

"Why Advising?"

Louis Newman, August 30, 2006

I want to begin with what I take to be the most basic question: why advising? Why does advising matter? Why should the College require faculty members to be academic advisors? Why should any of us, trained to be teacher/scholars in our respective disciplines, care about dispensing academic advice to students not in our classes about classes we've never taken? On the most crassly practical level, why put our time and energy into advising when the College does not reward us for doing so—either monetarily or through the tenure review system? Finally and most immediately, why should we be here this morning engaging in a workshop on how to be better advisors?

How we answer these questions and many others depends, of course, on how we understand what advising is. I want to suggest that we can define advising either narrowly or broadly, and part of my purpose this morning is to convince you to consider the broader, more open-ended way of defining our roles as advisors. In fact, I will argue that the more expansively we think about our goals as advisors, the more meaningful this work becomes, both for us and for our advisees.

For many faculty, including perhaps many of us in this room, academic advising consists fundamentally of meeting with students to talk with them about course selection prior to registration during what the administration deems "advising days". This is relatively simple, notwithstanding the complexities of the College's requirements and the various issues that inevitably arise about prerequisites, wait lists, and the like. How hard is it, after all, to look at a first-year student's tentative schedule and suggest that it might not be wise for him to take three math/science classes the same term, or to take all her classes back-to-back on T/Th, or to take an overload the same term he is playing a varsity sport, working, starring in a play, volunteering several hours a week, and writing for the Carletonian. For many of us, dispensing this sort of common sense advice is the essence of advising; it is probably what our academic advisors did for us when we were in school, and it is what the College (minimally) expects of us, insofar as

students have to meet with us in order to complete their registration. It has the added benefit of being simple and clearly defined: we know what we're supposed to do and we feel fairly competent at it. If our advisees ask us questions to which we don't know the answers, we can always call the registrar's office or contact a colleague in another department. Finally, given that we don't receive any special recognition for the time and energy we put into advising, this has the advantage of being efficient—we can get most advisees in and out of our office in ten minutes or less.

I don't mean to disparage this understanding of advising. Someone needs to oversee a student's overall academic program during these first two years, check that he is making progress on his foreign language requirement, insure that she is taking a wide array of courses, stretching herself by trying utterly new subjects, beginning to think about his choice of major (or, in the more typical case, not thinking about it too soon). Advising in this sense is essential to getting students on the right track, and this is especially the case when they are getting advice from a host of other sources (parents, friends at other institutions, RA's, and others) that may or may not be educationally sound.

But to think about academic advising solely in terms of course selection and the completion of distribution requirements is to assume that we are responsible for what appears on a student's transcript but not particularly for the quality of their educational experience. It is to adopt a purely formalist definition of advising according to which our job is to "check off" that they are all doing the right things, without attending to the unique needs of individual students. Important as it is, this sort of "nuts and bolts" advising ignores what I have come to regard as the most important aspects of a student's education, and the most significant opportunities we have for shaping a student's learning and life goals. So, in the remainder of this talk I want to invite you to think about advising in a far richer, more inclusive sense and to imagine how you might make advising more integral to your role as a faculty member.

Let me begin with that commonplace—the advising appointment. If we see this as an opportunity not just to see if the student is "on track" with his or her classes, but rather to get to know this student as an individual with a unique

mix of talents and challenges, aspirations and fears, the possibilities for the advisor-advisee relationship become vastly richer and more interesting. This first-year student is intent on being pre-med, and already knows that he wants to be a pediatric surgeon. As his advisor, I have the right—perhaps even the obligation--to engage him in a conversation about how he arrived at these goals, whether he has seriously considered alternatives, and even whether there might be some parental pressure involved. I might even invite him to reflect on how being broadly educated in the liberal arts might make him a better physician someday. Another student exhibits the opposite tendency: rather than being overly focused, he is utterly at a loss about how to choose courses, or where his passion and interests lie. He complains about being “bored” with everything and is perennially dropping and adding classes at the last minute. Here again, I have the opportunity as his advisor to explore what he did in high school, what he reads in his spare time, who his role models are, and/or what sort of work he imagines doing after he graduates from Carleton. In both of these cases, an advisor is faced with an opportunity to move beyond the superficial challenge of filling up a registration card (or whatever the electronic equivalent is these days) toward addressing the underlying motivations that have led him to choose (or avoid) the courses he has. And this is almost certain to open up into a still deeper conversation about this student’s life goals and personal qualities. Conceived in this way, a routine advising session about course selection becomes a chance to understand the students in front of us who are not merely struggling to choose among the myriad courses available to them. Rather, they are also and far more importantly making that selection in the context of a life history, and of a set of goals (however well or poorly defined), and of a concept of what this thing called a liberal arts education is supposed to be. Bringing their attention explicitly to these multiple contexts enables them to see that choices about courses grow out of and contribute to a much larger agenda, and that, in reflecting on those agendas, they will inevitably understand their choices differently. Needless to say, this advising appointment can’t always be wrapped up in ten minutes. It often requires a longer session or even more than one. But the outcome for the student and the advisor is far more satisfying.

