

SYSTEMIC ADVISING¹

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INTRODUCTION

A college can push its students to choose certain classes and majors in various ways. Through a formal advising program, it can (politely) coerce its students to go in certain directions. Through distribution requirements, it can structurally force students into certain classes or types of classes. With prerequisites, it may limit some students' ability to get into other classes. It can mandate a core curriculum that students have to follow. All of these are initiatives that most liberal arts colleges have taken at some point in the past, and all of which incur "coercion costs." But there is another approach, which we will call systemic advising: advising by the entire system. Colleges can guide students to choose their classes and majors in particular ways by, first, learning about how students make these choices in the first place (which we have attempted to do here); and second, by offering classes and majors that meet the needs and wants of the students and are structured with a recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of specific departments. This approach attempts to resolve the issues related to students having "too much freedom" over their academic path without simply setting up a system in which all students must take certain classes. Systemic advising guides students down certain paths, while keeping others as open as possible, simply through the creation and arrangement of classes, combined with a strong information initiative. Of course, to work effectively, systemic advising needs to be tailored to a specific institution and to its unique student

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body. However there are a number of methods any college can employ to institute systemic advising successfully.

1. Expanding Selection and Maximizing Exposure

Simply put, if students are interested in a certain academic topic, the system should guarantee that they can pursue it. This might mean expanding course selection, adding some majors and necessarily bringing on new faculty, but if one of the central tenets of a liberal education is to allow students to discover and follow their interests, colleges must provide the resources necessary for students to do so.

For most students, an *introductory* course is actually an *only* course, so the best way a college can encourage the breadth of student interests is by offering lots of introductory classes. Students only have a year and a half in most cases to decide on their major, and many want to start on it early. Hence, exposing students to as many fields and professors as early as possible in their academic career is key to ensuring students discover their passions when they have a reasonable amount of time to pursue them.

A related way to maximize student exposure to different fields is to institute some kind of “sampler” course, where students could, for the same full credit as a regular class, sample different departments, perhaps by spending a month in one class and completing some assignments there and then moving on to other classes. Although the specifics of such a course would have to be carefully planned to prevent the class from being too easy, too hard, or too complicated, it would supply a high amount of exposure for a student who might want to sample a variety of disciplines.²

² As we will mention later on in the “requirements” part of the Systemic Advising section, it would be unwise to require new classes such as these.

The selection of concentration options could also be expanded as per student interest, and a student's ability to design his/her own major should be maximized so as to allow motivated students with interesting, inter-disciplinary ideas to pursue. Liberal arts colleges are already quite flexible, typically, in this regard, often providing avenues for interdisciplinary majors.

2. Increasing the Quality of Introductory Courses

Whether or not a college expands its intro course selection, it should ensure that the quality of introductory classes is as high as possible. All too often, newer, often less experienced professors are "stuck" with having to teach the introductory courses, as the more experienced and senior faculty teaches their field specialties in higher-level courses. In other cases, weaker teachers often end up, for one reason or another, teaching introductory classes. In both cases, students are exposed to new material that they might find interesting if it weren't for the lackluster way in which it was presented.

Introductory classes need to be taught by a department's best teachers for three reasons:

1) to make the first experience students have with a field as positive and interesting as possible, 2) to demonstrate to the student body that the quality of teaching in the department is quite high (reputation matters), 3) (the negative side of #1) to minimize the number of students who have a bad first experience with a field and who therefore stop taking classes in the field. By doing this, colleges can put their best educators front and center for their novices to learn from, minimizing the bad introductory experiences that plague the intro class system in many colleges.

3. Requirements

As with introductory courses, the quality of required courses, whether major requirements or general requirements, should also be of the highest possible quality. Students *have* to take these classes, and saddling them with an inferior professor, curriculum, or course structure (such as an extremely large course) is unfair in and of itself. Further, students who realize that their major requires multiple classes with a poor professor may completely discard the idea of majoring in that field.

