

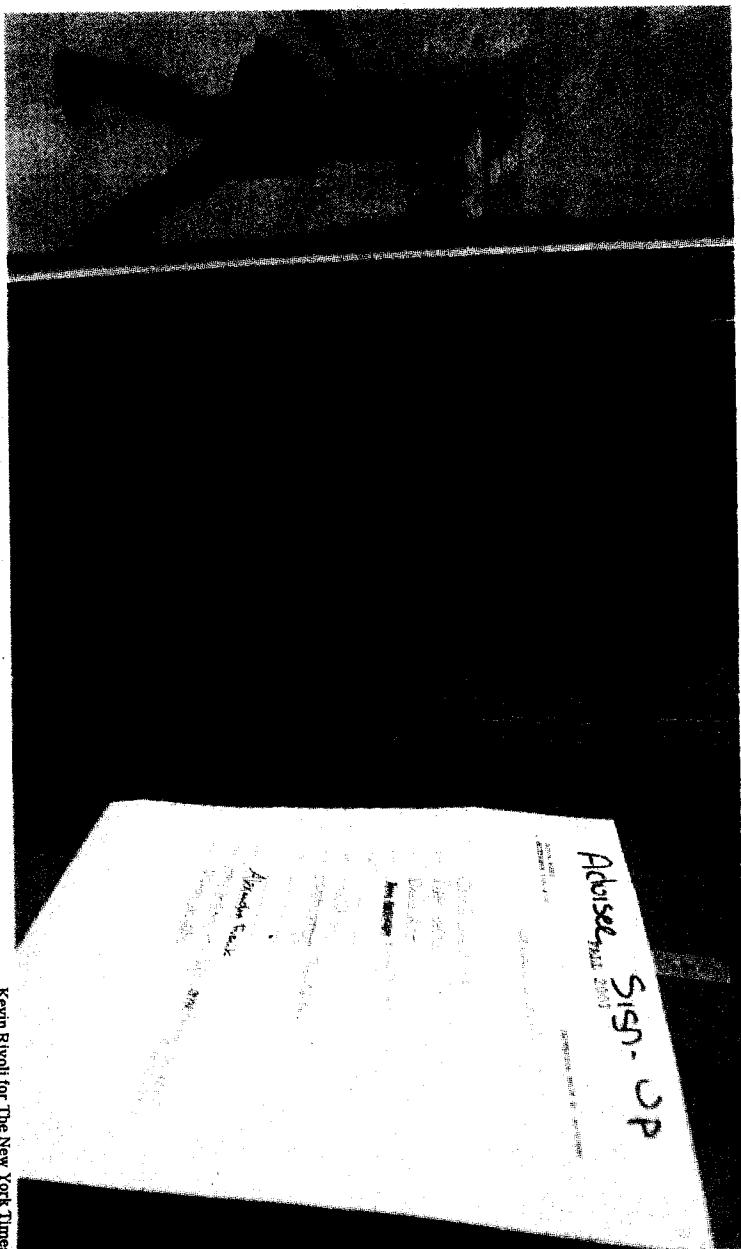
Take This Advice, or Don't

Faculty advising is becoming a lost art, and that's a shame.

FACULTY advising is like a blind date: given difference and adulthood, they are often ambivalent about the kind of relationship they want with an adviser. Should advisers be surrogate parents, friends, mentors or skilled professionals? Some students are looking for Mr. Chips. Some chafe at any decisive, directive adult. Some cling to anyone who throws them a lifeline.

"I felt completely overwhelmed during orientation week," said Alicia DeVirgilio of Malvern, Pa., now a sophomore at Cornell, expressing dismay that her faculty adviser did not tell her what classes to take. She did not bother to meet with him for the rest of the semester.

Graduating seniors and alumni are inclined to praise most aspects of their undergraduate education when they fill out surveys, but they routinely make an exception for advising. At all nine public institutions in Virginia, for example, recent graduates reserved their lowest scores for faculty advising. In its review this year of undergraduate education at Cornell, a reaccreditation team acknowledged that dissatisfaction with advising was "endemic at virtually all universities and many liberal arts colleges as well." According to a study submitted to the team, a majority of undergraduates at elite institutions were not satisfied with the advising they received before they declared their major.



A sign-up sheet on an adviser's door at Cornell. Studies show dissatisfaction with advising at many universities.

