

Case Studies
The Teaching-Advising Connection: Synergy for Student Success
Reflective Practice Workshop
Saturday, April 2, 2016
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The following case studies will encourage dialogue and prompt skill-building in the area of advising. Collectively, these case studies may help define the role of the advisor, describe organizational models for academic advising, and provide skills that can positively impact student outcomes in higher education.

Case 5: Megan

Dr. Karen Jones is an advisor at a small, private college. Megan is an 18-year-old freshman. When Megan calls to make her registration appointment for the spring semester, Dr. Jones remembers her well. They met at summer orientation, and Dr. Jones found Megan to be enthusiastic about college but completely undecided about a major. Her SAT and high school grades indicated a strong preference for reading; she had average math scores and low scores in the sciences. Megan stopped in at the beginning of the semester to switch her English class sections because of a conflict with her new campus job at the library. At that time, Megan was enjoying life on campus, getting along well with her roommate, and indicated that her classes were “fine.” When Megan arrives for her appointment she is a bit more prepared to select classes for the spring. She is still debating between her two majors and just wants to take “general classes” again in the spring.

“I really like that sociology class. Are there more classes like that?” Megan asks. Dr. Jones pulls up the list of sociology classes offered in the spring and asks Megan what she liked about the sociology class. Megan describes the chapter on environmental sociology and was fascinated. She has long been interested in environmental concerns and issues.

“One of my classmates is also interested in the environment. She’s majoring in geology and was telling me about it. Is there a geology class I can take? Maybe I’ll major in that.”

Dr. Jones pulled up the geology classes offered in the spring, happy that Megan found something in which she was interested, but concerned because of Megan’s past science grades and test scores. “Tell me about the science classes you had in high school. Did they interest you? How did you study for them?”

Megan describes her past science classes. She had earth science as a freshman and that class did interest her more than the others. “I never had to study much in high school,” Megan confessed. “I try to take notes but they never make sense when I read them later. In high school I just listened to the instructor, read the book and got the information. But in my science classes the instructors used all these diagrams and charts that I never really understood and then I would get bored.” They discuss Megan’s strategies for studying for her classes a bit more.

Dr. Jones can see that Megan begins to brighten but still seems a bit nervous. Dr. Jones asks if there is anything else she can do to help Megan. Megan thinks for a moment; clearly there is something else troubling her.

“Well, I don’t know if you can really help me with this, but it has been on mind and I’m not sure how to go about it.” Megan explains to Dr. Jones that she is gay and while she has come out to her younger sister and to many of her friends, she has not yet told her parents. She feels it time to do so and she wants to tell them when she is home over the semester break. But she is nervous about their reaction to the news. Dr. Jones empathizes with Megan’s situation and asks more about Megan’s relationship with her parents, how she told her sister, and what her sister’s reaction was to the news.

Case 7: Ted

When fall midterm grade notices came out, Ted Brown – an undeclared freshman, showed F’s in every course in which he enrolled. Dr. Jack Stevens, his advisor, waded through the loud music on Ted’s answering machine to leave several messages, but Ted did not call back until a week after the deadline for dropping courses. He told Dr. Stevens there had been an unexpected death in his immediate family, but now that he was back on campus and had a chance to talk with his instructors, he was sure things would be okay. Dr. Stevens expressed sympathy and outlined Ted’s options (repeating the courses in hopes of improving the grade or withdrawal) and asked Ted to keep in touch.

Ted came to see Dr. Stevens two weeks later, saying he wanted to withdraw his registration because he was too far behind and certain to fail all his courses. Dr. Stevens explained procedures and asked him to confer with his parents.

Several days later, Dr. Hightower, Ted’s father called. He informed Dr. Stevens he was a professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the College of Medicine elsewhere and wanted to know why Dr. Stevens was advising his son to “drop out of school.”

Dr. Stevens explained that the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prevented discussion of the particulars of his son’s case, but said he could explain the withdrawal procedure and the typical reasons why an advisor might suggest that a student withdraw their registration. Dr. Hightower said, “I understand completely. We have that at my school too. But we’re both university people so we can ignore the Buckley Amendment.” Dr. Stevens reiterated that he’d need Ted’s consent before discussing his case, but that he’d be happy to listen to anything Dad might want to say. He learned that Ted was Dr. Hightower’s stepson, had had a weak academic record in high school, and had been referred for assessment of a learning disability, but his mother refused not wanting her son to be “labeled.” Dr. Hightower himself wasn’t sure Ted had a real disability, but seemed to have little tolerance for sitting in a classroom for long time periods. “Ted is a kid that needs to be fully engaged in order to learn anything.”

Dr. Stevens got Ted back in the office that day and explained the conversation with his father, and Ted immediately gave Dr. Stevens permission in writing to discuss Ted’s situation with his father. Dr. Stevens appreciated Ted’s consent because he felt it would prevent Ted from playing him off against his father; Ted could no longer claim Dr. Stevens was making him drop out. He also wanted more information on how Ted learned best, there may be some ways Dr. Stevens can help Ted.

When Dr. Hightower phoned back later that day, Dr. Stevens remembered his customer service training and was quick to say, “I’m sorry about the death in your family. It seems to have upset Ted.” There was silence on the other end of the line.

“What death?” asked Dr. Hightower.

Case 11: Susan

Susan entered the university as an undecided undergraduate, but she was considering both animal science and communications as two possible areas of study. In her first semester, she completed the First-Year Survey course, which is designed to help students explore major and career options and assist them with the transition from high school to college. Although Susan completed the academic and career exploration assignment that was required for the course, she did not invest much into the experience. The assignment involved several parts: taking interest inventories, reviewing academic majors and curricular requirements, exploring career-related information in the Web version of the *Occupation Outlook Handbook*, and interviewing a senior student in a major of interest. In her assignment, Susan stated that her high school teachers and school counselors had encouraged her to pursue a science career because she had received good grades in math. Susan indicated that she thought animal science would be a good choice because she likes animals. She also talked about becoming a veterinarian, but she had not been exposed to that career field nor could she describe in any depth the elements that attracted her to the occupation. She also considered communications as a major because her father had told her that she would be good in public relations.

In high school, Susan was a good student. She earned a 3.5 grade-point average (GPA) (on a 4.0 scale), and her ACT scores were above the national average (her composite score was 26, with a 27 in English and a 24 in math). After her first semester in college, Susan earned a 2.75 GPA with a C in beginning calculus and Bs in General Chemistry I, Introduction to Film, and Honors Freshman Composition. She did not qualify for honor status. During your last advising meeting, Susan indicated that she needed to learn how to study more, but she did not follow through with your suggestion to use the on-campus academic resources available for study skill strategies and time management. She also noted that she was very excited about joining the photography club and was considering rushing for a sorority the following term. She is currently enrolled in Introduction to East Asian History I, General Chemistry II, and Introductory Psychology. Without consulting you, she dropped Calculus II earlier in the term through her Web access account.

In this advising meeting with you, she remains standing and only takes a seat after you suggest that she sits down. She appears to be in a hurry. Although she takes a seat, her coat remains on and buttoned. She begins the conversation by asking you to review her schedule for next term. With her coat still buttoned, she shows you her proposed schedule for the following term. She plans to take Calculus II again, Organic Chemistry I, Introduction to East Asian History II, and a sophomore-level writing course. All courses she has taken to date and has proposed to take count toward general education requirements. She turns to you and says, “Do you think I am making good progress?”