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CoAT Workshop Reflection: Advising as a Teaching

I attended the CoAT workshop titled “Advising as Teaching” on March 18, 2008 in the FCTL conference room in Clark Hall. The workshop was led by Erin Robinson from OASIS and Barbi Honeycutt from the FCTL and there were approximately eight other attendees, some of whom were departmental advisers. We began the workshop with introductions and a statement of individual purposes for attending the workshop. Erin presented first, and she began by presenting the concept of “developmental advising” and several theories related to helping students to have a successful academic experience. We also discussed the three types of advising: information, student focused, and future focused. She followed her introduction to these concepts with a chocolate-fueled bingo game to stress some parts of the material. Barbi then took over leading the workshop and described how advising is subject to similar pedagogy as general instruction. We discussed active learning and setting concrete goals and objectives with respect to advising similarly to how we would in teaching. We finished by breaking into small groups and pairs and discussing some example advising scenarios.

One concern that had always bothered me was how to ensure that these meetings are productive. How do you make sure that your advising meeting isn’t more than just a chat? Barbi brought up the point several times that, for an advising meeting, there should be goals and concrete objectives and outcomes for both the student *and* the adviser. The measurable aspect of these objectives is vitally important. Without something quantifiable and measurable, it is impossible to assess progress (or a lack thereof). It seemed intuitive to me to set such objectives for the student, though I hadn’t considered the benefits of doing it as an adviser. I think now about my own adviser’s attempts to have all of her graduate students come prepared to a meeting with a list of completed activities for the past week and immediate objectives for the next week. While the structure is nice, we would all go back to just showing up with meet with certain talking points. Being an inherently unstructured person myself (hence my initial aforementioned concern), the idea of setting goals and concrete, measurable objectives for advisees and advising sessions seems important to maintain a constructive relationship.

The importance of this formal structure was truly reinforced during the scenario exercise toward the end of the session. Our scenario involved a student who was trying to determine whether to go to grad school, med school, or enter industry, and we were supposed to give her advice on how to proceed. In trying to create quantifiable, measurable objectives for the student, I think that we came up with a much better suggestion than if we had simply told the student to “do some research.” We suggested looking up three med schools, grad schools, and industry positions, writing a short blurb about each, and coming up with three pros and cons each for med school, grad school, and industry positions in general. Then, we would have the student rank their top three choices in light of this new information and discuss the result. Further discussion will yield more action items to further help the student decide, such as talking to the career center or participating in an undergraduate research project. When we finished discussing our scenario, I really felt comfortable with this structured practice, precisely because

it was measurable. Answering the question, “Did I accomplish anything with this student?” was now assessable and, therefore, actionable. Thanks for another wonderful and informative workshop!