

On Choosing an Advisor

By Casey D. Allen

There are few things more important throughout your academics than choosing an advisor. How do you know if you've found the "right" advisor? What are the qualities you should look for in an advisor? And what *is* an Advisor anyhow? What do they do?

Advising or Counseling?

First of all, an Advisor is NOT the same as a counselor. Though each might use parts of the other's craft, their focus and training are different. An Advisor is the person who helps you map-out your plan of attack academically, and keep you on your chosen path – sometimes they can also help you discover your academic path! A counselor is the person who can help you with personal issues such as relationships, depression, roommate spats, and substance abuse problems (a good advisor will refer you to the correct campus entity to deal with such situations). Likewise, a "Career Counselor" (or Employment Counselor) helps you with your personal issues related to getting an internship, work-study position, or a job after you graduate. It's easy to get confused. For example, an advisor might give you "counsel" and a counselor might give you "advice". But think of it this way: in Academia, Advisors give advice and counsel about Academic issues and ideas, while Counselors give counsel and advice on personal issues and situations.

In the world of Academia, there are a couple different kinds of Academic Advisors. General Advisors help with "common" concepts: basic policies, procedures, and major exploration. Major Advisors deal with your major requirements – basically what you need to do to graduate with that particular major. Major Advisors should also know policies and procedures, and have a good enough grasp to help you choose your

(major) courses, perhaps (explore) a minor, and even look at graduate schools if you are interested. Major Advisors are often professors in the department (or the Chair or Head), and also teach and conduct research in addition to advising. Because this multiple role takes a lot of time (to do well), some departments might also have full- or part-time professional advisors for their students. This is especially the case in many pre-professional programs (e.g., pre-med, pre-dentistry, pre-vet, etc.) Later on in your academic life, if you attend graduate school, you may encounter or be expected/forced to choose a Graduate Advisor. Graduate Advisors play a more complex role, and, if chosen correctly, are often as much a mentor as they are an advisor. (A “Graduate Advisor” is *not the same* as the Graduate Program Coordinator...your Graduate Advisor might also be called your “Thesis Director” or “Dissertation Chair” or Dissertation Supervisor”)

What is Academic Advising?

Generally speaking, academic advising exists in two forms: informational and developmental. Informational advising is all the stuff you can discover on your own by reading the catalog, class schedule/bulletin, pamphlets, etc. It includes all of the policies and procedures of the university, college, academic departments, and other administrative entities on campus such as admissions, graduation, records, etc.

Pro tip: Everything you need to know about your school and program of study is in the catalog.

Even though the catalog may contain everything you need to know, you still may need someone to help interpret it. The University is full of academic jargon. An Advisor who effectively uses “informational advising” will help you interpret and understand the policies and procedures contained in official publications more clearly. Informational advising can also assist you in finding specific student services (counseling, healthcare,

student activities, etc.), help you prepare for specific program pre-requisites, and help you understand the rules of the “game”, like GPA requirements. Informational advising just helps you make sense of the college *process*!

The Developmental Advising process helps you to sort through your myriad of choices. There are numerous ways to accomplish this, and there is no single way that works for everyone, no one-size-fits-all outfit. A good developmental advisor should have at their disposal lots of different tools to help students decide *for themselves* what they want to do and why. Developmental advising is a very personal process and may include interest and personality assessments, value assessments, and even aptitude assessments. It should not give you a “this is your career/major/job” answer, but provide you with tools ***to make your own choices***. If you know your interests (what you do and do *not* like), personality, values, and aptitudes, then choices are really a lot easier. And good developmental advising should help you discover those. It’s not an easy process, and you may be asked to conduct some introspective analysis of yourself. It is *your life* after all – not the advisor’s, your parents, your spouse’s, or your kids’.

If you value a high salary, for example, you’ll most likely stay away from being a high school English teacher, since their annual salary is less than say, a chemical engineer. But if you “don’t like” math, you most likely will NOT do well in a chemical engineering program. An Academic Advisor trained in Developmental Advising would help you see that there are alternatives available to fit your interests, values, personality, and aptitudes. Let your Advisor know what you want to achieve. Explore with them. How can they help you attain what you want if they (or you!) do not know what it is? Keep in mind that developmental advising is sometimes a long process, and may take several visits, but there are few greater joys in life than discovering your place! Trust me...I’m a Geographer. Place is important. (-;

Selecting an Advisor

Choosing an Advisor then depends on your needs and the hierarchical structure of your school – smaller schools may not have General Academic Advisors, preferring that faculty take on that role, for example. Nevertheless, to be a successful General Advisor, the person should be up-to-date on policies, procedures, and curriculum of the school. And remember, if you are not getting along with your current advisor, consider switching. If you were assigned a certain Major Advisor and things aren't going well, ask to be reassigned.

