

ADVISORS WHO ROCK: AN APPROACH TO ACADEMIC COUNSELING

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Extensive educational research has established that student-faculty interactions have a significant impact on student retention and success. Baker and Siryk^[1] found that first-year students who had one-hour advising sessions not only had significantly higher scores on an adjustment scale, but were also less likely to drop out of college than were students who did not have those sessions. Pascarella and Terenzini^[2] found that students who persisted in their chosen major fields of study had a significantly higher frequency of interaction with faculty than did those who chose to switch or drop out. The widely cited “Talking about Leaving” by Elaine Seymour and Nancy M. Hewitt testifies to the importance of good advising:

Failure to find adequate advice, counseling, or tutorial help was cited as contributing to one-quarter (24.0%) of all switching decisions; it was mentioned as a source of frustration by three-quarters (75.4%) of all switchers (for whom it was the third most common source of complaint) and it was an issue raised by half (52.0%) of all non-switchers, for whom it was the second most commonly cited concern. Among all of the factors contributing to attrition, student difficulties in getting appropriate help is the factor which is most clearly derived from flaws in the institutional structure.^[3]

As the director of Undergraduate Studies of the Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering Department at North Carolina State University, I do a great deal of advising. My route to this position was nontraditional. After completing my Ph.D. in chemical engineering at Carnegie Mellon in 1991, I worked at Eastman Chemical Company in Kingsport, TN for nine

years. During that time, I had positions in process engineering, plant engineering, quality management, business process redesign, and business market management. In 2000 I had the opportunity to return to NC State, my undergraduate alma mater, to assume my present position. Besides advising 216 students myself, I coordinate advising for the entire department and also teach several undergraduate courses, including the sophomore course on material and energy balances, a junior-level professional development seminar, and the capstone senior design course. Like all of my departmental colleagues, I had no training whatsoever in either teaching or advising prior to joining the faculty, but I found that my industrial experience was invaluable in doing both. I share my advising story not as a model that all advisors should follow, but as one example of how an advisor might connect with students. Readers who would like more in-depth background on advising skills and approaches can consult one of several excellent references.^[4-7]



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MY STYLE OF ADVISING

If you want to know my style of advising, step into my office. It doesn't resemble the stereotypical professor's office—a desk covered with computer printouts, teetering piles of journals, and stacks of lab reports in the corner. It looks like someone's home. There are two bentwood Amish rocking chairs gently inclined toward one another, resting on a warm oriental rug. There is a rustic red and white quilt on the wall above the cabinet. Bookshelves line one long wall, but in addition to holding books, they are filled with photographs, mementos from students, artwork, and collages of graduation pictures from years past. On the bottom shelf is a basket with wooden blocks and a jar with seashells to entertain young children who come with their parents for advising appointments. This is my academic home and a sanctuary for students away from home. More than one student has commented, as we rocked and talked, "I feel like I'm rocking on your front porch."

At our first meeting, students are taken aback by the rocking chairs, unsure as to whether they should sit in them or not. Once I sit down and motion them to do the same, they tentatively sit on the edge of the chair, then ease into the molded seat and nestle back. I can see them almost perceptibly take a deep breath and relax. It's impossible to be uptight when you are rocking in a comfortable chair. When we are sitting side by side in the rocking chairs, I'm on the same level with the students. I'm not sitting behind my desk looking at them across a broad expanse—we're in this thing together. I'm not judging them or telling them the answers—I'm listening. Many times people come looking for answers, when all they really need is someone with whom to talk. The rocking chairs remind me that students come one at a time, and during the time I am talking with a student, he or she is the most important person in the world.

Every student has a story. Sometimes the story spills out at the very first meeting, but in most cases, layers are revealed over time. Often I meet students while they are still in high school. When they arrive at NC State, I am their first advisor. I teach many of them in the intro sophomore course, and by the time they graduate, I have had all of them in one or more of the courses I teach. They all experience the rocking chair at some point. It is a privilege and an honor for me to learn their stories, and in doing so, to become part of each story.

The bulletin board behind the rocking chairs is criss-crossed with red ribbons and covered with layers of letters, cards, baby announcements, photographs, and few a poignant programs from memorial services. It's practically an archeological dig in progress, and it reminds me that although students do graduate (at least, that's the goal!), they never truly leave. Although I have only been at NC State since 2000, I have 772 alumni "children" and friends who are working, changing jobs, requesting recommendations for graduate school, getting

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married, having children, and otherwise going about the task of living their lives as chemical engineers and young adults. With their many success stories in mind, I have started inviting them back to speak to current students about the challenges they have faced.

