

Who Am I? Where Am I Going? And How Am I Going to Get There?

The professional advisors in the College Center for Advising Services are there to help.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

Students who once saved existential questions for philosophy class are increasingly asking them in places such as the College Center for Advising Services.

The paths leading to the center's home at 312 Lattimore Hall are among the most well trod on the River Campus. In its labyrinth of rooms, as well as in nearby corridors, a team of more than 20 professional academic advisors help students on matters from the mundane—should I take this class on the S/F option?—to the fundamental—is this major, these plans, these ideas I've adopted, really who I am?

The center, known by its acronym CCAS, sits at the hub of a network of offices staffed with professionals who work collaboratively to help college students take advantage of opportunities they might not know about, and to get assistance when they need it. (You can find a list of them on the Web at Rochester.edu/studentlife/services.html.) During the 2015–16 academic year, CCAS advisors held more than 5,000 face-to-face meetings with students, and responded to thousands more e-mail and telephone queries from students, faculty, and other University staff.

Marcy Kraus is the director of the center as well as the dean of freshmen. The parent of an alumnus herself (her daughter, Leah, graduated in 2009), Kraus has worked in CCAS advising students since 1999. Her training includes a doctorate in psychology, which is fitting, considering that students will often approach academic advisors with complex personal problems.

"The range of concerns that students bring to us are much greater," she says, than in previous generations. "Students have health issues, mental health issues, family and personal concerns, and a lot of financial concerns."

In some ways, the skills of a good advisor are similar to those of a good clinician. In addition to knowing the academic rules of the College and the resources available to students, a good advisor, according to Kraus, "is able to listen without judgment, demonstrate empathy, and recognize how to effectively help students who are struggling with difficult situations."



KEY ADVISORS: O'Brien (left) and Kraus have shaped the College's approach to academic advising during years of growth and change in higher education and in the students it serves.

Kraus took over leadership of CCAS in 2009, after founding director Suzanne O'Brien took on other roles as associate dean of the College. O'Brien retired from the University this summer (see "Farewell, and Meliora," facing page), leaving her position as associate dean to Alan Czaplicki, and endowing her former position at CCAS. Later this fall, Kraus will assume the title of Suzanne Jagel O'Brien Director of the College Center for Advising Services.

O'Brien began advising students in the early 1970s, working with Miriam (Mim) Rock '42, then an assistant to the dean. When O'Brien was named the first director

of a newly formed academic advising office, among her early actions was successfully petitioning to change the classification of the academic advisor position from secretarial to professional. Professional academic advising was relatively new at the time, though, and not everyone was sold on the idea.

"Faculty in general were very skeptical of staff people—humph!—doing advising," says O'Brien. "We worked very hard to establish the advising office as a place where students and faculty alike could get reliable, accurate, and useful information, always based on the rules set by the faculty."

Attitudes have changed starkly since then. "The expectation now is that professional advisors know how to do the job, and the faculty contact the advisors to find out what the rules are," she says.

Farewell, and Meliora

It was elbow-to-elbow in the Meliora Grand Ballroom last April as President and CEO Joel Seligman remarked, “This is an amazing turn-out for the right reasons.”

The occasion was the retirement of Suzanne Jagel O’Brien ’59 after 55 years at the University—and nearly 60 years since she first arrived on campus as a freshman from Queens, New York. Rising to speak, O’Brien responded, “I hope I don’t disappear in a puddle of tears.”

From her first job at the University, as a secretary, O’Brien advanced to become founding director of the College Center for Advising Services and associate dean of the College, where she played pivotal roles in two of the institution’s most distinctive features: the Rochester Curriculum and the Take Five Scholars Program.

Her career path was not as easy as it may have looked, according to Beth Jörgensen, a professor of Spanish, who worked closely with O’Brien as chair of the College’s Board on Academic Honesty. “Suzanne came up through this university as a non-faculty member, as a non-PhD, as a woman, when that was not an easy way to make your gifts, your contributions, really valued,” Jörgensen told the gathering.

