

# **Impactful Academic Advising: What Students Recall Years Later**

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## **Abstract**

*Twenty-one graduate students were asked to reflect on what they remember most from their undergraduate academic advising experiences. Impactful advising is defined here as academic advising that leaves a positive, long-lasting effect on students. In this study, three themes emerged, which depict impactful advising. These advisors were inspiring, had a positive attitude, and were intrusive.*

*Academic advisors do not often realize the long term impact they might leave on students. Students may always pay close attention, but they do feel judgment. It is captivating what students recall several years or decades later, such as encouraging words to a struggling student or belittling the student for going to the wrong office.*

*As students themselves, academic advisors were likely self-motivated and were interested in finding solutions to their academic and personal problems. Frustration can set in when students arrive at advising appointments with no preparation, questions, or ideas related to how they can maximize their total college experience. Assumptions can easily be made about these students, which can be unfair to the student.*

## **Connecting Leadership theory to Advising**

In leadership studies, many employees prefer supervisors who operate under McGregor's Theory Y, which states that employees want to do their best and strive to find value and meaning in their work rather than Theory X, which states employees only work for a wage and are only motivated by fear of punishment (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Similarly, students prefer Theory Y advisors who help students make meaning of their curricular and co-curricular work in college. The vast majority of students do not wish to be left alone.

## **Students sometimes need permission**

Students likely have much on their minds but may not be sure how to articulate their thoughts, or maybe they do not wish to burden their advisors with their dilemmas. Students, like many individuals on campus, may misunderstand the role of academic advising, and must therefore be informed that advisors' roles go far beyond next semester's course schedule. Hearing examples of the most positive advising experiences as told by students can provide insight into becoming more impactful for students. Impactful advising is defined here as academic advising that leaves a positive, long-lasting effect on students. This study identifies three main characteristics of impactful advisors. These advisors were inspiring, had a positive

attitude, and were intrusive.

## **Method**

In this article we discuss what graduate students recalled as they reflected on their undergraduate academic advising experiences. Twenty-one students in an Academic Advising graduate course were asked to reflect on their advising experiences as undergraduates. All names have been assigned pseudonyms. Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures were followed and students consented to their participation in the study. Guiding questions were:

Question 1: Tell a story about the most impactful advisor you had.

Question 2: Specifically, what was it about that advisor that was so unique?

## **Results**

In addition to the expected traits of the “five C’s” of competence, confidence-building, cordial, credible, and creative (Fox, 2008), three themes emerged of a) inspiring; b) positive attitude; and c) intrusive. Several students also mentioned how their advising expectations were shaped by previous advisors.

### **Student expectations**

The student’s first advising session can lay the point of reference that will create expectations for future advisors, for better or worse. If distrust develops with one advisor, students are unlikely to fully trust a new advisor. Unless the advising experience is especially horrendous, students tend to generalize that other advisors operate in similar ways. Kyla reflected on her advisor:

He had absolutely no idea what he was doing. He didn’t know which classes I needed to take or which classes I had already taken. I was terrified because of my previous experience in signing up for the wrong class, and the fact that it almost put me a semester behind.

Jennifer, a first-generation community college transfer student said,

I expected the same type of advisement I obtained at the previous college. My [new] advisor did not spend extra time getting to know me or attempting to get a feel for my interests. I was never given advice or information. I was simply handed a schedule and sent on my way. I was under the impression this is how college worked.

### **Theme 1: Inspiring**

Students did not care whether their advisor was entry level or a seasoned veteran; what mattered was the advisor’s desire to help. This is confirmed by Fox’s (2008) counsel of “people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care” (p. 350). The best advisors inspired and motivated their students by believing in them. Though many students may have unrealistic self-appraisals of their academic ability, many simultaneously experience self-doubt, or quickly realize they can no longer depend on the academic reputation they may have had in high school. Anything advisors say can carry a lot of weight, even if said

nonchalantly. Making a joke about a class, professor, or major can leave a lasting impression.

Listening to students is a critical component of the inspiring theme. Imagine how nervous a student might be to a) meet a new advisor, b) open up about all her thoughts, and c) change majors. Upon meeting a new advisor to explore majors, Lacie said, “She listened intently and asked questions occasionally about why or how I did something and after I was finished speaking she assured me that we, together, would find the perfect major for me. How refreshing! Someone who enjoys advising!”

