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Panel I. Student Support Services

Academic Advisement

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Introductory Comments

At the rudimentary, superficial level academic advisement is a one-on-one interaction between an academic advisor and a student. Together, they select coursework that will satisfy a particular degree program. As such, it is a rather straightforward process. At The University of Georgia, coursework for a particular degree program is dictated by the Core Curriculum, College Requirements and Major Course Work. A Degree Audit Report that is generated for each student facilitates this process. It is a document that outlines course requirements for a major and it monitors the student's progress towards meeting those degree requirements. Ostensibly, it would appear that academic advisement and course selection, based on the Degree Audit Report, would be a task that students could perform on their own accord.

Yet, the reality is, academic advisement is not this shallow. It has a much deeper purpose, it has a broader agenda ... and this is where academic advisement can have a dramatic impact on a student's college career. First, not all students are certain about which academic major to embark upon when they arrive on campus. So, the real starting point for academic advisement is posing the following question to the advisee: "What is your final destination in life?" Once this goal is identified, our job as an academic advisor really begins. At that point, we become a Facilitator that guides student towards fulfilling their dreams and goals in life. We straddle the reality of current academia and future aspirations. Our calling is to bridge this chiasm and facilitate their transition to a future career.

As an example of this process, I advise quite a few students that seek a career in veterinary medicine. Typically, I start the advisement process by saying, "First, let's look at the end of the tunnel of this academic journey". In this particular case, what does a student need to do, to submit a COMPETITIVE application to Veterinary School? Well, to start, we need to select coursework that will meet the application requirements and a major that accommodates this coursework. This course selection process will be based upon course content and recommendations from faculty and students. Next, we need to prepare for standardized tests associated with the application process, in this example, the Graduate Record Exams. Here we can discuss strategies to enhance performance on these exams, such as selection of particular courses or enrollment in a Test Preparation Program (for example, Kaplan Test Prep). In addition, we need to be sure students receive appropriate Veterinary Internship Experience (400 hours of Small Animal Experience and 400 hours of Large Animal Experience). And, a competitive applicant should consider engagement in Extracurricular Service Activities, Undergraduate Research and Study Abroad programs.

The role of the Academic Advisor should never be overlooked or underestimated. We occupy a unique position and play a pivotal role in the success of our students. From a student perspective, we occupy a grey area between the structure of academia and parental support. We are a lot like parents to our advisees. We are sensitive to the challenges of academia that they encounter and we are caring and supportive of their career ambitions. As such, we help them navigate the tangled web of academia by making them aware of resources (for example, academic tutoring, scholarships, study abroad programs, research opportunities, etc) and how to use these resources to achieve their goals. In this capacity, we are the sideline cheerleaders that lend a sensitive ear to the academic challenges they face and we provide the words of encouragement to propel them forward. Thus, Academic Advisement is a multifaceted process that ranges from a Counselor that assists in Course Selection, to a Cheerleader that encourages students to pursue their aspirations.

A Philosophy on Academic Advisement

As academic faculty, our day-to-day routines take on a multifaceted array of activities that range from pedagogical teaching to scientific inquiry and public service. However, within the confines of the University campus, I have always believed that our interactions with students should supersede all other activities. Most often, these interactions take the form of classroom lectures and teaching laboratory exercises, endeavors that clearly consume significant amounts of time, energy and effort. By comparison, the amount of time spent in academic advisement is comparatively meager. Naturally, we consider that the classroom interaction with students has the greatest impact upon their future careers, and yet, those brief interludes when we interact one-on-one with advisees may well have the greater impact. With the graying of my hair, I have come to realize that what may, upon first glance, appear obvious is not always accurate. Our perceptions as faculty and what we consider to be important, in reality, may be quite distinct from a student's perception of what is most beneficial and influential in their future plans. It is with this background that I have developed a philosophy on academic advisement that has primarily been shaped by the very students that I advise.

Set the Students at Ease During Advisement

I believe the first, and perhaps the most important tenet of academic advisement is to develop a genuine rapport with your advisees. By surrounding a student with a reassuring environment, it encourages students to look forward to advisement sessions as opportunities to discuss career plans as well as personal issues that range from test anxiety to roommate dilemmas. Unlike the anonymity of the classroom stage, academic advisement is a personal one-on-one encounter where the focus is on the student's needs. To set the tone for the advisement session, I make every effort to schedule the advisement appointment at a time that is convenient with their schedule, a task that is typically performed by back-and-forth email messages. Furthermore, even my office "décor" is "designed" around advisement sessions. Amongst the clutter of books and file folders are large wall posters, a wide variety of memorabilia and a photo show on my computer monitor. All of this is designed to evoke a placid environment that oftentimes serves as a starting point for discussions regarding common interests outside the academic arena. Creating this initial rapport sets the stage for a future filled with meaningful advisement sessions.

Focus on the Big Picture

The second tenet of my advisement philosophy is to focus on the “Big Picture.” Typically, I initiate this discussion with a simple question, “What is your final destination in life?” By viewing the end of the academic tunnel first, we can assimilate a program of study that is designed to achieve those goals upon graduation. For example, if the goal is entry to a professional school following graduation, then we need to focus on the application process for that particular professional school and what is required to create a competitive application. This process may take on a variety of shapes and dimensions that not only include academic coursework, but also may demand that the student get involved in extracurricular activities in student organizations, internships, job experiences or study abroad programs. Ultimately, that is our job as academic advisors, helping students fulfill their dreams and goals in life. We are the facilitator that stands between the reality of current academia and future aspirations. It is our job to make those ambitions a reality. Clearly, academic advisement goes far beyond course selection to fulfill degree requirements. This task can easily be accomplished by the students themselves, by simply referring to a degree audit report. As advisors, we are the intermediaries between the here-and-now and what lies ahead. Our calling is to bridge this gap and reassure them through the rigors of college life and provide them with sage guidance to facilitate their transition to a future career.

Know the “Nuts and Bolts” of the Advisement Process

The third, and final, tenet of my advisement philosophy is knowing the “nuts and bolts” of the advisement process. If you are in the position of advising students, then you are obliged to give them reliable advice, because it may well have a significant impact on their future success. Be knowledgeable about academia, including the registration process, degree requirements, scholarship opportunities, internships, study abroad programs, research opportunities and an endless list of associated areas. Perhaps more importantly, if you don’t have the background knowledge in a particular area, have your fingertips on a resource that can provide that information. In the advisement arena, knowledge and sound advice are more than “power”; they set the level of advisee confidence in the advisor and they provide direction for the student’s future goals. Furthermore, as advisors, we must also realize that the “advisement knowledge base” is not static. It is incessantly altered by institutional policies. More importantly, it is constantly modified by day-to-day student interactions, peer recommendations and prior experiences.

Thus, from my perspective, advisement is a vital process in the student’s academic journey. It provides students the opportunity to escape the anonymity of the classroom and receive individual faculty attention that focuses on their personal ambitions. Together, advisor and advisee can develop strategies designed to achieve the student’s goals. In this capacity, as academic advisors, we act as a conduit that link and mold the college experience so it will bring fruition to their “final destination in life.”