

# Some Thoughts On Advising

(Revised 29-Dec-10)

## Cheating

In all the advising I've done at Mills, at Yale, and at New College of Florida, I've felt that I was cheating because I was borrowing so heavily from the great advisors I had in six years of undergraduate education and twelve years of graduate education. Some of the teachers I emulate and the things I have stolen from each:

## Tyler Estler

- a certain detachment and the importance of modeling of intellectual and pedagogical excellence. Sometimes a matter of fact showing by doing is key.

## Peter Kazaks

- learning to be a blunt friend and father who trusts his kids to do the right thing (and so doesn't get emotionally involved in their success or failure) but who has no qualms about telling them that a particular decision strikes him as ill-advised. The trick here is to communicate clearly what one thinks while making it equally clear that you will stand behind her whatever decision she makes.
- maintaining an interest in personal well-being and not being shy about passing along advice about growing up, about mistakes I've made or seen people around me make, and reassurance that mistakes are made, and, as a good friend once told me "you have to waste your twenties doing something"

## Paul Scudder

- making no bones about how I think the best students would go about something while being sufficiently flexible that students have enough rope with which to hang themselves.

## Natalie Rosel

- focus on credibility
- keep a no-nonsense attitude in play
- communicate a recognition that the best way around problems is often through

# Philosophy of Advising (and teaching)

I believe that the purpose of education is to change everyone involved. I also believe that the best educations are "custom made" rather than "off the shelf." The advisor-advisee relationship, when it works best, facilitates education as a change process and helps the student to craft an education that is uniquely her own. When asked what I am there for, I explain something along the lines of "my job is to assist you in the process of using the raw materials provided by the college to craft YOUR education" or "to work with you to figure out where you are and where you are going and how the resources of the college can be applied to your movement along that trajectory." I do not see my role as indoctrinating or forcing a particular version of the liberal arts on the student, but I will be quite persistent in pushing her to educate herself both broadly and deeply, to try things she does not think she will like or she doesn't think she can do. I'll suggest courses because I think highly of the teacher, that s/he will be "good for you" or "is someone you should experience." I'll have ideas about where her education or her career interests seem to be heading and I'll be sure to share my thoughts (perhaps repeatedly).

## Some Thoughts

(1) Be bold. Frederick the Great is said to have been fond of saying "Toujours, l'audace! Toujours!" There is often pedagogical value in surprising students. Don't be afraid to be a little jarring.

(2) Remember what it was like to be a student at the front end of education. One good test for whether you would make a good advisor is probably how much self-consciousness you had about the educational process when you were an undergrad. I don't mean here just your own, but also that of people around you. Do you recall people making mistakes, people who seemed to get it right, people who were smart but squandered their intelligence, ruts people got into and out of, etc.

(3) Take time to talk.

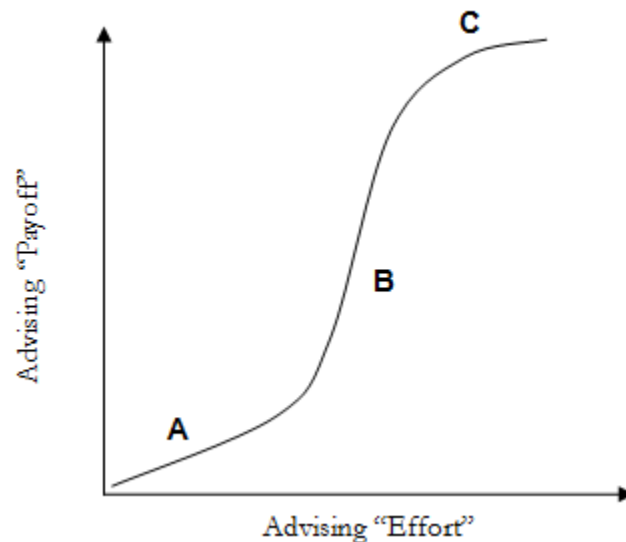
A Time to Talk

WHEN a friend calls to me from the road  
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,  
I don't stand still and look around  
On all the hills I haven't hoed,  
And shout from where I am, What is it?

No, not as there is a time to talk.  
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,  
Blade-end up and five feet tall,  
And plod: I go up to the stone wall  
For a friendly visit.

Robert Frost

(4) Remember the nonlinear return to time invested (a little bit more than a little buys you a lot). In this diagram, region A shows the normal payoff to a little advising effort. We have a few conversations, sign the cards, know the rules, etc. and it makes a difference. A little more effort gets a little more results. Just beyond this minimal region, though, is B. Here is where we see some real payoffs to advising. The extra effort is not that much but it can make a huge difference.



(5) Be genuinely interested in a student's life/education. Think about the fact that you have an opportunity to help a young woman craft her OWN education out of the materials we provide in our curriculum. What fits? What will have the most transformative power? Don't get caught up in guidance-counselor-eze "what do you want to major in?" We are not clerks in a department store.

(6) Do not be afraid of giving wrong advice. It happens. Give the student both sides and let her decide. Explain what you would do and why, but let her know that she can do what she wants.

(7) Really believe that in the final analysis a student's education is her own responsibility

(8) Learning Contracts

(9) Advising, like teaching, is an agricultural "technique" What does this one need to grow? Learn the difference between fertilizer, water, seeds, and sun. Plant seeds, recognize that they take time to germinate. Recognize that sometimes you just need to fertilize and water. And, most of all, recognize that at certain points all you need to do is stand back and get out of the way of the sun.

(10) point is to supplement what students get from other sources (teachers, student affairs, parents, etc.) not duplicate these (12) passing along learning skills, personal organizing skills, decision making, etc. (13) being a voice of conscience, keep student honest, but always let student make choices (14) don't be afraid to give student enough rope to hang herself (metaphorically only!) (15) be sure to never get in the way of brilliance and never stay out of the way of mistakes.

## Adapting Methods to the Individual

In my second year of college I signed up for a course called “Mathematical Excursions” – essentially a math course for non-science types that started with the golden section and Pythagorean music/math connections and ran up through the tricks of number theory and the philosophical implications of non-Euclidean geometry. Because these were ideas not covered in other math courses and because several of my friends were taking the course, I showed up on the first day with the intent to sit in on the course. Soo Bong, the instructor, looked at me and shook his head. “What are you doing here?” he asked softly. “It will be very hard for you to pass this course.” I was stunned and said, “But, Soo Bong, I aced differential equations with you my freshman fall – surely this is easy by comparison.” “Ah, you forget that my job is to teach. For you, this course will be very difficult.” And it was. He called me over to his office one day from the math reading room where I was hanging out and reading and drew a few curves on the board. A few moments later, after he’d described the problem, he said “to pass this course, you must produce proof of this theorem.” It took me about five weeks – his prediction that the course would be hard for me was right – but I probably learned more about thinking mathematically from that experience than from any of the courses I’d taken up to that point. The lesson? Any thing can be adapted to any student if you pay attention to the student, set your sights on thinking about where she is coming from, what she needs next, where she needs pushing, what talents are a step away from blossoming, what sorts of things she has been avoiding developing, and so on.