

## Academic Planning and Course Selection

BY BARBARA DIXON ACKERMAN

Part of your role as advisor may be to help students to select courses for the coming year. You will want to help them to design schedules that allow them to pursue their current interests while also helping them to discover and develop new interests. Helping students to select courses that match their abilities takes careful consideration. You want them to stretch themselves intellectually, but you don't want them to be in over their heads. You want them to get their tuition's worth, but you don't want them to be pulling all-nighters to get their homework done.

It is important to take the time to discuss students' choices with them. This helps the students to think about what each course is about, and what it may demand of them. These discussions can also help you to learn a great deal about your advisees. You may discover a bit about what motivates them as they comment on why they are or are not taking a particular course. They may be making decisions based on what they think they should take, what their friends are taking, what their parents want them to take, or what they think will look good on a college

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transcript. Take the time with your advisees to help them figure out what they themselves want to take. What are their priorities? What is going to make the coming year an exciting and eye-opening, yet manageable, one for them?

The process can also create a natural opportunity for parent contact. Contacting parents to discuss schedules for the upcoming year can help parents to understand course requirements and expectations. If parents have a good sense of the academic load that their child is carrying, they can support the child more effectively. These discussions can also help advisors to hear the kinds of hopes that parents have for their children. The following tips can help you to work with the student and the parents to design a schedule that is a good fit for each advisee.

- Make sure that your advisees understand the graduation requirements. You might want your advisees to keep a running list of the specific courses that they have taken to fulfill these requirements.
- If there are courses that advisees are looking forward to down

the road, make sure that they will have taken the prerequisites. You may want to have Upper School students fill out a four-year plan outlining the courses that they would like to take during their Upper School career.

- Find out about your advisees' extra-curricular activities and time commitments both inside and outside of school.
- Use discretion in scheduling multiple Advanced Placement courses since the students in these classes are doing college level work.
- Help your advisees to balance their schedules in terms of academics, arts, and athletics.
- Identify your advisees' greatest interests and help them to take advantage of all that your school has to offer in those areas.
- Remind your advisees that they can also pursue their interests through clubs if certain classes don't fit or are not offered. For example, if Ecology won't fit into a student's schedule, perhaps he could get involved with the school's environmental club. If Creative Writing is not offered, the student might consider working on the staff of the literary magazine.
- For rising juniors and seniors, you may want to check with the college counselor to be sure that the schedules that the students have selected will meet colleges' expectations.
- If advisees are having a hard time deciding which courses to take, encourage them to talk to students who have taken the courses before, as well as to the teachers of those courses.
- A situation may arise where an advisee wishes to challenge herself in a more advanced course than the one for which she has been recommended. In this situation, you may want to consider some of the following:
  - What are the student's reasons for wanting to take the more advanced course?
  - How demanding are the other courses that she will be taking? What effect will the extra effort required for this specific course have on her success in her other courses?
  - Is there anything that the student can and should do to prepare for this course over the summer? Is she willing to put forth that effort?
- Remind your advisees that they don't have to “get it all done” in Middle or Upper School. They will have lots of opportunities to select courses in college and beyond.

*From the CSEE Advising Handbook by Barbara Dixon Ackerman and LouAnne Smith*

## How did you do and how are you?

Teachers put a tremendous amount of time and thought (and did I mention time?) into the feedback that they provide for students at the end of each marking period. That feedback is only valuable, however, if the students act on it. Advisors can ensure that this happens by helping advisees to understand and follow through on their teachers' suggestions. The form below was designed for use at the end of the marking period when students are receiving grades and progress reports, but it could certainly be modified and used at any time to check in with advisees.

It can be difficult for students to be constantly evaluated by others. Part of the beauty of the advising program is that you, as the advisor, are not an evaluator. You can give your advisees the opportunity to assess themselves and to note their own progress. Students sometimes worry a great deal about one course or one teacher. Responding to questions like the ones on this form can remind them that they are multi-faceted individuals and that you, as their advisor, care about all aspects of their lives, not simply whether they are passing Chemistry. This form can be used as a springboard to further discussion about advisees' needs. Many of the concerns that they will raise will not have quick fixes, but if they feel that they have an advisor's care and support, their challenges can feel more approachable and manageable.

