

Communicating Effectively with Advisees

Effective communication is vital to the academic advising process. When students plan their class schedules, they are not merely choosing classes for the following quarter, but are indirectly making decisions that will affect the course of their entire life. Because of the profound influence advising can have on a student's academic and career choices, advisers should keep the following principles in mind, provided by Pennsylvania State University (2014) and adapted from the NACADA Faculty Advising Training Program:

- **Listen carefully** and check your understanding by paraphrasing what advisees have said or by asking a question. Ask yourself whether advisees have asked the right questions. Too often, the correct answer is given by advisers--but the wrong question was asked by students, and communication fails.
- Use **open-ended questions** and similar techniques that enable you to discuss topics with advisees rather than allowing only "yes" or "no" responses.
- **Discuss** with your advisees their backgrounds and experiences, progress on their goals, and future plans. Such a discussion will provide you with helpful information, and it will reflect your concern for advisees as individuals.
- Most communications have both an intellectual and an emotional component. Listen for the **emotional message**. If the emotional part of the message seems to be out of proportion or inconsistent with the intellectual part, you may need to examine this discrepancy before a rational decision can be made.
- Always **keep notes** about what decisions have been made and why. A quick review before seeing students again will help you recall specific details. This is an important way to demonstrate your interest in students as individuals.
- The more effective approaches to academic advising go beyond informing and begin to involve some counseling skills including **helping** and **empowering**.
- **Respect** your advisees as people and show them that you respect them. One way to do this is to make a sincere effort to do an effective job of your advising.
- Encourage **informed decision-making** of your advisees. They are adults, and, more importantly, they must live with their decisions.
- Respecting advisees does not mean that advisers must agree with all of their decisions. The adviser role is to help them make **realistic decisions**. If advisers have reason to believe that students will fail or are making a poor choice, they should honestly discuss this perception with them.
- Know enough to recognize when one of your advisees needs help beyond your capability and know how to make a **referral**.
- **Be available**; you cannot provide even the basics to an advisee if the advisee cannot find you.

Common Communication Pitfalls

No matter who you are communicating with, there is always the potential for misunderstanding. However, your communication will be greatly enhanced if you can avoid these common communication pitfalls, listed by Ford (1998) in Example University Academic Advising Handbook.

THE DONT'S OF ACADEMIC ADVISING

1. **TALKING.** You can't listen while you are talking.
2. **NOT EMPATHIZING WITH THE OTHER PERSON.** Try to put yourself in his/her place so that you can see what he/she is trying to get at.
3. **NOT ASKING QUESTIONS.** [Ask questions] when you don't understand, when you need further clarification when you want him/her to like you, when you want to show that you are listening. But don't ask questions that will embarrass him/her or show him/her up.
4. **GIVING UP TOO SOON.** Don't interrupt the other person; give him/her time to say what he/she has to say.
5. **NOT CONCENTRATING ON WHAT HE/SHE IS SAYING.** Actively focus your attention on his/her words, ideas, and feelings related to the subject.
6. **NOT LOOKING AT THE OTHER PERSON.** His/her face, mouth, eyes, hands, will all help him/her to communicate with you. They will help you concentrate, too. Make him/her feel that you are listening.
7. **SMILING AND GRUNTING INAPPROPRIATELY.** Don't overdo it.
8. **SHOWING YOUR EMOTIONS.** Try to push your worries, your fears, your problems outside the meeting room. They may prevent you from listening well.
9. **NOT CONTROLLING YOUR ANGER.** Try not to get angry at what he/she is saying; your anger may prevent you from understanding his/her words or meaning.
10. **USING DISTRACTIONS.** Put down any papers, pencils, etc. you may have in your hands; they may distract your attention.
11. **MISSING THE MAIN POINTS.** Concentrate on the main ideas and not the illustrative material; examples, stories, statistics, etc. are important but are usually not the main points. Examine them only to see if they prove, support and define the main ideas.

