

Bullying and “Badvising” in Higher Education

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Abstract

Most academic advisors intend no harm but do not realize the impact an insulting or discourteous comment can have on a student. In this study, graduate students discussed their undergraduate academic advising experiences and many described negative academic experiences. Some faculty advisors openly criticized other majors to students. Other students felt belittled by their advisors. A continuum of badvising is described, including minimal advising, neglectful advising, and advising that becomes bullying. The overarching theme is that ineffective advisors are more interested in telling than listening.

Keywords: bullying, ineffective advising

Just as individuals carry vivid memories of excellent teachers, they also often cannot forget experiences with bad teachers. Good and bad undergraduate academic advising experiences can also linger in one's memory years beyond graduation. Higher education studies often focuses on best practices while having a tendency to overlook poor practices. However, even if disconcerting, much can be gained from hearing students' personal experiences with bad advising. Anyone who teaches may be involved in academic advising, even if “academic advising” does not officially fit into one's position description.

Qualities of good advisors may parallel qualities of good teachers. For example, great teachers (and advisors) “respect students; create a sense of community and belonging; are warm, accessible, enthusiastic, and caring; set high expectations; and maintain professionalism” (Orlando, 2013, ¶ 3-9). However, when advisors engage in any of these qualities' opposite behaviors, it can lead to detrimental effects on the student. Further, engaging in these qualities' opposites would lead to unethical advising, yet many institutions continue to tolerate those who advise in this fashion. Raising awareness of the impact of this type of advising is necessary for higher education administrators. Bad advising experiences can have a direct impact on a student's decision to remain at the institution and general feelings about the institution upon graduation.

Bad advising, or *badvising*, seems to be a taboo topic in advising circles. No one likes to talk about it or admit its existence, and like bad teaching, it is conspicuously absent within higher education literature, but it is a topic that needs to be addressed rather than avoided. Similarly, research on professors' bullying students in college is also severely lacking (Marraccini, Weyandt, & Rossi, 2015). What is not as well-understood is the harm that bad advisors can have on students, which can be long-lasting. This is the first known article to identify and confront bad advising.

Badvising becomes apparent when advisors do not care about their students or the advising process. A common criticism to further silence the topic is “true, there are a few bad advisors but they aren't the ones who attend advising conferences or are interested in advising literature,” or “It's probably just a misunderstanding between the student and advisor.” A simple misunderstanding may not be that simple to a student. Quite likely, just as every institution may have instructors who would rather not teach, there are advisors (both professional advisors and faculty advisors) who would rather not advise, or worse, who should not be advising. A badvisor is someone who causes harm in some way to a student.

Bullying in Higher Education by Faculty and Staff

The only two known studies on faculty bullying behavior have reported between 14% (Chapell et al., 2004) and 18% (Marraccini et al., 2015) of college students have experienced bullying by professors. Marraccini et al. identified 11 behaviors on their survey to measure bullying by faculty. These 11 behaviors may be applied to academic advisors by simply replacing “instructor/professor” with “advisor,” including:

1. An [advisor] withholding information that affects your performance.
2. Being humiliated or ridiculed by an [advisor].
3. Being excluded by an [advisor].
4. Having insulting or offensive remarks made about you by an [advisor].
5. Being told or hinted by an [advisor] that you are incompetent.
6. Repeated reminders of your mistakes by an [advisor].
7. Having your comments ignored by an [advisor].
8. Having an [advisor] gossip about your sex life or spread rumors about your sexual activities.
9. Having false allegations made against you by an [advisor].
10. Threats of violence or physical abuse by an [advisor].
11. Acts of violence or physical abuse by an [advisor]. (Marraccini et al., 2015, p. 567)

Method

After gaining Institutional Review Board approval and explaining the study to 21 students enrolled in a graduate course on “Academic Advising,” all agreed to participate. Using a narrative phenomenological approach, I gathered a collection of individual stories (Creswell, 2005). Students told the story of their undergraduate academic advising experiences through reflective writing. Their stories would lead to the “essence” of the phenomena of the advising experience (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Trustworthiness was achieved in a few ways. First, students discussed their experiences in class as a means of member-checking and establishing credibility. Second, transferability was achieved when preliminary findings were shared at a higher education conference, as many program participants recognized similar student accounts from their campuses. Many students had wonderful experiences, but what plainly stood out was the horror stories of poor and sometimes even mean advising. The original intent of the study was to illustrate best practices in advising, but because of the intensity of these experiences and to underscore that bad advising is a prevalent, yet unacknowledged problem in higher education, these stories need to be told. Students discussed an array of advising experiences ranging from very little advising to neglect to bullying.

Results

The results were grouped into four categories based on participants’ response. The first is *minimalist advising*, where the advisor is not seen as competent. The second is *neglectful advising*, in which the student felt the advisor showed no interest in the student’s success. The third theme is *rude advising*, and the fourth is *bullying*.

