Interview with an advisor: Summary

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I interviewed Kait McConomy, an academic advisor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC). She currently holds a Masters in Higher Education and is now pursuing her Ph.D. in Higher Education.

A typical day for Kait as an academic advisor involves “meetings, lots of meetings”. She meets with students to discuss major choice, upcoming class schedules, and current class loads. She also meets with administrators to discuss topics including freshman seminars, academic program specifics, and students that are “high-fliers”. It is not uncommon for her to have caseloads with more than 150 students, so organization is key to be effectively managing her schedule and provide prompt and accurate advising for the students. It is also important to be familiar with all relevant databases and processes because if, for example, “a student slips through the cracks and doesn’t sign up for the right class at the right time, they might not graduate on time”. Advisors also need to be able to multitask and never stop learning. Kait explained that “it simply isn’t possible to be a subject expert in all fields and classes, but it is possible to learn enough about the programs and progression of courses for different majors to keep students on the right track”.

Communication skills and resiliency are also vital for academic advisors. “You’re going to meet with a lot of mean and angry students. Parents also require extensive communication, especially now with the confusion with the pandemic and the recent consumerism mindset. Many parents think that since they pay tuition, they are allowed to make demands regarding their student, but often our hands are tied by FERPA so we can only share some generalities.” She continued to assure that these “helicopter and all too often, lawnmower parents” come from a place of love and concern, but as an advisor, you must protect the student’s information and remain emotionally resilient.

Interestingly, Kait explained that often the most challenging aspect of being an academic advisor is working with faculty. For example, faculty can be inflexible regarding allowing a student into their class, or they could make choices about program changes but neglect to notify the advising department. This creates miscommunication and confusion from both parties. There is also generally a sense that faculty respect advisors but occasionally faculty boast an attitude of, “I respect you, but you need to listen to me because I am faculty and advisors are administration”. This is just one example of the politics that goes into being an academic advisor. Advisors have to make sure that they are talking to the right people and that they haven’t crossed the wrong people.

One example of a situation where Kait was unable to help an advisee was when she met with a student and explained that this student needs to register for certain classes in order to graduate on time. The student did not register for the right classes, and this threw off the software the university uses for defining a suggested course of study. Unfortunately, this class was only offered once a year and cannot be substituted for another course, so the student was denied when she applied for graduation. “It’s one of those situations where I’m her advisor, and my job is to explain what the student needs to do to meet her goals…but when the student chooses to go rogue and not follow my advice, there just isn’t anything I can do. It really hits me hard emotionally though because it’s hard not to feel discouraged when something like this happens. I guess that’s where the resiliency comes in again”, Kait reflected.

Academic advising can be very rewarding, however. Kait explained that seeing a student who was struggling but then begins to succeed “gives you enough serotonin to get through the week!”. She continued to describe how advisors act like counselors and if the student feels comfortable with you, you get to have moments where you can provide the right resource to really help them. This is why she became an academic advisor. She gets to have an impact on many students’ lives and help them reach graduation.

When asked about advice for aspiring academic advisors, Kait stressed the importance of shadowing an academic advisor or finding an internship where you can see what advisors do first hand. She also suggested I try to attend a conference that academic advisors might attend and interact with them to ask them where they got where they are. “No one is an academic advisor in graduate school because a master’s degree is a requirement to become one. Just be sure to focus on assignments within the school and learn as many transferrable skills as possible”.

I learned so much from talking with Kait, specifically regarding the politics of being an advisor and the struggles of communicating with so many departments, students, and parents. It was interesting to hear her examples of parental interactions and how closely they aligned with Levine and Dean’s analysis of parental involvement. Our conversation also confirmed concerns about siloed departments and the difficulties this presents for academic advisors.

Academic advising has evolved at UNCC technologically with more efficient databases and software to increase communication among departments. Although advisors must continuously practice using new software, it seems to be helpful in organizing effective meetings and meeting the students’ needs. Additionally, more freshmen seminars have been put into place in recent years with the goal of increasing student retention and informing students of the resources available for them. Regarding professional development, Kait is pursuing her doctoral degree in Higher Education, and she feels supported by her department and her peers. She also attends conferences and training to stay current in her field. Professional development and being a life-long learner is a priority for me, so I look forward to pursuing these opportunities as well.

Finally, UNCC’s mission is to act as an urban research university that is internationally competitive, accessible, affordable, and boasts a culture that values social diversity. They also routinely benchmark their programs, collaborate with peer universities, and support the scholarly pursuits of their faculty (UNC Board of Governors, 2014). Between Kait’s reflection of her daily life and her support in pursuing a Ph.D., it seems as though UNCC’s mission is reflected in the support they provide to their academic advisors, and they surely expect their academic advisors to uphold their mission to the students as well.

**References**

UNC Board of Governors. (2014, April 11). Mission Statement. Mission Statement | University Leadership | UNC Charlotte. https://chancellor.uncc.edu/about-unc-charlotte/mission-statement.