

PROMOTING ETHICS IN ADVISING: A CASE STUDY

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ETHICS RESOURCES:

UNL's Center for the Teaching and Study of Applied Ethics Resources Website:
http://ethics.unl.edu/ethics_resources/index.shtml

NACADA's Ethics in Academic Advising Resources Website:
<http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/Ethics.htm>

ethics.unl.edu

Adviser Gossip/Adviser Diaries

Sally Social, adviser in the College of Journalism at New York Times University, loves connecting to other advisers through various social medias, including her favorite, Facebook. Recently, Sally had a very difficult advising session during which a student challenged her knowledge and ability to provide sound advice because of her youthful appearance. The appointment started with Sally's review of Jim Chipontheshoulder's advising file. She noticed at once the bright red notice that Jim was on probation. She prompted him to discuss how he wound up on probation. He said he likes science writing—always has since his father gave him back issues of National Geographic and The Lancet (did I mention Jim's father is a medical doctor) to read on family car trips. Jim thought he was an expert in Zoology and Physiology, so he registered for "Advanced Zoology" and "Physiology for Biology Majors" in the first semester of his sophomore year. The F grades he earned resulted in his probationary status.

After hearing this, Sally explained that in her experience the best method to selecting major courses is to match courses with interest areas. Jim aspires to write for a scientific magazine. Jim thought he should take science, but Sally suggested he pursue writing or Journalism instead. Jim's earlier decision to take high level math and science courses was a mistake, she told him. Jim challenged her "What do you know about science writing? You have a BA in Journalism and are only a few years older than me." After spending 45 minutes finding courses that Jim agreed he was interested in taking, he left the office and Sally got online.

Sally posts on Facebook to advising colleague at another institution:

Sally: [Befuddled student just left my office. Why is it that students transfer their unbridled ignorance at me? This idiot took advanced zoology (and failed it—big surprise) just because he likes National Geographic. LOL.]

Pete Sampris (Athletic Training adviser at another university): [Sounds like a doozy of an advising session. You're awfully riled up.]

Sally: [Well, after I tried to help him, he had the nerve to comment on my age. He told me that I looked like a "student." I can't stand ungrateful students. As close as he is with his father (who fed his addiction to National Geographic), you would think that he would have better manners.]

Pete: [Maybe you should have advised him to do research on National Geography majors. Is he a future Journalism student, or just an annoying pest?]

Several weeks pass. By now, Sally has divulged the particulars about her session with Jim to numerous colleagues on FACEBOOK. She even posted it to an advising newsletter.

Jim finds the thread—a friend of a friend of an aunt is friends with Sally. He talks to his father who recommends that Jim submit a formal complaint. Following his father's advice, Jim contacts the Dean of College of Journalism, submits his complaint with documentation of the Facebook postings.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think that Sally's advice to take writing or journalism courses instead of science was the correct advice to give Jim? Why or why not? If it depends, what does it depend on? How should Sally account for her differences with Jim about what it takes to be a good science writer?
2. How should an adviser respond to an advisee's behavior that she considers rude, insulting, or otherwise inappropriate?
3. Do you think that Sally violated Jim's right to privacy? If so, how? If not, why not? What other considerations are relevant to the ethics of her actions?
4. When, if ever, is it appropriate to discuss one's advisees in a public forum? Is there a difference between venting about a student's rule or insulting behavior and discussing other aspects of an advising session? Is there a difference between posting on a website like FACEBOOK and posting in an advising newsletter or other professional forum, like the *Chronicle of Higher Education*? Why or why not?
5. What, if anything, should Universities and the academic advising community do to promote and protect advisee (and adviser!) privacy in the age of the internet?

Spirit vs. Letter

During the last week of the registration period, Tony Bologna, a Chemistry major interested in pre-medicine, comes into the Advising Office to meet with Barb, an academic adviser for a Liberal Arts College. Tony sits down and asks Barb “I need your help picking out some easy classes.” He proceeds to complain about the fact that next semester he has to take a heavy course load including Organic Chemistry and Physics and doesn’t want other “difficult” courses to bog down his study time.

While looking over Tony’s record, Barb notices that he has yet to fulfill the Civics component of the distribution requirements. “What were you planning to do about this Civics requirement?” she asked.

“I hadn’t really thought about it,” he replied. “I just think it’s kind of stupid that they even make us take that stuff. I want to be a doctor, and most of these Gen. Ed. requirements are just completely irrelevant and a complete waste of time.”

