

Philosophy of Advising
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During my 42 years of being fortunate to advise countless young people, I never thought of what I do as being underpinned by a philosophy. But if I had to claim one, it would be as a friendly uncle, giving academic advice but also in some small way helping to lay the foundation for a life of purpose, integrity, and social responsibility.

I began advising after teaching for several years in the Detroit Public Schools. Typical of many urban schools, the high school at which I taught was filled with students who were ill prepared to learn in an environment that encouraged minimal learning; that is, my school, like so many others in Detroit, engaged in what then was referred to as social promotion, advancing the child from grade to grade through graduation and thereby avoiding the problems that most surely would have resulted from adhering to strict academic standards.

Retaining students rather than advancing them from one grade to the next, addressing issues of hunger and violence and chronic absenteeism of both students and teachers would have paralyzed the school system. The strategy that was used as a solution was social promotion—make minimal demands of students, ease the burden on teachers, award students passing grades, and move them through and out of school. It seemed not to matter that a large percentage of them left school before graduation and that many who graduated read poorly or not at all.

It is these and other ills of urban public education combined with my concern for students generally that in part prompted me to come to Wayne State University as an academic advisor. Here, though I would be dealing with a different population, my passion for students would enable me to give full attention to helping them enter and move through the University and broaden their perspective while doing so.

Setting the Stage

My reaching out to students provides the context for an exchange of information and the establishment of a student-advisor relationship. When students approach me, they do so with the expectation of being helped, of being guided in their mission at the University. My accessibility, their awareness of that accessibility, and my reaching out to remind them of that accessibility constitute the first step of the advising process and establishes the advisor-advisee relationship.

The student needs something, although not all the time sure of precisely what, and the advisor, in possession of academic knowledge and varying levels of wisdom, provides what is requested but intuits other concerns. Almost invariably, students have multiple concerns, and my anticipation of and willingness to address them, whether in a single meeting or several, broadens the advisor-advisee relationship beyond academics.

Raising the Curtain

The trust that the student now has in me, and my sense of how to approach the student, are helpful ingredients for a productive advising session. If I were to label my method of advising, it would not be intrusive or developmental or . . . so much as common sense, hearing what the student says as well as implies and responding both with institutional knowledge and the wisdom that comes from life experience. I tell students the courses needed for their programs, the requirements governing those programs, the policies and resources of the University, and I listen to what they tell me—the uncertainty, the anxiety, the academic difficulty, the social pressure, essentially the way to remove hurdles on the way forward.

Performing the Play

My approach to advising may seem anti-intellectual, a dismissal of the plethora of research about how to deliver academic advising efficiently and effectively. My response to such thinking is captured in the words on a sign that hangs on the doors of some of my colleagues: “When you enter this office, you are respected, you are valued, you are heard, and you matter.”

I know what students need as part of their academics. That is the relatively easy part of advising. What I attempt to learn over time and through various interactions is what students need in their lives as seen through the prism of college attendance. My eclectic approach to advising allows me to draw upon various theories and use different techniques but always with my style.

A. Douglas, UAC August 2024