

What Is An Academic Advisor, Anyway?

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College academic advisors perceive themselves and are seen by students in various ways. Advisor self perceptions stem from a variety of factors including: (1) how advisors interpret their advising role; (2) what training and/or guidance are provided to advisors; (3) what expectations administrators and colleagues have for advisors; and (4) what recognition and/or rewards are available for competent or exemplary advising. Student perceptions of advisors arise from perceptions of: (1) advisor interest in the advising task and in individual students; (2) advisor competence; (3) advisor availability, patience, and preparation; and (4) advisor personality.

Advisors need training and guidance to do a competent job. Neither faculty nor staff advisors come to the task naturally able to advise competently. Advisors need to learn the content and procedure of their task; they need to acquire and refine their interpersonal skills; and they need to learn how their role fits into both the institution's mission and in students' lives. Such advisor preparation demands resources [ie: money, time, and patience]; trying to advise without adequate preparation portends nightmarish results for students. Students need and deserve competent advising. Not all faculty or staff are temperamentally suited for advising. Such faculty/staff and their students would both be well served by those not suited for advising being alternately assigned to other duties.

Advisor/advisee partnerships can range from formal, impersonal, infrequent, uninspiring exercises to informal, friendly, frequent, rewarding and enjoyable relationships. The responsibility for the outcome is mutual between advisee and advisor. Neither party should allow the other to abrogate, truncate, or neglect good advising. Advisors need to firmly, but tactfully, demand that students enter the advising arena prepared, focused, and alert. Advisees must demand that their advisors be informed, available, prepared, focused, and alert.

Advisors are resource people. They are expected to know the school's rules, procedures, time tables, and policies. These need to be transmitted to students, when possible, before trouble occurs. Advisors need to be cognizant of program, policy, and procedure changes. They are expected to keep abreast of graduate school possibilities for interested students. Advisors need to be aware of current employment demands, available positions, and job market trends in their fields.

Advisors are student advocates. They are there to intercede whenever students need help in negotiating bureaucratic red tape or arbitrary or capricious instructors, administrators, or staff members. Students in need of assistance need someone to point the path to appropriate help and to see that relevant aid is offered without hassle or trial. Students deserving exceptions to normal rules or procedures need advisors to grease the wheel, when appropriate, for such action. Students must come to see their advisors as being interested in their welfare above rules

or procedures when at all reasonable. Advisors are intended for seeing that rightful outcomes are made possible.

Advisors are referral resources. Advisors must be cognizant of campus and community resources available to students having needs beyond advisors' skills. Students need advisors whom they can trust. Advisors need to be able to refer students to others who can help or guide students to solve non academic difficulties they may be experiencing. Students' academic performance is inexorably tied to how the rest of their lives are progressing. Students' teacher, peer, family, romantic, and employment relationships; their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health; their out-of-class activity; financial well being; test anxiety; home sickness; and pre-graduation anxieties are all germane to an advisor's role. Many of these circumstances require referral to other professionals; but it is the advisor's initial understanding, empathy, and competent referral that is the key to student well being. Students who do not really know, trust, and frequently interact with their advisor seldom seek the help they need and deserve.

Lastly, advisors are friends. Students typically enter college fearful, lonely, confused, in a strange environment, and in need of an anchor (their advisor) to provide stability, assurance, consistency, an outlet for frustrations, someone to hear them out and to answer questions, and to be a source of confidential guidance, affirmation, and support.