“In that case, I know of just the class for you” she said, as she proceeded to tell him about a notoriously easy section of *American Government* that would satisfy the requirement. “I have heard that Professor D.C. Washington is a complete pushover—his class wouldn’t take up much of your time. I have heard several students say that they were able to get an A with hardly any effort at all. Come to think of it, I don’t know of any students who received less than a B+.”

Discussion Questions:

1. Is it appropriate for advisers to tell students about “notoriously easy” courses? Why or why not? If it depends, what does it depend on?
2. Does an academic adviser have an obligation to the institution to make a good faith attempt to make sure that the *spirit* (not just the letter) of university policies (including General Education Requirements) are followed?
3. Do advisers have an obligation to explain the purpose or emphasize the importance of general education?
4. How should advisers negotiate the tension between their institutions educational/academic mission and maintaining a customer-friendly image?

Crushing the dream

Brandon D. Grades has always wanted to help people. He loves children and has dreamed of becoming a pediatric oncologist so he can rid the world of childhood cancer. With these noble aspirations, he has enrolled in the College of Letters & Sciences as a Biochemistry major pursuing the pre-medical track. Throughout high school and into college, he has volunteered at St. Jude's hospital during the summers, shadowed various physicians while established a mentoring relationship with a pediatric oncologist, and taken difficult science courses.

In order to map out his final two years of coursework and discuss his medical school application, Brandon sets up an appointment to see his adviser, Professor Monotone. When Brandon arrives for his appointment, Professor Monotone enters the office, having just come from a meeting with one of Brandon's professors who has expressed concern about Brandon's low grades. Before Brandon can ask his first scheduling question, Professor Monotone begins a monologue on the importance of A grades for pre-med students and ends by telling Brandon that he will never be a doctor. Professor Monotone then explains that he has to leave so he won't be late for his lecture course and leaves the office. Brandon leaves his office discouraged and crushed, without any direction for his future academic or career plans or a chance to talk with Professor Monotone about options.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is it problematic for an academic adviser to make assumptions about a student's academic history without hearing the student's side of the story?
2. What ethical issues arise when an academic adviser helps an advisee pursue long-term career goals? What should an adviser like Professor Monotone do when he judges that an advisee is making unwise career choices or career choices that do not match his academic skills? Is Professor Monotone failing to live up to these obligations? If so, how?
3. If you were Brandon's adviser, in what ways would you proceed differently from Professor Monotone?

Personality Conflicts

Kristi Combative is a freshman Business major at Ivy League University who aspires to become the next Bill Gates. At New Student Orientation, Kristi meets with her adviser, Paul Passive. After an exhausting hour long advising session in which Kristi challenged, pressured, and argued with Paul to get permission to take sophomore level courses and courses that “interested” her but weren’t the recommended courses for a Business major, she left with a first semester schedule. Paul hoped Kristi would change her major before he would ever have to see her again.

Unfortunately for Paul, he sees Kristi’s name on his schedule in October during the spring registration period. This time, Paul tries to prepare himself to be firm because he had to deal with some fallout from professors in his college who didn’t feel Kristi was ready for their courses.

On the day of the appointment, Paul writes out some notes about Kristi’s major and courses required. She is already somewhat behind on the prescribed major courses because of taking merely courses that “interested” her, as opposed to selecting solely based off the recommended major planning guide. The notes Paul drafts clearly lay out a spring schedule that puts Kristi back on track.

Paul, swallowing his anxious feelings, calls for Kristi in the advising center lobby and ushers her into his office. He leaves the door open. Before Kristi has a chance to say anything, Paul pulls out his notes, quickly explains them, and registers Kristi for spring classes. Meanwhile, Kristi is panicking inside because she wanted to ask Paul about the effects of changing her major. She has found that the “interesting” classes are more engaging than the Business class she is in. Could she still pursue an MBA after graduation if she majors in European studies? Can Paul still advise her? Kristi’s fears mount but she doesn’t feel that there is time or space for her to voice her concerns.

Paul hands her the new spring schedule he made and tells Kristi that he looks forward to seeing her in the spring to plan for fall.

Discussion Questions

1. What should advisers do to make sure that personality conflicts do not interfere with their responsibilities toward their advisees?
2. Do academic advisers have any special responsibilities to freshmen advisees? How should advisers find balance between helping (freshmen) students pursue their current goals, and helping them broaden their interests? Between helping them be academically successful and allowing/encouraging them to challenge themselves?
3. How should an adviser find balance between dominating his advisees and allowing them to do things that he knows will hurt them in the longer run?
4. What responsibilities do advisees have to their advisers? To be open to their adviser’s suggestions and the reasons for them? To make sure that their adviser has all of the relevant information? How should we make sure that advisees are aware of and understand these responsibilities?