Fifth 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 themselves think outstanding advising practice is. Such practice can take many forms, as the words of this year’s Star Prize winners attest.

Harvard realizes this mission in part by pairing students with academic advisors who provide them with close personal and intellectual guidance in every phase of their undergraduate careers. The impact of advisors on students can be both subtle and profound.

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Freshman advising is great fun, and I have been working with Harvard undergraduates in different capacities for the last decade, as a research mentor, teaching fellow, proctor, and academic advisor. Many of Harvard's students have incredibly high expectations of themselves and they can feel very down for not living up to a standard they believe exists. There is a fear of not being good enough, focused enough, and perhaps most importantly, of not being on the right path for the future or making the right choices. It takes trust and respect before an advisor will hear these thoughts and I believe that building relationships is the most important step to good advising. I strive to be accessible to all my students and to get to know them. The interactions beyond purely academic advising are very important. You laugh, you learn something new, you are accessible to them not only as an advisor, but as a fellow human being. This is where you get that foundation, the necessary trust to have a discussion when problems or essential questions come up. As a freshman advisor I like my role as a sounding board, I want to listen a lot and ask guiding questions instead of giving advice. If I am asked a direct question, I give honest answers and if I don’t have them I get back to them quickly or I redirect them to the PAFs, the BSC, the dean, other proctors, faculty, former students or current students. I am also happy to engage my personal network of friends and colleagues to help students. For example, I have connected many passionate freshmen with academic labs and have enjoyed the gratitude from students and matched professors. I am pleased to still be in contact with students long after they have left the yard, and I enjoy hearing about how their fascinating lives unfold.

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**A Student Perspective on Freshman Advising...**

- Meet your advisees where they are; show some vulnerability
- Go out of your way to help every student, even the clueless ones
- Be Accessible
- Get to know your advisees on a personal level
- Help you advisees see the “bigger picture”
- Be honest with your advisees about what you know
- Don’t simply recite the rules and guidelines in the Student Handbook
- Be proactive in reaching out to students
I think there are two key things that I’ve learned in the past eight years of advising that have made me a better advisor. The first is to ask specific questions. In my first year of advising, I often asked very open ended questions – “how are things going? How are your classes? How’s life in your entryway? More often than not, my advisees would say “good”, “fine” and “good” and that would be the end of it. Now I ask more specific questions – “how do you like Expos? Have you started your first draft? Did you get any feedback yet? How do you feel like you are doing in the class?”

Even if my advisees don’t answer those questions, it helps them know that I am interested in their experiences and gives them a chance to talk about other things. The second thing I’ve learned is that to be a good advisor, you need to meet with your advisees somewhat regularly. A colleague of mine always ended her advisee meetings by scheduling the next meeting. Once I began doing that, my relationship with my advisees improved considerably. I generally meet with my advisees every other week or every third week for about a half hour. Because of this, I have a better sense of what is going on in their lives and what to ask about. They also feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and concerns with me. Advising is one of the most rewarding things I do and I’m always excited to meet the incoming freshmen. I also enjoy staying in touch with my advisees as they become upperclass students. I always ask them to give me advice – what did I do well as your advisor and what do you wish I had done better or differently? And I do my best to take their advice!

A Student Perspective on Freshman Advising...

- 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
- 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
Working with my freshman entryway this year has been one of my most enriching, inspiring, and humbling learning experiences ever. Perhaps the most critical lesson that has been reaffirmed for me is this: advising is a partnership. It’s a collaboration with one’s students, with the other members of their support team, and with our greater community as a whole.

When it comes to partnering with students, I’m constantly reminded that there is no “one size fits all” approach. Being consistently there for your students does not mean serving the same function or providing identical guidance for every person. Let each student tell you what they need and how you can be a resource - and strive to be a responsive listener! When helping someone through a challenge or celebrating a triumph, it’s tempting to project what you would need in that same situation onto the student; I certainly do this and have to redirect myself. While it can be tough at times, it’s so valuable to bring an open mind and an open heart to every interaction.

A common theme throughout proctor orientation is, “You won’t know everything - and you’re not expected to. Ask for help often.” As a newer advisor last fall, I entered the year feeling that I needed to have all of the answers; I would guess that it’s not so uncommon to feel this way, and it can be overwhelming. This message from orientation has been immensely reassuring, an invaluable reminder that you’re part of a larger team of experts. Be willing to be mentored; being an advisor does not mean you stop needing advising yourself. Be willing to not have an answer right away - by taking the time to draw on the knowledge of others, you better serve your students and you also build up your own advising tool box. Above all, remember that students have advising teams that are bigger than just you, so it’s essential to be a frequent and frank communicator with their other mentors.

