Fourth Annual Star Family Prizes for Excellence in Advising

Established by James A. Star ‘83
The Star Family Prizes for Excellence in Advising were established by James A. Star ‘83 to recognize and reward individuals who contribute to the College through their exemplary intellectual and personal guidance of undergraduate students.

In addition to the recognition they receive, winners of the prize also receive an honorarium. Each year, we ask them to tell us what they think outstanding advising practice is. Such practice can take many forms, as the words of this year’s Star Prize winners attest…
1. Frequent, small interactions can give you meaningful insight into where a student is, and what they might need.

- While deep, life changing conversations can be the most rewarding and satisfying part of a student-advisor relationship, they can’t be forced. I know that some advisors have great ways of working those into a planned schedule of advising with students, but I struggle with doing that well, and try to meet students where they are, knowing that some are not always ready to think about where their life is going or what drives them. Instead, I focus on persistent, small interactions with my students, which allow me to get to know them, and create opportunities for deeper discussions.

- Frequent small interactions also lower the barrier to discussions with the advisor. Infrequent meetings might seem daunting. However, smaller discussions are easier to fit in to a busy schedule, and become part of the norm for the relationship.

- Lastly, frequent check-ins provide a more realistic overall picture of your advisee.

2. Empowering students to be their own decision makers, and peers as sources of insight

- There is a theme that comes up frequently in theories of student development that most students come into college believing in absolutes and that authority figures have all the answers. It’s a pivotal part of their growth to move into a place where they trust their own reasoned decisions, and understand that they themselves will be those authority figures, and that knowledge isn’t absolute. To this end, I very rarely tell a student what to do, but rather, help them understand the options and pros and cons of various courses of action and let them make their decisions, and own the consequences of those decisions.

- I try to also emphasize what good sources of insight and thought their peers can be. Every week, I post a question of the week in the entryway for people to respond to, which can vary from silly things, like “what non-traditional pet would you like”, to more academic “What issue are you passionate about?” or “What are you going to do differently this semester?” It’s a group bonding activity, but it also helps them see the interests and concerns of their peers.

3. Foster a sense of openness and non-judgment, especially about mistakes.

- I find that many students come to Harvard having followed fairly predefined paths of success, and are afraid both to explore new opportunities, and to take risks. It’s important for students to know that mistakes happen, that they are okay, and that their advisor is going to be empathetic to those mistakes. I emphasize at the beginning of the year that no topic is off the table, and that I’m not going to judge them for anything except intentionally hurting or disrespecting one another.

- What has worked best for me as an advisor has been to be open about my own path and the mistakes I made.

- Lastly, I would be ignoring my own advice if I didn’t mention my own mistakes here. There are students that I have alienated by asking them too many hard questions too early in our relationship. On the other end, I have students that I regret not pushing harder to think about their interests. Advising is tough, and it is impossible to get it right every time, but the important thing is to learn from your mistakes and do what you can to rectify them. In the end, it’s about trying to do right by the student and help them find their place in the world.
People sometimes ask me what Harvard students are like, and you might expect that after interacting with them for almost 20 years, I would have an answer. In fact, however, the answer seems to grow more elusive with each passing year. Each time I think I have Harvard students neatly classified into types, a new cohort arrives in Cambridge and changes everything. This is the charm of working with Harvard undergraduates. They come from everywhere, they do everything, and all they really have in common is excellence.

I remember spending a lot of time as a new adviser studying the curriculum, academic policies, and available resources. I was very nervous about possibly giving out wrong information; I thought students would expect me to know the answers -- at least some answers. These days, though, when I prepare for new advisees, I find myself thinking more about questions than answers. I’ve learned that most of my advisees do a very good job of going through the courses and regulations. Many can recite without notes what courses they want to take. A few arrive at the first meeting with all eight semesters planned out. What they need, it seems to me, is someone to hear them out, probe, and sometimes gently push back.

The longer I do this, the more I think of myself as a kind of counterweight. When a student arrives saying that her goal is “To become a diagnostic radiologist at a medium-sized academic hospital in either Kentucky or southern Indiana,” I feel uneasy with the specificity of the plan and challenge her to consider alternatives. On the other end of the spectrum, when a student arrives saying sheepishly that he hasn’t got a clue what he wants to do (and feels panicked because everybody else seems headed for a career in diagnostic radiology), I try to convey to him that he’s right where he should be as he starts college, and in some sense, he’s actually ahead of his radiologist classmates.