But I also want to suggest that we think of advising as encompassing other aspects of a student's academic career, besides just courses. Virtually every student I've encountered in my twenty two years on the faculty comes to campus with a wide range of strengths and weaknesses, and these have everything to do with how well they succeed in their academic work. One student is insecure and firmly believes that her acceptance to Carleton was a fluke; another excels at the arts, but is afraid that she is incapable of doing anything that involves quantitative reasoning; still another writes brilliantly, but cannot bring herself to say anything in class for fear that others will think it isn't valuable. This student comes from a family in which she is the first to attend college and feels enormous pressure to succeed, as well as feeling tremendously disadvantaged in relation to others; that student comes from enormous privilege, has attended exclusive private schools, and expects classmates to treat every contribution she makes to class discussion as a pearl of wisdom. The former student feels fortunate to be at Carleton, but "out of her league;" the latter student is resentful about being here and regards Carleton as a poor alternative to the Ivies that didn't accept her. The list could be extended indefinitely. The point is simple: students come to their academic work here with attitudes, expectations, fears, and goals that have been shaped by parents, socio-economic and ethnic background, prior educational experiences, and a host of other factors. If we expect to track their academic progress here in a meaningful way, much less to guide it, we need to know at least the broad outlines of their lives—where they come from, what they hope to accomplish here, and where they imagine they're headed after they graduate. Engaging them in conversations about these things is part and parcel of what an advisor can do. And, in the course of doing so, advisors can help students recognize opportunities for growth, or clarify the academic skills that they need to hone, or challenge their own views of themselves (whether inflated or impoverished).

I have had many such conversations with students over the years, in which I encouraged them to speak up in class more and believe in the value of their own minds, or in which I encouraged them to apply for a fellowship that they never imagined they were worthy to receive. In other conversations I have carefully

invited them to challenge the cultural values that they were raised with or to make academic choices that were at odds with those their parents favored. I have called students on what I sensed was intellectual arrogance and I have called them to account when it was clear that they weren't performing up to their potential. I have done all these things because I have begun to see my role as advisor in a more holistic way--as part mentor, part coach, part cheerleader, part referee, and even part surrogate parent.

It is in the last of these roles, the parental one, that I have ventured farthest from the standard understanding of advising, but also in which I have had the most profound experiences with advisees. These opportunities can arise in a number of situations: when I get a notice that a particular advisee is failing in one of his classes, when an advisee shows up looking excessively nervous or upset, when an advisee tells me she is having trouble with her roommate, or that she is considering a leave of absence, or that he feels he doesn't fit in and wonders whether he should transfer to another school. In these and many other situations, I will often say something as simple as "Do you want to talk more about that" or "I'd like to know more about what's going on with you, if you are willing to share it with me." Nine times out of ten in my experience, the student is only too happy to talk; indeed, in most cases they react as though they had just been waiting for the invitation to open up about some important emotional issues they are facing. And when they do, I find that my role is simply to listen attentively and sympathetically, to offer words of encouragement and support, and occasionally, if they seem receptive, to offer some carefully worded advice. Frequently those conversations create a powerful sense of connection with my advisees. They leave feeling deeply cared about, and I leave feeling that I really made a difference in one student's life that day. And, of course, these advising sessions are self-reinforcing—the more frequently they occur, the more satisfying they are for me, and the more I tend to seek the opportunities when a student is looking for this sort of support and encouragement.

In virtually all these encounters, I feel confident that the students did not walk into my office planning to share their personal problems, or expecting that I would be interested in hearing about them. They assume, as probably many of us

assume, that advisors are for talking about strictly academic matters. But I have discovered over the years that I can no longer make a sharp distinction between academic and personal issues. The student who just learned that his parents are divorcing, or who is depressed, or whose roommate is deeply into drugs and alcohol is almost certain to experience difficulties of some kind in his academic work. And the otherwise capable, generally diligent student who suddenly begins falling asleep in class, or failing quizzes, or missing deadlines is almost certainly facing some sort of personal problem, often several of them at once. To pretend that we can compartmentalize the academic aspect of a student's life from the rest of her life I now regard as an illusion. We can live with that illusion and go about the business of being academic advisors in the more restricted sense I mentioned above, but in doing so I think we miss some of the most important opportunities we have to engage students. Moreover, I think we cheat ourselves out of the experiences that make us better teachers.

I learned long ago that mastering my subject and honing my skills for teaching it was, at best, only half of what I needed to do in order to be effective in the classroom. The other half was knowing my students—how they think, which issues are live for them and which are not, what experiences have shaped their lives and their sense of themselves, and what they need in order to maximize their potential to learn, which always involves taking risks and making connections. And how could it be otherwise? After all, we are teaching what we know to *people*, young people, at a very special point in their lives, who come to us with lots of experiences that have shaped their ability to learn what we have to teach, especially when what we are teaching is how to be more creative and effective learners. It follows that the more I know about them, the better I understand them, the easier it will be for me to connect with them, and to connect them to the issues embedded in the material of my course. In this sense, the very expansive role of advising that I am presenting has both grown out of my teaching and enriched it. When my teaching hasn't gone well, it has forced me to realize that I didn't really know enough about who I was facing in the classroom. And as I developed deeper relationships with students, I found that I would

lecture and lead discussions very differently, with more attention to the real-life situations that I know they find themselves in.

