

A photograph of two women sitting at a table, engaged in conversation. They are both wearing dark leather jackets. The woman on the left is looking towards the woman on the right, who is smiling. There are glasses and papers on the table. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be an indoor setting with warm lighting.

# THE ACADEMIC ADVISOR: A KEY PARTNER IN STUDENTS' SUCCESS

**B**rittany<sup>1</sup> is about to call it quits. A few days ago, her parents dropped her off at the university in anticipation of a wonderful freshman year. But she knows almost no one in this strange, big place and is already starting to feel homesick. She almost bursts into tears as she looks at the daunting list of tasks: choose a major, figure out a class schedule, buy textbooks, find a job, etc. Where can she turn for help? She calls her parents frequently on her cell phone, but other than a sympathetic ear, they can't offer much help. Enter the academic advisor.

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**BY LINDA FELIPEZ NELSON AND BRUCE J. TOEWS**

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## What Is Academic Advising?

“Academic advising is a developmental process which assists students in the clarification of their life/career goals and in the development of educational plans for the realization of these goals. . . . The advisor serves as a facilitator of communication, a coordinator of learning experiences through course and career planning and academic progress review, and an agent of referral to other campus agencies as necessary.”<sup>2</sup>

The responsibilities of academic advisors include:

- building a relationship with students so that they feel comfortable sharing their dreams and challenges and seeking advice;
- helping students develop realistic goals and aligning their educational plans accordingly;
- ensuring that students understand their degree requirements and enroll in the appropriate courses;
- monitoring student progress and providing intervention and encouragement when problems arise;
- making students aware of the institutional services available<sup>3</sup>;
- facilitating connections with employers and graduate schools.

## Building Relationships

*Transparent, knowledgeable, available, and compassionate*—these are key attributes of successful academic advisors.

Christian academic advisors must consider the welfare of the whole individual. The intertwining personal, spiritual, and social lives of students are within their reach as advisors in Seventh-day Adventist schools. Getting to know each student, expressing concern about their personal and academic lives, and listening carefully to their concerns can make a significant difference in students’ college success. Above all, a smiling face will help to dispel the stereotype of the unapproachable professor, as advisors are professors, too! Smiles should be shared freely and abundantly. Inside and outside of the academic setting, recognition and acknowledgement will help facilitate students’ adjustments to new surroundings.

As academic advisors, when we share stories from our own lives with our advisees, they begin to understand that we are, in fact, just like them. Building relationships is especially critical to the survival of new students. Invitations to share meals with a small group of students at the advisor’s home can make a lasting impression, particularly on freshmen and students enrolling from foreign countries or transferring from a different school.

Advisors can freely share hugs, smiles, and kind words. Still, boundaries must be maintained for the safety of both the student and the advisor. An academic advisor must take special care when meeting alone with a distraught or angry student. Although confidentiality must be respected, it is helpful to leave office doors and blinds open. In a potentially delicate situation, an inde-



**Linda Nelson, co-author of the article, shares her umbrella with an advisee as they walk across campus.**

pendent third person could be invited to sit in on the meeting, to serve as a passive observer and witness.

The parents of our students have entrusted their loved ones to our school for more than sound academic and career advice. Often, a young student, possibly away from home for the first time, needs much more than a simple class schedule and a checklist to succeed in college. He or she may be struggling with feelings of homesickness, difficulties with roommates, financial trouble, family problems back home, challenges with the local food service, mental and/or physical health issues, and feeling inadequate or overwhelmed.

The advisor must learn the details of each advisee’s program. Knowing where one’s students come from,



**Bruce Toews, co-author of the article, explores several degree options with an undecided student.**

where they are headed, and what kind of help they need to get there are the basics of becoming an expert advisor. The advisor should learn as much as possible about each advisee. Perhaps the industrial design major is also a car enthusiast and a creative cook. Maybe the graphic design major spends her free time teaching English as a Second Language and is part of the praise and worship team. The advisor should ask questions and make notes about his or her advisees' personal interests and background information. Students will respond positively once they learn that the advisor is really interested in them, and the relationship will be strengthened and enhanced through informal conversation and time spent together.

### **Dealing With Emotional and Learning Challenges**

We would like to share a couple of illustrations from our lives as academic advisors. The first example demonstrates that advisees often have no one else to turn to in times of trouble.

(Bruce): *One day I had the opportunity to help jumpstart the car of a young advisee who was far away from home and seemed lost and lonely. As I witnessed the tears in her eyes, I was reminded that young students face tremendous pressures trying to balance study and work with their social lives, all against a backdrop of needing to make big decisions as they enter adulthood. As an advisor, I am constantly vigilant to identify advisees struggling ac-*

*ademically or emotionally. Advisors can have a big impact simply by having listening ears and caring hearts.*

The following illustration points out the significance of being alert to indicators of problems that commonly affect students.