I can hardly begin to list all the things my advisees have taught me over the years, but suffice it to say, I think I have learned more from them than they have learned from me. I am still in contact with some of my earliest advisees, who now have careers and mortgages, partners and kids. It’s a privilege to have them in my life and to be in theirs.
To advise, the Oxford English Dictionary tell us, means to observe, to notice, to direct attention to, to consider.

When I find myself too quick with “advice,” I remind myself what it means, at root, to advise.

1. In general, it’s important to be non-directive, to use open-ended questions (“what would be the benefits of that choice? What would be the trade-offs?”) and reflective statements (“that sounds like a very difficult choice”), and to allow students to talk themselves through their own questions. However, there are those moments when it’s important to trust your instinct if there’s a decision that you think is clearly the right one, but the student is unsure, and be directive. In general it’s important to let students come to their own decisions, but it’s important to trust your instincts and be directive when necessary.

2. Take advantage of your networks. Without fail, friends and colleagues have been generous with their expertise and time. Don’t be afraid to ask them for help.

3. There is a tension in advising about the best way to teach students when they make bad decisions. In the past month I was approached by several students to write a recommendation letter with anywhere from 24-48 hours’ notice (in one case, it was past the deadline and the student requested the letter ASAP so their application could be considered). For some advisors, the best way to teach students that asking for a letter at such short notice is to decline to write the letter. I, on the other hand, fall in the other camp. While I do believe that it’s important to let students fail to learn, as someone who’s pretty young and making lots of mistakes myself, I don’t feel like I should be the arbiter of punishment for my advisees. I scold, I complain, but I still write the letter. I think it’s the right thing to do.
Always remember that there was once a time when something that is now easy was once new. That sense of angst and excitement of new adventures is something I try not to forget because it reminds me just how powerfully formative different experiences can be. I fundamentally believe that college is chocked full of those moments, both inside and outside the classroom. I am a first-generation college student for whom much was new when I entered Amherst College. From choosing classes to living away from home, I had to navigate much of my academic life with emotional support from my family but no real specific advice from them. Mentors at Amherst filled that void, especially mentors who did not take for granted that I knew the ins and outs of Amherst as a freshman. I bring these life lessons with me to Harvard.

Harvard is hard to navigate. Admitting to myself that I was a fish out of water really helped me connect to my sophomores—and all students more generally—early on. More than just realizing my own limited knowledge about the College, however, not making assumptions about what students know and/or want goes a long way in building relationships with them. To help fight the temptation to make judgments based upon what is just in the advising journal, I make sure to ask my students a variant of two questions in our first meeting, both of which ask them to define their own story. The first question is, “Tell me a little about yourself.” The second question is, “how can I help you make the most of your time at Harvard?” I always want students to take ownership of their relationships with college officials.

There are four practical things I want to conclude with that make advising go smoother, especially in the beginning of the year. First, protect your time. Being an advisor and/or tutor can take up to ten or twelve hours of every day if you let it. Schedule advising meetings in discrete time intervals using Doodle or some other scheduling system. I work better knowing when my meetings are going to occur rather than a steady stream of restarts caused by people trickling in. Second, choose a location that both of you feel comfortable. The topic of conversation can help determine where the meeting should take place but be cognizant that the most innocent conversations about the weather can lead to very heavy matters of life. I hold off of public meetings early on because not all students are used to this more intimate style of advising and being open in a one-on-one setting, let alone in public, may be emotionally taxing. Lastly, when meeting at local eateries like Starbucks, be up front about who is paying if you invite a student to meet you there. The angst that some students feel about being able to “afford” to meet with their advisor is something that should be minimized.

Third, make the student do the heavy lifting. Either ask students to bring laptops to the meeting or allow them to use your computer. Have them Google the requirements for Sociology, Social Studies and Social Anthropology if they are choosing between them. Have them look up the math courses they need for Engineering. It is not your job to have the answer to every scenario a student brings to your desk, especially when the answer is a few clicks away. Having them discover these easy-to-find answers helps them take ownership of their career at Harvard in small ways that they can build on. That does not mean we abdicate the advising role to Google, but we should not be our advisees’ only source of answers.

