Barbara Mowery (Babs) sits right at home in her office.

"Academic advisors, in my humble opinion, are one of the most important connections that you can have on campus," says Kevin Washo Jr., chief of staff in the University of Pittsburgh Office of the Chancellor. "Not only do they help with the mechanics of graduating on time, but they also are an integral part of having consistency and a personal connection as students manage their academic workload."

To see the lasting impression that an academic advisor can have on a student's life and career, you don't have to look far. Many University leaders across campus give credit for their own successful academic and career paths they had to their Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences academic advisors—often to one senior academic advisor in particular.

"To me, Babs is the anchor of my Pitt experience," says Penny Semaia (Arcs'03), Pitt's senior athletic director for student life. "She has helped me in all aspects of my life. She wasn't just an advisor—she was a mentor and guide."

Barbara Mowery—or Babs, as her advisees affectionately call her—started curating her vast knowledge of all things Pitt when she joined the advising staff in 1972. Since then, while working diligently to guide and mentor countless Dietrich School students, she herself earned her BA, MEd, and EdD at Pitt, gathering not just 46 years of institutional knowledge but also firsthand experience as a Pitt student.

That experience helps Mowery to truly connect with her advisees. "One of the most meaningful aspects of working with Babs was, without a doubt, her way of working hands on with her students," Washo recalls. "Transitioning from a relatively small high school to a large university, I was nervous that I wouldn't get the individualized attention that I had enjoyed throughout my high school days. Babs had a large workload, but she never rushed me and always gave me and all of her other students the individualized attention that can be so important at a university."

Washo continues, "Babs always had a smile on her face and always treated people with the utmost respect. I think the combination of her work ethic, her personality, her love of Pitt, and—most importantly—her love of her students is what I've remembered most. These have been qualities I've tried to take into aspects of my career as well."

Heather Howe Abrams, director of visitor engagement for the Pitt Office of Admissions and Financial Aid, also brings pieces of Mowery's approach to her own career today.

"When I decided on my career path in admissions and started my career," she says, "Babs was always one of the professionals I tried to emulate. When I assumed my role as an advisor for the Pitt Pathfinders, I once again went back and thought about the impact that Babs had on her advisees and decided that [that] was how I wanted to be for my advisees. I knew Babs' door was always open, and even on her busiest days, if I needed something, Babs was always there for me. That is something I strive to do for my students as well: I want my students to know I am always there for them."

Mowery's influence on the future paths of students isn't limited to her own advisees. She leaves a lasting impression on every student who works with her, as Julia Stein, course / classroom scheduling administrator in the Office of the University Registrar, explains: "Babs Mowery had a profound impact on my life during my time working in the Academic Advising Center as a peer advisor. She showed me what a meaningful and positive impact an advisor can have on a student's life and inspired me to pursue a career in higher education. Throughout my undergraduate, and now graduate, career at the University of Pittsburgh, Babs has provided insight and support despite my not being one of her advisees. Being an undergraduate student is a stressful time in a student's life, and having support from someone who understands the University system and takes the time to understand each student's goals is invaluable."

This appreciation for the quality of the Dietrich School's academic advising is a common theme in the recollections of Mowery's former advisees.

"When I talk with students about the University, I tell them that their advisor is one of the most important people that they need to get to know during their time in college." Abrams says. "This person is their key to everything that they need to succeed during their college years. Their advisor will be the one guiding them through the academic process and helping them make sure that they are getting the most out of their college experience. The one-on-one experience that Dietrich School students have with their advisors is an amazing and invaluable resource for them."
Academic Advising Helps Students to Achieve More

In the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, we encourage our students to do more, to explore their passions and interests, and to create a personalized college experience that is all their own. And we’re uniquely positioned to provide that experience: We offer more majors, boast more world-renowned faculty members, serve more students, and provide more first-year research opportunities than any other single unit on campus.

Our students rise to the challenge. More than one-third of Dietrich School students double or triple major, and most Dietrich School students add a minor. Just flip through the pages of this issue of Pitt Pride and you’ll see students pursuing studies in nonprofit management alongside chemistry, music alongside environmental science, communication alongside public service.

How do our students do it? Beyond being hardworking and high-achieving individuals (which they are), all Dietrich School students have a guide and mentor along the way in the form of a dedicated academic advisor.

Dietrich School advisors are the gatekeepers to the ultimate Pitt experience. They know how to schedule courses in a way that allows for three majors and graduation on time. They know which research opportunities would be a good fit and how to get started. They know about scholarships and fellowships that can help to pay for school. They know many different pathways through the University that can get students to the careers they desire.

When students enter the Dietrich School, they are assigned to academic advisors in the Academic Advising Center. These advisors are experts in helping students to identify academic plans and to find ways of exploring diverse interests. Once a student decides on a major, the student works with an advisor within that department who can best serve the student-specific needs of the student.