When choosing a General Academic Advisor, consider:

- Their major. Ask them why they chose the major they did. Advisors have varying backgrounds and experience, and their majors will also vary.
- Their job. Why did they choose to be an Advisor? Where did they work before becoming an Advisor? What kind of “experience do they have outside the university?
- Their interests. Maybe their interests overlap with yours. This can be a mutually beneficial arrangement, and make meetings more comfortable.
- Their time on the job. How long have they been an advisor? If they have been an advisor for more than a few years, have they ever thought about moving up or changing jobs? Why, or why not?
- Their training. Are they certified in any assessment tools? Are they an *active* member of any professional group (for example, the National Academic Advising Association, or NACADA, has nearly 9,000 members in the US! Is your advisor one of them?) NACADA offers a graduate certificate in Academic Advising, do they know about it?
- What other students say about them. If other students like or dislike a specific advisor, why?

Remember that Major Advisors are usually faculty members who also teach and do research. Usually the main part of their job is *not* advising. Because they have so many different items on their plates, they may have not had the benefit of being trained in the Art of Academic Advising. In some departments, the department chairperson takes on the role of Advisor, while other departments assign a specific faculty member or members. Along with the General Advisor suggestions, listed above, also keep the following in mind when choosing a Major Advisor:

- Are their interests the same as yours? This can be very helpful in exploring options.
- Do their advisees graduate on time? If not, why? Do they care if you *want* to spend 3 years as a senior? (there are pros and cons to doing so...)
- Are they up to date on the policies and procedures of the school?
- Do you know them? Spend time with your instructors and get to know them as a “regular” *person*.

Keep these criteria in mind and by the time you are ready to choose a Graduate Advisor, you should already know what to expect. If, however, you were like me and never had an advisor during your undergraduate years, the rest of this paragraph is for you. Your Graduate Advisor will be (*should* be) your mentor. They will (and should) help you through not only the policies and procedures of graduate school, but also offer help with course selection, research topics, and ideas for scholarly papers, presentations, or publications. They should also guide you through the thesis or dissertation process, and any exam process(es) before that. A good Graduate Advisor will also help you look for funding opportunities along the way, and help you network and apply for jobs when the time comes. They should also keep you on track so you graduate in a timely manner (or within whatever timeframe you've let them know you'd like to do).

Conclusion

Once you enter college, the world of academia considers you an adult. There is no hand holding, no coddling. No mercy. You are expected to do everything for yourself – from paying for books to working out relationship issues to attending classes. You are expected to be responsible. Advisors can save you a lot of frustration. They can help you discover your own place in academia and, with some luck and hard work, in the world. Use your Advisor from day one, and they will be cheering for you in the stands when you walk across the stage – degree in hand – on your last day. Great advisors believe in the power of education and will do everything they can to help you succeed. Your success is, indeed, their success, and their success is Academia's success!

Dr. Allen has spent many years on the frontlines of higher education in both informational and developmental advising. He has been a General Academic Advisor, Major Advisor, and Director of an Academic Advising Center, worked with at-risk students (first generation, non-traditional, academically at-risk, etc.), pre-professional and professional students, administered baccalaureate and graduate degree programs, overseen academic transfer credit processes, and served on numerous committees – including a stint as chair of the Pre-Medical Curriculum at St. George's University in Grenada, West Indies, helping develop the curriculum for the Minor in Sustainability at University of Colorado Denver, and refine the environmental science and geography curriculums at The University of the West Indies (Cave Hill) and Western Governor's University, respectively. He is fluent in the educational systems of US, UK, Caribbean, India, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Along with his qualifications in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Strong Interest Inventory, and several other values assessments, he has given multiple professional presentations relating to academic advising at local and regional conferences, published articles on advising, and earned NACADA's award for *Outstanding Advising Program*. [Email him](#) with any questions!