When the advisor shows genuine concern, trust can be quickly established. Lacie continued talking about her renewed trust in advising:

In the one hour I spent with this new advisor, I felt like everything changed for me. I learned more about myself then than in all the years before. The most interesting part was that it was just me talking and her actively listening. She showed a genuine compassion for my situation and a desire for guiding me in the right direction. I could tell she wanted to create a positive relationship with me through the questions she asked and her eagerness to listen to my stories.

Inspiring advisors also showed genuine interest in their students, and as a result, these students do not feel like a burden or a number. Jessica said:

[My advisor] took an interest in me and what I wanted to do with my life, and I felt like I was more than just a problem she had to deal with. To this day I still go and visit her from time to time. She took the time to talk to me and got to know me and my ambitions.

Similarly, Kyla reflected:

I can remember going into my advisor’s office with tears in my eyes to tell him I had finally passed [the praxis exam]. I gave him a huge hug and thanked him for believing in me, because honestly I had lost faith in myself. I truly believe that his faith and confidence in me enabled me to push through my doubts and fears, and he is a big part of the reason I graduated.

Jessica succinctly captured the essence of this theme: “I believe that the best thing that my advisor did for me was believe that I was worth taking time to get to know.” James, an older student, discussed how his advisor helped him feel part of the campus community: “Being a non-traditional student, as well as living off campus made me very detached from the university setting. She was my connection. I will always be grateful for her dedication to my success and happiness.”

Some advisors may feel that if their students are in majors with limited course flexibility, that they may not have an option to have meaningful discussions with students. However, Jessica explained how her advisor made this work:

There was not a lot of need to discuss what classes I needed to take, because the classes were already arranged for us. Still, my advisor took the time to let me know about the classes I was signed up for and how they would help me in the future.

Students appreciate, and are increasingly expecting, individualized attention. Laura explained how her advisor did this:

This advisor asked me questions about what I was interested in and gave me pointers about

graduate school options and career options. He helped me figure out a map to graduate on time with a degree that would set me up for success in the future. The main thing that made this meeting one of the best experiences with an advisor was probably his focus on me as a student that made me feel that he truly had my best interest in mind.

### **Theme 2: Positive attitude**

In this study, great advisors loved their work and were happy to see the student, which is consistent with Fox's (2008) work, who said advisors must be fully present in the advising appointment, to the point that it seems they have been looking forward to the appointment all day. Lacie described how advisors first greet their students sets the tone: "I was greeted with a smiling face and an enthusiastic, 'Hi Lacie! How are you doing?'" She acted like she had known me forever and I immediately felt comfortable." Noticing the seemingly simple and mundane things can help students feel recognized (Fox, 2008). To further illustrate this concept, a supervisor once said this about his advising department: "When students come to our office to see us, we want it to be the highlight of their day" (P. Thayer, personal communication, December 2005).

Professional academic advisors enter the profession because of their dedication and passion for helping students through advising. Faculty do not enter their varied disciplines with the goal of advising, but dedicated and caring instructors share many characteristics with great advisors. Several students mentioned positive experiences with faculty. Katie said,

I had one instructor who I looked up to and often sought counsel or advice from on major course selection. She always had positive remarks about my academic progress and encouraged me to further my education in whatever subject area I saw fit. While our meetings were usually brief, following a lecture, these small encounters of positive reinforcement ended up being my best faculty-based academic advising experiences.

Ashley, who transitioned from a professional advisor to a faculty advisor, spoke of her faculty advisor's positive excitement:

My new advisor was very excited to have a new student in the program, and she laid out the different career specialties available under the [profession]. She later became my favorite professor, and I always felt like she was available should I need anything. From that point on, I remember very few specifics about my advising experiences; they became a seamless part of student life.

Crystal discussed how her advisor's availability and interest in Crystal as a person beyond academics left an impression:

I remember her asking me each semester how classes were going, and letting me know that if I ever needed anything she was always there to help. I very much appreciated the connection she had with her students to go above and beyond to make sure they were succeeding not only academically, but also personally. This seems like such a normal thing for good advisors to do, but it really makes a difference for students!

### **Theme 3: Intrusive**

Many students believed their advisors far exceeded their obligations. Most of these advisors employed intrusive advising (Cannon, 2013) techniques. Students frequently credited these individuals with “saving them” and being the reason they persisted through to graduation.

The implications from these results on retention are immense. Laura’s faculty advisor was new to campus yet he

was honest about his lack of knowledge, but at the same time confident in his ability to complete his job and keep me going in the right direction. This could have easily turned into a mess, but this professor did an excellent job of asking the right people the right questions in order to help me correctly register for my classes and complete my degree audit.