Kevin Rivoli for The New York Times

Students may get several advisers during their college careers — one whose mandate is to help them fulfill requirements toward several possible majors, and once accepted into a major, one assigned by that department to help them shape their major and prepare for a transition to the world of work. (A Cornell faculty handbook warns advisers to watch for students who sag toward the end. "Some seniors worry deeply about leaving school and being on their own," it says. "Consequently, they may find ways — failing a course or not — satisfying a requirement — to delay graduation.")

Faculty advising appears to be least effective the first year, when students need it most. Within days of arriving on campus, freshmen must select courses, keeping in mind college-wide requirements, and over the first two terms interpret academic signals as they begin to gauge interest in and aptitude for a major.

But most faculty members do not consider advising as important as teaching and research. The good students don't need it, the cynics say, and the bad students won't use it. These days, almost everybody manages to graduate anyway. "Adviser of the Year" awards that provide money and public recognition have not changed this thinking. Nor have mandates that advising be taken into account in tenure and promotion decisions. Difficult to evaluate, advising remains a tertiary responsibility to professors.

Aware of these realities, administrators have added an array of student services, from psychologists to career centers, to backstop or supplant faculty advisers. Full-time professionals at academic advising centers now meet emergency requests, evaluate petitions for exemptions from college rules or call in failing students. But with only two or three professionals for every thousand students, they cannot see, let alone get to know, all the students who need help.

Peer advisers, usually well-meaning juniors and

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seniors, circulate the received wisdom about who and what to take, invariably recommending the most popular, if not the most profound, courses. All of which leaves faculty advisers with a choice: Fight a losing battle with the grapevine or give the required signature on the registration form.

But faculty advising has not outlived its usefulness. Some professors still see academic advising as teaching in another guise. Faculty advisers, who have access to their charges' standardized test scores, past and current courses and grades, remain uniquely qualified to help students view their curriculum as a coherent whole and monitor academic and intellectual progress.

"The most important factor in retention rates is a relationship with an adult on campus," said Richard W. Brown, professor of history and faculty adviser at Ithaca College. "Usually, that means a faculty member." Students can increase their chances of finding good advisers and get more out of the relationship if they take some initiative and adjust their expectations:

- When possible, institutions match the academic interests of students with those of their advisers, but mismatches are frequent, especially in the most popular departments. Starting with an adviser on neutral ground, however, may actually be helpful since as many as 70 percent of undergraduates abandon the major they identified when they applied to college.

• Expect to meet with an adviser during orientation week and before enrolling each term. Consult with your adviser whenever you add or drop a course, even if his signature is not required. In addition to these visits, make an appointment within two weeks of the beginning of the semester, whether or not there is a problem, and at least two more times each semester to talk about ideas or assignments that excite or puzzle you. Orientation is the worst time for advisers and advisees to get to know each other; students are focused exclusively on choosing courses, and professors are overbooked. I plead with my advisees to visit me in November and do a good deed for a lonely man.

- The very first appointment with an adviser sets the tone for all that will follow. When a student stands at

the door, glancing nervously at other freshmen in the hall waiting for their appointment, with an arm stretched out clutching a form, the adviser is almost certain to say, "Where do I sign?" and end the session. Come prepared with a succinct introduction, describing intellectual passions, academic aptitudes, extracurricular interests, career aspirations and issues of special concern before turning to course selection.

- If a faculty member is unavailable, uninterested or demonstrably uninformed, ask for another adviser.

Since few students do, the request may be granted. You may also be able to pick your own. If impressed with a professor in a course, consider asking him to take you on as an advisee. In academia, as elsewhere, flattery works, but even if it doesn't, undergraduates who consider every professor an adviser and make extensive use of office hours invariably have a more rewarding academic experience.

- Students often "enable" bad advising by engaging in what Lynne Abel, associate dean for undergraduate education in the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell, calls "a conspiracy of silence." When an adviser asks, "How's it going?" and the student responds, "Fine," after he has just gotten a C when he expected an A, the adviser will happily move on to the next appointment. An adviser can help when alerted to bad grades or difficulty keeping up with assignments.

- Whether it comes from peers, parents or professors, advice about individual courses or instructors is subjective. "I like mustard on my pizza and enjoyed the film 'Attack of the Killer Tomatoes,'" Robin Torres, director of the Center for Advising and Academic Services at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., tells undergraduates. Good advisers will not be upset when students do not adopt a recommendation, especially if there is a good reason for choosing an alternative.

- Take a course from your adviser. There is a risk that if you do not like the course or perform poorly the relationship may be strained. But potential benefits are substantial — a knowledge of strengths and weaknesses as well as a relationship, based on shared ideas, that is not bureaucratic but rich and substantive.