

Questions for First-Year Advising: A Seasonal Guide

Many faculty have requested some more concrete ideas for facilitating effective advising conversations throughout the year. In response, we offer this brief summary of possible approaches and questions. The advice here is drawn from professional advising resources as well as from the CEP and from other faculty, staff, and students. We hope that you may find it helpful.

- Sarah Bolton, Joyce Foster, James Manigault-Bryant, Lee Park and Rosanna Reyes.

Advising and Mentoring Approaches:

- **Advising as teaching:** This model asks students to prepare for the discussion in their advising meetings, along the lines of preparing for class. The meeting then sets up a space for them to explore their understanding, to figure out what they don't know and how to go about finding it out, and to develop their skills for making well-informed academic decisions and plans in the context of their interests and goals.
- **Co-advising:** In this approach two or more faculty meet together occasionally, along with their advisees. The larger group can make it easier to have a broad-ranging conversation about making the most of Williams, and students benefit from hearing one another's questions. Older students might be added to the group occasionally as well.

Tips for Effective Mentoring:

- Act as a resourceful point person, offer connections, assist student in taking the first step (drafting an email, figuring out office hours, understanding appropriate ways to approach a professor or dean.)
- Show your knowledge by giving examples of alumni or others
- Encourage students to feel that resources are there for their success, that they are entitled to use them. Normalize use of these resources when striving for excellence. Encourage meeting professors, attending office hours, applying for fellowships, etc. Help connect students to people with resources they can use.
- Communicate high standards and confidence in the student --- "I want you to succeed and I know you are capable. Let's look at options you have for next steps to strengthen your learning in X "
- Help students notice leadership and other opportunities that they might be eligible for and benefit from.

Advising throughout the year. Advising only in the context of course registration periods can limit conversation to a practical matters. Here are some seasonally-themed questions and topics suggested by students, faculty and staff that may allow for a broader and deeper discussion over time.

I. Summer

Students are thinking about the basics, and preregistering for courses for the first time. Here are some examples of questions to pose before that first conversation with advisees, to help them reflect on themselves as learners and on their goals. You could also ask them to read "Choosing First Year Courses" before you talk, as a basis for your discussion.

- What have you most enjoyed academically? (Subjects, kinds of work, classroom experiences)?
- What do you consider to be your greatest academic strengths?
- College is all about developing new skills and strengths. What are the skills you are most interested in building, and areas where you feel less confident? (In conversation you might prompt them with some skills areas that are important for college work – reading effectively, writing in various formats and contexts, quantitative/mathematical skills...)
- What subject that you've studied before are you least likely to pursue here? Why?
- Do you have long-term goals for yourself, academically or professionally? (It's fine if you don't).
- Do you have any particular academic goals for yourself for this first term? (Examples: studying more deeply something you already love, trying some things you've never learned before, starting a major, building writing skills, getting to know a professor really well...)

Here are some topics that might form part of your summer conversation.

- “Where did you grow up? I’d love to know a bit about your community and your high school.” “ Have you thought about what life at Williams might be like?”
- How did the student come to choose Williams? (You could say something about how you made that choice, too.)

- Talk about exploring the liberal arts and the distribution requirements. How are they thinking about them? (One might use them to go deeply into a subject of interest that's not a major, or to explore one course in each of a range of topics...) Education is about pulling together tools that will enable you to keep learning throughout your life...
- Suggest some departments or programs that the student may not know about and talk about the kind of work there. (You want to strengthen your writing skills? Great! You could pick an English course, but have you thought about Philosophy? Art History? Comp Lit? Africana Studies?).
- Ask students where they are getting advice on course selection (family, high school teachers, friends, no one?). This can help you get a sense of whether there are specific family supports (or pressures) in play, and also whether the student is feeling alone in making decisions about college.

Some advice students have encouraged us to offer:

- Take one course every semester that falls outside your comfort zone.
- Spend time looking at the year, not just the semester. If there are subjects you plan to postpone to spring, make sure that's possible. (Some only happen once a year, some may have scheduling conflicts).
- Notice that some majors are quite structured and that starting them early matters. You want to explore, but also to plan.
- Early on, treat every course as if it could lead you to a potential major.... even ones that you think are "extra". Pick topics that you feel you have to learn about because they are so interesting- not just things you are good at.
- Don't rush to place out of every intro course you possibly can. Often, it's really important to take those classes at the college level. High school experiences are different from college ones, even if the topics seem similar.
- Try to balance types of work in a given semester (problem sets vs. exams, daily work vs. longer writing projects)
- Try not to take four large lecture classes if you can help it. Have at least one smaller course.
- Think of a couple of back up courses in case your first choices don't pan out. (Explain to students that they will hear from the Registrar in mid July about whether they need to go to a second choice of course.)

