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Challenges Encountered by New Advisers: Honest Answers, Practical Solutions

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“I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information I had to know in the first few days of my advising career ... It seemed like I had to learn everything NOW!”
– New advising professional

When a person leaves a counseling graduate program and enters the work force as an academic adviser, she/he faces many challenges that the theories and professors rarely mention. The classroom tends to explain behaviors and offer frameworks for interpreting actions, but the reality of a job is rarely understood until one faces the job as the new professional. As a professional in the field of academic advising, I found this pattern to be true. I felt that I had an excellent background to help students in my ability to counsel them (I could develop rapport with the best of counselors). I even believed that I was knowledgeable in the ways of how a college develops requirements and a quick study in how to learn the nuances of a college catalog. Once faced with the reality of the job, I found the challenges to be somewhat disconcerting. While it shook my confidence both as an adviser and as a professional, I did believe that although my initial challenges were troubling, they were by no means unusual for new advisers. With this belief in mind, I decided to find out if others had gone through what I had experienced and also to research possible solutions to these challenges.

To find out if advisers did share the same challenges I faced, I used ACADV, the National Academic Advising Association's advising listserv. Through the listserv, I compiled a list of the most common challenges faced by new advisers. I submitted a simple survey consisting of one question: “Please list your top three challenges faced by new advisers.” I received responses from advisers who had been advising for over 25 years as well as responses from advisers who had been in their positions for less than a month. The results of the survey seemed to confirm my suspicions that there is a common set of challenges that new advisers face. What follows is a list of the top three challenges faced by new advisers, as reported by advisers. I also included possible solutions to each of these challenges.

Challenge #1: Too much information to know immediately
The top challenge that was reported was about the amount of details and new information that a new adviser must know almost from day one of his/her job. One quote from the survey was particularly indicative of this challenge: “I was overwhelmed by the amount of information that I needed to know in order to be effective.” Information seemed to be the theme of this challenge and it included such challenges as having to know all of the information immediately, lack of training, and knowing whom to contact and when.

Solutions:

- Do not guess at the answers to an advisee's questions - when in doubt ask. Find another adviser who is available, even if it means leaving your session a few times. Find out how other advisers have handled situations.

- Make looking up information in your catalog easy.

- Develop a contact list. Every time you look up the number of a department, add it to an ongoing list.

- Explore offices around campus. Walk around and meet people. Pick up brochures and information, even if it is just office hours.

- Get comfortable saying “I don't know, but I'll find out.” The important issue here is to find the answer and get back to the student.

- Seek a mentor. Find someone in your office that is willing to answer your questions, allow you to sit in on sessions, and talk to you about your skills.

- Use your students as resources. Ask them about a professor or how difficult a class is. They are the ones with the first-hand knowledge.

Challenge #2: Enabling vs. Advising
The second highest-reported challenge in this survey dealt with “enabling vs. advising.” Most respondents seemed to have
issues surrounding doing too much work for the student. One adviser's response was very telling and may be indicative of our profession: “I never know how much customer service is too much. When I am helping a student, I want the student to be able to eventually do this work for herself, but I don't want her to go away feeling like I did not help her.” The central themes to this challenge included questions about how much information is too much, when should an adviser stop giving information, and when is the adviser doing more work than the student is.

**Solutions:**

- Show students how to do things, as opposed to just telling them. Many students will not admit when they do not understand what you are telling them. Showing them, for example, how to access their student records instead of just telling them can prevent the student from leaving feeling puzzled and having to come back for the same information.
- Brainstorm solutions with the student. Let the student devise what he/she needs.
- Provide the necessary references, phone numbers, contact person, campus address, etc, but do not actually make the contact for the student.
- Advising is not counseling. Know when to refer and to whom.
- Keep in mind that you are not the family umpire when working with families. Remember the confidentiality rules.
- Realize that every student may not follow your recommendations.
- Set boundaries for yourself (e.g, not staying late with a student, nor working through lunch).

**Challenge #3: Telling students things they do not want to hear**

The third most-reported challenge involved telling students things they did not want to hear. While telling students bad news is not high on anyone's list of enjoyable activities, the task of bearing bad news is difficult for advisers because they usually are the ones who foster good will and provide answers. An example of this can be seen in the following quote: “While advising my first international transfer student, I think I spent nearly two hours with him. The language barrier was a problem, and I had to explain why most of his credits did not transfer and that his projected graduation date was two years longer than he expected. I had to give him news he did not want and would not accept.” The main themes of this challenge involved working with difficult students, helping students to re-interpret bad information given by someone else, and explaining to students who do not meet requirements that they cannot enter a specific program.

**Solutions:**

- Empathize with the student, regardless of your feelings for their situation.
- Help the student find other options.
- Emphasize solutions, not what the student should have done.
- Be aware of University procedures available if the student chooses to take action, such as appealing a grade, disputing information, etc.
- If a student becomes belligerent, calmly let the student know that his/her behavior is not acceptable. Have a plan with co-workers in the case of a threatening situation.

While the anecdotal evidence of this survey supports the notion that all advisers have faced common adversity in their careers, it also suggests that the task of moving from theory to application can be quite challenging. Although new advisers face a myriad of challenges when they go from the classroom to an advising session, it is important to keep in mind that those problems, while difficult at times, can be overcome. The solutions presented in this article were gathered from experienced advisers or derived from theory. This article is meant to be the beginning of more research into how new advisers can improve their transition from the classroom to the office and also to suggest some practical solutions to the common problems faced by all new advisers.

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