The Power of Good Advice for Students

By RICHARD J. LIGHT

Some years ago I attended a gathering of faculty and senior administrators from more than 50 colleges and universities. Each was invited to present a view from his or her campus about the responsibilities of faculty, deans, and advisers for shaping students' overall experience at college.

The first person to speak was a senior dean from a distinguished university. He announced proudly that he and his colleagues admit good students and then make a special effort to "get out of their way." Students learn mostly from one another, he argued. "We shouldn't muck up that process."

I was dismayed. I was hearing a senior official from a major university describe an astonishing strategy: Find good students and then neglect them. It got me to think hard about what decisions administrators and faculty members, as well as new students, can make to facilitate the best possible undergraduate experience.

Since that meeting I have participated in 10 years of systematic research to explore that question. My colleagues and I have interviewed 1,600 Harvard undergraduate students; I myself have interviewed 400 students. I have also visited almost 100 institutions of higher education. Some are highly selective; others are open admissions; most are in between. They include private and public institutions, large and small, in all areas of the country.

And, of all the challenges that both faculty and students choose to mention, providing or obtaining good academic advising ranks number one. In fact, good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience.

Although agreement is widespread that academic advising is important, different campuses have widely different resources for advising. A small, private liberal-arts college with 2,000 students almost always will design a different advising system than a large, public state university with 20,000, simply because of different financial constraints.

Yet despite those differences, several recommendations about good advising have emerged from my own experience and student interviews -- findings that may be helpful to advisers on many campuses. Those recommendations don't cost a lot, and are relatively easy for advisers to share with students and for students to carry out.

For example, one remarkably simple suggestion builds on the obvious idea that part of a great college education depends upon human relationships. Each year I meet, one-on-one, with several new students to discuss each student's goals at college, his or her background, and a "study plan" -- what courses the student will take in this first year, and how those may lead to future courses. Then we come to the part of our conversation that I look forward to most.

I ask, "So, now that we have had this conversation, what do you see as your job for this term?" Just about all students answer that their job is to work hard and to do well in college. I ask what else they might set as a goal. Their responses often emphasize participating in campus activities. Again, I press them to say more about their goal for the semester.

By now, most students look puzzled; they wonder what I am getting at. And then I share with them the single most important bit of advice I can possibly give to new advisees: "Your job is to get to know one faculty member reasonably well this semester, and also to have that faculty member get to know you reasonably well."

I point out that achieving that goal may require some effort and planning. Yet think of the benefits, I remind each new student. Even if you only succeed half the time, that means in your eight semesters in college you will get to know four professors. And they will get to know you. I tell each student that I am convinced that they will be far better off, and will have a far richer experience, if they follow that advice.

As my first-year advisees approach graduation, many tell me that this advice was the single most helpful suggestion they got in their freshman year. According to them, as well as many other undergraduates, certain professors exert a profound impact, influencing their development as young scholars, as good citizens, as human beings.

I have identified several other equally simple and effective recommendations about good advising:
Require students to keep time logs.
I ask each student to record exactly how his or her time is spent, half hour by half hour, for several weeks. Then I sit and debrief each student, one-to-one, about what their time log shows. A crucial focus in the debriefing should be on how time in between scheduled obligations is used. For example, a student with a class from 9 to 10 a.m., and then another class from noon to 1 p.m., has two hours of in-between time.

How should the student use this time? He or she may choose to chat with friends or go back to the room to study. He or she may want to do a few errands or do some physical exercise. There is no single correct thing to do. Rather, whatever he or she chooses, the key point is that it should be done with some thought.

Finally, I follow up a few weeks after the debriefing, to see if each student is actually putting into place whatever insights and suggestions emerged from going over the time logs. A single follow-up call, with encouragement to persist in efforts to make changes, has made a measurable difference in the lives of some of our students.

It is critical to stress that encouraging students to track their time systematically is just the first step. The debriefing, and encouraging students to implement whatever changes they want to make, is what leads to the payoff.

Consider what the debriefing session accomplishes. For a student, the entire process is a rare chance to reflect together with an adult about how he or she is now allocating time and energy. Meanwhile, the adviser gets a running start in helping a student. It is hard to imagine a better way for an adviser to get to know a student than by sitting with that student and discussing how he or she spends precious time, hour by hour, day by day.

The debriefing offers each adviser an opportunity to get to know his or her advisees at as personal a level as each advisee chooses and feels comfortable with. It is a great chance for an adviser to genuinely advise.

Encourage collegial work
When I arrived at Harvard as a Ph.D. student in statistics, I felt young and nervous. I learned an important lesson my first week, entirely outside of class, that taught me about the meaning of collegiality.