II. First Days:

At this point students have heard a lot of new advice since you talked with them in the summer. Depending on the extent of your summer conversations, now may be a good time to take up many of the "summer" topics, either again or for the first time. In addition, now is a good time to ask...

- What new ideas do you have about your courses now that you've been on campus a few days?
- Do you have new placement information that's influencing your starting lineup?
- What does your schedule look like, in terms of course hours?
- This is a very busy time. Almost every student has some concerns or worries about starting classes --- from getting books to figuring out sections -- is there anything you are concerned about?
- Do you know how to contact the prof. for your course to ask a question, or the chair of a department? (Show them how to find email addresses, help draft an email with a question in it as an example of what is helpful and appropriate.)

Some advice students encouraged us to offer:

- As you learn more, start making a list of courses/subjects you'd like to take "some day"
- Make it your business to get to know a professor - start this week! [Explain how office hours work.]
- Make sure you are clear on how the Honor Code works for each of your classes. If you aren't sure - ask.

III. Later Fall/Spring Preregistration:

Conversations in mid-fall tend to land in two areas - connection to resources, academic strategies and support, and further developing an academic trajectory.

On academic advice and support:

- How are things going? Help the student make specific connections to supports ...Writing workshop, Peer tutoring, Math Science Resource Center, Study Skills workshops. Encourage (and assist if necessary) direct connection with Professors. Ask about how the student is studying - alone? in a group?. You can help them strategize about how to form a study group in their class. If student is struggling a great deal in one or more classes, connect them to the Dean's office for support or to drop a class if necessary.
- How is your schedule/time planning working out? Are you finding places to study that work for you? Ways to spread studying out over the day or between classes?

On academic choices, planning, and settling in:

- Have you heard of any new subjects you want to explore?
- What are you enjoying the most in your classes?
- How are conversations with your parents about your academics going? (Can offer some assistance here, for example with thinking about range of careers associated with student's interests.)
- Are your thoughts about a major narrowing? Broadening?
- How are things in the entry? Have you found any close friends yet? A larger community?

IV. Winter Study/Spring:

Students at this point benefit by stepping back and thinking about what they've learned in the fall about their longer-term plan.

- Are their thoughts about majors changing?
- Are they thinking of studying away?
- Are there things they may want to major in that they haven't tried yet?
- How is their vision for the liberal arts evolving?
- Are there other experts (department chairs, for example) from whom they need to get specific information?

It's a good moment to check on how the transition back to home and then to school again is going...

- How were their holidays? What was it like returning home?

This is also a good time to start to think about summer as a part of the arc of the student's first year, for example.

- What do you anticipate doing this summer?
- How have your classes influenced your summer plans?

Students suggested we ask:

- In WSP, have you gotten together with a professor from fall? You have time now to strengthen that relationship... whether you built it in the fall or not.
- What would you like to have go differently this spring than in the fall? [This is a place you can encourage students to aim high, while also letting them know that studying/succeeding in college is something one learns to do, and that figuring out what strategies work best for them may take some time.]
- Are there resources you would like to add to your weekly or daily academic practice?
- Is there anything that you joined in the fall that you'd like to quit? Or things you'd like to join?

Resources:

Material on Microaggressions and Faculty Bias:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/11/opinion/sunday/professors-are-prejudiced-too.html>

<http://itooamharvard.tumblr.com/>

<http://itooamwilliams.tumblr.com/>

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/robinedds/students-of-colour-share-their-experiences-of-life-at-oxf>

An interesting piece on how advice to “do what you love” lands with students:

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/17/a-life-beyond-do-what-you-love/?emc=eta1>

References on Advising as Teaching:

Ryan, Carol C., *Advising as Teaching*, *NACADA Journal*, Volume 12 (1) 1992.

Magolda, Marcia and King, Patricia, *Toward Reflective Conversations; An Advising Approach that Promotes Self Authorship*, *Peer Review*, 10(1), pp. 8-11 Winter 2008

<http://www.dickinson.edu/academics/resources/advising/content/Advising-as-Teaching/>

Links regarding advising at Williams (including the Brief Guide to First Year Advising , Choosing First Year courses and more)

<http://faculty.williams.edu/teaching-advising/first-year-advising/>