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this caring and talented advising community!

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**A Student Perspective on Freshman Advising...**

- 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!
In the Category of Sophomore Advising

ROBERT E. ACCORDINO, MD, MSc  
Clinical Fellow, Child & Adolescent Psychiatry  
Massachusetts General Hospital & McLean Hospital  
Harvard Medical School  
Resident Tutor in Mather House

My best practices in advising have been carefully taught to me by the examples of extraordinary mentors throughout my educational journey starting with my parents, and most recently, at Harvard Medical School with such exemplary teachers as Drs. Laura Prager, Eugene Beresin, David Rubin, Eric Hazen, Suzanne Bender, and Anne Fishel. This award for which I am most grateful is a tribute to all of them.

Some characteristics of my most valued mentors that I have tried to practice with students in Mather House have included:

- listening empathically and asking thoughtful questions to try to understand the student’s perspective
- practicing unconditional positive regard for the student
- collaborating with the student to come up with tailored solutions to problems or concerns
- supporting students to reach conclusions that make the most sense for them

It is truly a privilege to be a member of a diverse community with undergraduate students. Getting to know students in a variety of contexts enriches the lives of both the mentor and mentee. In addition to meals together in Mather House and taking part in Mather House events, I have found it particularly beneficial to attend mentee’s events taking place outside of the House such as performances, concerts and sports competitions. These experiences further enhance the potential of the mentoring process.

A Student Perspective on Sophomore Advising...

- 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 encouraging. The advising relationship should provide a safe space for your students to talk things through and be supported rather than judged by you
I’ve been an advisor for the majority of my life, even serving as a “big sibling” to fourth graders when I was in sixth grade. This is because (1) I recognized early on the significant role advising had played in my own life, and (2) I was fascinated by how my own experiences, although already past, could be repackaged and applied in useful ways to my advisees. My formal advising roles at Harvard began my freshman year when I co-founded the Harvard College Undergraduate Research Association (HCURA) with the intent to make a strong advising program that would help undergraduates find and excel in research opportunities. I’m delighted to see that 10 years later the organization is still thriving and has advised hundreds if not thousands of Harvard students.

Since then, I have served as a Peer Advising Fellow, Drug & Alcohol Peer Adviser, Student Mental Health Liaison, and Resident Tutor at Mather House (with an emphasis on premedical, pre-career, and sophomore advising). These experiences have enabled me to work with students on multiple areas of their lives and, in the process, given me a strong sense of what advisees are looking for: an experienced listener.

The majority of my advising conversations are spent listening to my advisees. Stephen Covey said, “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.” I think this is an easy trap to fall into as an adviser; after all, aren’t you supposed to give advice? Through a lot of practice (both with students and patients, from my time in medical school) I’ve realized that people often need a third party sounding board who can help them organize their competing thoughts to ultimately find the best decision. This is even more important now that people spend less time listening to each other given all of the available distractions.

While active listening can take an advisee most of the way there, the role of experience should not be discounted (Albert Einstein wrote, “The only source of knowledge is experience.”) Advisees are more apt to listen and follow advice if they feel like you have experience dealing with similar issues. I’ve thus made it a habit to share an overview of my experiences in many different areas with advisees so they feel comfortable approaching me, not only for premedical and pre-career conversations but also for other areas of their personal and professional lives.

I look forward to serving as an advisor for many years to come. Thank you for this honor and opportunity.

A Student Perspective on Sophomore Advising...

- Show your advisees that you genuinely care about them
- Be available and approachable
Over my tenure as an advisor, I have been privileged to work with amazing peers and students. I have learned so much from so many and deeply believe that **good advising only happens when advisors have vibrant networks of colleagues who serve as consultants, reliable referral sources, and supports for personal and professional issues.** Alone we cannot hope to understand the diverse sets of experiences of our students or have knowledge of the wide array of resources that might be useful to them. **We can only support students’ personal, social and intellectual development when we are committed to our own parallel growth.** This requires a dynamic community of peers who challenge and support one another. Capturing all that I have learned from inspirational peers who have challenged and supported me would be impossible. Here are three lessons that guide my work:

**Be the Wizard of Oz**
The first advisor that truly had an impact on my life told me decades ago that **being a good advisor is like being the Wizard of Oz.** Looking for and labeling people’s strengths can be incredibly powerful, especially if they have not yet been able to articulate these strengths for themselves. Often **reflecting back the strengths that you see in a student creates possibility models that build confidence and opportunities for growth.**

**Help Them to Have “Ah Ha” Moments**
Whether or not you have the answer does not matter. **What matters is that students find their own answers. Inquiry is one of your most powerful tools as an advisor.** I frequently find myself thinking that I have the answer that will solve a student’s problem. In my better moments, rather than blurting out my quickly formed cure-all, I find myself **asking questions that allow the student to explore their points of tension and work through barriers.** After listening to the student’s reflections, advice is either unnecessary or better informed.

