

## **Lessons from First Year Advising**

Michael Jennings, MA

Associate Director of Health Promotions

In 2004, I accepted a position to lead an initiative to build a foundation for student-alumni programming. One of my major responsibilities was to advise the student group that worked to build camaraderie and spirit at a campus that had very little.

The oversized studs in my ears were my way of showing the students that I was not one of those rigid suits that took away their right to have a good time in college. I was the young hip advisor who knew what they were feeling, what they wanted out of life and who they were as people. I wanted them to know I was one of them. The only difference was that I was just a little further in the journey of life.

I made a personal vow to be the best advisor that they ever met. Our meetings were going to be upbeat and fun. Our group was not going to be like any other group on campus. We were going to get people fired up about our campus. The students were going to love me more than any other advisor on campus. It was going to be just that easy; after all I had a great personality and I truly cared for them.

During the first year of my tenure as their advisor I experienced a lot more adversity than I could have ever imagined. There were blurred communication lines, confusion on how to advise, inability to manage leadership personalities, and my own lack of understanding of the bureaucratic nature of higher education. Honestly, I had no clue what I was doing. I was so overwhelmed that I emotionally broke down in my office one morning.

Now that I look back I was more concerned about the students liking me than I was with anything else. My priorities were totally out of sync. As I matured in the profession, I found out that there is much more to advising than being a friend, being the coolest advisor or having the best meetings. I realized that being an advisor was about helping grow students' hopes and dreams.

As I reflect on my advising experience, I realize that our primary responsibility is to touch students' lives in a way that helps them grow professionally and personally.

My true moment of revelation came when I was meeting with the president of the group I advised. She was a truly talented and incredible person; confidence beamed from her like a lighthouse in the darkness of night. After meeting with her for a few minutes, she revealed to me that this was her first leadership position. All the confidence that was present when she entered the room escaped like trapped gas through an opening.

It was then that she said, "I really don't know how to lead. What do you expect of me as the president because I am scared of standing in front of the group and telling them the wrong thing."

As we sat across from one another, I saw a mirror image of myself. I was a confused advisor who had no clue how to lead a group of talented students or how to motivate them to be the very best they could be.

I needed her as much as she needed me. That year the president of the student group taught me how to be an advisor. She taught me that I am in a position that can have a profound impact on someone's life for a long time. During that year, I watched her blossom into an incredible leader. I would love to say it was because of me but it was not. I only helped her see what was she had inside all along.

I am so proud of what she accomplished and where she will go in life. We became so close that in November, I will walk her down the aisle at her wedding. I guess in many respects we become parental figures to our students.

Our role as advisors to students is not to be cool or even to be their friend. Our role is to help grow them into the best leaders possible. Sometimes, this means telling them the unwanted truth, allowing them to fail and reprimanding them when they let you down. During my tenure as an advisor, I learned that being a good advisor is staying true to yourself, being consistent and dependable, but most important, being able to adjust to the nature of the group. This means that we have to listen and be observant of the members regardless of what is going on.

At the beginning of each new school year, I met with each member of the group to ask them two questions: "What makes a good advisor?" and "What could I have done better last year to be a better advisor?"

I made a lot of mistakes as an advisor but each year I learned and aimed to be better. Just as a supervisor evaluates us, we also need to be evaluated by our students. I encourage you to ask the tough questions to learn how you can be better.

Advising is much more than helping the group achieve their mission statement. Here are a couple pieces of advice I received from the students during our meetings. Remember, being a good advisor is not limited to these answers.

**Listen** – "Be a good listener" is one the most consistent answers I received from students. Obviously, advisors must draw the line somewhere, but students want someone who they can talk to about what is going on in their campus lives. Where I made my mistake was opening my ear to everything they wanted to talk about. As I matured, I began to set limits on our conversations. It is important to understand that you set the line for communication. If you do not want to hear about their dating issues then make that clear from the beginning.

**Consult** – I found I was a consultant more than anything else; my job was to let the president of the group lead. It was not my job to lead the group but to lay everything on the table to help them make the best possible choices they could. As advisors, we are not supposed to do all the work. I found that many students wanted to take the lead on projects but some needed to be pushed more than others. Our responsibility is to keep them accountable for the work they are supposed to do.

**Trust** – The third president of the group challenged everything that happened in the past. She even challenged what I did. She wanted to reinvent the group; I did not think that was a good idea because what we were doing was working. We had some strong disagreements, but I realized she was elected president for a reason. What she did that year was amazing. She changed the face of the group and brought even more recognition to our office and the student program. Although we work with students on a

daily basis, we are still removed from student life. Sometimes our students see success where we do not.

**Be There** – Make your students a priority but be protective of your time. I had an open door policy, which brought students in my office around the clock. I will admit my other work suffered because I always put my students first. I was lucky because I had a supervisor who understood that students needed a safe place. However, a gentle balance is needed.

I became so involved that I burned out quickly because I had cast myself into the role of campus savior. If I had it to do all over again, I would have scheduled office hours for my students to stop by instead of always stopping what I was doing to deal with their issues. Setting clear lines is the best advice I can give. There were many times that I heard more about my students' life than I preferred.

Remember that each year brings a new group of students, and their needs change. To be a good advisor, we need to be able to adjust to the changing dynamics of our group. Adjusting our advising style to cater to the needs of the group is what gives your group longevity and keeps it fun for you.