12. **REACTING TO THE PERSON.** Don't let your reactions to the person influence your interpretation of what he/she says. His/her ideas may be good even if you don't like him/her as a person or the way he/she looks.
13. **NOT SHARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR COMMUNICATION.** Only part of the responsibility rests with the speaker; you as the listener have an important part. Try to understand. If you don't, ask for clarification.
14. **ARGUING MENTALLY.** When you are trying to understand the other person, it is a handicap to argue with him/her mentally as he/she is speaking. This sets up a barrier between you and the speaker.
15. **NOT USING THE DIFFERENCE IN RATE.** You can listen faster than he/she can talk. Use this rate difference to your advantage by trying to stay on the right track, anticipating what he/she is going to say, thinking back over what he/she has said, evaluating his/her development, etc. Rate difference: Speech rate is about 100 to 150 words per minute; think rate is about 250 to 500 words per minute.
16. **NOT LISTENING FOR WHAT IS NOT SAID.** Sometimes you can learn just as much by determining what the other person leaves out or avoids in his/her talking as you can by listening to what he/she says.
17. **NOT LISTENING TO HOW SOMETHING IS SAID.** We frequently concentrate so hard on what is said that we miss the importance of the emotional reactions and attitudes related to what is said. A person's attitude and emotional reactions may be more important than what he/she says is so many words.
18. **ANTAGONIZING THE SPEAKER.** You may cause the other person to conceal his/her ideas, emotions, and attitudes by antagonizing him/her in any of a number of ways: Arguing, criticizing, taking notes, not taking notes, asking questions, not asking questions, etc. Try to judge and be aware of the effect you are having on the other person. Adapt to him/her. Ask for feedback on your behavior.
19. **NOT LISTENING FOR THE STUDENT'S PERSONALITY.** One of the best ways to find out information about a person is to listen to him/her talk. As he/she talks, you can begin to find out what he/she likes and dislikes, what his/her motivations are, what his/her value system is, what he/she thinks about everything and anything that makes him/her tick.
20. **JUMPING TO ASSUMPTIONS.** They can get you into trouble in trying to understand the other person. Don't assume that he/she uses words in the same way you do; that he/she didn't say what he/she meant; that he/she is avoiding looking you in the eyes because he/she is telling a lie; that he/she is trying to embarrass you by looking you in the eye; that he/she is distorting the truth because what he/she says doesn't agree with what you think; that he/she is lying because he/she has interpreted the facts differently from you; that he/she is unethical because he/she is trying to win you over to his/her point of view; that he/she is

angry because he/she is enthusiastic in presenting his/her views. Assumptions like these may turn out to be true, but more often they just get in the way of your understanding.

21. **CLASSIFYING THE SPEAKER.** It has some value, but beware. Too frequently we classify a person as one type of person and then try to fit everything he/she says into what makes sense coming from that type of person. He/she is a Republican. Therefore, our perceptions of what he/she says or means are all shaded by whether we like or dislike Republicans. At times it helps us to understand people to know their position, their religious beliefs, their jobs, etc., but people have the trait of being unpredictable and not fitting into their classifications.
22. **MAKING HASTY JUDGMENTS.** Wait until all the facts are in before making any judgments.
23. **NOT ALLOWING RECOGNITION OF YOUR OWN PREJUDICE.** Try to be aware of your own feelings toward the speaker, the subject, the occasion, etc. and allow for these prejudgments.
24. **NOT IDENTIFYING TYPE OF REASONS.** Frequently it is difficult to sort out good and faulty reasoning when you are listening. Nevertheless, it is so important to a job that a listener should lend every effort to learn to spot faulty reasoning when he/she hears it.
25. **NOT EVALUATING FACTS AND EVIDENCE.** As you listen, try to identify not only the significance of the facts and evidence, but also their relatedness to the argument.

Ford, J. (1998). The don'ts of academic advising. In *Example University Academic Advising Handbook* (24-26). Retrieved from http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/portals/o/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/Example_Univ_Handbook.pdf

Becoming a good listener is challenging and takes practice. However, by taking the time to carefully listen to your advisees, you will streamline the advising process and reduce frustration both for yourself and your advisees. For more information on practicing good communication skills, see Schilling's (2010) steps for [effective listening](#).

Schilling, D. (2012). *10 steps to effective listening*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/womensmedia/2012/11/09/10-steps-to-effective-listening/>