Another more straightforward solution to the “bad professor” problem is to remove the requirements themselves—departmental and/or general. Of course, this is not possible, or even desirable, for many departments to do—after all, all fields hold on to a core set of beliefs, philosophies, theories, and methods required of all students in the major. However, there are ways of requiring students to learn about the core beliefs and practices of a field, as well as the breadth of the field, while also giving the students options within the field.

The philosophy department at the college we studied had a complicated but effective system to expose students to both the core ideas and the different areas within philosophy. Majors were required to take one of three logic courses, differing in teaching style, difficulty, professor, class size, and content. So all students were exposed to logic, central to philosophy, but they had options within that requirement to suit their schedule and interests. The same department divided up its discipline into two areas of philosophical study, and required that majors take three high-level courses: one belonging to the first area, and at least one belonging to the second. Overall then, students had lots of options while still covering the breadth of their discipline. Thus, the

department accomplished several important goals at once, with no discernable extra expense on either students or faculty.

Requirements of any sort limit students' academic options. Some colleges require that specific classes be taken by all students, sometimes in a specific year, and in other cases students need only take them sometime during their careers. Although requiring a specific course or type of course (such as freshmen seminars), as we have seen, severely limits students' choices. If these courses are handed off to junior faculty or are taught by bad teachers, the students' experience of these subjects is severely degraded.

A simple way to ensure all students receive the content that a college wants all its students to learn is to simply insert it numerous times throughout the curriculum of various departments. Students typically take a total of 32 courses during their college careers, and if a college includes this desired content in a fifth of its classes, it can make it highly unlikely that a student can avoid taking that material. In many cases where the desired outcome is, say, to improve students' writing or oral communication skills, colleges need not require that students take writing or oral communication classes—they need only saturate the curriculum with papers and public presentations in classes that already exist. This way, no faculty are devoted to teach a class specifically on, say, writing, but instead all faculty become at one time or another, writing teachers. There is good evidence to suggest that this kind of saturation of a curriculum with a certain skill is far more effective than simply requiring a single class on it (which can easily be forgotten). Further, by integrating material into existing classes, a college avoids the growing pains inherent in instituting new curricular requirements, which can quickly ruin the program in students' eyes.

In cases where the college wishes to require content that is more restricted in how it can be disseminated—for example, if a college wanted all its students to study ethics in at least one class—it is imperative that that college provide numerous different types of classes that cover that content, and at different levels. For the same reason that the philosophy department required logic, but offered three very different types, levels, courses to better suit its particular students, if a college wants to require certain material, it needs to maximize the options within that requirement as much as possible.

4. Providing Upperclass Students With a Breadth of Academic Opportunity

First and second year students are not the only ones who should be able to explore academic fields they are unfamiliar with—many upperclass students want to do so as well and are continually frustrated at not being able to get into intro classes because these classes are unavailable to them. A prevalent – and often inaccurate – belief behind preventing upperclass students from taking intro classes is that these students want to take an easy class, to both ease their workload and raise their GPA. (In addition, this is the legitimate concern that seniors may intimidate freshmen in classes.) Not only is this empirically rarely true (a majority of students express genuine interest in taking material outside of their discipline throughout their college careers), but it is logically flawed as well. The notion that an introductory class in a new field will necessarily be easy for the student ignores the fact that the student has no exposure to that field and might actually find it extremely difficult. Students who, for example, have focused almost entirely in humanities and in their junior year want to take an intro math class should not be prohibited from doing so because that class would be “easy” to them—it most likely

would not be. Some students express such willingness to see their GPA drop somewhat just to have some experience in a field that is unfamiliar to them. This behavior needs to be encouraged, not prevented.

There are some scheduling issues that would necessarily arise if juniors and seniors were allowed to take introductory classes—namely, the college would have to offer many more introductory classes to accommodate for the increased number of students that would enroll in them. As the college should, ideally, be offering more such classes anyway (as part of the “expanding selection” initiative), offering more such classes should not be a particularly difficult problem to overcome—it would simply require a shift of some resources.

