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# Perspectives on Education: Advising in the 90s

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## Advising in the 90s

by *Barbara Apstein*

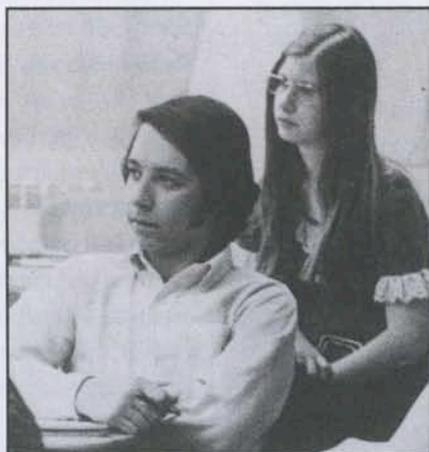
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No less than yearbooks, old college catalogues provide a window on the past. Not too long ago, while engaged in one of my periodic efforts to create additional bookshelf space, I unearthed a Bridgewater State College catalogue from 1971, and, leafing through it, tried to imagine what the College had been like before anyone had heard of car phones, C.D. players, junk bonds, or yuppies.

The 1971 catalogue is less than half the size of its modern counterpart, but then, it seems that everything was smaller twenty years ago. Bridgewater in 1971 had 3,500 day students; this year there are 5,300. Tuition was \$200 a year for Massachusetts residents. Girls favored mini-skirts and long, straight hair. Some of our most popular academic programs — Aviation, Management Science, Computer Science — didn't yet exist.

Some of the changes are less obvious. For example, the 1971 catalogue has only a few sentences on counseling: "Each freshman is assigned to a faculty advisor. Additional guidance by a professional counselor may be arranged through the office of the Dean of Students." In 1971, we thought that was adequate.

The 1990-91 catalogue devotes several pages to advising, and reveals a far more thoughtful and comprehensive approach. The creation of an Academic Advising Center marks the recognition that counseling is a full-time job which requires a professional staff: the current director is Tom Walsh, who works with associates Kirk Avery and Helena Santos as well as five faculty members. The Center focuses on the needs of the College's most vulnerable population, the freshmen. Walsh and his staff examine the admissions folders of all incoming students, attempting to learn all they can from grades, test scores, recommendations, essays, and other data, in order to assure the best possible placement. For example, Julie, whose test scores suggest an outstanding mathematics aptitude but who is timid and hesitant, is encouraged to undertake calculus. Hector, whose high school record reveals a reading disability, is steered away from a program heavy in reading. Mark, who has a heavy work schedule, is advised to carry four courses rather than the standard five. The advisers are keenly aware that events occurring outside of school can have a powerful impact on academic performance, and occasionally they are in a position



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to intervene. For example, a faculty adviser was recently able to help arrange a student's relocation from a difficult home situation into the dorm.

The Advising Center has also embarked on some innovative projects, most notably the Accelerated Calculus Program. Director Walsh and Mathematics Professor Jean Prendergast were intrigued by the possibility that students could improve their performance in math by working in groups. A research study conducted at the University of California at Berkeley had addressed the question of why Asian students experience more academic success than members of other groups whose S.A.T. and other test scores are comparable. The Berkeley researchers discovered that, unlike the other groups, the Asians studied cooperatively. With the help of a FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education) grant from the U.S. government, Walsh and Prendergast enrolled 60 students from among those groups deemed especially likely to benefit from the cooperative approach — commuters and minorities. These students meet to work on calculus in groups of five for several hours each week. An instructor is present, but in a passive role; she intervenes only when the students themselves have reached an impasse and are unable to move ahead. The results of the Accelerated Calculus Program have been impressive. The participants enjoy working cooperatively; in addition, their grades not only in math but also in other subjects have increased by an average of one letter grade.

There are probably a variety of reasons for the increased emphasis on advising at the College in recent years. The pool of 18-year-old applicants has declined, making retention of students more important than it once was. Events of the past decade have shaken our confidence in the superiority of American education. Studies, reports, and task forces remind us almost daily that American children are less well-educated than their counterparts in other industrialized countries. If these young men and women are to achieve their full intellectual potential, it is clear that colleges must do more than offer a curriculum and assume that the students can do the rest on their own.

The increased time and energy the College has devoted to advising has clearly paid off. Ten years ago, 44% of Bridgewater's freshmen dropped out before the end of their first year. One can only imagine the boredom, frustration, and bitterness which that figure represents. With the advent of the Advising Center, however, the rate of attrition began to decline, and by the end of this year it is expected to be approximately 16%.<sup>1</sup>