### How's It Going?

#### End of the Marking Period

##### I. Ratings

Please use the following scale to let me know how things are going. Feel free to skip any that don't apply to you or that you would prefer not to answer. Also feel free to add any comments or explanations.

-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----  
Really rotten So-so Good Great Couldn't be better!

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. This week
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Today
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Physical health and well-being
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Emotional health and well-being
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Math
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. English
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Foreign Language
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. History

- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Science
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Arts
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Athletics
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Extra-curriculars
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Motivation level
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. Organization level
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Energy level
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. Plot of favorite T.V. series
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. Success of favorite athletic team
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. Social life
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. Home life
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. World events
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. Other \_\_\_\_\_

##### II. School Life

1. The academic area in which I feel I've improved the most so far this year is . . .
2. The academic area that I need to focus on is . . .
  - Two specific steps that I can take to improve in this area are . . .
3. I would describe my homework load these days as . . .
4. I try to get \_\_\_\_\_ hours of sleep each night.
5. Significant assignments on the horizon include . . .
6. One person (real or fictional) that I am enjoying learning about is . . .
7. When my parents or guardians see my report card, I think that they will say . . .
  - I would like them to know . . .
8. I'd like my teachers to know . . .
9. Four adjectives that I would use to describe myself as a student are . . .

##### III. Life Life

10. Four adjectives that I would use to describe myself as a person are . . .
11. If I had 3 completely free days, with schoolwork off limits, I would . . .
12. Something outside of school that I am looking forward to is . . .
13. One other thing that I'd like you, my advisor, to know is . . .

*From the CSEE Advising Handbook by Barbara Dixon Ackerman and LouAnne Smith*

If you have made time in your busy week to read Advisor's Quarterly, chances are you are interested in new ideas or new directions for your advising program. There is no time like the present to begin to enhance your program. This point in the school year is a fine time to evaluate the advising system and to consider new possibilities. A survey can be a very helpful tool for gathering new ideas. You will probably want to tailor your survey so that it provides specific feedback on particular topics, but you can use the surveys below as a starting point.

As you process the survey suggestions, there will probably be several changes that you can put in place almost immediately that will have immediate benefits. Other improvements will require some long-range planning and these can be implemented in the fall. Perhaps colleagues and students will be interested in forming a committee to follow up on some of the suggestions. The more people that are excited about your program's potential, the stronger it will become.

## The Advising Program - Student Survey

We would really appreciate your impressions and ideas about different aspects of the advising program. Would you please take the time to write brief responses to the following questions?

1. What role do you think advisors should play in students' lives?
2. Are you happy with the way advisors are assigned or selected? Are there any changes that you would suggest along these lines?
3. What has helped you to form a relationship with your advisor? What suggestions do you have for how advisees and advisors can get to know each other better?
4. How frequently should advisees meet individually with their advisors? How often do you think the whole advisee group should meet?
5. What has helped or would help you to get to know the other members of your advisee group?
6. List 2-3 topics or issues that you think would be good topics for discussion in advisee groups.
7. List 2-3 activities that you think would be worth-

while advisee group activities.

8. If you attended another school before coming to this one, how did the advising program at your old school work? Were there any pieces of that program that you would like to see us incorporate into our program?
  9. What do you see as the benefits, or potential benefits, of our advising program?
  10. What else should we have asked in this survey? Are there additional comments that you would like to make?
- Your Name \_\_\_\_\_ Your Grade \_\_\_\_\_

## The Advising Program - Faculty Survey

We would really appreciate your impressions and input about different aspects of our advising program. Would you please take the time to write brief responses to the following questions?

1. What do you believe the goal of our advising program should be?
2. What makes advising challenging for you? What makes it rewarding?