O’Brien served alongside faculty members on the College curriculum committee for nearly her entire tenure as CCAS director. “I’ve had a front seat from which to view the academic changes that have taken place,” she said. She called the Rochester Curriculum “the most revolutionary” change she’d participated in, and added, wryly, that it positions the College “still ahead of most everyone else, trapped as they are in their narrow, prescriptive curricula.” She noted that she was especially proud of having served on the committee that recommended the establishment of the Frederick Douglass Institute for African and African-American Studies.

O’Brien’s hands-on role in building and mentoring a staff of professional advisors, as well as her practically Talmudic mastery of the



COLLEGE LEADER: O’Brien served students for more than 40 years.

complex rules of the College, made her something of a legend on the River Campus. Summing up that legacy was Richard Feldman, professor of philosophy and dean of the College.

“I’m pretty much of a soft touch, willing to bend almost any rule as a result of a passionate appeal from a student,” Feldman admitted. “Suzanne repeatedly reminds me to think of all the other students who might have made similar requests if they had only thought to appeal. She is unwavering in her commitment to fairness and equity, adamant that we stick to our principles.

“But at the same time, she’s routinely able to find some hitherto-unknown—to me, at least—rule to invoke in order to deal in a fair and principled way with students who have genuine needs. She has an unmatched combination of integrity and compassion.

“To a rare leader who embodies the spirit of Meliora in the most profound way,” he concluded in a final toast, “thank you for your extraordinary service.”

—Karen McCally ’02 (PhD)

Suzanne Jagel O’Brien ’59

Career Highlights

- BA, English, Phi Beta Kappa
- Secretary, Center for Brain Research, 1961-70
- Director, College Center for Advising Services, 1973-2009
- Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies, 1986-2009
- Associate Dean of the College, 2009-16

Major Awards

- Goergen Award for Distinguished Contributions to Undergraduate Learning, 2003
- Susan B. Anthony Lifetime Achievement Award, 2007
- Witmer Award for Distinguished Service, 2014
- College Award for Distinguished Contributions to Undergraduate Learning, 2016

There have been additional changes, both in the student population and in students’ approach to their education. While the center’s advisors have long made meeting the needs of underrepresented minority students a priority—working with staff in the Office of Minority Student Affairs to do so—diversity has increased more recently

in other categories, such as international students, to name just one.


“The advising staff has grown because we’ve been asked to take on a greater level of responsibility for individual populations of students,” Kraus says. In working with an increasingly multicultural student body, advisors need what she calls “cultural competence,” while also guarding against assumptions about individual students that are based on broad demographic data.

Undergraduates also worry about their career prospects. That’s not necessarily new, but Kraus notes that students are taking on more significant levels of debt than in the past. Understandably, she says, they want to choose majors they’re confident will pay off. Widely held assumptions about particular majors, however, often are not supported by data or by the experiences of many alumni. But merely repeating data and anecdotes doesn’t effectively address students’ concerns either.

“The 21st-century academic advisor needs to be able to talk to students realistically, but confidently” about career prospects, says Kraus. This year, she’s working with Joe Testani, the director of the Gwen

M. Greene Career and Internship Center, to expand collaborations between the two offices. Career and academic advisors have traditionally held separate conversations with students. Academic advisors have tended to see part of their role as encouraging students to view their liberal education as something valuable and important apart from their career goals.

Kraus offers a hint of how such coordination might go, through a story about a student who came to see her last year. The student badly wanted to study Japanese, but was afraid of what her parents might say. Kraus and a counterpart in the Greene Center worked together to help her see “that if you want to major in Japanese, there’s a place for you in the job market.

“We want to do a better job of helping students connect the dots,” Kraus says. 

Vice President, Senior Advisor to the President, and University Dean Paul Burgett interviewed O’Brien for the University’s Living History Project in 2014. The videotaped interview, along with a transcription, can be found at <http://livinghistory.lib.rochester.edu/obrien>.