**Show Up**
Perhaps what we crave most is to matter. **Advisors can play a critical role in helping students to connect to the community and feel valued.** Showing up for students in difficult times, joyful times and the times in between signals to students that they matter. Whether you attend performances and games, share meals or bear witness to a student’s struggles over a cup of tea, presence builds trust and communicates care.

**A Student Perspective on Sophomore Advising...**

- Don’t set discouraging and/or unnecessary limits
- Be sensitive to the family and career pressures on your advisees
Chris Lombardo
Assistant Director for Undergraduate Studies, Engineering Sciences
Lecturer on Engineering Sciences, School of Engineering and Applied Sciences

When I think back to my own advising experience, it seemed very mechanical. I went to my academic advisor, she checked the classes that I needed to take in the next semester, and she made sure that I was on track to graduate. She was effective, efficient, personable, and caring, but there was something lacking in our relationship. My advisor was unable to bring life experience in research or industry practice to our advising process, which is a crucial element of the advising relationship. I believe that advising should really be about connecting life experience to the academic environment as opposed to solely enforcing academic policies and ensuring that students have checked all of the boxes for graduation.

For each of the students I meet with, I try to learn about what motivates them, whether it's building the next electric car, designing robots to automate our future, or ensuring a supply of clean energy for our planet. It is these areas of interest, those “perfect future jobs”, where I can get students to begin to lay out a path for their future. This path is not solely about what concentration to choose or what electives to shop, but, more importantly, how the student can enrich their learning by moving beyond classroom experiences. A student could pursue an internship or research in a faculty lab, extra-curricular activities where they use what they have learned in the classroom in a new or different situation, an international experience, or any other experience that makes real life connections back to the classroom.

The most effective advisors know their students through more than just advising conversations. They know their students from being an instructor in the classroom, an advisor to a student group, a mentor for an international experience, or just someone they see and converse with on a routine basis on the good days and the bad days. Sometimes all it takes is simply a walk around campus with one student when I could take the time to point out all of the pieces of our electric power infrastructure around us to bolster his interest in rural electrification for low resource communities. We advisors share in the joys of success and are the motivators when difficulties arise, but at the end of the day we are a part of our students’ daily lives and they are a part of ours.

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A Student Perspective on Concentration Advising...

- 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 growth as in your academic growth
- Take an active interest and in your students’ lives outside of the classroom
I think of myself less as a teacher than as a coach. My job is to help students do their best possible work, which often means stretching beyond the work they are currently doing. I have to push them hard and be honest with them. But to push them hard and be honest with them, they have to trust me. And I have to trust them. I think we sometimes forget how important trust is in an academic advising relationship. I figured it out the hard way as a grad student. After months of leaving my advisor’s office in tears, I finally marched in and had a conversation with him about the advising relationship. After an initial awkwardness, he told me a story about his own experience as a student (which involved a teacher throwing his paper on the ground and stomping on it—something that delighted him!). I told him about mine (er, not eager to have a paper literally stomped on). He was finally a human being (if an unusual one). And someone who wanted to help me do my best. I finally trusted him. And my work flourished.

So how do we develop trust? It helps to keep in mind that you are advising a whole human being not a disembodied intellect. No good coach thinks she’s just training a body. Why think a good teacher only trains the intellect? The student’s intellect is embedded in an emotional life, a social life, a physical life, a family life, and maybe a spiritual life. She’s also built up a bunch of habits, some of which need to change. If we forget all that, or ignore it, we make our job harder. All the factors I just mentioned affect how the student works and what kind of advising she will be responsive to. So the first thing I do with students is simple: I ask them to tell me about themselves. (They have such interesting lives!) I ask about work habits (and sleep, exercise, etc.), about family, about friends, etc. And I’m not shy about talking about myself. (I’m a coach, not an analyst.) It’s also important to help the student figure out what she wants to work on, not what I think she should work on. She has to own the project. At that point, it’s easy and fun. I find I can work with my students the same way I’d work with colleagues: honest and straightforward engagement with the ideas.