It should be obvious by now that this vision of advising extends the definition of that role considerably beyond the standard way we use that term. And just as obviously, it changes the definition of my advisees. From this perspective, my advisees are not only the fifteen or so students whose names appear on my "advising list." Every student in my classes, past or present, as well as every student with whom I have a significant relationship outside of class, is a potential advisee. And while this might at first sound extraordinarily burdensome and even unrealistic, I would say simply that approaching all students as potential advisees has led me into any number of wonderful interactions. At one time I might approach a former student in Sayles just to say hi and to ask how they're doing only to learn that they have discovered a new passion while on an off-campus program and have chosen a new and exciting career path that they're excited to talk about. Or I might be invited to lunch by another student who is struggling with issues in her personal faith and wonders whether I've ever dealt with similar issues. The point is about openness. If I remain open to the possibility of more extensive, more meaningful advising/mentoring relationships with students, they are far more likely to happen than if I signal to them that this isn't my role.

By now many of you are probably wondering (understandably) whether this *is* your role as an advisor, whether you should make yourself available for the kinds of conversations with students that I've described, even if you were inclined to. After all, you may say, I'm not a therapist, nor do I want to get involved in students' personal issues. Doing so makes me uncomfortable and might even be irresponsible. There are significant issues here of maintaining appropriate boundaries with our students. And besides, that's why the College has a Wellness Center, a Career Center and an Academic Skills Center, all staffed with experts in these areas.

I want to be clear, then, that I am not proposing that any of us take on a role that we're uncomfortable with. I am only inviting you to consider whether your "comfort zone" may be larger than you have assumed, and whether there

may be benefits to such relationships that you had not considered. Of course, there have been many times when a student told me about problems that I was in no way able to help them with. At such times, I have leaned forward, looked them straight in the eye, and said firmly, but gently and supportively: "It sounds like you're dealing with a lot of very intense issues right now and that it's all pretty overwhelming. I think that if I were in your position, I would feel like I needed help. I wonder if you've considered making an appointment to see someone in the Wellness Center." I have been surprised by the number of times that they had not considered asking for help (being Carleton students, they are used to taking care of things themselves). Or how often they had considered it, but just needed someone they trusted, like an advisor or teacher, to tell them it was okay. As an advisor, it is not my job to be their therapist, but it is my job to recognize when they need that help and to encourage them to seek it out. Or so, at least, it seems to me at this juncture in my career.

I don't want to suggest that this expansive concept of advising is for everyone; indeed, I assume it is not. I have often wondered whether I have gravitated into this way of thinking about advising because I teach about religion, which invariably raises existential questions for students and so invites them to reflect on their own lives in the context of doing the work for my courses. If so, then perhaps the vision I have shared this morning is relevant only to those of you who have the good fortune to teach in the Religion Department. But I suspect not. I suggest that all of us, whatever our fields of expertise, can benefit from asking ourselves this series of questions:

--how do I think of my role as advisor?

--what do my students expect of me as their advisor, and, apart from their expectations, what sort of guidance would they welcome if I offered it to them?

--how can I be most effective as an advisor, however I conceive of that role?

--are there opportunities for advising that I had not considered before, and that would deepen my relationship with my advisees?

--how do I see the relationship between advising and teaching; how could I apply what I know about teaching to my advising, and vice versa?

In asking ourselves these questions, I think we will be forced to challenge some of our assumptions about advising and about ourselves as advisors. For one, we will probably come to reject the designation of certain days on the calendar as “advising days,” with its subtle implication that on all other days, we can largely ignore advising. (We might also question why the College Catalog has two pages describing the history of each building on campus, but not a single paragraph about the advising system!) For another, we will begin to ask our colleagues about the most important things they know about being a good advisor, and about the most significant experiences they have had with advisees, so as to make the most of this aspect of our work with students.

In closing, let me return to the question I raised at the outset: why advising? What is it that makes, or can make, advising so important? For my part, I would say this. At its best, advising is integral to all the most meaningful interactions I have with students. It is defined by all those situations in which they talk to me about what is happening, academically or personally, with them, and I respond by sharing what I have learned from many years of working with other students. They bring to me their aspirations and fears, their struggles and insights and confusion, and in response I offer them challenging questions and words of encouragement, a listening ear and the willingness to point them in the direction of whatever help I think they might need in the moment. Advising in this sense is at the very heart of what I think I am here to do: help students maximize their potential, overcome their limitations, clarify their goals and strive to achieve them. Personally, I think this is part of what makes a Carleton education worth having, especially in contrast to the far more impersonal experience that many students have at much larger institutions (and that I personally had as an undergraduate). So, I invite you to think about advising not as just one thing you do, but as something you can do in and through virtually any interaction you have with your students and advisees. Because as we become better advisors, we become better teachers, and our advisees become better, more self-aware, more successful students.

In the final analysis why should we care about advising, and why should we strive to expand our vision of ourselves as advisors? Because it can be the

most satisfying and meaningful aspect of our work, and because, as I see it, our students deserve nothing less.