



Academic Advising and Teaching in the Brown Curriculum

Because Brown's "open" curriculum has no distribution requirements, our students are faced with more curricular choices at all stages of their academic careers. Solid working relationships between students and faculty members are central in supporting meaningful student selection of courses and in establishing significant and rigorous paths of inquiry consistent with liberal learning at Brown. One of the improvements to the traditional advising by faculty was the CAP (Curricular Advising Program) introduced by former Dean of the College Harriet Sheridan. The goal of the CAP program was, and remains, to improve the quantity and quality of faculty and undergraduate discussions about curricular choice through the academic advising process.

Each year, some 200 faculty serve as academic advisors for undergraduates. Faculty members can serve as Freshman Advisors (with a subset of these serving as CAP advisors), Sophomore Advisors (with a subset serving as Randall Counselors), and/or Departmental Concentration Advisors. They may also serve as advisors for graduate students, but this relationship is not the focus of the current article.

In order to learn what “academic advising” means to different members of the faculty and to provide those new to advising at Brown with some insights into the advising process and its fundamental connection to teaching, the Sheridan Center recently asked a group of experienced and respected academic advisors for their perspectives on the advising process.

Advising as Teaching

Associate Dean of the Faculty William Crossgrove notes that the yearly letter which the Dean of the Faculty sends to individual faculty, "Materials to be submitted annually to the Dean of the Faculty", includes the following statement under the heading of *teaching*:

"...You should also describe your participation in graduate and/or undergraduate advising. Your statement should include the number and type of advisees, the procedures you have employed, and an assessment of their effectiveness."

In addition, the Dean of the Faculty's annual letter to department chairs concerning "Faculty Salary Increases" indicates that advising should comprise one-third of the teaching responsibility of each faculty member, and asks chairs to assess individual faculty member's undergraduate and graduate advising in determining yearly salary increases.

In their responses, faculty discussed the relationship between advising and teaching in the context of Brown's "open curriculum". According to Calvin Goldscheider (*Sociology and Judaic Studies*), "Advising and teaching are two sides of the same coin we call education. We advise as we teach and we teach as we advise." Many other faculty members also consider advising and teaching to be clearly linked, if not inseparable. Chris Amirault (*Education*) notes that the concept of coaching applies to his role as both teacher and advisor.

Effective Advising

Faculty described what they believe to be characteristics of an effective advisor and discussed how they gauge their effectiveness as an advisor. Jan Tullis (*Geological Sciences*) states, "An advisor must care about 'the whole person'; should ask questions about the student's background, travels, and extracurricular interests in order to help make connections; should show interest in helping to find answers to student's questions even if he/she does not immediately know the answer." Chris Amirault lists "availability; honesty; awareness of the experience of college life for students coming from vastly different backgrounds; the ability to say 'I don't know so let's find out'; caring and thoughtfulness" as desirable characteristics of effective advisors. Jim McIlwain (*Neuroscience*) notes that effective advisors are highly instrumental in helping students identify options. Calvin Goldscheider suggests, "The ability to listen and willingness to be helpful are critical traits. Passive listening is hardly helpful; giving direction without listening is not likely to be successful." Leo Depuydt (*Egyptology*) observes, "Advice seems most effective between people moving toward a common career goal."

Faculty offered a variety of responses on how they know that they are being effective advisors. Calvin Goldscheider states, "I don't think that there are clear ways to

evaluate my effectiveness as an advisor except to judge by how many return after they are no longer required to obtain my signature. If the quality of our teaching is measured by how much the instructor learns, then the quality of our advising may be evaluated by how we gain new insights into the educational process by advising. How much do we learn about other parts of the university, our colleagues and our community. We meet each year with a new cohort of students and become reacquainted with previous cohorts. They should be teaching us new things about their goals and we should be listening and learning from them." Jim McIlwain suggests that the contentment of one's advisees is an important indicator of effectiveness.

Advising Challenges

Faculty offered insights into some of the challenges of advising first year students at Brown. Leo Depuydt finds that it is important for students to feel that they are addressed as equals. Calvin Goldscheider adds, "The biggest challenges are to treat each of the first-year students as part of a new cohort and to treat each student as special and unique. Advising styles are not easily put into a formula. We have to be ready to learn new ways of helping and teaching students." Jan Tullis stresses that first-year students may not have an adequate understanding of the significance of advising in their academic experiences at Brown. In addition, faculty must be aware that student may be reluctant to "bother" their advisors and, consequently, the onus of initiating contact often falls on the faculty member. Other respondents state that paucity of time and overabundance of advisees can pose problems for conscientious advisors. Jim McIlwain cautions that advisors must be alert to the fact that first-year students often feel overwhelmed by the amount of new information they are expected to process during their first few weeks at Brown.

Faculty respondents also expressed concern that the time and effort spent on advising was often not valued, either departmentally or institutionally. One faculty member observes, "The pressures on faculty from many sources are great and advising often (too often) is seen as a burden and an obligation rather than a challenge.... Just as research and teaching are intimately linked (ideally we teach our research) so advising is linked to the broader educational enterprise.... Advising should not be viewed as taking time away from other important institutional or individual teaching and research goals. While we do not live in ideal worlds, we all know that students are our most precious resource. Since we are committed to the educational enterprise in the context of a university, we should view advising (and the investments that should be made in advising) as important as other investments that we make."

Advice for New Advisors

Faculty respondents provided suggestions for colleagues new to advising at Brown. Calvin Goldscheider offers the following: "First and foremost, new faculty should learn about Brown. Brown is a complex system of departments and courses, of research and teaching, of resources and opportunities. It takes time to learn about your own department and related departments; it takes time to learn about the resources and the opportunities available. My best advice is to spend the first year as an apprentice advisor joined to one of the best in your department." Jan Tullis concurs that it is vital to familiarize oneself with the academic culture of Brown *before* serving as an advisor. She also stresses the importance of advice from Meiklejohn student advisors, more experienced departmental colleagues, and academic deans. In addition, Tullis suggests that "offering a CAP course is by far the most rewarding and effective way to do freshman advising; that guarantees that you see your advisees several times a week and forge a much better relationship." Furthermore, she says that email can be an invaluable way of staying in touch with one's advisees. Jim McIlwain asserts, "Know your way around the course announcement bulletin. Know the premed requirements." He also emphasizes that advisors should tell first-year students (1) to attend class, (2) to get to know one or two professors well, and (3) to keep everything the Registrar sends them. Chris Amirault suggests that advisors meet regularly with advisees every couple of weeks, preferably over a meal, and encourage their advisees to come in during office hours.

We wish to express our gratitude to the faculty members who took the time to respond to our questions. We appreciate the thoughtful responses we received, and regret that we were not able to include all of them.

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