Students say that this team advising effort provides more support. As a student moves through their Dietrich School experience, they develop personal relationships with more and more guides and mentors, expanding their options and leading them into a robust future.

Dietrich School academic advising—like everything we do at the Dietrich School—is dedicated to offering more. Advisors deliver an experience that is more personal, more supportive, more knowledgeable, and more engaging. You’ll read more about that in these pages. And if you still want more, visit asundegrad.pitt.edu/advising.

John A. Twining
Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies

EXPANDING THE ACADEMIC ADVISING CENTER

Advising Online
Meeting students where they are, of course, also means going online—which is why the Academic Advising Center has increasingly taken advantage of Skype as a way to engage with students. Using Skype allows advisors to establish personal connections with students, sometimes before they even set foot on campus.

“We are fortunate to advise in a time when new technologies allow us to access students in multiple ways,” says Fischer. “This frees up valuable time to engage in more personal relationship-building activities with our students.”

Advising Around Campus
This fall, peer advisors—Dietrich School undergraduates who help fellow classmates get the most out of advising—will come to residence halls to help first-year students work through common frustrations. The initiative, spearheaded by advisor Tom Converso, was developed to help resident assistants (RAs) respond to their students’ questions related to academics, the enrollment process or connecting to academic support opportunities like peer tutoring.

Converso, who has extensive experience working in residence life both at Pitt and at other universities, explains, “Working in residence life made me accept that our students do not operate in the typical 9–5 time frame. We need to figure out new ways to adapt and meet them where they are in order to best serve their needs.”

Academic advisors will also be available for drop-in hours in the Hillman Library, allowing Dietrich School students an opportunity to connect with an advisor in person, even when they can’t make it to the Academic Advising Center.

Advising Beyond Course Scheduling
Advisor Lucy Delaney joined the Academic Advising Center team last year after earning a master’s degree in clinical mental health counseling and working in community mental health and higher education for several years. “My background has taught me the importance of relationship building and meeting people where they are,” says Delaney. “I love getting to know students, what their goals are, and what their unique experiences are. I am certainly here to help students choose and plan for a major, but I also have students come to ask how to use the bus system, [learn how to] deal with personal challenges, and share their struggles adjusting to living with a roommate.”

Advisors in the Dietrich School, like Delaney, bring with them unique and varied backgrounds that allow for a strong, personalized advising model.

Advisor Shawn Alfonso-Wells joined the team after earning her PhD in anthropology at Pitt and teaching courses at both Pitt and Carnegie Mellon University. “As an advisor, I am able to use my teaching experience to help students understand what is expected in the classroom and offer insider tips on how to be successful,” says Dr. Alfonso-Wells. “I know the pressures of in-class and homework assignments, and I help students realistically plan for success.”

Alfonso-Wells is quick to point out that there is no one experience or opportunity that suits all students. “You have to see each student as an individual. Even students with similar goals need to take different pathways to get there. The key is offering students choices and encouraging them to take the path that suits them best, even if it isn’t the most common pathway.”

According to Fischer, this is just the idea behind personalized advising. “When advisors form meaningful relationships with their students, the impact of those relationships not only positively influences a student’s collegiate experience but their life after graduation as well,” he says.

ENGAGING STUDENTS COMPLETELY

Expanding the Academic Advising Center Beyond the Center’s Walls

Amaya Christie (political science and information systems design) with Andrew Lotz, her departmental advisor in political science, and Gregory Allen, her first-year advisor. Even after declaring a major, Dietrich School students often maintain close relationships with their initial advisor.

“Advising is a collaborative process between student and advisor,” says Derek Fischer, director of the Academic Advising Center in the University of Pittsburgh Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. “We know that students who truly engage in the process achieve more impressive academic goals—including completing multiple majors, minors, and certificates—in shorter amounts of time. Extending our services beyond the walls of our office allows us to provide advising that is more personal, supportive, engaging, and effective.”

Fischer took over the role of director one year ago, bringing with him more than 10 years of academic advising experience and a vision to build on the groundwork laid by his predecessors to engage students in new ways. That vision prioritizes meeting students where they are—literally.
ALUMNI PROFILE

By Miranda Bridgwater (A&S ’17)

Advising That’s More Engaging: Curating an Individualized Experience

When I first came to Pitt, I knew that I wanted to study psychology, but I had interests in research and clinical work and studying abroad and volunteer work—the list goes on and on. My advisor, Associate Director of Undergraduate Advising in the Department of Psychology Jennifer Stapel, never discouraged me from exploring all of my areas of interest. After my first meeting with Jen, I felt like I had a rough plan for what I would do over my next four years and in what order. During my first term, she steered me toward the First Experiences in Research program and showed me how to look for a more permanent directed research experience through the psychology department. With her assistance and encouragement (and great letters of recommendation), I ended up in a research lab that focuses on social stress in children and adolescents who have parents with schizophrenia. This lab became my home for the next three years, led to my full-time job after graduation, and helped me to realize what my true passion in psychology is: clinical psychology.

