Sound Bites for Sound Advising
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Can you remember a pivotal advising moment when a question you asked caused a student to stop and respond, “Good point. I never thought of that before”? In that second, you realized you had a wonderful sound bite to remember, because that simple question challenged the student to develop a new perspective on his or her motivations, interests, or opportunities. As academic advisors, we engage students on a daily basis and ask the tough questions that encourage them to take responsibility for their academic success. We are pleased to have this opportunity to share with you some effective sound bites we have gathered, and to offer ideas for sharing your sound bites with your colleagues.

As advisors who prefer a developmental approach, we often find ourselves sharing helpful suggestions within our department. We are continually looking for ways to enrich the advisor-student interaction. How can we get the most from each advising session? How can we build rapport as we continue to meet with students?

From talking with others, we generated so many sound bites that we spread the word at the Regional and Annual NACADA Conferences. The wonderful interactions and ideas exchanged at both Conferences allowed us to compile an extensive list of sound bites from advisors across North America. We have provided a list of our “top ten” sound bites below, along with explanations of why we love them.

What brings you in today?

We feel the connotation of this sentence is vastly different than oft-used “How can I help you today?“ because it shifts the responsibility toward the student.

How important would you say it is for you to ______ on a scale from 1 to 10?

This gives students a concrete way to evaluate and quantify their priorities. You can use this question to determine how important it is for the student to clear academic probation, work x hours each week, participate in extracurricular activities, etc.

What are you passionate about? What fascinates you?

This is an in-house favorite that we ask students exploring their major options. This helps divorce the idea that a major equals a career and focuses on their strengths and interests.

What do you think will happen if you don’t change anything? What is the worst outcome if you do change? Best outcome?

Sometimes we encounter students who seem apathetic or stuck. To someone who feels this way, taking that next step can often feel overwhelming. This conversation script provides a catalyst for the student by reframing the dilemma.

Would it be okay if I told you some of my concerns regarding your plan?

This can be a powerful question from the advisor to gently but firmly express that the student has a plan that may be unrealistic or un-researched.

What strengths do you want to focus on?

It is important to provide encouragement to students who are on-task and taking an active role in their academic and career development. This question suggests students identify areas in which they excel and the core competencies they can build upon.
I can suggest advantages and disadvantages, but the decision is yours.

This statement is appropriate for students who have little experience making their own decisions or are expecting the advisor to tell them what is best for them. In other words, it puts the responsibility on the student to make an informed decision.

What can you do to break down these challenges into tasks that are manageable?

Goals can feel overwhelming without specific steps in place. As advisors, we can encourage students to approach problems in a step-wise and time-sensitive way that seems manageable.

It sounds like you have a number of concerns/questions. What are you most concerned about?

Often we meet with students who bring a list of questions to cover during the appointment. This sound bite allows both the student and advisor to focus on what is most immediate and relevant. It helps the student reframe his/her priorities more clearly.

Advisor Exercise:

Our hope is that reading our favorite sound bites has resonated with you in some way. If so, we suggest the following exercise to help spread the exchange of ideas:

- Write down 5 of your favorite sound bites. These can be ones you created or adapted from someone else.
- Find 5 sound bites from the list on our website that you would like to use and write them down.
- Work to incorporate these into your daily interactions with your advisees.
- Create an exchange program with your colleagues in which each of you completes steps 1-3 and shares your sound bites with one another.
- Let us know what worked well for you! We can incorporate them on our website to benefit the advising community.

We have learned so much from creating our presentations and dialoguing with our fellow advisors. In our student interactions, we have found these sound bites to be an excellent way of revitalizing our advising enthusiasm and understanding our students better. Students seem to like it, too. We hope that this has helped you to generate practical ideas for your advising sessions and rekindled your passion for working with students. Advise on!

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