Minimalist Advising

The student’s first advising session lays the point of reference that will create expectations for future advisors, for better or worse. If distrust develops with one advisor, students are unlikely to initially trust a new advisor. Unless the advising experience is especially horrendous, students may generalize that all advisors operate in similar ways. Kyla (all names are pseudonyms) reflected on her advisor:

He had absolutely no idea what he was doing. He didn’t know which classes I needed to take or which classes I had already taken. I was terrified because of my previous experience in signing up for the wrong class, and the fact that it almost put me a semester behind.

Jennifer, a first-generation community college transfer student said,

I expected the same type of advisement I obtained at the previous college. My [new] advisor did not spend extra time getting to know me or attempting to get a feel for my interests. I was never given advice or information. I was simply handed a schedule and sent on my way. I was under the impression this is how college worked.

There were some rather uninspiring advisors, often from faculty advisors whose primary foci are research and teaching (and therefore not on advising), in comparison to advising as a primary function of professional advisors.

Charity spoke of a dean:

Later on, when I had to do yet another degree audit, I met with the dean of the business department. That was a painful and truly horrible experience. The man seemed more incompetent than I had been my very first day of college. He acted like he was confused the whole time when he reviewed what classes I had completed and needed to complete in order to graduate.

Andrea said this of faculty advisors: "I feel professors who are also advisors to their students know their requirements but not necessarily the overall picture." Some faculty advisors were openly critical of other majors. One student was not completely confident of her business major and wanted to explore other options with her faculty advisor, only to hear: "Do you want to be poor the rest of your life?" Silenced and embarrassed, this student felt she had no choice but to remain a business major so as to not disappoint her advisor again.

Tasha, a marketing major recalled a conversation with her literature professor, who one day asked about Tasha about her major after class. Tasha stated, "I casually answered, 'Marketing.' With a grin on her face, she replied, 'So, you're going to waste your talent making ads for dish washing detergent?' That really changed my viewpoint." Another student, Greg, grew accustomed to not asking his advisor questions, partly because he did not think his advisor could have helped him:

Her job was to be an accounting professor; not to advise students. Honestly, I do not recall us ever talking about anything substantive or what I wanted to do with my life. I did not seek the help that I more-than-likely needed nor was my advisor capable of determining if I needed help and, if she did know that I did, I do not think she would have been able to provide it.

Neglectful Advising / Feeling like a number

Unfortunately, there was no shortage of neglectful advising examples. Amanda said, "During my entire undergraduate experience *I was never asked how I felt, what I wanted, what I thought I could handle, my goals, or what I was hoping to achieve through higher education*" [emphasis added]. Andrea said, "I would meet with an advisor who would put together a schedule, at lightning speed, and off I would go." Similarly, Lauren commented, "The advisor talked very short and to-the-point and sent me on my way." Jessica seemed to have "speed appointments": "When I would visit her she would just sign me up for classes, then usher me on my way. I cannot remember her taking any more than about five or ten minutes for any advising session." These advisors were not developing a nurturing relationship with their students.

At Beth's institution, the course registration period appeared to represent a culture of advising resentment among an entire department: "I received an email from the secretary informing me of my meeting time, to come prepared with course codes, and that the meeting 'needed to be brief' for *both of our sakes* [emphasis added]. Crystal said her advisor "spoke so fast that I felt as if my presence was an *inconvenience to her* [emphasis added]. I was so overwhelmed with the information that I had no idea as to what was discussed after our appointment." Tara echoed these sentiments:

During our meeting he would check my account to make sure I didn't have any holds and then he would look in my file for necessary classes that I needed to take. This whole process would usually last 15 minutes. I never remember discussing my future plans or how I was doing in classes.

Charity never experienced a good advisor: "I do not recall an advisor following up with me at any point in the semester at either college, making suggestions, or anything of that nature."

James shared this vivid recollection:

The advisor was very cold and distant. I remember being so disappointed with her. It kind of *set the tone for the rest of the year* and my time [there]. I feel like it could have been different *if she would have smiled, tried to get to know me, or showed some level of excitement. I had never felt like just a number in my life until then* [emphasis added].

Two students lost faith in their advisors and resorted to other informal "advisors." Jessica believed her advisor was untrustworthy. She explained,

Not having an advisor that you can count on is very frustrating. I had to go to staff members [in my major department] to get the answers I needed that I should have been able to get from my advisor. They are really the ones that I count as my "advisors."

Katie explained how she could not trust her professional advisor. She turned to her peers for advising:

Through the sorority I also learned of the horror stories of some advising experiences including encounters with bad attitudes and advising students into the wrong courses causing delayed graduation. I believe this to be the principle reason I stayed away from the advising center - the staff overall seemed to be overwhelmed and lacked a genuine interest in student success.

