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ADVISING AND MENTORING AT BROWN: SOME RANDOM THOUGHTS AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

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[Ed. note: Prof. Hu-DeHart was selected for the 2009 Karen T. Romer Award for Excellence in Advising. In this article requested by the Sheridan Center, she has generously shared her many years of experience to inspire colleagues across the University.]

Here I share some random thoughts I have gathered from my experience Teaching, Advising and Mentoring students at Brown, and before that, at Washington University in St. Louis, Lehman College (Bronx campus) of the City University of New York, and the University of Colorado at Boulder, for a total of some thirty-five years. (Can it have been that long?)

As I see it, Advising and Mentoring are, fundamentally, relationships; as such, they need to be built and maintained. As with all relationships, they are as much intuition as method, emotional and practical. But these are also asymmetrical, that is, not between peers, but rather, based on seniority, knowledge, experience, authority, and yes, power, which need not always be exercised, but is present all the same. I respect my advisees as individuals and persons in their own right, as developing adults, but also mindful of the fact that they are still acquiring self knowledge, gaining self confidence, in short, becoming mature.

I regard Advising and Mentoring as a form of academic service, an extension of the classroom, on the same continuum of teaching and learning. For this reason, I have most enjoyed—and feel the greatest satisfaction and success—when I advise and mentor individuals who are also my students. The classroom provides a sustained period of regular contact and engagement, and allows me to process how my relationship with the student evolves as well as observe interaction with other

members of the class. The relationship with me is reinforced and enhanced through my detailed responses to the student's written work done outside the classroom, which often elicits (with my encouragement) the student's reaction in turn to my comments, creating in effect a dialogue. This understanding of the individual provides a solid foundation for taking the relationship to the next step, into Advising and Mentoring.

If the advisee is not already my student, then I begin the relationship by probing into positive and negative experiences with other instructors and in other classrooms, trying to get a sense of what works, what excites, what stimulates the mind and imagination, as well as the disappointments and failures, and possible explanations, including especially the student's own responsibilities.

In general, whether my student or not, I try to get an overview of the person's academic record and intellectual experience to date, as prelude to moving to Advising and Mentoring, which is about setting goals, short and long term, clarifying vision and reaching those goals. I want to make sure we understand that the goals are about career and about life, about work and about living, about self and about others around them, in society and the world.

I understand that my role at the university, as professor and advisor/mentor, is first and foremost about their academic success. But I also understand that academic progress is inextricably linked to their general well being as social beings, in a complex community called the university, and mindful of the fact that the four short years they spend on campus is just the beginning of the rest of their lives! Hence why we call the ceremony at the end none other than "Commencement"!

I feel strongly that academics, especially at a privileged institution like Brown, is more than just acquiring a degree for credentialing purposes and getting a well paying job after graduation; it is really about developing your intellectual and critical thinking abilities for the rest of your life. It is about discovering your passions and commitments, and find a way to integrate them into your other needs and responsibilities, in order to lead a satisfying, fruitful, and productive life, selfless to the extent possible, and most of all, know that you matter, ready to meet the next challenge to serve others.

To be an effective advisor and mentor, I need to know the Whole Person in front of me. I ask many questions about the family and the home community, parents, siblings, grandparents, boy/girl friends and best friends; music and movies, sports and favorite activities. I am interested in hearing about triumphs and disappointments, challenges and hardships, as well as privileges and opportunities. Once I show genuine interest in the many dimensions of their lives and selves, the stories pour forth without much restraint!

I have found that many Brown students have grand visions, and I want to nurture those visions, but also help bring them down to a realistic, manageable level

that can actually be pursued step by step, systematically, methodically, realistically, without dampening the spirit behind them. This requires both compassion and tough love—advising them they may be over their head, biting off too much, and way too ambitious for the resources at hand. More often than not, I do not actually tell them what to do or what not to do, but sound out notes of caution and alert them to possible pitfalls, then help them develop a strategy to assess feasibility (time, resources, other constraints) and devise alternatives. In the end, they need to feel in control and take responsibility for decision-making.

I respect parents and parental concerns. When parents visit, I often ask to meet them, and speak their language if I am able (Spanish, Chinese), by way of assuring them that someone is looking out for their child's wellbeing. With some exceptions, most students appreciate the love and support of parents and grandparents. As a parent myself who saw three children go through college, I sometimes find myself serving as a "cultural broker" in both directions between parent and child. This most likely happens in immigrant families, where the child assimilates and acculturates more readily and rapidly than immigrant parents from more traditional Latin American or Asian societies. In the case of low-income students, they are very mindful of the tremendous sacrifice their parents make in order for them to attend Brown and the emotional toll of seeing their child go to a far and strange place, one they are not likely to afford a visit before graduation four years later.

A good conversation between advisor and advisee must not be hurried. Students can sense quickly that you are in a hurry and need to get out soon. It takes time to reach a level of comfort where important information is divulged for discussion. If pressed for time, then make a point of scheduling another time before dashing off; better yet, announce beforehand that meeting time may be curtailed. A comfortable relationship also engenders lots of laughter, and occasionally tears, but in any case, emotionally open.

Be always ready to go for help, and to acknowledge that you are not equipped professionally, intellectually or emotionally to deal with certain issues that arise. I have called colleagues in the Dean of the College, Dean of Student Life, Financial Aid, Admissions, the President's Office, Psych Services, the Chaplain's Office, even the Police Department, not to speak of many colleagues across campus and off campus, for advice and referrals. To do this most effectively and efficiently, advisors need to have one or more close contacts in these critical units of the university, so that one does not run into a wall with blind calling.

Maintain good contact information—including names and phones of best friends and roommates in some cases—so that you can intervene when you sense something amiss. As Brown casts its net ever more widely geographically across the country and the world, and deeply along the socio-economic scale, I have encountered students with needs and challenges that we have not yet named and assigned an office to address. Trust your instincts when you have an unusual

advisee who does not fit the typical mode of Brown students—white, comfortably middle-class, financially secure, solid high school academic preparation, wide network of friends and family. You may have to be more assertive in reaching out and maintaining contact with them, before meaningful intervention is too late. Again, in these situations, do not attempt to do it alone, but enlist the support of others around the university, and when necessary, surrender your primary role to others better equipped to take over while letting the advisee know you are still available to mentor.

There may well be a temperamental predisposition to advising and mentoring, but like teaching, we can all improve and do better. We can pick up skills from others, develop our own strategies from trial and error practices, and get feedback from our advisees. But you have to make the effort, and make yourself available for contact and face time. Nothing is more dispiriting.