

Exam Preparation: Express the Stress

BY BARBARA DIXON ACKERMAN

It is the time of the year when teachers begin to say, “Be sure to know this for the exam,” and it is also the time of the year when advisors are asked to provide students with exam preparation tips and test-taking strategies. So advisors talk about organizing notes, making study sheets and flashcards, using mnemonic devices, summarizing versus analyzing, reading directions, eating a good breakfast, and so on. Once the advisor has covered these topics, which the different subject area teachers have probably also covered, advisor groups can have some fun with the topic of exams. Here are a few activities that will allow students to both express and relieve a little exam stress.

“Have an exam jam. Create your own percussion section by clicking pens, tapping pencils, snapping binders, crumpling paper, tapping keyboards, punching holes, and slamming staplers”

- Write an interior monologue to illustrate the somewhat scrambled thoughts that run through a student’s brain during a late night study session, or during the exam itself.
- Choose your favorite comedian and write a monologue for that comedian to deliver about exams.
- Act out a game show using exam-type questions as the game show questions.
- Write a poem, rhyming or non-rhyming, in the form of 3 multiple-choice questions.
- Make a top ten list of the many ways to procrastinate rather than study.
- Come up with an exam cheer for a particular subject.
- Write a poem using as many vocabulary words as you can from a particular subject.
- Create a commercial for a study aid that you think would help you to ace your exams.
- Make a video in which you interview a variety of people about exams.
- Write a dialogue between two students, one who is highly stressed about exams and one who has a more relaxed approach.
- Have an “Exam Jam.” You can create your own percussion section by clicking pens, tapping pencils, snapping binders, crumpling paper, tapping keyboards, punching holes, and slamming staplers.

- Sketch a representation of your brain while you are studying or at the end of exam week.
- Write a letter or a poem from the point of view of a teacher who is in the middle of grading exams.
- Write a letter to yourself to be opened on exam return day. What reminders might you need to help you to keep exam results in perspective?
- Does the school have any exam week traditions? Would your group like to start one?

Advisors may want to display their group’s creations so that other students may enjoy them. Some may even be worthy of submission to the school’s literary magazine!

CSEE Spring Conference Making Advisory Meaningful

Greenhill School, Addison, Texas
Friday, March 30-Saturday, March 31
Presenters: LouAnne Smith and Barb Dixon Ackerman
authors of CSEE’s Advising Handbook

Advising Conference To-Do List

1. Learn about advising programs at schools from all over the country
 2. Collect a variety of advisor group activities, as well as strategies for working with individual advisees
 3. Focus solely on advising for a concentrated period of time
 4. Create an action plan for your school
 5. Receive a handbook that you can literally hand over to the advisors at your school
 6. Mark your calendar – Friday, March 30th and Saturday, March 31st
 7. Book your flight or fill your tank
 8. Come to the CSEE advising conference at the Greenhill School in Addison, Texas
- See information and registration materials at csee.org.

The House System at Steward (Not at Hogwarts)

How do you increase communication between students and advisors, promote mixing between students from different grades, boost school spirit, and get one quarter of your student body to attend Opera Night? The Steward School is accomplishing these goals and more through the House System. If the term “House System” reminds you of Harry Potter, then you are thinking along the right lines. The names of the Steward houses such as Gryphons, Dragons, and Serpents were inspired by the Harry Potter series. Steward is an independent K-12 school in Richmond, Virginia with approximately 200 students in their upper school. The upper school head, Butch Keller, learned about the House System at last year’s CSEE advising conference when he was comparing notes with administrators from a school in Canada where the House System has been a long-standing tradition. Butch worked with student and faculty focus groups last spring to determine the guidelines so that the House System could be launched in the fall, and it has certainly taken off. During the school’s spirit week, the houses made banners and engaged in a variety of competitions. Butch reports that the spirit week pep rally was one of the best in the school’s history.

Each of Steward’s seven houses consists of four advisor groups, two girls’ groups and two boys’ groups, for a total of between twenty-eight and thirty-eight students representing all four grades.

The Steward School seal is a shield with a cross in the center. The four arms of the cross represent character, academics, athletics, and the arts. The House System helps to pull together those four areas because students can earn house points by making either the academic or effort and attitude honor roll, and by attending athletic and cultural events such as school plays or Opera Night. Butch was particularly pleased to report that fifty-four students had attended Opera Night. Clearly the house competition system is working! Teams are currently earning character points by placing address labels on envelopes for the American

Cancer Society. One team made the contact with the Cancer Society and then challenged the other teams to earn points by assisting with the task.

Members of the student government organization called the Leadership Council are responsible for keeping track of the points, and standings are announced at the beginning of each month. At the end of the year when the points have been tallied, the school will honor the winning house with an elegant dinner – they have already lined up the quartet! The dinner will be followed by a dance to which all of the houses are invited. That celebration should be a grand finale to an extremely positive and productive school year at Steward.

Why Advisors in Schools? Seven Good Reasons

- The “most preventive” of measures against school violence is a good relationship with an adult
- Good advisory relationships can offer important perspectives to teachers, coaches, and administrators
- Psychologist/author James Garbarino points to the importance of “enduring and deep relationships” characterized by “an unshakable sense of warmth, stability, and affirmation” as a key remedy for the *Lost Boys* he writes about
- Advisory relationships can offer islands of comfort in the lives of students who feel judged by teachers
- Advisors can play important roles in liaison with families
- Advisory programs break down artificial barriers of school grade, school interest, and individual talents that arise in schools
- Advisory programs offer advisors possibilities for contact with wonderful students they might not have known in the normal course of a student’s time at the school

Mission Statements for Advisory?

