Orientation….Still Recruiting

Beth Wolf, Director of Recruitment, Marshall University

I’ve often been asked why the Office of Recruitment is responsible for coordinating Orientation, and I always respond that it’s because we are still recruiting those students. They are not fully recruited until they move in to the residence halls (or show up for the first day of class if they are commuters). For the days of Orientation, all of us become recruiters, and we play an important role in whether a student remains committed to being part of the Marshall family.

While New Student Orientation is an exciting time when we start to see the faces of our incoming freshmen and transfer students, it can also be stressful. Long hours away from our offices—our “regular” work piles up while we go through advising student after student. Sometimes it can be difficult to keep our “happy faces” on when a student asks if they really have to take a class at 8:00, or when a helicopter parent tries to swoop in during advising. Yet we must strive to keep our demeanors warm, welcoming, and even comforting as our new students deal with the rush of emotions that come with the reality of seeing their fall class schedule in front of them.

For better or worse, I am often the sounding board for parents and students at the end of each orientation session. The better occurs when they stop to tell me what a great day they’ve had, and how excited they are for the start of the semester. The worse is when I have found myself intercepting a tearful student or angry parent when the stress of the day becomes too much for them. As advisors, you have the power to turn fear and frustration into happiness. Here are a few of the things I’ve noticed make the biggest difference to students and parents during Orientation.

First, students get nervous when something seems out of the ordinary, even if it’s not. One year I had a dad approach me in a panic. His daughter had called him crying because “she didn’t have any classes.” The reality was that her name had been omitted from the list of attendees for the day, so the advisors hadn’t printed her schedule out yet. But in her nervousness, she interpreted this to mean that there was an issue with her admission status and that she hadn’t actually been admitted to her chosen program.

Second, some parents arrive assuming that we want to keep their child here as long as possible. With the development of our four-year curriculum plans, I now have concrete evidence to show them that we are trying to make it possible for their son or daughter to obtain their degree quickly. When advisors provide students with their own four-year plan and mark which courses they are registered for, it helps reinforce to both the student and the parent that they are starting on the right track.

Third, most of our incoming students do not speak our lingo. I’ll never forget the young man who walked into the Don Morris Room trying to find his advising location. When I asked him what college he was in, he replied, “Marshall.” We become so accustomed to our terminology, we sometimes don’t even realize when we’re using it, or when it might be unfamiliar to others. Taking the time to explain to a student what a CRN or 901 is can go a long way in reducing their feelings of being lost.

Finally, remember that while we think of our advising interactions during Orientation as being short, rushed, and perhaps even inconsequential, the care you show for a student can stay with them a long time. We’ve all probably had students whom we advised during Orientation ask if we would be their “counselor” for their time here. Coming from high school, they are accustomed to working with the same person each time they have a question about scheduling. If we all strive to be the kind of person they want to see again, then we will succeed in making Orientation another effective and positive recruitment event!
SRC Presents at the NACADA Regional Conference
Jessica Jordan, Resource Specialist, Marshall University

On Friday, April 13th, Michelle Barbour, Jessica Jordan, Matt James, and Sarah Craiger represented Marshall University’s Student Resource Center by presenting at the NACADA Regional Conference in Charlotte, NC. Their topic was “Destination Graduation: Getting Undecided Students on the Right Track.” This presentation was noteworthy for the Student Resource Center, as they have been named the official advisors for all undecided students, effective fall 2012.

The presentation focused on the SRC’s implementation plan for undecided advising in the fall and their current strategies for helping undecided students find a major that best fits their personality and interests. The SRC has an exceptional ability to work with undecided students, as they have a direct link to Career Services. Michelle Barbour is currently the Career Services Counselor in the SRC and will play a large role in the advising process by administering career assessments and conducting career counseling sessions with undecided students to assist them in exploring their options and ultimately finding a good match in a major.

As for the Resource Specialists, they plan on using a student-guided approach to advising, by conversing with students about majors, programs, and the CORE Curriculum during each student interaction. The staff realizes that in order to effectively advise these students, they will need to spend extra time getting to know their students to successfully guide them to a career path. The SRC staff will also be providing each student with an undecided advising guide and requiring students to have more than one advising session per semester to ensure the advising focus is not only on class selection, but also on career building and major selection.

The presentation received positive feedback from all attendees and helped the staff to brainstorm additional ideas for their unique approach to undecided advising. As for now, the SRC is excited for the challenge of working with undecided students in the fall. They look forward to helping students “Get on the Right Track” and find a major they enjoy.

Negotiating Civil Discourse in Academic Advising
Shannon Burton, Michigan State University

Higher education professionals have come to recognize that our students are an amalgamation of their family structures, race and ethnicity, gender, religions, and educational experiences. As students converge upon our campuses, they are challenged to confront their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in new ways through coursework, the people they meet, and the extra-curricular opportunities in which they engage. Advisors hope to create environments where students feel safe sharing their views on coursework and their activities, but we realize that the comments students make can be positive, negative, or sometimes even inappropriate.

How should advisors engage students in deeper discussions when we hear comments about an experience that borders on incivility? What can we do to help students begin to develop healthy means to discuss experiences? Academic advisors can help students put their views and experiences into perspective when we teach students to maintain discussions that support, rather than undermine, societal good in the academic environment. While it may be difficult even for advisors to reflect upon controversial topics, there are strategies we can use to manage civil discourse. To facilitate appropriately, advisors must examine our perspectives on societal issues first.

Understanding Ourselves

1. Advisors should have an understanding of our views on issues so that biases can be checked. The key is to engage students and allow them to reflect upon what they are saying versus imposing our beliefs upon students.

2. Advisors should be aware of the ways in which we may respond to comments we consider “uncivil” and determine how we may mitigate our initial reactions. Remember, students should continue to feel that advisors’ offices are safe and secure places to talk about themselves and issues that may affect their academic success. Reacting, however instinctively, in a negative way may have reverberating repercussions for continued relationships. Additionally, as professionals and as representatives of the institution, we are role models for appropriate behavior and how to express views within the institutional culture.

3. Advisors should be aware of our communication styles and how these styles affect our interactions with students. We may need to offer other means for communication or ask for space to reflect so that appropriate responses may be given.

4. Advisors should encourage students to use the advising time to discuss ideas. We should let students know that regardless of their opinions, advisors will respect them and guide them towards academic success.

Once advisors set the above parameters, we can use the following strategies to help engage students.

Read more in NACADA’s Academic Advising Today.
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