

CASE TEACHING NOTES for “A Word to the Wise? Advising Freshmen”

Jessica Dudek, Nigel Marriner, and Clyde Freeman Herreid
University Honors Program
University at Buffalo, State University of New York



INTRODUCTION / OBJECTIVES

Freshmen frequently struggle with major decisions both inside and outside of school. Even if they have required advisement sessions, they do not always have a clear idea which questions to ask and which information to share with the advisor. This is true even for many science students who think they have certain career goals and a clearly delineated set of requirements. (Keep in mind that over 50% of engineering majors change fields and that most premedical wannabes alter their plans after the first couple of years.) Oftentimes unasked questions can have a profound effect on students' curriculum choices and their success in school. Large numbers of students make poor choices and have unfortunate experiences as a result.

We designed this case to sharpen freshmen Honors students' understanding of the advisement process and to focus attention on some of the important choices that they must make. We have run this exercise in six Honors sections involving 500 students just before their mandatory advisory sessions. It clearly has been beneficial for them, and we suspect that this case can be used in general science courses early in the semester as an icebreaker, especially in situations where case studies will be used. Students are definitely interested in student problems, particularly when they have a personal stake in the problem. There is another case on the website that also involves a similar personal analysis: “A Case in Point,” by Mary Walczak and Juliette Lantz. It focuses on how to write a job resume and how letters of recommendations are evaluated.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

We hand this case out to the students at the beginning of class with the simple instructions that are printed at the front of the case. Students are asked to list three main questions that each of the four students (Eric, Carl, Helen, and Sabrina) should ask their advisors. We also suggest they jot down any suggestions they think the advisor might have as answers. We have found that about seven minutes is adequate for this step.

Then, since we have our students working in teams of five, we assign each group two profiles to consider, either Eric and Helen or Carl and Sabrina. Obviously, they could evaluate all four profiles, but two per group seems to work well given the time constraints. We tell each group to compile a list of the top concerns for their assigned students. This takes about five minutes.

Next, we have the various teams report out their findings. As this happens, we list these on the blackboard under the names of the four students. We first get the problems Eric faces listed, then move on to the concerns of the others in turn. As this occurs, the instructor has the opportunity to comment on the questions as they emerge. This takes about 20 minutes.

Finally, we ask all of the students to write their own profile, preferably in the third person voice. We also ask them to list the questions that they should ask their advisors when they meet with them. This takes about

seven to 10 minutes. We collect these profiles for our advisors to have when they meet with their students. These serve as an excellent starting point for a serious advisement session.

If this exercise were to be done in a classroom, the instructor could read these and make general comments in the following class. Alternatively, the students could simply keep them for their own use and reflection. Other possibilities include using them for role-playing exercises.

BLOCKS OF ANALYSIS

Eric

Eric's overriding issues are his lack of focus on a particular field or major, his uncertainty about what majors are available, and his skepticism regarding the advisement process. We emphasize the value of an advisement session for Eric. An advisor can go over Eric's major options and tell him about majors he hadn't thought of or known about. His advisor can also review his General Education requirements and explain exactly which ones are fulfilled by particular Advanced Placement courses. Finally, instructors may want to call attention to Eric's work hours, and how he should consider cutting back his hours during midterms and finals.

Carl

The main issues for Carl are his pursuit of a double major, his disregard for his General Education requirements, and his reliance on friends for academic advice. We use Carl's case to explain to students the differences between a double degree and a double major and how to fit two majors into a four-year span. We also point out that students should not get advisement from fellow students and we explain the proper procedure for petitioning. Instructors may also want to discuss the benefits of General Education courses and the wisdom of taking upper-level courses as freshmen.

Helen

Many of our students are pre-med, and Helen's case highlights many important issues for these freshmen. In class we explain that Biology is not the only acceptable pre-med major and we outline the pre-med requirements. We also use Helen's case to emphasize other key factors in medical school admissions, including volunteering and extracurricular activities. We talk about our school's pre-professional health advisor and the pre-health listserv, which provide essential information to pre-med students. Finally we underscore the value of an academic backup plan for pre-med students in the event that they do not or cannot attend medical school. Instructors also may want to focus on Helen's struggles as a commuter and her disagreements with her parents.

Sabrina

The majority of our students begin as engineering majors much like Sabrina. Since they don't have much choice in their course selection, they question the value of an advisement session. In class we explain that although the engineering curriculum is regimented now, students will have more choices in their upper-level electives. We also emphasize the many clubs, internships, co-ops, study abroad and research opportunities available in the School of Engineering. Sabrina's case also allows us to point out the existence of special Honors sections of physics, chemistry and calculus. Additionally, instructors may want to use Sabrina's case to discuss how students may resolve roommate issues and who to talk to if they are encountering difficulties in the residence halls.

Where Does This Go?

In our advisement sessions we have found that students are often reluctant to bring up some of the more sensitive or non-academic issues and questions that they write in their own profile. Once the advisor initiates a discussion of that particular topic, however, it often becomes apparent that it is in fact an important issue for the student. In a few cases the students were advised before they had written a profile. After the advisement sessions, the advisor read the profiles and noted that in many cases the student did not voice some of those important issues in the advisement meeting. Such instances pointed to the value of the advising case study and individual profiles. This exercise allows students to see how sample advisement sessions work, to think about their own advisement appointment in advance, and to articulate their questions and concerns in a non-judgmental environment.

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