Teagle Working Group on
“The Values of the Open Curriculum: An Alternative Tradition in Liberal Education”

Best Practices for Advising

General Principles and Observations

’hui shall not create students in thine own image.” An inexperienced advisor will tell his or her advisee to try the things that they did in college, to pursue their interests, to do what worked for them. We suggest the following:

• Remind advisors that their goal is to learn what is important to their advisees, not simply to dispense advice.

• Listen to students, don’t interrupt to tell them what to do. Ask questions and listen to their answers.

• Remember that each advising relationship is ideally a four-year proposition (potentially even longer) and you must give your advisee room to develop, to discover what matters to him or her, and to arrive at these realizations by experiencing the coursework they undertake, by learning from mistakes, and by making meaning, with your support and their reflection.

• Students are more insecure and more vulnerable than faculty sometimes realize.

• They need to be reminded that their advisors want to meet with them to discuss how things are going, how they are thinking about “next steps,” how the pieces of their lives as students—both inside and outside the classroom—fit together.

• Interactions with faculty advisors that happen beyond class, beyond the office, in more neutral and informal settings, usually make for better conversations and better long-term relationships.

• Institutions should offer whatever support they can to encourage these kinds of “extra-curricular” interactions.

• Students must be full partners in the advisor-advisee relationship. However, many students come to college without sufficient knowledge or experience to fulfill this role.

• Students need to be coached in what to expect from an advisor, and in what to do to get the most out of the relationship. This matching can be
done, in part, through the materials that matriculating students are sent in the summer before their first semester.

• It can be fostered by seminars or panels on advising during Orientation at the start of the new academic year and by “re-orientations” through the sophomore year. But advisors themselves, of course, play a critical role in teaching their advisees what they should expect, in offering advising that appropriately fulfills advising needs.

• Peer advisors can also provide significant support, by offering practical advice about course selection and detailed information to the entering student about the inner-workings of the college, and by modeling relations with faculty by working jointly with the student’s faculty advisor.

♦ Situations that possess some kind of content, or mutual intellectual engagement, foster the best relationships because they enable familiarity and comfort between advisor and advisee—conditions that lead to mentoring. Several of the schools found ways to promote this kind of relationship. Most common among them were:

• Assigning first-year students to a faculty advisor in their academic field of interest.

• Maximizing opportunities for students to enroll in a course in which the instructor would also serve as advisor.

• Creating seminars for incoming students. In these settings the teacher/advisor gets to know the advisee over the course of the semester, can monitor the student’s adjustment and progress (especially in the first term) and has the potential to become the student’s mentor.

♦ Demands on faculty time—from research and writing, teaching, and committee service—diminish the importance of advising as a priority for faculty. While many faculty express a desire for more or better training as advisors, they do not have the time to undertake or complete it. Therefore, any means of offering incentives for advisor training or rewards for service should be fostered.

Connectivity
Students say consistently that they would like their advisor to know more about advising resources at their college—not just faculty in other departments, but where to find information that provides access to opportunities extending from or outside the classroom, and beyond the college. Faculty, similarly, express a desire to know more than they do. They believe that it is critical to have a thorough knowledge of their institution’s various departments and faculty members. Others said that while they would like to be better informed than they are about other resources, they allowed that they did
not really have time to master so much information, but would like to know where to point their advisees.

♦ A number of practices are of help in this:

• Good web resources, transparent in the information they convey, easy to navigate, and somewhat redundant in the organization of information on advising resources.

• Lists of advisors in each department to which advisors can refer students.

• Lists of major advisors can also be distributed to students.

• Events that place representatives from most majors/concentrations in one place, where students can quickly learn what they need to know but can also ask more in-depth questions, are very useful, and also put a face to the person responsible for advising the department’s majors.

♦ First-Year advisors are struck by the number of times students in their first and second years need to hear about advising resources. It is as though they have to absorb and process a certain amount of information before they are “ready” to hear about more extensive or specialized forms of academic resources.

• First-Year Orientations and re-orientations over the course of the first two years create the kind of redundancy necessary to increase students’ awareness about the resources around them.

