

# The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal

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## Help! Do I Have to Advise College Students, Too?

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*You are sitting at your desk reading an article about how to improve your teaching. On the right-hand side of your desk is a stack of papers to grade, on the left-hand side is a stack of articles you need to read so you can write a paper to publish for promotion and tenure, and in the middle of your desk is paperwork you need to fill out from your last committee meeting. As you turn the page, you hear the sound of throat clearing at the door. You look up and see one of your students standing there with a deer-in-the-headlights look. You ask this student what you can do to help. This student states, "I overheard one of my fellow classmates talking about having to take Psychology 101, and I thought that I needed to take Psychology 1010. I am so confused." At this point you realize you have no idea what this student is talking about and you have no idea what Psychology 101 or 1010 have to do with anything. You now hear yourself saying, "Somebody help! Do I have to advise college students, too?"*

This scenario is played out in thousands of offices every August as a new academic year begins. Faculty members say that they became college professors in order to teach students and pursue research in their chosen fields; they often do not realize that advising is part of their job requirements. Besides their teaching responsibilities and meeting the guidelines for promotion and tenure, they also need to be academic advisers. Academic advising can encompass any and all of the following:

1. assisting students with decision making and career exploration
2. helping students understand and comply with institutional requirements, academic policies, and school-related procedures
3. identifying systemic and personal conditions that may impede student academic achievement and developing appropriate intervention
4. fostering a positive interaction/relationship between the adviser and the advisee

If this is not enough, new faculty must also learn to navigate the university, their colleges, and their departmental systems. They must apply new and known theoretical frameworks, meet a myriad of new requirements, and successfully pass through checkpoints that may or may not be clearly marked. Now they are hit with advising. They may need help. The purpose of this paper is to provide a portion of that help. The authors seek to help faculty members with advising responsibilities increase their existing levels of interpersonal effectiveness by improving their adviser-advisee relationships through the use of a set of communications skills.

This paper is divided into five sections. First, a brief theoretical framework of academic advising is provided. Next, a number of varied definitions of advising are explored. The third section discusses how to learn effective communication skills to use in academic advising. The fourth

introduces a set of communication microskills that research indicates will enhance the sharing of ideas in adviser-advisee interactions. The conclusion then suggests how the reader may best use the information provided in this article. These sections are intended to walk the new faculty adviser through the process of becoming a better communicator and, therefore, a better adviser.

## **Theoretical Foundations of Academic Advising**

In order to understand the importance of specific communication skills in the advising process, one must first consider models that provide the foundation for academic advising. Cook (1999) wrote a chronology of academic advising in America. Advising began during the colonial period when the faculty acted *in loco parentis* (in place of parents). It was not until the late 1820s that Kenyon College in Ohio introduced the first formal system of advising. While some form of advising had been used for many years, 1970 became a pivotal year for this practice, since findings of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education recommended placing enhanced emphasis on advising as an important aspect of higher education. Current literature (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Glennen, Farren, & Vowell, 1996) supports the Carnegie Commission in that academic advisers are crucial factors in a student's decision to remain in college.

The literature has frequently supported four models addressing this. The two most well known of these models are prescriptive advising and developmental advising. Crookston (1972), who is a guru in the field of academic advising, identified these two models. A third model, known as integrated advising, combines the strengths of prescriptive and developmental advising. There is also a fourth emerging academic advising paradigm, which is known as intrusive advising (Heisserer, 2002). A brief summary of each of these models follows.

*Prescriptive advising.* In this model of advising, the relationship between the advisee and the adviser is based on authority and the handing down of advice. Advising sessions are almost exclusively related to courses and the requirements of a particular degree. Registration cycles on campus typically drive this form of advising. Although the outcomes of prescriptive advising are often successful, this type of advising does not empower students to develop a sense of personal responsibility regarding their educational choices. According to Crookston (1972), the student assumes no responsibility for decision making and relies totally on the adviser's recommendations. Specific prescriptions typically focus on course selection, degree requirements, and registration.