Fourth, be yourself and have fun. Find your way!
Olutoyin Okanlawon, M.D.
Sophomore Adviser
Resident Tutor in Eliot House
Clinical Fellow in Anaesthesia at Brigham and Women’s Hospital

A college mentor of mine once said, “you shouldn’t go through life with a catcher’s mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw something back.”

This quotation echoes the importance of service and social responsibility; I feel it adequately describes my view of advising too. I learned from some of the best advisors and mentors a person can ever have. They not only guided my career trajectory but also shaped me into the individual I am today.

The word, “advising” often yields a positive connotation. However, I have also been a beneficiary of bad advice; it is just as valuable to learn what to do, as it is to learn what not to do. With this understanding and dual perspective, I approach “advising” as both a privilege and responsibility.

Before my first advising session with my assigned students, I ask each student to fill out a survey that focuses on certain elements of their life experiences, ranging from their classes and academic interests to their relationships with their blocking group. This, combined with information in the advising portal collated from freshman year, provides context to my very first question. “So tell me about yourself?” Invariably, students tell me about their anticipated concentration, their career aspirations, etc. The simplest conversation starter turns into a job interview. Then I push further, no tell me about your SELF. What makes you upset? How do you define friendship? What are three words your friends would use to characterize you? How do you define success? Do you consider yourself successful?

I have been fortunate to be in a position to foster great advising relationships with a diverse group of students. I strive to be approachable and non-judgmental. Likewise, the strength of my advising is cemented on trust and reinforced by sincerity and authenticity. Advising is multifaceted and extends beyond study card day. While I do focus on academics, my style of advising is more holistic and tends to cover many other facets of life. Such intentional approach promotes self-care, encourages balance, and promotes introspection. The latter point in particular provides the basis for my conclusion and a few pearls that I have shared over the years with my students: 1) Willingness to face, no rather, embrace uncertainty in life is a strength not a weakness. Uncertainty often mandates reflection and sometimes that means pressing the pause button on the VCR (sorry, 20th century metaphor). 2) Curiosity breeds adventure. Ask Curious George. 3) Introspection should be a daily routine embedded in a lifestyle, not prompted by a life event. 4) You can’t live a fulfilling life without understanding what is within. There is an inner voice that is yearning to be heard and neglecting it due to “busy schedules” is simply self-defeating.

My role as an advisor, above anything else, is to help students appreciate the power they possess within as they continue on a journey of self-discovery and fulfillment. And I have been humbled and honored to be a part of so many students’ incredible journeys because these same students have enriched my own life and have inspired me to continue onward in this capacity.
Once, when I asked a mathematician-turned-philosopher friend for advice about travel in Nepal he replied “Travel is a very personal thing. Each person makes his own trip.” I knew this was true when he said it, and my trip itself bore out the wisdom of his comment. Similarly, each student’s trip through Harvard is uniquely his own. The nature of the trip depends upon the decisions made, the way challenges are met, the way opportunities are perceived and seized, and the way the student carves out his own path.

I don’t believe there is a fixed set of “good questions” that, if revealed, unlocks the secret of good advising. Advising is more of an art. While asking good questions is important, listening well is key. Who is your advisee? Where are her roots? What are her strengths, passions and aspirations? Keep your ear to the ground. Is your advisee taking advantage of the opportunities that present themselves? Is your advisee constructively moving beyond his or her comfort zone? What are your advisee’s challenges? Does your advisee have the tools to tackle these challenges? Is your advisee harnessing some of the resources and opportunities at the university for his or her own growth?