I checked in at the statistics department a few days before classes began to make an appointment with the man who the admissions letter said would advise me. His name was Frederick Mosteller. To my surprise he was immediately available in his office and invited me in. After some pleasantries, we set a time for later that week to discuss my course selection. Just as I was getting up to leave, Mosteller asked me to wait a moment. He picked up a small bundle of paper, put a paper clip on it, and handed it to me. When I glanced down, I saw that its title was "Non-sampling Errors in Statistical Surveys: A Chapter for the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences."

"Richard," asked Mosteller, "could you please mark up this draft for us to go over when we get together later this week? I'd love to get your comments on this."

I was panicked. I hadn't even started my first course, and already my adviser was asking for comments on his work.

The next two days were difficult. I read the chapter 10 times. Finally I felt I understood it pretty well. When I returned for our advising session, I handed him back his draft, told him I had learned an enormous amount, and thanked him for giving it to me. I told him I thought it was superb, and that other readers would learn a lot too.

Mosteller smiled and told me kindly, but directly, that he had hoped for something different: "I treated you like a colleague, and you didn't do that for me." He explained that by sharing his first, rough draft, complete with occasional typos and grammatical errors and imperfect organization, he was assuming I would help him, as his professional colleague, to improve it. So now, as a colleague, it was my job to dig in and to make specific suggestions.

Mark it up with red ink, he told me -- the more, the better. He wouldn't promise to take all my suggestions, but that wasn't the important part. The important part, he said, was that going through the process together was a key aspect of becoming a professional.

I took Mosteller's admonition very seriously. I returned a few days later carrying a document covered with red ink. I even included suggestions about writing style, choice of tense, choice of subheadings, and many other details. The payoff came when we had our next session a week later. He put my marked-up version on the desk between us, and, starting on the first page, we went over every suggestion I had made. As promised, he rejected many of my changes. But he took a few. And we had good discussions about many others. Mostly, it was he who did the explaining.

Finally I understood. I realized that what had at first seemed like his request for my help was actually Mosteller's giving me his help. He was doing his job. He was advising me. Brilliantly. He modeled, with his own behavior, how working and debating with another person about a work in process is a way to pay them a great compliment.

For years I have asked my own new advisees to do exactly the same thing. I stay in touch with many of my own former students from the past 30 years. And that one act -- sharing a rough draft of a document and asking my new, young advisee to mark it up so we can sit
Urge students to get involved in group activities.
For other students, the single biggest contribution an adviser can make is not about academics. It is to encourage them to join a campus organization or group that will give them social and personal support.

In interviews, some students from minority groups stress this point. So do students who are the first in their families to go to college. And so do students who are leaving behind crucial support networks they had in high school -- with parents, supportive high-school teachers or advisers, religious counselors, athletic coaches.

Such students may not integrate quickly or easily into their new community. For many, their academic work as well as their social life and sense of being grounded will suffer. When this happens, it illustrates how strong the connections are between academic performance and extracurricular activities.

What is the policy implication of this finding? That advisers should encourage students from their very first days on campus to find a group to join.

For example, one student arrived at Harvard from an island in the South Pacific. She came from a low-income family, and neither of her parents nor her older brother had attended college. She had been at the very top of her high-school class but, after her first few days at Harvard, she was on the verge of packing up and going home. She felt simply overwhelmed by everything: the activities, the pace, the course selection, the big city nearby, even the other students.

Her adviser, whom she first met a few days before classes began, quickly recognized that. And so he urged the student to find an extracurricular activity that she would enjoy, ideally one that would also help her get to know other students. He suggested writing for one of the campus newspapers. The student declined. How about joining the Glee Club? The student didn't think her voice was good enough. Did she play a musical instrument? No, she didn't.

The adviser took his job very seriously, however, and refused to give up. He listened to her responses, and then made another suggestion: He told her that when the Harvard Band held tryouts the next week, she should show up and try out. The student repeated to her adviser that she did not play any instrument. "No problem," he replied, "just tell them you want to hold the drum."

The adviser happened to know that one of the college band drums is so big that a second person often helps the drummer hold it. In fact the student did become a member of the Harvard Band, and that single event was critical for keeping her at Harvard. While her grades were good, the dramatic success was her extraordinarily happy overall experience.

In an interview, when we pressed her to analyze that success, she repeatedly mentioned the band. Because of the band, she said, she got to know many other students well. Also, becoming part of the band, with its performances at football games and other campus activities, gave her a wonderful feeling of belonging.

She told us that all of those good things had happened because of that conversation with her first-year adviser. The adviser's one insight fundamentally changed the quality and texture of her college experience, including her academic engagement as well as her personal happiness. Without that advice, she never would have thought of joining the band, and certainly not just to hold a drum.

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