*Developmental advising.* Crookston (1972) also developed this model. In this approach, the relationship between the advisee and the adviser is based on equal and shared problem solving with a focus on personal growth of the whole student. It includes the following objectives:

- creating awareness of the relationship between education and life
- setting realistic academic and career goals and then developing specific objectives to achieve these goals
- fostering an awareness of life extending beyond the college years
- achieving student awareness of rational cognitive processes for decision making as well as behaviors needed to carry them out

*Integrated advising.* Despite the shortcomings of both prescriptive and developmental advising models, both approaches have notable strengths, suggesting that advisers might implement elements of the two. That is, one could use the effective qualities of prescriptive advising (expertise, awareness of student needs, and structured programs) and of developmental advising, which addresses concerns in relation to a student's total needs (Earls, 1987).

*Intrusive advising.* This model recognizes the unique needs of at-risk students, including those from minority groups; students who are academically disadvantaged or on probation; those with disabilities, cognitive problems, or psychological issues that interfere with academic success; or students from low socioeconomic levels or who may be struggling with family or financial concerns (Heisserer, 2002; Upcraft & Kramer, 1995). According to Upcraft and Kramer (1995), intrusive advising is an effective method by which the advisers and the institution take the initiative in providing support services to help these students succeed.

As one can see, each of these four models has strengths. Prescriptive advising's strength is its focus on course selection and institutional requirements (Crookston, 1972). This approach is very beneficial to the faculty member whose advisee roster is large. For faculty advisers who have a smaller number of advisees, developmental advising works well. Instead of routinely answering questions relevant to an advisee's degree requirements, the adviser directs the student to proper resources, thus facilitating the development of greater independence, decision making, and problem solving (Chando, 1997). The pluses for using the integrated advising model are that it integrates both the prescriptive and the developmental advising models and that it emphasizes both the informational and the counseling roles. Intrusive advising is a special model in that it is geared to the professional academic adviser who works with at-risk advisees (Heisserer, 2002). In summarizing these four models, it is important for faculty members new to the advising arena to select a style of advising that will be their philosophical foundation upon which to base their advising sessions.

Once faculty members have selected a model on which to base their academic advising, they also need an operational definition of academic advising that can be used to suggest a set of skills necessary to become an effective adviser. The literature does present a wide assortment of just such definitions (Crockett, 1985). A selection of these definitions that provides a full range of meaning for the term *academic adviser* is presented below.

### **Definition of Faculty Academic Advising**

The authors accessed the NACADA Web site to obtain a definition of academic advising. At last count there were eleven definitions of advising presented there. Each definition was well written; however, none quite satisfied the authors' philosophical inquiry. That is, the definitions were either too long, university specific, or too focused on either the developmental or prescriptive models. The authors felt that academic advising definitions should include a barometer for success. As they investigated the literature, they came across a definition of advising success that incorporated the concept of resilience or the ability to cope (McGillian, 2003). Therefore, advising, in order to be successful, needs to include a component of assisting students to become resilient to the trials and tribulations of the college experience. Academic advisers, through the concern they have for students and the one-on-one attention they provide, can play an important

role in developing this resiliency in their student advisees and helping them attain academic success.

Based on this discussion, the authors felt that the best definition of academic advising is the one stated by Creamer (2000). Creamer states that academic advising is considered an educational construct that depends on the understanding of college student behaviors as well as institutional conditions that assist students in planning and implementing educational and life goals. Three specific skills appear to be associated with this barometer of successful academic advising. They include communications skills, questioning skills, and referral skills (Nutt, 2000). This article will address one of these barometers of successful academic advising: effective communication skills.

### **Effective Communication Skills**

In order to have a better perspective on successful communications skills, one needs to explore the barriers to effective communication. Provided below is a brief discussion of common barriers to effective communication in an advising setting. While this list is not exhaustive, it does address those that seem most problematic.