Scattered on the shelves are photographs of my family and artwork that my daughter has generated over the years. The bulletin board contains some special notes in childish writing, like "GO MOM! I LOVE YOU." I am especially conscious of my role as a mentor to female students—a model that was not available to me as an undergraduate when there were no female professors in the department. I want these young women to know that they can practice engineering and still have a family and a life outside of their profession. As someone who has taken time off to have a child, worked part-time, and chosen assignments that allowed me more flexibility during various times during my career, I can assure students that work and life can be balanced to allow room for success in both.

On the side desk sits a computer—the office's one nod to modern technology. When I'm not sitting in a rocking chair, I'm at the computer keeping a steady stream of e-mails flowing in and out. I've never been able to follow the advice of efficiency experts who suggest checking e-mail only once in the morning and once at the end of the day. Even in a department as large as ours (421 undergraduates), effective use of e-mail can eliminate barriers to communication, especially since we are located in a new section of the campus out of the mainstream of student traffic. Information about summer job postings, AIChE student chapter meetings, undergraduate research and scholarship opportunities, recommendation letters, and departmental details routinely zip across the lines to and from students. I want my students to be well informed and knowledgeable about campus and professional opportunities.

The final element of the office that reflects my advising philosophy is the door. It's open, and my desk chair is positioned so that I can see someone hovering around the entrance. Unless I'm doing something that must be completed at that moment, which is rare, I stop, smile, and say, "Come in, how can I help you?" The student usually says something like, "Are you busy?" Even if I'm in the middle of grading 40 essays for our undergraduate seminar course, checking blue cards for graduation, or contacting guest speakers for senior design, I say, "No, I'm not busy. Please come in and sit down." We rock. They talk. I listen. Often they leave saying something like, "Thanks for seeing me. I always feel better after leaving your office."

That's why I'm here.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ADVISORS

At this point the reader may be thinking, "Give me a break. Besides the fact that I couldn't possibly fit a rocking chair into my tiny office, I'm no Mother Teresa. And my graduate students already feel neglected, not to mention my own children." My purpose in writing this article is not to suggest that my style is the only style, or even the best style, but to encourage faculty to find their own style. The rockers and most of those little personal touches and the time I spend on advising (which is, after all, my main job) are nice, but they're not essential. Based on my experience, literature in the area of advising, and the feedback I have gotten from my students, I would offer the following suggestions on how faculty can make their advising more effective within the constraints of the other demands of the job:

- *Organize your department advising system to improve consistency and efficiency.* Depending on the size and structure of your department, consider ways to structure the advising process to allow faculty to best meet student needs. For example, I serve as the Coordinator of Advising and advise all the freshmen, double majors, and transfer students—in general, students who require "extra attention" and may have unusual or challenging curricular issues. This allows each of our faculty to advise a smaller group of students (typically 25 or less) who are doing the "standard" curriculum or a concentration in their area of expertise. This organizational structure improves advising consistency and efficiency, "giving back" time to other colleagues who are more focused on other key department functions such as instruction and research.
- *Use resources within your department to leverage advisors' time with students.* Our faculty call on me as a resource for information, as a referral if they feel the student needs additional attention, or as a "substitute" if they know they will be on travel status during advising time. I publish an annual advising handbook for both students and faculty with curricular information and frequently asked questions, and this information is also available on the departmental Web site. One of our staff members distributes hard copies of student degree audits at advising time and maintains a file for each student with

relevant information on their advising history. Don't feel as though you have to have all the answers yourself—use all the resources available to ensure that the time you do spend with each student is worthwhile.

- *Learn your advisees' names and use them.* Our Registration and Records Web site has an option that allows you to access a photo of each student—you can print out the pictures and names for easy reference. I take photos of students in my introductory class holding name tents, and study them in my office. A colleague photocopies his students' drivers licenses! Whatever works for you, use it.
- *When you are talking with a student, try to resist the temptation to peek at your watch or glance at your computer screen to read your latest e-mail—nothing sends the message faster that "I have better things to do."* (I have a large clock on the wall opposite the rocking chairs that helps me be aware of the time without seeming impatient or anxious to be rid of the student).
- *After you take care of the business of registration advising, take a moment to ask students about their summer plans, career goals, or hobbies.* This helps students feel that they are more than just a number, especially in a large department.
- *Let students know that you have a life outside of the office.* You could do this by posting an article or picture on your bulletin board, having a family or vacation picture on a desk, or displaying a memento from a recent trip or conference.

Finally, but most importantly, *care*. Findings by Wilson, *et al.*,^[8] indicate that faculty who are frequently sought out as advisors outside the classroom tend to provide clear clues about their accessibility through their in-class teaching style and their attitude. You can go to teaching workshops and even advising workshops to hone your skills, but simply caring is the foundation of all student interactions. No one cares how much you know, unless they know how much you care. You could be the one to make the difference in a student leaving, staying, or staying and enjoying the ride. Advisors rock!

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