Concentration Advising

A Student Perspective on Concentration Advising...

- 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
- Be knowledgeable about the resources available to your advisees and about how to direct them
When I started teaching ten years ago, the first thing I had in mind was to offer my students what I wished I'd received when I was a student, but didn’t. Since then, the student's perspective and needs have been the viewpoint from which I’ve shaped my syllabi, my classes, and the entire teaching process, which is and will always be a learning process. I remember when I was a freshman, a linguistics professor told us how he started tutoring high school students to pay his way through college. He had to teach grammar, which he’d never really understood, so he spent a lot of time preparing for the class. It was only when having to explain it to someone else, he said, that he understood it himself.

As a student, I was dreaming of a true mentorship, such as I imagined Socrates advocated, one that goes beyond the intellectual to encompass the moral and the personal. One that discovers and uncovers what is only dormant in the student, as a midwife would. So we never learn anything, we only remember – and I also didn’t learn this on my own, I remembered having read it in Nietzsche.

Successful teaching isn’t only a matter of intellectual preparation, but a much more complex process of growing together that depends on what I think is our key moral value: generosity. What I’ve always tried to teach my students has been to develop a structural coherence throughout all their activities and actions, be they intellectual, social, or personal, which is nothing else but staying true to yourself and your moral values. So generosity as a teacher doesn’t mean only offering your time to help your students grow intellectually, but also the ability to step back from being a professor and become a friend when their life needs it. Only when the friend’s work is done can the professor step back in. And then only to become a student once more.

André Breton, the father of surrealism, always surrounded himself with young people, because that was the only way for himself and his existential project to continue and to stay young at the same time. By staying a student all my life, I thought, I’ll never grow old. So I see this award as a celebration of youth and of my students everywhere, past, present, and future.

A Student Perspective on Concentration Advising...

- 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
Advising is by far the most rewarding part of my job. I love getting to know my students well, and I love following them over time and working with them as they grow and change. I keep the following quotation, from a New York Times obituary, on the bulletin board behind my desk:

“So I listen. I try not to dwell on my own inadequacies as an adviser. Instead, I tell myself that almost everyone has a story to tell, and sometimes, through the retelling, we can find answers.”
- Jeffrey Zaslow, author and advice columnist, February 10th, 2012

Listening to my students’ stories is hard for me, because I’m an extrovert and I like to talk. But I can’t advise well if I don’t listen carefully. When I meet with my students, I want to know what matters to them, both personally and intellectually. I want to know what makes them happy, what makes them sad, what fascinates them, and what frightens them. Sometimes they tell me with words, and sometimes they tell me through their body language, when they straighten up and their eyes shine as they tell me one story, or when they slump and look away as they tell me another.

When I’m advising my students, I try to reflect back what I hear them saying, asking questions to help them dig a little deeper and challenging them to reflect on their ideas and values and to consider different perspectives. I share parts of my own story to encourage them to be open and honest, and I remind them that we are all stumbling along on a journey, trying to live good lives and be true to ourselves and to the people and causes we commit to. I hope that by being listened to and by being cared about, my students will gain some of the courage and faith they need to become the people they want to be.

A Student Perspective on Faculty Advising...

- 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
- Be open-minded and nonjudgmental
- Make your advisees feel worthy of your time
I always try to help my students become themselves – their true selves, their maximal selves, the most awesome versions of themselves they can possibly be. I typically do this by asking absurdly overbroad questions – “How’s your life, universe, and everything?” is my favorite – and pushing students to listen to the questions implied by their own answers.

I also frequently tell my students not to “stay up too late.” That said, I don’t really mean it. College is a great time to skimp on sleep – if (and only if) you’re enjoying what you’re doing.

A Student Perspective on Faculty Advising...

- 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
- Be inspiring
- Emotional support is as critical as academic support
- Don’t assume that all students have the same baseline knowledge (about graduate school, job opportunities, help-seeking strategies).
- Let your advisees make mistakes
- Be down to earth and friendly
- Openness is key
- 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
For me, the classroom has always been the ideal incubator of a good advising relationship. That is where teacher and student meet, even if not as equals in terms of their knowledge, over a common intellectual interest. It is in connection with their shared interest that the two learn to respect one another, and it is within that milieu that their relationship grows. The relationship has a solid and adult basis from the outset. **Student and advisor discover that they have a lot to learn from each other, and trust grows out of that.**

The more I know about a student—her high school background, the courses he is taking at Harvard and how she feels about them, the books and films that have meant a lot to him since childhood, her extra-curricular activities, where he grew up, her sense of humor—the better I’m able to bring my own life experience, my familiarity with Harvard, and my knowledge of the academic world to bear in our conversations in ways that may prove helpful. It’s the shared intellectual interests that allow this familiarity to develop, the shared interests that have been at the heart of the university as an institution since its foundation in the twelfth century, and at the heart of the mentoring relationships that are fundamental to it.