### Resources

3. What resources (people and materials) have been helpful to you as an advisor? What kinds of resources would be helpful to you?
4. What adolescent developmental issues would you like to know more about?
5. Have you heard speakers at conferences or elsewhere who had good ideas about advising students? Might that person be a good speaker for the school to invite?
6. Are you familiar with advising programs in other schools? Are there aspects of other schools' programs that we might be able to incorporate into our program?

### Communication

7. What kind of background information would it help you to have about your advisees, and how would you like that information to be made available?
8. Does our system for communication between advisors and teachers work well for you? Are there any improvements or adjustments that you would like to see in this area?

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**In the web: <http://www.docmikebradley.com>  
**No, Your Advisor's Not Crazy!****

Doctor Michael Bradley, psychologist and author of *Yes, Your Teen is Crazy!*, *Yes, Your Parents are Crazy!*, and his latest, *The Heart and Soul of the Next Generation* provides valuable advice about addressing teen issues on his website, <http://www.docmikebradley.com>. The website includes background on Dr. Bradley, excerpts from his books, copies of eNewsletters, and a parenting forum where Dr. Bradley and parents converse on line about such issues as teen rebellion, drugs and alcohol, and single parenting. Advisors can gain wise counsel by reading Doctor Bradley's eNewsletters on

“...his central message is the importance of treating adolescents with care and respect.”

topics such as Prom Night and adolescents' knowledge of foreign affairs. While Dr. Bradley writes about a variety of topics, his central message is the importance of treating adolescents with care and respect.

Several of the eNewsletters refer to current research on adolescent brain development, and Dr. Bradley's analogies on this topic are particularly memorable. For example, in eNewsletter Volume 4, Number 4 entitled “Tween Sad and Confused” he states, “If you picture yourself trying to live in a house that's undergoing massive renovations, you have a sense of what life is often like for a young teen: Nothing works right, you can't find what you need, and sometimes the chaos makes you just want to scream. Teen brain renovations usually account for these 'crazy' phases, and just like those huge house projects, in the end they will produce dramatically wonderful results that can cause you to forget just how tough it really was.”

Later in the article Dr. Bradley uses a very effective sports analogy. “In baseball terms, childhood is just the regular season: Interesting and important, but drawn out and not very intense. Adolescence is the

playoffs: Everything gets faster, bigger, and very intense. Everything counts. The stakes go way up in the 'playoffs' of adolescence. This is no time for the coaches (parents) to stop talking with their charges.” A visit to Dr. Bradley's website will help advisors to talk more effectively with their adolescent charges as well.

### Advisory: What's the Point?

Advisors play key roles in our schools' moral development/character education programs. As a matter of fact, meaningful contact with an adult is a factor both in moral development—the way it helps bond kids to their schools and to the individuals in the school community—and in the “prevention” side of the equation: the one greatest factor in preventing school violence entails students having positive relationships with adults.

Why advisory programs?

- They insure that students have someone looking out for them.
- In schools where students change classes from one semester to the next, advisory programs provide stability and continuity of relationships (it is harder to “fall through the cracks”).
- They allow structured and unstructured time without the pressure of academics.
- They give students an opportunity to form a relationship with an adult at school—or adults to form a relationship with students at school—that they might not ordinarily have crossed paths with.

## Attendance, Announcements, and They're Off!

Some schools begin the day with a brief advisor meeting that serves as a homeroom period. Often attendance is taken and announcements are made. If your school's schedule is structured in this way, here are a few ideas about how to make these brief meetings worthwhile and something that your advisees look forward to. Five or ten minutes is not a great deal of time, but it is enough time to help to set the tone for the day. So often, students begin their days feeling rushed, hassled, and stressed.

The following activities might help students to begin the day feeling informed, curious, or amused. These activities can certainly be modified or combined for use in longer advisor meetings as well. The more ownership the students themselves can have of the activities, the better. So, students should bring in songs, ads, trivia questions – anything that interests them that might also interest the group and get the day off to a positive and lively start.