#### *Barriers to Effective Communication*

1. *Disorganization of the advising session.* This includes such things as not taking the time to know your advisees by name, not having their academic records, and not giving them your undivided attention.
2. *External distractions.* This can be defined as anything in the immediate environment that disrupts the effective exchange of ideas between adviser and advisee, such as temperature of the room, lighting, noise (especially that coming from the hall or office next to yours), comfortable seating, being on time for the appointment, and interruptions from office and/or cell phones. Distractions from the student's side include bringing in a friend, listening to an iPod, fumbling with books or a backpack, and so forth.
3. *Lack of knowledge of the framework of the university's and/or department's advising program.* For example, one of the author's departmental philosophical frameworks is the integrated model. Each academic adviser should know his or her advisees by name, keep records of their degree plans, and know the referral process in order to facilitate the use of this model.
4. *Inadequate communication skills on the part of the academic adviser.* By this we mean not knowing or not using those techniques that are known to be successful in sharing ideas and meaning and increasing the number and quality of ideas and meanings shared. These barriers may include such things as thinking of a response while the advisee is still talking, speaking down to or over the heads of advisees, or indicating lack of interest in the advising session through poor body language and failure to use all or some of the advising microskills that are discussed later in this paper.

#### *Addressing These Barriers*

1. *Organization of the advising session.* Knowing the advisee's first name will assist in this manner. Another way to work on communication skills is to set aside time for small talk. This allows the student to feel comfortable in an advising session. If this is the first visit, you should give the advisee your business card so they will know your contact information and will feel at ease knowing they have your permission to contact you. Make sure you get the student's contact information and/or update details such as program requirements. Also be sure you keep to your schedule. It is not fair to infringe on the next advisee's time. Of course, always end your advising session by asking for questions and thanking the student for his or her efforts in making the session successful.
2. *External distractions.* These can be avoided with just a little pre-advising preparation. Check to make sure that you have the proper lighting in your office, chairs (preferably comfortable) are available, and your cell phone is turned off or at least on mute. When your advisee arrives, ask him/her to turn off cell phones, too. You should also take your office telephone off the hook, as there is nothing more distracting than the telephone ringing. Above all, make sure you are on time for the appointment.
3. *Knowledge of the theoretical framework of the university's or department's advising program.* This information is available by reviewing your university's academic advising handbook or speaking with your departmental chair.
4. *Inadequate communication skills on the part of the academic adviser.* The final type of barrier that may arise is due to inadequate communication skills on the part of the adviser. Poor communication skills include not making eye contact with your advisee, trying to multitask while advising (i.e., talking on the telephone and with your advisee at the same time or focusing on what you are going to say rather than listening to your advisee), talking over advisees' heads by using concepts that they are not likely to understand, and so forth.

