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What the University College Advisor Needs to Know

By Jean G. Kennedy

The University College advisor at Michigan State University needs to know dozens of things. The kinds of things she has to learn can be divided, roughly, into two categories: the written and the unwritten.

The sources of written information are the catalogs, brochures, directories, and handbooks circulated on the campus. Consulting these, she comes to know the requirements of the degree-granting colleges (of which there are seventeen at MSU with well over a hundred programs) and the University requirements. She must also be familiar with the rules and procedures governing the academic life of our students: recess and dismissal policies; the readmission process; MAPS (Minimum Academic Progress Scale); honors programs; opportunities for independent study, advanced credit, and credit by examination; and how transfer credits are evaluated.

The advisor must be conversant, as well, with the services and the organizations available to students. These range from the facilities in student living quarters to those provided across the campus such as the Health Center, the Counseling Center, the Ombudsman's Office, the Legal Aid Bureau, the Placement Bureau, the Learning Resources Center, the Office of Financial Aids, the Scholarship Office, Supportive Services, the libraries, and the Volunteer Bureau. She must know, too, where the student can replace a lost I.D. card, obtain a bus pass, a lecture-concert ticket, a refund, used books, or a football ticket—and
where to register a complaint, a car, a bike, or report a theft or register to vote. I have even been asked the best way to get a date!

The unwritten sources of information for the advisor are the students with whom she has contact (usually about three hundred per term in a four-hour working day), the instructors she comes to know, and the people on the other end of her telephone line whom she will consult in the course of doing her job... everyone from a helpful clerk in the Registrar's office to the busiest dean of a college.

From these kinds of sources she will gradually come to know quite a lot about people on campus and will be able to direct a student who is interested, for example, in some new or esoteric field to the professor who is an authority on the subject.

How to get action or assistance for a student is something else she will learn from these contacts. Knowing whom to call on a student's behalf can often save considerable time, energy, and adrenalin. If a good rapport has been established between an advisor and the people in the many offices on campus, the student may well get the impression that his welfare is of some concern to someone besides himself and that he is not simply the proverbial "number" after all.

Another area where an advisor's experience helps the student is in knowing not merely what is said—even in print—but what is implied. When a student reads in the catalog, for instance, that "Upon completion of the first year requirements, a limited number of students will be accepted for the sophomore program" he may not know the basis on which that limit is set. The advisor who knows that only those with a certain grade point average will be accepted can prepare the student for the realities of the situation.

Again, it helps to know what is not said. Course descriptions often sound enticing but if the advisor observes a student agonizing over which of two courses to elect and knows that one of them bears little resemblance to the description given, she can pass that information on.

Even the people in the Placement Bureau are reluctant, I think, to forecast very far ahead what the job opportunities will be in a given field. Yet almost daily students seem disappointed that advisors cannot predict their futures! What we make an earnest effort to do, however, is to keep abreast of changing trends. Some of our information comes from sources within the University but an advisor's contact with people in professions and occupations beyond the campus are often very instructive.

The advisor needs to know what the graduate schools will require of those now embarking on an undergraduate degree. We are often asked, as well, about programs and majors which MSU does not offer. It is important, too, to be aware of the curricular offerings of junior and community colleges in the state. Meetings with representatives from these areas are held frequently to keep advisors informed.
Finally, the advisor has to learn how to respond to the myriad kinds of concerns students have. Sometimes called “playing it by ear,” it means, simply, that the advisor assumes different roles for different circumstances. To the student incensed by some real or imagined injustice, the advisor may become his champion or mini-Ombudsman. Confronted by a depressed or tearful student, one must determine if the situation calls for a gentle referral to the Counseling Center or some on-the-spot motherly advice or even some stern talk straight from the shoulder. We are all quick to point out that we are not trained psychologists but if a receptive audience is what’s wanted, we are available. We might even call this “playing it by heart.”

No advisor learns all about the workings of the University in a week or even a year. The requirements, policies, people, attitudes, and practices keep changing. The most important thing the advisor needs to know is that she must be learning constantly and she must be a good listener.