Advising is most often not in the form of advice but in turn, a form of support, of challenge, of encouragement, a form of mutual exploration, and a form of “life coaching”. By encouraging reflection, pointing out possibilities, leading advisees to explore possible pathways, we as advisors can encourage our advisees to appreciate their own journey and craft it into something uniquely theirs. The real treat in advising is the opportunity to work with undergraduates and to discover how wonderfully distinct and exciting each student’s journey through college can be.
The keys to good advising are perhaps the same as those to being a good friend:

- be fully present
- listen carefully
- share your experience
- help
- play
- and, maintain trust

One of the most important roles of an advisor is to work with students to find ways to address their academic concerns and to give students the confidence and skills to discover their own passions. Coming from a multi-cultural background and being the first in my family to go to a four-year college, I recall the difficulties I had adjusting to college life and the pivotal role of academic mentoring and a liberal arts education to my education. Those experiences made me appreciate the importance of following one’s interests, taking calculated intellectual risks that push creative and independent thinking, reading broadly and not just instrumentally (for the sake of doing well in a course), and writing clearly, persuasively and imaginatively. I try to instill these values in the students I advise in the Anthropology Department at Harvard University. Effective advising and teaching extends beyond the classroom and office hours – in chance encounters that lead to interesting conversations, in recommendations for courses and reading, planning of student events, or going to a museum exhibit. Advising is therefore also about thinking outside the classroom box. Most of all, I believe that good advising is being there for students: letting students know that they can count on your help can make a difference in small, almost invisible ways, but makes their educational experience more rewarding. Listening is an art form, and listening for what is not said – the problem that goes unacknowledged or the clarity sought but not achieved – requires even more patience than listening to what is said.
TERRY ALADJEM, PH.D.
Faculty Adviser
Lecturer on Social Studies

I am delighted when students take something they really care about, and turn it into an investigation that makes their college experience deeply gratifying—which should certainly happen in a Social Studies senior thesis. I ask them 1000 questions to help them discover their intellectual passion, and repeat their answers back to them to affirm what they are thinking. I also see myself as an advocate for my students who helps them find the courses and resources needed to pursue that inquiry, and to see the underlying connections in all of their pursuits.

During the thesis advising process, my students quickly become the experts, and I become their pupil, and I learn a tremendous amount from them!
Teaching at Harvard College may seem to be a singular experience—something of which I am reminded whenever tourists interrupt my classes to snap photos through the windows. I frequently encounter the assumption that Harvard students must be unusually confident, producing brilliant work without even having to try; they must be easier to teach than most.

Yet Harvard students also present distinctive challenges. With their intelligence often comes a tendency toward intense self-criticism. Harvard’s prestigious reputation breeds feelings of inadequacy, and the pervasive competition on campus instills terror of ever being wrong. These challenges seem to manifest especially amongst the students attracted to my courses on gender and African studies, many of whom are young women and students of color. To teach my students effectively in seminars, tutorials, and senior thesis workshops, as I do, requires mentorship of them as whole human beings. This mentorship ideally occurs over the long-term, with conversations about research, writing, and life extending past graduation.

Through our advising conversations, I aim to turn students’ self-criticism into an inspiring self-awareness, by treating them as intellectual peers and encouraging them to take intellectual risks.

Fostering self-awareness means making space for students to reflect on the central dynamic that drives them as thinkers. I ask what kinds of questions persistently concern them, in and out of class. We go through students’ previous choices in paper topics, extracurricular engagements, and reflections on their personal lives. I draw attention to underlying patterns connecting students’ diverse interests.

Treating students as intellectual peers means eschewing some hierarchy and formality—they call me Meghan, and I often bring my dog to our meetings—and showing that scholarship can be as joyful and collaborative as it is challenging. In an environment where students feel both respected and relaxed, they can take the risks that high-achieving students often fear. I emphasize that some failure is inevitable in any project worth undertaking, that much of what they write they will have to rewrite, and that there are always going to be typos, despite our best efforts. The key thing is to keep asking questions, without being afraid to answer them in unconventional ways.
While I have never given too much thought to my advising strategy, I think that the success of my advising is rooted in getting the students out of their comfort zone. In particular, I set up very high expectations regarding the skills they should acquire and the outcome I expect from them. Maybe because I cannot avoid thinking of every single undergraduate as a potential PhD student, I emphasize that they have to make the most out of their experience at Harvard to acquire the skills that will allow them to pursue graduate studies. I try to convey to them that they were blessed with the opportunity of being in a place where there are so many resources that other people dream of, and thus, that they have the duty to make use of them. I honestly believe that the acquired skills will pay off in the future, even if they do not land in academia. At the same time, while I ask for a lot, I also try to give a significant share of what I demand. I make an effort to be there for them throughout the challenging tasks I normally embark them on.
A Student Perspective

Nominators for the Star Prize were asked to share their thoughts on outstanding advising practice. Here is some of the advice they would give to advisers...