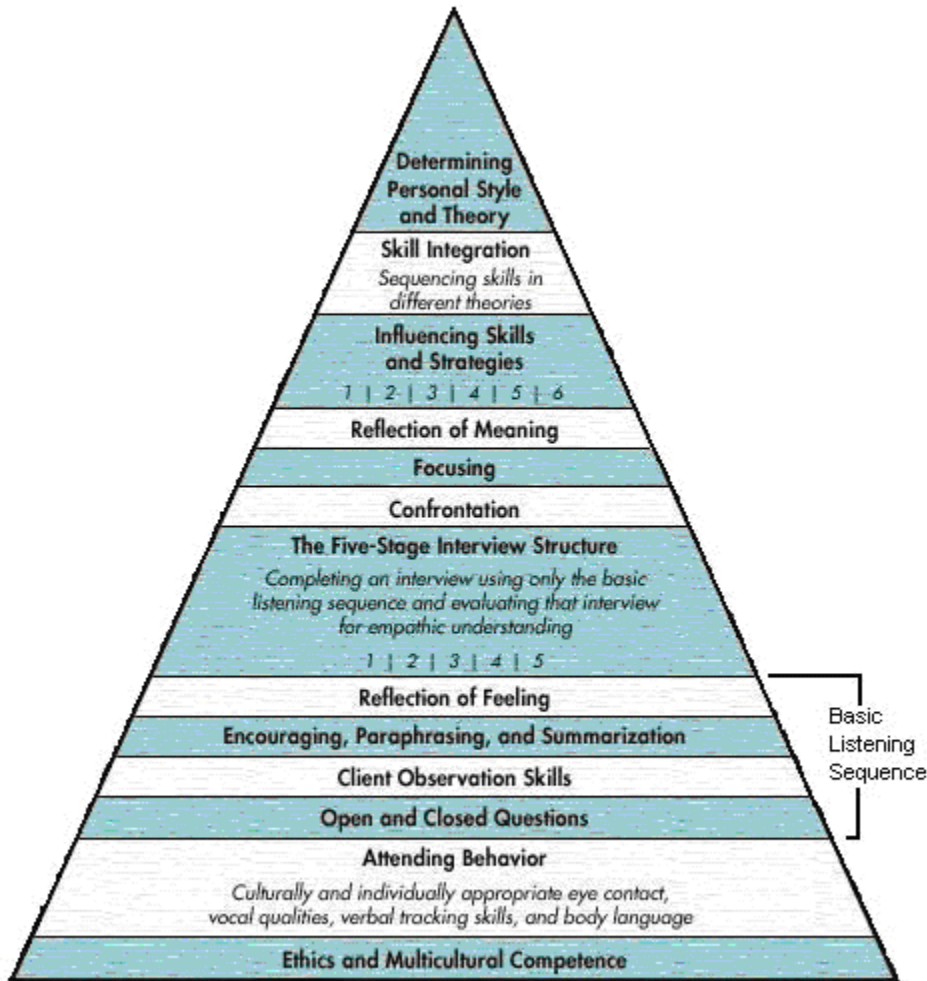
Because communication skills are the lifeline of advising, the next section will address a set of communication microskills shown to enhance the kind of sharing that is needed in an effective advising session.

## **Microskills**

College professors must develop the ability to recognize their advisees' needs and concerns (after all, we are in a “helping” profession). So, let us examine a set of basic counseling communications skills that can be used with advisees to help identify their concerns. Ivey and Ivey (2003) captured this set of skills in a highly useful counseling model for improving communication that they termed the Microskills Hierarchy. Beginning therapists learn these counseling skills, and they are also incorporated into other helping professions and are used by practitioners such as attorneys, doctors, and social workers. It would make sense, therefore, to teach these skills to faculty academic advisers. The Microskills Hierarchy consists of thirteen levels of communication skills (see Figure 1). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore all of these levels, college advisers can benefit greatly by examining the Attending Behaviors and the Basic Listening Sequence and incorporating them into their advising practices.



**Figure 1** Microskills Hierarchy (Ivey & Ivey, 2003)



### *Attending Behaviors*

The definition of attending behaviors refers to the ways advisers can be attuned to their advisees, both physically and psychologically. The purpose of attending to students is to increase the students' talk time. Attending behaviors can be summarized by the following equation:  $(3) V_s + B$  (Ivey & Ivey, 2003).

*V1: Vision or eye contact (the adviser looks at the advisee).* Eye contact is a way advisers indicate interest and is one of the most important components in effective communication.

*V2: Vocal qualities.* The voice is an instrument that communicates much of the feelings you have toward another person or situation. This includes vocal style (rate, volume, and tone) to indicate interest or disinterest.

*V3: Verbal tracking (staying with the advising topic).* Advisers need to stay focused on

their advisees' conversations or they may miss important information the advisees are trying to convey.

*B: Body language (nonverbal cues).* Adviser's body language:

- Adviser must *squarely* face the advisee, have an *open* posture, slightly *lean* toward the advisee, maintain *eye* contact, and *relax* (do not fidget or be distracted). This is also known as SOLER (Egan, 2007).
- Advisers need to be comfortable using their bodies as vehicles of contact and expression. They should smile, face their advisees, and so forth.