Another possibility for departments would be to offer a higher-level introductory class that upperclass students would be allowed to take, which would be much more work intensive, but the content itself would be introductory in its expectation. The possibilities for such classes are numerous and, again, need to be tailored to the college, curriculum, subject, and student interest, but their goal should be to provide advanced students with the diversity of curriculum that first and second year students have, without sacrificing quality or resources.

5. Information Initiatives

Another step a college would have to take to implement systemic advising would be to create a way to make sure students know about all the available classes and majors they can take, as well as lesser-known interdisciplinary or self-designed majors, and how to access those options. One good side of the formal advising program was that many

advisers were quite informative, providing information about more obscure classes and majors to students who would otherwise be oblivious to them. Part of the problem this initiative would seek to eliminate would be aided by the expansion of introductory classes—as students themselves are able to sample more, they will have more exposure to professors and students in different fields who themselves can be valuable resources for information. Coupling intro-class expansion with a saturation of information about students' course and major options, the various strengths and weaknesses of the departments, and different departmental requirements, would probably eliminate scenarios where students learn about majors after it is too late for them to change, or learn about classes after they have been closed out. In cases where this wouldn't work, it is unlikely that even formal advising could have succeeded—if a student has no idea about an entire field of study, and doesn't take the small amount of time to investigate it, an adviser probably would have little influence over him/her.

6. Freeing up Faculty Time for Students

Another way to 1) provide students with the information they need to make major choices, 2) provide the students with a source of guidance should they need it, and 3) potentially provide them with an opportunity to develop a close relationship with a professor is to increase the amount of time faculty devote to their students, mainly through office hours, and to provide incentives to both faculty and students to use that time well. As faculty members are themselves often fonts of knowledge not just about their fields, but the college and its curriculum in general, students should feel comfortable turning to them for advice and guidance, interaction which would also further increase a

student's chance of developing a close relationship with a faculty member. As with classes, this time should be scheduled so as to maximize the chance students will utilize it:

The Chem Department in general is really nice about reaching out to people, and like very supportive. You know, I was freaking about it last year, and not comfortable. And they're great, [they] keep ridiculous office hours that they're there. It was like 11:00 at night, and I definitely feel very comfortable going in and talking to them. [Laura 03-04]

By providing incentives to faculty to offer more office hours later at night, perhaps by subsidizing meals faculty eat with students, and also encouraging faculty to require students to meet with them to discuss assignments or other class-related issues a certain amount of times during the semester, a college could significantly increase the chance that students who need academic advice and guidance can get it should they need it.

7. Targeted Scheduling

Another way colleges can structure their curricula to encourage students to take certain types of classes is to schedule them at times that students are most willing to take classes and will be most engaged and interested in being in class. Student preferences for class time vary by the different activities they participate in, and the different lives they lead. Courses are made attractive by this formula: subject matter plus professor, plus schedule. Generally speaking, Friday and Monday are more unattractive than the mid-

week for classes, and late morning/early afternoon classes are better than early or late classes. Different colleges, college cultures, and available activities cause this to vary widely, and so again, systemic advising through scheduling needs to be set up to fit the school. The general idea behind such targeted scheduling is to put classes the college, department, or individual faculty member especially wants students to take in attractive time slots. Hence, if a college wants its students to take all introductory classes for their first year, and wants them to be interested and engaged in them, it should scatter those classes around attractive times. Holding an intro class at 8 a.m. will effectively kill it—students will be tired, probably hungry half the time, and not interested in learning. Many will simply sleep through the class. Some professors seem to think that by scheduling their classes at unattractive times they will attract only students who are absolutely dedicated to the material. Some cases this will happen, but they will also exclude a good many students outside of that department who are genuinely interested in taking the class, but who, say, simply aren't "morning people." A problem that colleges should endeavor to avoid with targeted scheduling is putting too many of the same type of classes at the same time—overlapping 4 classes that a freshman might want to take all of, for example.