FRESHMAN ADVISERS

- Be accessible
- Get to know your advisees on a personal level
- Help your advisees to see the “bigger picture”
- Be honest with your advisees. Don’t simply recite the rules and guidelines in the Student Handbook
- Reach out to colleagues of yours who can help your advisees
- Do your research
- Be inspiring
- Don’t plan out your advisees’ entire academic careers
- Push your advisees to bust out of their comfort zones
- Don’t think of freshman advising as being just about helping your advisees to choose the right classes and signing off on their Study Cards; they haven’t experienced college before, and need advising on so much more
- Question your advisees when you think they’re being hasty! They’re ambitious and driven—which comes with the territory—but that doesn’t mean they’re always right
- Take advantage of Annenberg lunches!

SOPHOMORE ADVISERS

- Push back on your advisees’ thoughts and ideas; challenge them. Help them to put things in perspective. College is a time of significant growth; you have the potential to help students through what can be a confusing and stressful time. Step back and look at your advisees’ life with a broad perspective, not only focusing on academics
- Tend to the development of all parts of your advisees— the intellectual, the academic, the social and most importantly, the personal. Attend student events
- Follow up with students
- Be available and approachable
- Let your own experiences as a student inform your advising work
- Be well versed in issues of inclusion relating to gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, class, and ability status
- Meet your advisees where they are; show some vulnerability
- Go out of your way to help every student, even the clueless ones
- Don’t assume that all students have the same baseline knowledge (about graduate school, job opportunities, help-seeking strategies). The role of an advisor is to empower students to find their own voices, to encourage them to pursue their interests, and to guide them as they find their place at Harvard.
- Be sensitive to the family and career pressures on your advisees
- Emotional support is as critical as academic support
- Be proactive in reaching out to students
- Show your advisees that you genuinely care about them
- Be encouraging. The advising relationship should provide a safe space for your students to talk things through and be supported rather than judged by you
CONCENTRATION ADVISERS

- Help your advisees see the connection between college and their long term goals.
- Oftentimes the most valuable thing an advisor can give a student is reassurance that they are good enough, that they deserve to be here.
- Make time for your advisees because it means a lot to know that an advisor is as interested in your personal as in your academic growth.
- Take an active interest and in your students’ lives outside of the classroom.
- Openness is key.
- Encourage your advisees to pursue their true passions.
- Be patient.
- Don’t be afraid to give real advice! Share your experience and your wisdom.
- Build relationships of trust and friendship through relatively frequent meetings.
- Connect your advisees to a wider (and wiser) graduate community.
- Don’t set discouraging and/or unnecessary limits.
- Be knowledgeable about the resources available to your advisees and about how to direct them.
- Let your advisees make mistakes.
- Guide your advisees. Don’t hold their hands. Encourage them to be independent and to explore.
- Be willing to learn from your advisees.
- Be available.
- Encourage students to reach for the stars, but don’t stop there: offer to get them one step closer to their goals through a helpful introduction or a letter of recommendation.
- Make your advisees feel worthy of your time.
- Be down to earth and friendly.
- Be open minded and nonjudgmental.

FACULTY ADVISERS

- Be generous with your time; hold regular meetings with your advisees.
- Ask why your advisees choose the classes they do; make sure their reasons are the right ones.
- Take an interest in your advisees’ lives as a whole.
- Be available.
- Make advising a priority.
- Don’t over mentor; encourage students to seek their own answers, and to develop their skills.
- Foster a collaborative advising relationship with your advisees.
- Be open, supportive, and nonjudgmental.
- Be inspiring.
- Be approachable and patient.
- Help your advisees be resourceful and to feel a sense of agency in their intellectual and personal pursuits.
- Honesty is the foundation of a productive and rewarding advising relationship.
Congratulations to All Nominees