The increased trend on customer service in higher education is not one that Amanda appreciates. She said as an online undergraduate:

I felt like a customer instead of a student while communicating with any staff within that organization. As a “customer student” I felt used and somewhat mistreated and was glad to see graduation come and go without a second thought as to the welfare of the college or surrounding community.

Rude Advising

A difference can be seen between advisors who use “speed appointments” (to quote Jessica above), and those who are unequivocally negative. Rude advisors are not interested in listening to students and are not open to admitting mistakes. Katie, a criminal justice major, was not sure why she was placed in calculus, as her major did not require this course:

Trusting that the academic advisor was well-versed in course placement I did not hesitate when I was placed in a calculus course. On paper I met the minimum standards for this course but I barely squeaked by with C’s in high school mathematics and hardly a strong grasp on the foundational concepts.

Katie went on to discuss how this advisor’s work led to her withdraw:

This, in part, is what led to me feeling overwhelmed by college curriculum. Additionally, I was not treated warmly by the advisor or explained the roles in advising during the initial encounter. I cannot help but to think that if I had been treated in a more welcoming manner I would have been more apt to seek help than to completely withdraw.

Lauren’s faculty advisor told her, “‘If you are not getting the material now, you will be lost in the rest of your upcoming accounting classes.’ What she said made sense but I took offense from her *tone of voice*. It was a ‘Why are you wasting my time?’ tone.”

Bullying

Bullying of college students by college professors has received only slight attention. Three students encountered bullying according to Marraccini et al.’s (2015) parameters. Laura was ignored, Ashley was made to feel incompetent and humiliated, and Kyla felt incompetent, humiliated, and excluded, in addition to being insulted before her classmates and in the advisor’s office. Laura went to her advising appointment prepared, but was shut down:

When I showed this advisor my proposed class schedule, she was very speculative and borderline rude about my choices. She did not even attempt to figure out why I wanted to be in the classes, but told me she thought I was taking the wrong route. Never did she suggest different choices or options that I might have. When I explained to her what I was attempting to do accomplish, she simply moved on and put me in the classes I asked about. The way she handled my situation definitely discouraged me. I was hoping she would be able to clarify some options for me or help me fully buy into a program, but instead the opposite occurred.

Ashley felt belittled by a one department:

I went to the Psychology department and told them that I needed an advisor so I could get a Psychology degree and help people, and I was told that I was in the wrong place if I wanted a career in social work. I was embarrassed at my mistake, and left quickly for the department they recommended. The feeling that I had come to the wrong place and did not know enough about the field to choose the right major easily made this my worst advising experience. *All I wanted to do was get away.*

Kyla began as a math major but experienced sexist behavior by her professor who, also served as her advisor:

I also learned very quickly that throughout the next couple of years I would be one of the only females in my classes. This made me very uncomfortable, and after having a professor that constantly made me feel stupid and out of place, I decided Math was not for me.

Kyla's advisor seems to have exhibited a pattern of bullying. Kyla further explained, he "was not only rude to me in the classroom in front of other students, but also in his office. I felt very uncomfortable, and dumb, when I was in his presence. I had tried to go to my professor's office (who was also my advisor) for extra help many times, but no matter what I seemed to do he just would not help and *always made me feel unintelligent and worthless*" [emphasis added].

Limitations

In these stories only the student perspective is considered, and in many cases, the advisors may not recall these meetings at all. To the advisor, a conference with a student will typically not be the life-changing event that can develop for the student. However, what is common among these bad advisors is that they were more interested in telling than listening. Good advisors understand their students and come to know them as individuals. One suggestion is that when advisors have their students present in person, search for them by name, rather than number, in the institutional database. Advisors must listen carefully to what students are saying, and listen even more carefully to what they are not saying.

Discussion and Implications

Just as many institutions have adopted policies and programs to "tell someone" if students and staff notice students of concern, students and staff need to be empowered to "tell someone" when bullying occurs by faculty and staff toward students. Bad advising, and bullying behavior in particular, can no longer be a topic to tolerate or ignore. Some of the students in this study left their institutions with feelings of contempt and continue to hold an overall negative view of their college experience due to relationship they had with their advisor. Some mismatches between student and advisor are bound to happen due to personality differences, so the advisor should not be held responsible for all student satisfaction. Indeed, as an advisor, I have had students request advising changes both to me and from me, and it seems only logical and just for advisors to work with their supervisor to determine if a student should be reassigned--with the student's permission--when an advising relationship turns minimal or negative.

It is important for advisors and administrators to recognize the effects bad advising can have on students. By raising awareness of these issues, advising directors can become more effective in the screening and training process of new advisors. Current advisors should be reminded to extend basic courtesy to students and to hold conversations with students that reach beyond course schedules. Students must be greeted warmly and with genuine interest. Even great advisors would do well to reflect on how their perceived attitude and affect has impacted students.

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