I have been fortunate to know teachers both at Harvard and elsewhere who modeled for me the practice of attentive reading of student writing and thoughtful response to it. This is not merely a matter of explaining how the paper misses the mark and how it could be improved. It’s about engaging with the thinking of the student writer and responding to it. That **engagement is important to building the mutual respect, trust and goodwill that are essential to a successful advising relationship.** It can be disheartening, to be sure, to respond at length to a student’s paper, only to have them admit, when they complain about their grade, that they haven’t read your comments. Still, I believe in the importance of those comments to the development of a good advising relationship.

**A Student Perspective on Faculty Advising...**

- 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
- Build relationships of trust and friendship through relatively frequent meetings
- Show you are interested in your students’ lives outside of the classroom
Congratulations to All Nominees

- Robert Accordino • Tim Ahfeldt • David Alworth • Seema Amble • Edwin Amonoo • William Anderson • Ashley Anderson • Sarah Anoke • Silviya Atanasova • Seth Avakian • Jacob Barandes • Anya Bassett • Tom Batchelder • Andrew Berry • Brianna Beswick • Jimmy Biblarz • Joe Blitzstein • Stacy Blondin • Barry Bloom • Virginia Brooks • Sue Brown • Greg Bruich • Randy Buckner • Paul Buttenweiser • Kevin Caffrey • Tez Chantaruchirakorn • Laura Chivers • Suzannah Clark • Kathleen Coleman • Joanna Cornell • Deb De Laurel • Alison Denton Jones • Namita Dharia • Carlos Diaz Rosillo • Robert Doyle • Ryan Draft • Kate Drizos-Cavell • Brandon Edwards • Rachel Esplin Odell • Cara Fallon • Brian Farrell • Steven Felix • Hayley Fenn • Douglas Finkbeiner • Lynn Fitzgerald • Judith Flynn • Melissa Franklin • Shiv Gaglani • Kiran Gajwani • Petrina Garbarini • Brandon Geller • Jorie Graham • Andreas Haggerty • Frances Hagopian • Meghan Hakanson • Anne Harrington • Joseph Harris • Karen Heath • Shori Hijikata • Missy Holbrook • David Hwang • Sarah Jams • Vijay Iyer • Helen Jack • Alice Jardine • Kate Johnsen • Matt Kaliner • Yoshio Kaneko • Gabe Katsh • Michael Kester • Stephanie Khurana • Evan Kleiman • Scott Kominers • Lauren Kuntz • Hyek Kweon King • Susan Laurence • Cara Lawler • Nicole LeBlanc • Dean Lee • David Leslie • David Levari • Margo Levine • Brigitte Libby • Caroline Light • William Lo • Amanda Lobell • Hermioni Lokko • Christopher Lombardo • Rob Lue • Kevin Madore • Angela Maione • Noah Marks • Sorrell Massenburg • Catherine McKenna • James McSpadden • Brendan Meade • Nefyn Meissner • Annie Morgan • Nicole Newendorp • Ayodeji Oggunnaike • John Park • James Pelletier • Katherine Penner • Jessica Perkins • Donald Pfister • Nicolas Prevelakis • Soledad Prillaman • Kevin Rader • Lauren Raece • Mike Ranen • Kathy Richman • Ramyar Rossoukh • James Russell • Subir Sachdev • Martin Samuels • Jason Saretsky • Sheehan Scarborough • Daniel Schrag • Noah Selsby • Margo Seltzer • Anthony Shannon • John Shaw • Alison Simmons • Suzanne Smith • Nina Sokolovic • Anne Marie Sousa • Katherine Steele • Rebekah Stout • Bonnie Talbert • Leslie Tarvar • Sara Trowbridge • Kris Trujillo • Gregory Tucci • Patrick Ulrich • Delia Ungureanu • Werner Van Vuuren • Helen Vendler • Charly Viola • James Waldo • Dina Wang • Alexandra Was • Ruth Watterson • Kanoe Williams • Alix Winter • Andrew Wong • Robert Woollacott • Kimberley Yu

**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 advisor 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.