• It is by now a truism that sophomores feel neglected, so events that serve to remind them of the college’s resources are not only appreciated by them, it is also the case that sophomores are often better situated to make use of them.

• Because sophomores need to be more thoughtful about the near and intermediate future than First Year students (since at most colleges they are expected to choose a major/concentration by the fourth term), they are usually eager for information that will help them make decisions. Yet some portion of them also show signs of complacency or indifference in advice seeking. Events that vary in size and format (from break-out groups to larger “town hall” meetings) have the best possibility of reaching sophomores in all their diversity.

Mechanisms for Enhancing Accountability
While students were ambivalent about instituting “checks” that would compel them to meet with advisors, many also recognized that without some form of mandatory task or
set of tasks to ensure meetings with their advisors, they were unlikely to arrange them of their own accord.

- Most of the best practices enumerated by members of the Working Group suggested mechanisms in the context of advising in the major, or a capstone experience extending from the major.

  • At Antioch, for example, the student must craft a Statement of Purpose as a part of the narrative that he or she composes in designing an Individually Guided Major.

  • At Brown, students must write a brief essay justifying their choice of a concentration.

  • A few colleges offer some combination of a capstone experience with seminar taught by their project advisor and submission of a senior project proposal.

  • At least one school compels a specified number of meetings with the capstone advisor leading up to the summer before the student embarks on the senior project.

- A few of the schools in the Working Group identify an “Advising Week” each semester as a way of focusing the attention of advisors and students on planning the course of study for the following semester.

**From Advising to Mentoring**

Faculty who serve as academic advisors often say that they want or need training to serve as useful advisors; hardly any faculty express the same sentiment about mentoring: this is because in order to have become successful in their field of inquiry in the first place, they probably had an excellent mentor along the way. They learned how to ask the right questions, to become proficient in the intellectual concerns of their field of inquiry, and to develop appropriate skills by modeling the behavior, attitudes, and work habits of some older person they admired, who took an interest in them, and “showed them the ropes.” Mentoring is experienced as a natural outgrowth of teaching and scholarship, and is often performed unself-consciously, whereas advising has a kind of generic quality and uniformity about it that eludes the advisor in the normal course of the workday. Whereas mentoring draws on information and expertise that is already fully developed and continues to evolve, almost effortlessly, advising requires attention to details, information, scheduling, and coordination, that might have little to do with one’s work as a scholar or even as a teacher.

- The natural “habitat” of the mentor is the major or concentration in which a faculty advisor teaches. Typically a student will take one or more courses with an instructor and then ask that person to serve as his or her senior project advisor when one is required or elected. Yet other forms of mentoring can be enhanced
earlier in the undergraduate career by fostering research or support of teaching opportunities over the summers or during the academic year.

♦ Both New College and Brown subsidize student research with faculty guidance to give students a chance to work closely with faculty on a research or teaching topic in which he or she is currently engaged. As mentioned previously, Sarah Lawrence actively promotes the mentoring model by requiring its faculty to “don” First-Year students through weekly meetings. This relationship continues throughout the years that students are at the College. Central to this ethos is the notion that as students are exposed to a growing body of coursework their interests will change and develop, and that part of the don’s role is to facilitate identification of another advisor who can continue to serve the student’s needs. Oftentimes, as the student moves fully into a concentration, s/he will decide to change dons so that a richer relationship can develop around this common interest. Students are also encouraged to develop mentoring relationships with other faculty so that s/he can benefit from a diverse host of resources on campus. This practice allows faculty to mentor students without the full commitment of the donning relationship.

About the project
In academic year 2005-2006, the Teagle Foundation awarded a grant to Brown University, and seven other liberal-arts colleges (Amherst, Antioch, Hampshire, New College, Sarah Lawrence, Smith, and Wesleyan) to study the meaning and purpose of the “open curriculum.” Among the conclusions outlined in the group’s final report was a general acknowledgment of the importance of advising in such open academic environments. ♦ Paul Armstrong, former Dean of the College at Brown and Principal Investigator of the study, called for a further dialogue among the schools to address the “values, risks, benefits, and challenges” of the Open Curriculum. The working group took up Armstrong’s suggestion and requested a one-year, no-cost extension of the original grant, with the aim of studying the question of advising more closely.