## **Basic Listening Skills**

The definition of basic listening skills refers to the adviser's ability to understand the messages advisees communicate, whether these messages are verbal or nonverbal (Ivey & Ivey, 2003). To truly listen, you must hear and you must observe (Sheehy, 2002). According to Ivey and Ivey, basic listening skills include using both open and closed questions, employing advisee observation skills to derive meaning from all forms of communication both verbal and nonverbal, practicing higher levels of active listening (encouraging, paraphrasing, summarizing), and reflecting feelings.

*Open and closed questions*

- Open questions include those that allow advisees to freely explore and guide the session where they would like it go. These questions usually begin with *what*, *why*, *how*, and *what else*.
- Closed questions are those that emphasize factual information and elicit very specific information. These questions are often answered with a *yes* or *no* answer and usually begin with *are*, *do*, *did*, or *could*.
- Be careful. Too many questions can offend the advisee who may feel interrogated.

*Advisee observation skills*

- These skills include observing and reading the advisee's nonverbal behavior, including facial expressions, body position, and use of space.

*Higher levels of active listening*

- Encourage students to continue talking. Some strategies associated with this include head nodding and encouraging sounds and words such as “uh-huh,” “hmmm,” “go on,” and “tell me more.” (Sheehy, 2002).
- Paraphrase what you understood the student to say. Paraphrasing is the process of feeding back to the advisee the core of what has just been said. The adviser's own

words plus the important key words of the advisee are used to clarify the main point that was made (Sheehy, 2002).

- Summarize. Summarizing covers a longer time span and more information than paraphrasing (Sheehy, 2002). This technique involves tying together into one statement several ideas and feelings at the end of the discussion. The purpose is to give the advisee a feeling of movement and progress.

### *Reflecting feelings*

- Expressing in the adviser's own words the essential feelings stated or strongly implied by the advisee is also a useful tool. The goal is to use the aforementioned communication skills to identify the advisee's feelings and reflect them back to the student (Sheehy, 2002).

Ivey and Ivey (2003), Gordon (2007), and Sheehy (2002) recognized that using these basic microskills (attending behaviors and basic listening skills) can go a long way in helping an advisee to feel heard and validated. In order for advisers to do their jobs, they must know their advisees' full and complete academic history as well as their needs and desires. Advisers' abilities and skills in using the basic microskills will allow them to get the full narrative from their advisees so that they may apply the framework of the university toward setting and accomplishing the students' academic as well as life goals.

### **How to Use This Information**

The purpose of this article was to provide some help to new faculty members who are already overloaded with teaching, research, and publishing duties and also find that they must provide advising assistance to students. Therefore, a set of specific skills and strategies has been presented to help them “beef up” their advising with very little additional effort. The emphasis here was on strengthening their communication skills without a lot of extra preparation time or effort.

The authors repeatedly used the word *skill* because a skill can be taught. With this in mind, after reading this article, faculty academic advisers should be able to improve their required advising sessions by doing just a few simple things. The authors therefore close this discussion of microskill use in improving communication by providing a list of easy things that can be done today to improve student advising sessions:

1. Turn off cell phones and take office phones off the hook. (Ask advisees to turn off their cell phones as well.)
2. Have a spot dedicated to advising sessions, such as your office or a vacant classroom.
3. Create an inviting atmosphere free from distraction.
4. Greet the advisee by first name (if possible).
5. Set time for small talk.
6. Give advisees your business card.
7. Thank the advisee for coming in and ask if he or she has any questions.



8. Keep your schedule and do not infringe on the next advisee's time.
9. Get the student's contact information and continually update it.
10. Follow the (3) Vs + B equation.
11. Follow SOLER.
12. Use open and closed questions to gain information.
13. Listen closely and observe advisees' verbal and nonverbal communication.
14. Practice active listening by encouraging, paraphrasing, and summarizing the thoughts and information conveyed in the advising session.
15. Reflect feelings expressed by advisees in your own words.

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