8. Minimizing the bad Faculty Effect

Experiences with poor teachers can and do ruin students' relationships with a department and hence reduce the likelihood that they will continue in the discipline. We have mentioned the importance of maximizing the exposure students get to a variety of fields throughout their college careers, while also allowing them the flexibility to pursue

their specific interests if they want to. We have also discussed how, in maximizing their exposure to new classes, the college should ensure that these classes are taught by the best faculty possible to encourage students to pursue that field. The flip side of that coin is that colleges should minimize the “bad faculty effect,” which occurs when a student takes a class with, simply put, a bad professor.

The bad faculty effect can be minimized in a number of ways, most of which we have mentioned earlier. By putting only good professors in intro and required classes, we make it more likely that students never have a bad experience with a faculty member. Removing this structural constraint is key, because then minimizing students’ exposure to bad faculty more or less comes naturally. As we have said, rumor and reputation will precede a professor, and taking measures such as, say, giving students the opportunity to evaluate their professors and/or classes, and then making some of this information public, will drastically minimize the bad professor effect. Other less direct measures a college could take might include scheduling classes with better professors for time slots that students find attractive, filling up slots that might otherwise be filled by worse teachers.

The whole issue of “bad teachers” is a complicated, political, and clearly controversial one, for numerous reasons we will (and need) not discuss here. If a college—its faculty and administration—wants to provide students with the best possible education, there are some uncomfortable truths it must face, and one of these is that some faculty are exceptionally good at teaching, have students who love them, and should have as many students as possible, while other professors are poor teachers, and should have as little exposure to students as possible. Recognizing this uncomfortable truth can have a

drastically positive effect on student outcomes, which should be the single most important goal of a college.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Systemic advising, when properly instituted in a way suitable to the college, can solve most of if not all of the problems that both formal advising, and an over-structured core curriculum seek to solve by coercing or forcing students to make decisions in certain ways. By understanding how students make important academic decisions, we can recognize how to shape a curriculum in such a way to as maximize student choices and minimize their opportunity to “abuse” the system and/or make bad choices.

There are cases where students are completely uninterested in academics, have no passion for any field, and actively look for ways to avoid more work—abusing the system by, for example, taking as many “easy” classes as possible, and fulfilling only the minimum number of requirements allowable. Systemic advising cannot provide for these students. However, it does not seem that formal advising, nor any other kind of advising or shaping of student choices, can have the desired effect on these students either. There certainly are students who have no interest in college and are simply there for the degree. Ideally, an admissions department would recognize this in applicants and reject them. A liberal arts education is more than simply a degree; it is an active participation in an intellectual and social community, and it requires at least a basic level of interest in some academic field. Still, disaffected students do enroll in liberal arts schools. However, an advising program—in whatever form—cannot and should not be built around the unadvisable. It must be structured around the most common denominator that students hold,

which is that most students have at least some interest in at least one intellectual field and have at least some willingness to take classes outside of that field.

Advising need not be a formal program, but can be integrated throughout the curriculum through the expansion of certain options. A student's freedom to choose his/her classes and major need not be a risky one, if the options are structured in such a way that they are *all* attractive and beneficial to the student. Doing this is a matter first of understanding the overall process students go through in making decisions, and second, of shaping the environment so that students have the resources, information, and options so that they *can't* make bad decisions.

LAYING THE GROUND FOR STUDENT-MENTOR RELATIONSHIPS

Formal advising programs have one primary goal—to guide students to make the right academic choices and set academic goals. But there is often a second goal for these programs – to encourage the development of close student-faculty relationships. Ideally, an adviser is not just someone a student goes to with questions, but someone with whom a student can discuss both academic and non-academic issues, someone whom the student can turn to throughout his/her time at college and even beyond for advice.