## Investing in students’ lives

A paradigmatic shift occurs when advisors’ mindset changes from advising students to investing in students’ lives. This level of investment requires more energy and courage. Beth’s advisor noted a change in Beth’s behavior and did not avoid the issue:

My advisor took note not only of my life academically, but professionally, personally, and emotionally. This was really important to a person like me, because *I struggle with asking for help or admitting defeat*. For example, when my advisor found out I was having a hard time my freshman and sophomore year, she adapted and assisted me quickly. During this time my parents’ messy divorce was being finalized, I suffered from sepsis, my kidneys began to deteriorate, and I was sexually assaulted by a football player on campus. *My advisor took notice of the changes in my behavior*, asked what was wrong without intruding or judgment, and managed to help me through this time with ease. *My advisor made an investment in my life*.

Beth continued by talking about her advisor would follow up with her:

It should be said that my advisor’s advising style was fitted to me and my own personality, needs, and desires. My advisor also made sure to check in periodically via email to see how my classes were going, check on my health, my progress in counseling, and my overall well-being besides just the times of registration for classes.

Crystal, a distance student, credits her advisor with encouraging her to complete her degree:

Even though I never met her face-to-face, I knew that she genuinely cared about each of her advisees. During this time I had faced several life events that could have given me reason to quit school and not finish, but my advisor was always there pushing me to succeed. *She will never know how grateful I am* for not allowing me the chance to give up when the world seemed to be crashing around me. To this day we are still good friends.

## A second chance

Sherri was a GED recipient, and later became a first-generation college student as a mother of three. She credits so much to her advisor:

As [my advisor] spoke she said something that would stick with me for years to come. She told me

to take a deep breath and that everything was going to be great. She told me ‘Anything is possible’ and that I need to remember to believe in myself. She explained how it does not matter how old or when a student starts college but that getting involved is far more important for students to learn more about their campus and build leadership.

Sherri would later transfer from her first college to the next one after receiving failing grades. Upon enrolling at her next college, Sherri said:

Realizing that I left [my last school] abruptly and not taking the right steps I was unable to receive financial aid and I would have to pay for my education. I was devastated and sat outside the building crying and was so upset. Not knowing what I was going to do or how I was going to tell my husband that I had failed to achieve something so important and I would now not be able to achieve my dreams. As I sat there with my face in my hands and upset, I felt someone’s hand on my back saying, ‘It’s not that bad, it is going to be okay. Remember, anything is possible!’

This was the same person who had helped Sherri at the previous institution. She continued:

I wanted to give her a hug as she explained that she did not do anything; that I actually had done everything and this was just a situation that I would learn from only to make me stronger. To have someone take the time out of her lunch and then to sit and work with me to help me realize I had a chance to work at reaching my goals again [was exhilarating]. *I felt a connection even though she let me make the decisions* of how I would achieve those goals; she was there for guidance only.

## Implications

These themes are manifestations of advisors’ advocacy and desire to help students. Advisors who seek resources and continually challenge themselves are likely not the bad advisors mentioned above. Yet, college staff must encourage students to seek the advice of trusted faculty and staff if they are belittled. Hiring committees should ask candidates to provide examples of times when they helped students through difficult periods, challenged students to overcome obstacles, or far exceeded students’ expectations.

Students’ advising needs change as they progress and mature (Brown, 2008), and thus advisors must adjust their approach to match student needs. The best advisors can do this and reject the notion that students dread advising and simply prefer prescriptive advising (Appleby, 2001). Having students explain what constitutes quality advising reinforces our commitment to students. Advisors need to ask more probing questions. They need to try harder to read students’ minds while suspending assumptions. If a student looks distracted, stressed, elated, or down, advisors should have the freedom to ask the student about it. Advisors can ask students the seemingly mundane things. Some examples include:

“Wow, you’re carrying a lot of things in your backpack today. You seem busy. Tell me about it.”

“Describe ‘back home’ for me.

“What are the best and worst things that happened this week?”

“What are you looking forward to in the next week?”

“What are you good at?”

“What do you want to learn about?”

“Where do you think you can improve?”

Advisors should take some extra time with the students who need additional support, or refer as appropriate. For most students, their academic advisors may be the only individuals on campus who have the one-on-one opportunity and courage to ask these questions. In doing so, students will feel heard, understood, and worthy; and their advisor's impact will not be soon forgotten. An interesting discussion question for an advising staff to consider is: "What will your students say about you 10 years from now?"

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