(What's the Point?)

“So we have these meetings with our advisees, and we consume several dozen donuts, but what's the point? What are we trying to do here? Couldn't we be using this time more productively?”

If advisors at your school ever raise these questions, then your program might benefit from the creation of an advisory mission statement. A mission statement helps members of the community understand the purpose of the program and also reminds participants of the meaning of their work and of the goals that they are striving to achieve. Because advising is sometimes seen as an “extra” or even as unnecessary, a mission statement can also help to formalize the advisory program and to illustrate its value. In addition, a mission statement will enable you to evaluate the effectiveness of your program.

The mission statement can be posted on the school's website so that parents are aware of the significant role of the advisor in their child's academic life. It can also be included in an advising handbook for faculty, and shared with candidates for teaching positions so that they have an understanding of their role as advisor as well as teacher at the school.

If you decide to develop a mission statement, you may find it worthwhile to have advisors contribute to its creation. Any group discussion about advising will provide advisors with approaches and tools that they can use with the students, so a ten-minute brainstorming session about the mission of the advising program could be quite beneficial.

Here are some elements that you may wish to include in an advisory mission statement. Choose the items that are an appropriate fit with your school culture and add ideas that will help you to define your program.

I. The goal of our advisory program is to match each student with an adult in the community who will . . .

- serve as a sounding board to help the student make thoughtful decisions

- facilitate communication among student, parents, teachers, and administrators
- monitor the advisee's academic progress and strategize regarding areas of academic difficulty
- assist with academic planning
- serve as an advocate in a disciplinary situation
- record student progress and celebrate accomplishments

II. The goal of our advisory program is to provide opportunities to...

- form relationships with peers and to collaborate with peers on a variety of projects
- reflect on academic progress, acknowledging successes and addressing difficulties
- articulate goals
- learn about issues affecting the local and global community
- ponder moral and ethical questions
- gain self-knowledge
- share what is on their minds
- take a break from academics, relax, and have fun

About AQ:

CSEE's *Advisor Quarterly* is a free publication for educators working with young people in schools. Please pass it on.

If you are not on our email list (not shared, used only by CSEE) to receive future issues of AQ, email “subscribe” to <advisor@csee.org>

This issue of *AQ* was edited by CSEE Advisory Consultant Barbara Dixon Ackerman and the CSEE staff. Submissions (also to <advisor@csee.org> regarding innovative programs and other ideas are both welcome and invited.

The Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education
800.298.4599
www.csee.org
<info@csee.org>

In the web:

Are Advisory Groups 'Essential'? What They Do, How They Work

The Coalition of Essential Schools does excellent work in several aspects of school life, but one focus in strong relationships between adults and students. In "Are Advisory Groups 'Essential?'" Kathleen Cushman outlines a number of models for advisory (are they for academic, or personal, purposes?) and formats for working within them ("some of the best advisory group discussions start with historical, literary, or scientific situations that pose compelling moral dilemmas").

This article, available on the web, is worth reading for schools rethinking their advisory programs, or for advisory looking for thoughts on how best to work with students in middle and upper grades.

http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/cespr/view/ces_res/8

Parent/Guardian Contact

Most parents and guardians will tell you that when the phone rings and it's the school calling, it's usually bad news. Why not surprise them with a congratulatory call? Be the provider of praise. Advisors can catch advisees doing something good; perhaps the student approached a problem in a mature manner or was an effective role model in a particular situation. Advisors can contact parents to share these observations. This type of positive feedback lets parents know that the advisor is in touch with their child and is available as a resource for both the child and the parents.

The advisor can also use this opportunity to educate the parents about the advisor's role. It is important for parents to understand that the advisor is not Mr. or Mrs. Fix-It. A vital part of every child's education is learning appropriate and effective ways to address challenges. The advisor's role is to help advisees to problem solve and to make their own thoughtful decisions.

At this point in the year, advisors might also contact

In the web:

Advisory Design Sequence

Many of us would not think about "designing" an advisory program; and most of our programs were in place before we arrived. Like most such entities, however, advisory programs are done well when they are thought through, when goals are set, when strategies for achieving those goals are outlined, when students and adults understand the purpose and how that purpose should be achieved.

Advisory Design Sequence is a simple, one-page PDF document that aims to assist schools in their missions to work with students. Five boxes of questions lead the reader from a look at school goals (what is our mission? what do we want our students to achieve?) through a look at advisory goals (what needs should advisory address?), to the more specific questions of design (how will it best serve needs in this school?) and strategies (how will advisors and students spend their time in such a way that the goals will be accomplished?).

The fifth box raises four important "Implementation Issues": is there adequate preparation of teachers and students? is the program adequately supported?, etc.

<http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/PDFS/design.pdf>

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parents to hear their perception of their child's progress. Advisors can call or email with questions such as, "What is your impression of what is going well and what is more difficult for your child at this point in the school year?" and, "How does your child seem to be balancing academic responsibilities with commitments outside of school?" If there are concerns, the advisor should clarify which, if any, the parent would like the advisor to raise with the student. These examples of open communication when things are going smoothly can help parents and advisors to work together effectively if the student encounters difficulties later in the year.