### Music

- Play a song or share song lyrics
- Play "Name That Tune"
- Students might be willing to play instruments for the group

### Media

- Read the headlines from the day's paper and perhaps students will be interested in reading the articles
- Share an article or a cartoon
- Analyze a magazine ad or commercial.

### Brain Teasers

- Challenge the group with weekly puzzlers
- Read Two-Minute Mysteries
- See if they can crack a code
- Pose trivia questions or play a round or two of "Jeopardy"

### Language

- Expand the group's vocabulary with The Word of the Day
- Learn words from foreign languages and signs from sign language
- Post and discuss quotable quotes

### Culture

- Share works by an artist, musician, or poet of the week
- Share facts about different people, countries, or cultures
- Read a page from a book that you would like to recommend to the group
- Let them know what happened "Today in history . . ."
- Provide information about an upcoming holiday
- Inform the group about upcoming local events such as festivals, speakers, and concerts

### Organization / Relaxation

- Spend five minutes organizing a section of a notebook
- Pass along a few academic tips and study skills
- Exchange stress reduction and healthy living tips
- Visualization can be quite effective. Perhaps have students visualize themselves performing successfully in an upcoming endeavor.
- Do some stretches to loosen up for the day
- Share five minutes of peaceful silence

### School Events

- Sign a birthday card or thank you note for a member of the school community
- Provide background information about an upcoming speaker or assembly
- Make reminder signs to encourage people to recycle, contribute to a drive, or attend an event.
- Collect suggestions for the student government to consider

### Environmental Ideas

- Meet outside one day and notice nature, perhaps as it gets close to Earth Day
- Exchange environmental tips
- Learn to identify trees, plants, or constellations

### On-going Projects

- Start a collection of something together such as stamps, bumper stickers, or autographs
- Create a time capsule with mementos from the advisees' year

## Hiring Time

Once the stack of resumes has been thinned and teaching candidates begin to visit your school for interviews, be sure to inform them about their role as advisors. Describe the structure and importance of the advising program at your school and outline their advising responsibilities. Let them know that you are not expecting them to be the school counselor, but rather a caring, interested, and well-informed adult who will listen to the students and help them to make thoughtful decisions. Discuss expectations in terms of parent contact as well. You may want to give them the advising job description in writing, since they are taking in a great deal of information on their interview day.

Find out if they have had previous experience as advisors or if this will be a new role for them. Explain how the school counselor supports advisors and let them know what additional resources will be available. Perhaps your school has an advising handbook or a resource shelf. Perhaps new teachers are given smaller advisee groups their first year, or are paired with an experienced advisor who can provide guidance and assistance with advising procedures. You may want to recommend a book or provide an article that they can take with them.

Educating candidates about the advising program lets them know from day one that advising is a priority at your school and part of their job that will require time and energy but that will also be quite rewarding. The advising program will certainly benefit them as classroom teachers because they will have other adults with whom to strategize about students' success. Advisors also assist classroom teachers by helping to hold students accountable. While advising is demanding, it can also be quite fulfilling. Some of the perks of the job include contributing to students' growth, celebrating their accomplishments, and developing lasting relationships. Who wouldn't want to sign on for that job?

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### Advisee Group Activities

9. Are there particular activities that you have used with your advisees that have worked well? Are there any activities that you do with your classes that might also be appropriate for advisor meetings? Do you know of something that a colleague has done during an advisor meeting that you might want to try with your group?
10. Do you have ideas about ways to build relationships between students in your group?
11. Are there some topics or issues that you think that the school needs to address that might be discussed in advisor groups?
12. Do you see ways in which the advising program could support other school programs (e.g. community service)?

### Time

13. Ideally, how often would you like to meet with your advisee group?
14. Ideally, how often would you like to meet with individual advisees?
15. Ideally, how much contact would it be helpful for you to have with the parents of your advisees?

### Sign Me Up!

16. If you are not currently an advisor, would you like to be?
17. Would you be interested in being on a committee to further develop the advising program?

Signed, \_\_\_\_\_

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### About AQ:

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

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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.

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