

Teaching through academic advising— some UST experiences

Many thanks to Dr. Patrick Chau, Acting Director of UG Programmes, SBM, Dr. Mark Davidson, Chairman of the Curriculum Committee, CIVL; Dr. T.C. Pong, UG Programme Coordinator, COMP and Dr. Khaled Ben Letaief, UG Programme Coordinator, ELEC for sharing their many years' of experience in academic advising in their respective departments/schools. The four experienced advisors disclosed the details of the different programs they have organized so far, and shared with us what didn't work in the past and what they thought would work at the moment while most initiatives are still in their early implementation stage. They also highlighted what knowledge and skills faculty members need for effective academic advising.

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Academic advising is one of the most common practices in higher education that involves almost every single faculty members and students. A study of the American College Testing Program (1992) showed that 98% of faculty members working in accredited 2 and 4-years institutions were involved in academic advising.

Academic advisors assist students in developing intellectual potential and exploring educational opportunities and life goals. They help students to clarify educational objectives, plan and pursue programs consistent with their abilities, interests and goals while meeting degree requirements at the same time. They encourage students to make the best use of the university resources. In other words, academic advisors are working hard to humanize and personalize the undergraduate experience through this bonding and helping exercise which takes place, most of the time, outside the classroom. They try to educate the whole person!

Traditional academic advising program is characterized by assigning a group of new students to a faculty member who would meet occasionally to discuss program/course planning and enrollment during the registration period, performance in classes and at times, talk about personal problems that affected class attendance or deadlines. Little or no preparation is required for these meetings and very few are documented. It is the student who takes the initiatives to meet with his/her advisor. The actual workload of academic advising varies tremendously among faculty members though they have been assigned similar number of students.

What didn't work!

This form of academic advising is definitely not new on UST campus but all four interviewed faculty members point out at the outset that it does not work! Students here, in general, do not take the initiative to consult their advisors. There are queries on program/course enrollment and decisions are made based on peer's advice which, though given with all good intention, could be mis-leading or insufficient at times. There are questions like "Who am I" or "Where should I go from here" but few seek advice from their advisors who have gone through similar growing stages. There are unrealistic attitudes about the demands of college and the expectations of faculty which are expressed in grievances about the workload but few suggestions or dialogues to improve with due consideration of both the teacher's and students' perspective in a subject learning. Few students may consult the student counselors on general career guidance but the majority of them need professional advice in a particular discipline which is best provided by professionals in the field. In a nutshell, there is a perceived communication gap between faculty advisors and students, and the latter group, do not feel "at home" within their departments. Also, the nature of academic advising is getting more complex nowadays than simply advising about courses and career paths.

Some initiatives in SBM and SENG— Academic advising programmes in different formats

General and Specialist Advising in SBM

Two advising programs—the General Advising Programme and the Specialist Panel (Professional Advice) were running concurrently last fall as a trial for all 730 year-one students enrolling in the BBA degree program in the school. The General Advising Programme which aimed to help students get familiar with the course structure and study resources and to transit smoothly into college life, involved all 130+ faculty members in the school. Most

advisors took the initiative to meet with their 5 to 6 advisees once or twice in the semester. It was supplemented by the Specialist Panel which was composed of experienced faculty members from different departments who could provide program specific advice, e.g. choice of major in year-two studies, and discipline-related career guidance to all students. A list of specialists with their contact number, email address and room number was distributed to all students in the school.

At departmental level, the Departmental Liaison Person (DLP) became the major link between students and Career Guidance service offered by the Student Affairs Office to provide career related advising.

Feedback towards the two programs is being collected from students, student representatives on the various committees at departmental and school levels, faculty members and UG program coordinators.

Advising through a Communication Course in CIVL

In this Spring semester, all 22 faculty members in the department are involved in advising the 342 students and each faculty is the advisor to 15 to 16 year 1-3 students. The group meets once every fortnight for one and a half to two hours, in the form of a non-credit but compulsory communication skills course.

At the beginning of each meeting, there will be two or three presentations by students, with materials of various topics of interest, e.g. professional ethics, the meaning of being an engineer, the changing social context, etc. supplied by the faculty advisor (students are encouraged to use their own materials in consultation with the faculty advisor,) followed by discussion of the presentation topics and any other topic of concern to students, e.g. career guidance, the coming political handover. All communication has to be in English.

All faculty-advisors are encouraged to modify this basic structure to fit individual style and students' needs since they are playing a proactive role to establish bond with students in the department. There is also an agreed guideline that the course "do(es) not create significant additional work for the students outside of the course sessions".

Initial feedback on the exercise is encouraging and faculty advisors keep exchanging innovative ideas about the course meetings informally.

The Academic & Professional Development Course in COMP

This academic advising program, in the form of a non-credit required course for all year-one students, aims to provide each student in the department with a "faculty friend" to give academic advice, to improve students' communication skills and to help in their professional development. It was first trial-run in Fall 96 with 18 faculty-advisors working with more than 140 year-one students, plus some volunteer year-two and three students, who formed groups of 10-12 and met once every fortnight for an hour in "free format", e.g. having lunch together, sports after class, discussion on current issues in the late afternoon. In general, the faculty advisors took the initiative to organize the earlier meetings and acted like facilitators but the organizing work could be shifted gradually to students at later stage who organized themselves spontaneously.

Survey feedback from the students showed that students found the academic advising part of the program useful. They liked to meet with their seniors in the meetings to exchange ideas and experiences. There was a suggestion to spread the program into a year-long program with more frequent meetings at the start of the semester and a break during the mid-term and final examination periods. Feedback from faculty advisors asked for some kind of structure to plan and implement the program, e.g. suggestions on topics for group discussion; external speakers to talk about career opportunities with follow-up small group discussion, seminars on project/research topics. Some faculty advisors also questioned if English should be the only medium of communication if academic advising were the major focus of the program.