When senior year rolled around and I found myself experiencing panic about my next move, Jen was there to help with letters of recommendation for everything from full-time jobs to postbaccalaureate fellowships to PhD programs. She put me in contact with other students who had gone down similar paths. When graduate school applications didn’t work out the way I wanted them to, Jen was there to remind me that it wasn’t the end of the world and to focus on my other opportunities. Without Jen, I would not have been able to graduate at the end of my four years with a degree in psychology and sociology and a minor in administration of justice. I always looked forward to my meetings with Jen, and I always left with a clear idea (or at least a good feeling) about what I was going to do next.

When I started at Pitt, I thought I wanted to go the premed route—but ask my first-year academic advisor, Theresa Fabrizio, and she’ll tell you that plan was far from set in stone. I knew for certain that I wanted to do something in a science-related field, but I really had no idea what I actually wanted to do. I jumped around from premed to research to environmental science to environmental engineering, and the list, believe it or not, continues on. Theresa made me feel very comfortable and calm while I tried all of these areas out. She helped me through the very difficult process of deciding on my major. She laid out my options. She assured me that I had time to figure it out. She never let me doubt that it would all work out. Theresa helped me to explore my interests and encouraged me to take classes, even if they didn’t seem to fit in with my major. She told me about the nonprofit management certificate, which she thought I would be interested in. I am currently halfway through the certificate program and couldn’t be more grateful for her advice. Those classes are some of my favorites I’ve taken at Pitt.

Theresa also connected me to the Browne Leadership Fellows Program offered through the School of Social Work. The fellowship was amazing, not to mention an outstanding résumé booster, and I never would have applied for it if Theresa had not told me about it and written me a fantastic recommendation letter. In the time Theresa was my advisor, I probably e-mailed or called her more than 50 times. I always had questions, and she always had an answer. College is a big deal, and it is important to me that I get as much out of it as possible. My future completely changed when Theresa became my first-year advisor. Academic advisors can truly lead the way down a unique and meaningful path.

STUDENT PROFILE

By Noah Puleo (biological sciences, chemistry, non-profit management)

Advising That’s More Knowledgeable: Connecting to Meaningful Opportunities

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I came to the University of Pittsburgh totally undecided about what I wanted to study. My academic advisor, Emily Snyder, gave me the encouragement and motivation to explore different areas, and with her support, I discovered a deep passion for sociology and psychology. But Emily doesn’t just encourage me to use my time here to build myself as a student; she also connects me to opportunities to build myself as a person. Knowing my intended major and career considerations, she told me about the peer advising program. We both thought it would be a great opportunity to get some experience under my belt.

As a peer advisor, I’ve learned more about the Dietrich School than I ever knew there was to know. It not only has allowed me to use more resources around campus, but also has given me the ability to connect other students to opportunities and experiences, like Emily has done for me. One of my favorite roles is helping incoming students create their class schedule. This seems like it might be a simple task, but at the Dietrich School, students are individuals with specific ideas and interests of their own. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Seeing the relief on students’ faces after they finally get their schedules nailed down feels great, mostly because I know exactly how it feels to be in their shoes.

As a peer advisor, I really make a point to be honest and connect with the students I’m advising. I’m very forward about what I like and don’t like, and students seem to really appreciate it. I also like to give my e-mail address to the students I help so they can reach me with any questions they may have. Working as a peer advisor truly makes me happy because I know I’m doing something good for others. College is all about experiences and opportunities, and I am so glad to be a part of some students’ experiences here at Pitt. I love this school and want to help others get the most out of it, too.

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Advising That’s More Supportive: From Day One to Graduation Day

By Stephanie Jiménez (music and environmental science)

Transferring from seeing my initial advisor to my departmental advisor has been very smooth. Rather than feeling like I was leaving a relationship I had grown in my first years at Pitt, I feel like my support network has expanded to include two advisors. I’ve been working with Assistant Professor Shalini Ayyagari, now my departmental advisor, since the first term of my first year at Pitt. I took multiple courses with her and even conducted independent research with her before she officially became my departmental advisor. Having already had a relationship has been so beneficial. She knows where my strengths and weaknesses are academically and what my research goals are for the future.

I also still visit my initial advisor. Her care for my well-being is refreshing and supportive, and I feel comfortable sharing with her both the successes and the struggles I experience in my academic pursuits. I am able to come to both advisors with questions and concerns regarding my academic plans and my goals for the future. I hope to keep up the dialogue about my academic and postgraduation plans with both of my advisors because the more discussions I have with them, the more suggestions I receive, the more prepared I feel when making decisions about my future. They both have unique personal and work experiences they share with me that have really taught me a lot.

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