Leena Akhtar • Terry Aladjem • Bridget Alex • Angela Allan • Seema Amble • Laura Amrein • William Anderson • Sarah Anoke • Asad Asad • Jacob Barandes • Jamaal Barnes • Marguerite Basillico • Gasper Begus • Monica Bell • Alice Belser • Andrew Berry • Katia Bertoldi • Sujata Bhatia • Steven Biel • Lauren Bimmler • Kenneth Blum • Kirsten Bomblies • Allen Boyd • Lauren Brandt • Tamara Brenner • Kelly Brock • Michael Burke • Genevieve Butler • Kevin Caffrey • Todd Carmody • Glenda Carpio • Kate Cavell • Avik Chatterjee • Nick Chisholm • Amanda Claybaugh • April Cook • Sheila Coveney • Eleanor Craig • Deborah De Laurell • Sangu Delle • Robert Doyle • Ryan Draft • Danielle Early • Brandon Edwards • Mazen Elfakhani • David Elmer • Cassandra Extavour • Ellsworth Fersch • Karen Flood • Laura Frahm • Melissa Franklin • Leanne Gaffney • Kiran Gajwani • Brandon Geller • Karine Gibbs • Lauren Gold • Robin Gottlieb • Jonathan Gould • Jorie Graham • Phillip Grayson • Frances Hagopian • Edward Hall • Thomas Hammond • Shawn Harriman • Dave Harrington • Anne Harrington • Emily Harrison • Meghan Healy-Clancy • Morgan Hennessy • Caitlin Henningsen • Seth Herbst • Geoffrey Hill • Lindsay Hinkle • Brad Hinshelwood • Lara Hirner • Jennifer Hoffman • Carole Hooven • Brandon Hopkins • Chuck Houston • Evelyn Hu • Alex Hugon • Ming Hui • Mai Anh Huynh • David Hwang • Stratos Idreos • Anthony Jack • Bret Johnston • David Johnston • Bryan Kate • Gabriel Katsh • Stephanie Kenen • Hannah Kilgore • Charlene Kim • Mark Klement • Kohler • Lauren Kuntz • Brooks Lambert-Sluder • Susan Laurence • Anne Julie Lee • Joseph Lee • Lewis • Daniel Lewis • Light • Kevin Liu • William Lo • Alex Lynch • Susan Lyons • Laura Magnotti • Manrai • Geoff Marietta • Maynes-Aminzade • Leader • Loretta Molony • Masahiro Muralidhar • Kiran Musunuru • Sandra Naddaff • Benjamin Nelson • Elise Noel • J.P. O’Connor • Olutoyin Okanlawon • Omobolaji Olubulcoca Ogunsola • Alex Orquiza • Jason Outlaw • Mihaela Pacurar • John Park • Jisung Park • Pam Park • Federico Perez • Naomi Pierce • Scott Poulson-Bryant • Mara Prentiss • Phoebe Putnam • Alia Qatarneh • Jenny Quigley-Jones • Brendan Randall • Tom Roberts • Jennifer Roberts • Sophia Roosth • Ramyar Rossoukh • Sarah Samimi • Martin Samuels • Willeke Sandler • Daniel Schrag • Alison Simmons • Warner Slack • Suzanne Smith • Keely Soltow • Anne Marie Sousa • Ann Spokes • Peter Stark • Katie Steele • Patricia Stuelke • Frances Sullivan • Lauri Tahtinen • Bonnie Talbert • Lisbeth Tibbits-Nutt • Don Tontiplaphol • Gregg Tucci • Cori Tucker-Price • Heidi Tworek • Delia Ungureanu • Daria Van Tyne • Joseph Vitti • Jim Waldo • Dina Wang • Anna Wang Erickson • Nicholas Watson • Bruce Western • Ryan Wilkinson • Robert Wood • Emrah Yildiz • Danish Zaidi • Angela Zhang • Vanessa Zoltan

**Names in bold are those of past winners who were nominated again this year**

**Names in crimson are this year’s winners**

Special thanks to the many students who honored their adviser with a nomination, who shared their stories with us, and whose sentiments underscore the vital role of academic advising in promoting the transformative experience of Harvard undergraduates.