Plans to modify the program are now under discussion and hopefully in 1998-99, all 400+ students in the department will be involved in the program. An agreed base line is, the program will not create additional workload for students but can help them study well.

In parallel to this, the Class Professor system with several experienced faculty members working closely with students' representatives from different years of study to organize all kinds of academic, social and recreational

activities is still in force. Students are encouraged to approach the Class Professor for whatever advice they need. In addition, senior students working in the lab to assist the junior students in their programming also provides the needed peer support in an informal manner.

The Peer Advising Program at ELEC

The Student Advisory Centre, manned by senior students to explain the School system and course work structure to their juniors, and to advise on course selection was the first one of its kind in the School of Engineering last spring. Past examination papers were also made available for reference in the Centre which was operated at fixed hours, during lunch time and late afternoon for 10 hours per week. However, usage of this service was limited.

As an alternative this semester, one experienced TA-turned demonstrator is assigned the role to provide students with advice on course selection and program planning in the Centre. He is accessible to students most of the time and is knowledgeable about the department and its study programs. As reported, the demonstrator was kept fairly busy during the add/drop period at the start of the semester and is now planning how to establish his bond with students from a peer's perspective. Promoting the service among students is an issue of concern.

The demonstrator works closely with the UG Programme Director on this matter while the 'traditional' form of advising is still practiced in the department.

Some common characteristics of the initiatives

- The initiatives **do not replace the traditional form of one-to-one advising but** in many ways, **enrich** the experience through group interactions in a more structured manner. The policy of compulsory attendance to meetings/courses is used as a mean of establishing rapport and bonding between the adviser and students in group form while leaving individual consultation in the hands of students. It helps to strengthen communications between advisors and students and solve prevailing problems of student-groups while individual needs are tackled at a more private and personalized level.
- None of the aforementioned programs stands alone but are coupled with other programs/activities, like Student Advisory Committee with students representatives, on-line discussion group for students, Class or Specialist Professor scheme, etc. **to strengthen the communications with students** and involve students in the departmental decision-making process.

All interviewed faculty advisors stressed the importance of making different channels available to collect students' feedback.

- All four academic advisors are **proactive in helping their students**. To them, there are many 'fronts' to reach students, through academic, social, cultural, recreational, or professional development activities. All 'fronts' are complimentary to each other in developing the whole person. Academic advisors can definitely find a way which suits their own style and meets the needs of their advisees.
- All initiatives are thoroughly discussed and planned in the departments through numerous meetings and carefully implemented **with head's support** which is essential to the success of the program. **Effective coordination at different levels** is another "must have" while **on-going program evaluation and refinement** is the spirit behind.
- In all aforementioned programs, **faculty members of varied expertise and experience** are involved in the provision of different types of advising to students' in their academic progress. Formal and informal sharing of ideas and experience about the practice among advisors helps to pool resources which can be of particular help to the new faculty advisors.

In brief, all initiatives are proactive in nature to see to students' needs and they are very different from the traditional "passive" form of academic advising which is initiated by students.

Knowledge and skills in advising

A synthesizing of all suggestions from the four experienced faculty advisors shows three key elements in effective academic advising:

1. **Understanding students, their needs and concerns at various developmental stages.** A basic understanding of the developmental tasks students are undertaking helps advisors and students work together to find the best courses of study and co-curricular activities that fit the students' interests and aspirations. Helping students to clarify and plan their life goals is also important since students nowadays are more bewildered about how best to prepare appropriately for their futures, other than by adopting a pragmatic or consumer orientation towards their studies.
2. **Knowledge of school and curricular information,** e.g. degree requirements; the rationale behind of a general foundation education and its relationship to specific field of study; the relationship between course work and future career practice; current information, policies or procedures that affect students; club activities available on campus and outside campus for physical, social, cultural or professional development, etc. Faculty advisors should also be familiar with the university resources, like services offered by the Student Affairs Office, Language Centre, Student Union so that on-time referral can be made in case of need. Stress and excessive anxiety are two common problems of students, particularly among the academically underprepared group.
3. **Some relational skills and knowledge.** The most frequently mentioned elements by the advisors are: being friendly and approachable; open-mindedness with non-judgemental attitude ; good listening skills with paraphrasing; effective questioning techniques; and willing to spend time with students. Also mentioned is the importance being "role model" to students and the need to share one's experience during the process, e.g. sharing one's academic or research interests and talking about what it means to be an educated person.

All three aspects of knowledge and skills are needed for productive academic advising. Curriculum information and school/departmental policies are very much accessible while informal discussions with other experienced academic advisors can be enlightening in the work.

Concluding remark

Academic advising is an integral part of teaching and effective academic advising takes time, effort and resources. It takes place in every single corner on the campus at all times in various formats but its impact, which may not be recognized immediately, can be profound and far reaching. How many stories of success you have read include a statement like this: " I remember while I was in school, Mr. So and So, my teacher said to me... "

Reference and resources

- Reinartz, A.G. & White, Eric. R. (ed) *Teaching Through Academic Advising: A Faculty Perspective*, Issue No. 62 of the New Directions for Teaching and Learning, Summer 1995, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995.
- National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) at Kansas State University is a national organization to promote quality of academic advising in higher education. Please visit its homepage at:
URL: <http://www.ksu.edu/nacada/index.html> for details.
- "Academic Advising Resources on the Internet", is a vast collection of on-line reference materials about academic advising, maintained by University of Texas. It is linked to many academic advising offices in universities in the States and provides numerous sample advising guides for both advisors and students.
URL: <http://volvo.gslis.utexas.edu/%7eacadres/index.html>