We know from our study of the various types of student-professor relationships that these close relationships are not only possible, but in fact quite common, and that they normally start when a student takes a class with a professor, meets her during office hours, likes her style of teaching and the material she teaches, and continues contact with

the professor after the end of the semester, either by taking another class, just dropping by to talk, or sometimes by making this professor an academic adviser.

There is little evidence that the advising program itself has helped create a close student-professor relationship—in the majority of cases where students stated that they were close to their adviser either 1) the students switched advisers to a professor whom they were already close to, or 2) the students likely would have grown close to this professor anyway, as the students were taking courses with the professor, who also happened to be their adviser.

The faculty and administration have not only recognized the benefit behind close student-faculty relationships but have attempted to institutionalize it and encourage it through the formal advising program. Although this secondary goal of such a program is well-intentioned, the advising program itself has actually caused very few close student-faculty relationships and does little to nurture existing relationships. Students who have these relationships with faculty, in other words, have them regardless of the advising system.

However, there are other initiatives colleges can take that will likely 1) increase the likelihood that students develop close relationships with faculty, and also 2) nurture existing relationships. The encouragement of close student-faculty relationships, which we will call mentoring relationships, should be systemic and not programmatic. Faculty cannot be assigned to students to develop these relationships, because such relationships occur naturally and organically, in the same way that all friendships do. Encouraging them then is an issue of 1) exposing students to the most faculty possible so as to increase the chances that they meet someone they can bond with, 2) promoting increased faculty-

student interaction by making the student-faculty ratio as good as possible, and by offering incentives to students and faculty to spend more time with faculty.

1. Exposing Students to Faculty

In the same way that it is important for students, especially early in their academic careers, to receive as much exposure to as many academic fields as possible, it is important for students to be exposed to as many members of the faculty as possible. Not only will this give them a better sense of what to expect from the department, but it will also give them more professors with whom they might form a mentoring relationship. The way to encourage this, again, is to have a good student-faculty relationship and to reduce structural limitations on students' class choice by as much as possible so that students have the freedom both to meet new professors and to take classes with professors they like.

2. Promoting Meaningful Interaction Between Students and Faculty

If exposing students to as many members of the faculty as possible is the main quantitative measure colleges can take to encourage the creation of these relationships, then promoting meaningful interaction between students and faculty is the primary qualitative way colleges can develop mentoring relationships. Through some of the measures we have already discussed, such as offering incentives to both students and faculty to spend more time with each other, and encouraging faculty to suggest that students visit their office hours during the semester, the quality of the relationships between receptive students and faculty can improve. Other methods, such as providing

meeting spaces outside of professors' offices for faculty-student meetings, improving the student-faculty ratio, encouraging faculty to participate in student extracurricular activities, and setting up curricular initiatives such as writing intensive classes (which encourage interaction when students meet with professors to discuss papers) could all potentially be quite effective as well. It is important, however, that these measures remain optional for students and faculty—again, in cases where either the student or the professor is not receptive to mentoring relationships, none will be formed, and it likely a waste of time and resources to encourage them.

Combined, systemic advising and the systemic encouragement of mentoring relationships will 1) provide students who need advice with a large number of resources to turn to, 2) provide students with increased information upon which to base their important decisions, 3) increase the likelihood of mentoring relationships which will greatly improve their ability to make effective choices and create academic goals, 4) structure the curriculum, culture of student-faculty relations, and academic content itself to provide students with the education they need and should receive, while maintaining their academic freedom. These two initiatives can resolve a majority of the problems facing students with regards to the curriculum while minimizing the effects on faculty workload and also increasing the chances that students develop meaningful and lasting relationships with faculty. Although other factors will limit a college's ability to institute some of these measures, the simple recognition of the process a college's students go through in making their important decisions can shed an immense amount of light on new ways to structure a college so as to ensure its students are getting the proper education.

