psychological issue, financial problems, or interpersonal difficulties. In these cases, faculty can seize the teachable moment to guide advisees in the right direction for help. Many colleges and universities have extensive networks of individuals who are specifically trained to handle these issues. Whether students need help from the career center, financial aid, the counseling center, or from legal counsel, we can teach students where to find the most appropriate resources for their situation. Perlman, McCann, and Kadah-Ammeter provide an excellent perspective on ethical issues that arise when working with students-in-need.

### ***Approach Advisees Holistically***

It is tempting to focus only on the teachable moments where students become enlightened by their faculty advisors. Often, however, I have found that we as faculty can equally experience "teachable moments" in which students broaden our own horizons. In today's rapidly changing academic environment, students arrive at college with increasingly divided responsibilities and demands on their time. Appreciating students as individuals, who each have unique personal histories and current life situations to navigate, allows academic advisors to respond and adapt to their changing needs throughout their academic careers. Recognizing that students may have different goals or interests than those of their faculty advisors can create teachable moments in which the mentor learns to step back and let

students make their own decisions. In fact, this teachable moment may lead to the realization that advisees need to spread their wings and switch to different advisors who more closely match their career interests.

### **Challenges in Advising**

Sometimes, the teachable moments that arise during advising involve navigating difficult topics. For example, it sometimes becomes clear in advising meetings that students are struggling academically (Foushée & Sleigh, 2004, discuss ways to assist struggling students). During these times, it helps to seize the teachable moment and refer advisees to appropriate campus resources. Or, try discussing individualized study and test-taking strategies, time management skills, and note-taking techniques.

Advisors may also encounter resistant students who visit because they “have to.” Here, it helps to build rapport with the advisee first, then later seize teachable moments as they arise, providing information that might allow advisees to see the usefulness of advising meetings.

Working with transfer students may also present unique challenges. As they adjust to a new academic and social environment, transfer students often raise questions about careers, campus life, and course opportunities that lend themselves well to teachable moments.

Some obstacles to teachable moments in advising are structural when departments utilize online, group, or peer advising. In each of these cases, teachable moments can be elusive, as faculty and students are relatively removed from each other. In other departments, faculty may have so many advisees that they can spend little time with individual students, severely limiting the opportunities for discovery. Departments that value advising and its potentials may want to limit or remove these structural obstacles as best they can.

### **Conclusion**

Regardless of the advising style that faculty adopt, positively and effectively interacting with advisees requires many of the skills that faculty already utilize in the classroom. The benefits of approaching advising from the perspective of mentor and teacher are enormous both for faculty and students. Grabbing teachable moments and using them to improve future teaching and advising is one of the best ways to increase faculty wisdom and fine-tune skills that enhance the college experience for both advisees and students. For the administration, advising may not be the most glamorous activity listed on faculty activity reports. But for engaged and thoughtful faculty, academic advising can be one of the most rewarding aspects of being a professor. ?

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