Advising Tips

While each advising meeting should be customized to fit the student and advisor, I hope you find the following tips helpful as you meet with your new advisees this year. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions about advising or teaching this coming year.

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First Group Meeting

Before setting up individual appointments with each student, consider having a short group meeting (10-15 minutes). The group meeting is a wonderful opportunity to set expectations about advising and the benefit is that all advisees hear the same message. You can advise students on how to access you (Do you check email or voicemail? Do you want them to come to your office hours?), your expectations (Do you expect students to bring ideas to you? Do you plan to challenge them?), and your vision of a Mount Holyoke education. It is also a good time to normalize the need for resources (without scaring students!); for example, you can be approached if the student needs help in finding helpful resources, whether counseling, work study, or tutoring. When students hear this information as part of a group, they are less likely to feel singled out when advised individually later. This is also a good time to let students know that you plan to give each an important homework assignment, and that you look forward to seeing each of them again in a few weeks, if not before, to follow up.

It is up to you if you want to spend this group time having student to get to know each other; frequently, students are eagerly awaiting their time to meet with you alone, and are unsure if they can raise important questions in front of strangers. Some people feel more comfortable leaving team-building among advisees alone, whereas others might feel comfortable approaching this in a phased manner (holding a group-lunch or coffee meeting later in the semester).

Example comments:

“I do not check my office voicemail often, so if it is possible, please email me or stop by my office hours.”

“I am going to try my best to listen to each of you, but at the end of the day, I see my job as trying to push you to learn and grow. As a result, you might even get annoyed with me because it seems that I won’t just agree with all of your plans. I want to support you and challenge you.”

“Some students have a strong support system at home, or live close by, while others do not. I take my role as advisor seriously. If you need something, please ask me because I see my role as helping you to get in touch with our resources on campus. If I don’t know the answer, I’ll give you a suggestion of where to turn, and we’ll both learn.”
First Individual Meeting: Advising Day

The temptation is to move from hello right into scheduling classes. Taking a few minutes to ask some key questions will help your advisee to feel more connected to you. Ultimately, this will help you to understand her plans better and encourage your advisee to return to talk further.

Ideas of how to open:

- My name is Becky and I have been at the college for 12 years. I’m hoping I can get to know you a bit better and then focus on getting you into a good schedule. I know we have a lot of time this semester, so don’t feel frustrated when our time is up. I’ll plan to talk to you again [within the week or in the next few weeks]."
- Tell me more about what you enjoyed in high school (including what you felt you were good at and what brought you a sense of connection or accomplishment).
- What are your goals?
- Are you feeling concerned about anything right now that I might be able to help with?

I find it really helpful to sketch out a weekly time log and block in the classes the student is thinking about taking, the PE classes, and extra-curriculars (including work) so the student can see for herself where some conflicts might be. If the student appears to be narrowly focused on a career, or too interested in playing it safe with a high school-like schedule (or one focused only on strengths), it is unlikely that you will change the student’s mind in 15-30 minutes. An alternative approach is to raise some concerns and suggest possibilities, while remaining supportive. If a student comes back to see you, you have a better chance of supporting her trajectory.

Example Comments:

“I’m hearing you say that being able to work/be on the crew team/being involved on campus is very important to you. Let’s sketch it out and see what it might look like. It’s possible that you might have to choose one thing to start with, try out your schedule, and see if there is room to add later. I know that feeling successful your first semester is really important.”

“Since you are so interested in pre-health/going abroad/community organizations, I am going to ask you to complete a homework assignment in the next couple of weeks. I want you to visit the pre-health advising session/center for global initiatives resource lounge/student programs fair. If you want to, I’d be happy to hear about what you learned and be a sounding board for you when I see you again in a few weeks, or in my office hours on an upcoming Wednesday.”

“I can see you are really interested in these 5 classes, and it seems that Class 4 and 5 could either work. Let’s have you attend each class once, collect all of the syllabi, sketch out the deadlines and make sense of what will really happen in each class. Then, I’d love to hear from you on your decision of which one you are going to take. If I can help you to decide, let me know. I should be around Thursday and Friday, or you can email me with what you are thinking.”
Second Individual Meeting: Before the Add/Drop Period

While some new advisees go back to visit their advisors (or connect via email or phone) during the first half of the semester, we know that many other advisees do not. Even the most interested advisors find that students do not return emails or visit during office hours. This is concerning because when students do not connect in the first semester, or when they drop classes unexpectedly, they can be at a higher risk for leaving. Having a conversation with an advisor can make a big difference. Please reach out and/or make it easy for students to find you for that 2nd conversation.

Example comments:

- I hope to hear from you. Maybe you can stop by during my Thursday office hours after the first full week? If I don’t hear from you, I’ll drop you a line and ask how you are doing.
- Did you get a chance to visit [fill in resource] that I had suggested? If yes, tell me about it. If no, do you think that you might find time this coming week, or do you have an idea of a different person or office that might be worth visiting? You can always stop by on Wed or Friday afternoon next week and tell me about it.
- How were your first classes? Do you feel excited about any of the classes?
- How is your roommate/dorm situation? I know you mentioned that you were a little concerned about it.
- Have you had a chance to sketch out your weekly schedule? Did you find that you had room to add in any activities that you had mentioned when we first met?
- Are you feeling concerned about anything right now that I might be able to help with?