(Linda): *Zach came to my office for the first time on a bright, sunny afternoon. Smiling sheepishly, he admitted that he had left one of our sister institutions because he flunked out. He had been admitted to our school on a probationary basis. One of the entrance requirements was to meet with his academic advisor on a regular basis. As we chatted, Zach described some of his interests, which included video and computer games. When I asked how much time per day he spent gaming, Zach laughed and looked away. He said he'd sometimes go for days, barely eating or sleeping, playing Internet games with people he'd never met. He laughed again when I asked if the gaming interfered with his studies and said, "Probably." When I asked if he felt he was addicted to gaming, he laughed very hard and replied with a resounding "No!"*

*Throughout the quarter, Zach came to my office for only two of our five regularly scheduled meetings. Reports from his teachers indicated his class attendance waned dramatically after the first week. Zach did not respond to my e-mail or voicemail inquiries. When I finally bumped into him in the hallway, he tried to dodge me. I asked where he had been and why he hadn't attended classes or met with*



**In a relaxed setting, Bruce Toews shares some of life's lessons with a student.**

*me, He answered that he chronically overslept. I asked him if he stayed up late at night playing computer games, and he replied, "Most of the time, yes."*

*Earlier that quarter, I reported to both the men's dean and the counseling center that I thought Zach was depressed and addicted to gaming. Zach failed all of his classes that quarter and did not return to our school.*

*I learned from this encounter that the gaming addiction and subsequent depression in Zach's life were seriously out of control. Although everything was handled according to policy, we should have tried an aggressive and earlier intervention. Had we intervened sooner, perhaps making counseling a requirement of admission, Zach might have been able to overcome his addiction and depression. Had he received help to deal with these issues, he might have achieved academic success.*

As relationships strengthen, advisors will have ample opportunity to observe behavior and time-management patterns that may be counter-productive to their advisees' success. People react in different ways to change and stress. The demands of college life can be overwhelming to new students.<sup>4</sup> Poor hygiene, skipping classes or missing appointments, avoiding e-mail or telephone contact, and a general non-committal attitude can indicate depression, relationship problems, gaming addiction, and other behavioral issues.<sup>5</sup>

Formal early-warning systems must be in place so that advisors can report their suspicions to experts who can intervene promptly. At our school, we require academic progress reports, three or more per term, for at-risk students. Electronic copies go to the residence hall dean, athletics director, advisor, academic administrator,

and other appropriate support personnel. When red flags are raised, this helps us ensure that the student gets assistance before a situation spirals out of control.

On some occasions, advisors will need to refer students to various service centers on campus or in the community. For instance, students who struggle with depression must be encouraged to obtain professional help. At times, the academic advisor may need to make the initial contact, and even walk with the student to the first appointment.

### **Developing Realistic Goals**

Sooner or later, the proverbial question: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" takes on a sense of urgency. Although some college students know exactly where they are going and how to get there, many others are still in discovery mode, finding their way as they go. Undecided or undeclared students are often embarrassed about their uncertainty. Furthermore, their indecision can lead to feelings of despondency and lack of motivation. We have often observed that when undeclared students finally decide on a major, they experience a sense of relief and an uptick in energy and determination.

When visiting with undecided students, we encourage them to relax a little, to follow their hearts, to take a broad spectrum of general study courses, and to use the school's career and testing services. We point out that many successful people didn't know at first what they wanted to do in life. Indeed, many older adults still don't know what they want to do, as evidenced by multiple career changes. Besides, a bachelor degree isn't necessarily preparation for just one career track, but rather provides

groundwork for life itself as well as a way of thinking and of seeing the world. In cases where undecided students have narrowed down the choice of a major to two or three, we can help them schedule classes that will apply to all their choices, which will buy them some time to make the right decisions.

Students need to know right up front that advisors have their best interests at heart. We are not going to push them in a certain direction simply because it's what their parents want. Nor are we going to impose on them our own biases (e.g., everyone should major in my discipline). Advisors must be patient and listen carefully, since students may have trouble articulating their goals. It can take time for this process to evolve naturally.

With that said, however, given the cost of higher education, it is certainly prudent for students to clarify their goals as soon as possible. Especially in some technical disciplines (such as nursing, accounting, engineering, and industrial design), course sequences and tight scheduling require students to get on track very early. It is not uncommon in these technical majors for students who chose a major belatedly to require five or even six years to complete their requirements.

If students express an inclination toward the advisor's specialty, he or she can help them gain a clear picture of what their careers will entail and the steps needed for success. If they are leaning in a different direction, the advisor can help them connect with knowledgeable faculty and community professionals who can mentor and arrange job-shadowing. With judicious guidance, students should have selected a major by their junior year, and have had a chance to intern in that area to help confirm that they are pursuing the right goals.

### Course Planning and Scheduling

Once students' goals are established, the advisor's next job is to assist them with curriculum planning and scheduling. Some advisors do not think it is their job to help with detailed planning. After all, long ago when they were in college, little if any assistance was provided, and they made it through just fine. But modern degree requirements have become surprisingly detailed and complex, and it is unrealistic to expect students to quickly master all their information in college bulletins or catalogs. Indeed, it even takes a diligent effort for advisors to stay on top of the requirements, but this is an important part of the job. There isn't room for many mistakes. When bad or inadequate advice is given, students and their families will remember it for a long time, especially if this delays graduation.

To maximize the chance of smooth sailing, a system should be in place that prevents students from registering

without the approval of their advisor. At our university, advisees are told that the advisor needs to review their course schedules before he or she will grant electronic authorization for them to register.

It is important early on to establish a proper mix of general study and major-specific classes. Many students will avoid enrolling in foundational courses, such as math and English, but since these are usually required prerequisites, they must be taken as soon as possible. At the same time, it is appropriate to leave some general study courses for the junior and senior years in order to provide more course variety and flexibility in scheduling. Prerequisites should be clearly explained to students so that they enroll in the proper sequence of classes. Special attention to scheduling is also needed when courses are not offered every term or year.

In course planning and scheduling, some of the biggest challenges occur with transfer students: evaluating courses for adequate content (especially if they were

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taught in a different language), upper- and lower-division differences, semester-to-quarter conversions (and vice versa), and residency requirements. In order to create a course schedule for transfer students, advisors will often need to make an educated guess about which credits will transfer before they receive the official transcript evaluation from the registrar's office. If articulation agreements already exist between schools, advisors should request access to these documents.

In many ways, good advising is really a form of teaching. The advisor helps students use their information-gathering and decision-making skills to prepare a fairly intricate plan. A number of tools can be used to facilitate this process. It is helpful to have degree comparisons that show clearly how the objectives and requirements of degrees differ.

Once the student has selected a degree, it is essential to create some type of user-friendly outline that allows him or her to check off completed courses and see readily which ones must still be completed. At our university, we are fortunate to have an online, automated degree audit system, which indicates exactly how students' credits have been applied and what requirements remain. Using this information, students are encouraged to cre-

ate their own class schedules, term by term, which can quickly be reviewed by the advisor. This not only saves time for the advisor, but more important, it encourages advisees to take ownership of their own program.

Toward the end of their junior year, students typically meet with advisors to plan their senior year courses. At our institution, we require that seniors pre-register for all remaining classes so advisors can ensure that no time conflicts or scheduling problems exist. At this point, a senior outline is printed, which is signed by the advisee, advisor, and the registrar. An approved senior outline minimizes the chance of last-minute surprises, which can delay graduation and cause significant resentment by students and their families.

### The Advisor as Advocate

At some colleges and universities, an ombudsperson serves as an advocate for students who have a dispute with a university policy or decision. However, many universities do not offer this service, and even where it exists, there are times when the academic advisor is the natural person to advocate for a student. Such situations include disagreements about transfer credits, policies that impact housing or food service, conflicts between chapel requirements and work schedules, and complications relating to prerequisites for upper-division classes. In many cases, the academic advisor can help the student navigate the tangle of university bureaucracy. The academic advisor has thus moved beyond the role of advising into one of advocacy.

To illustrate, here is a real example. One advisee, who starting studying digital design at our university, transferred to another school. When she returned to our institution, she discovered that the other school was not accredited, and some key courses would not transfer. Her advisor was able to arrange for some challenge exams, a solution of which the student wasn't even aware. She successfully completed the challenge exams and obtained credit toward her degree.

### Connecting With Employers and Graduate Schools

A final responsibility of advisors is to help place students in jobs or graduate schools. Many times, advisors will have connections that can facilitate this process. At the very least, advisors will be asked to serve as references. Since there are many legal pitfalls in giving references, advisors should carefully review the do's and don'ts of providing a reference.<sup>6</sup> For example, in the United States, it may constitute a violation of federal law to share information about students' GPAs or grades without their written consent.<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion

The responsibilities of academic advisors involve much more than just class scheduling and signing registration forms. Advisors also serve as career mentors, academic

coaches, relationship counselors, prayer partners, referral coordinators, and confidantes. Providing a listening ear and knowing when to call in expert advice are essential.

There are few things in life more rewarding than watching students' careful planning and hard work turn dreams into reality. Academic advisors are privileged to witness and contribute to numerous success stories, as young people find their wings and take off. Years after graduation, former advisees will express appreciation for the role their advisors played in their lives. It is truly humbling to consider the responsibilities and the rewards of serving as an academic advisor. ✍



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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The names of students mentioned in the article have been changed to protect their privacy.
2. David S. Crockett, ed., *Advising Skills, Techniques, and Resources: A Compilation of Materials Related to the Organization and Delivery of Advising Services* (Iowa City, Iowa: ACT Corporation, 1987).
3. Career services, counseling and testing center, teaching and learning center, disability services, etc.
4. For more information on game addiction, see <http://subliminaltherapy.com/conditions/gameaddiction.html>.
5. For more information on depression among college-age students, see [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/1874327/college\\_student\\_depression.html](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/1874327/college_student_depression.html).
6. For helpful guidelines on references, see <http://www.nacaweb.org/public/reference1.htm>.
7. For more information about the Family Rights and Privacy Act and references, see <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/legal.htm>.