

Advising, Counseling, and Parenting

The photograph above shows me with my three freshman advisees. We are looking at a core plane that is among the props I keep in my office as conversation-starters. Core planes are computer memories from the pre-silicon era; this one probably was made by hand in the 1950s, and packs a few ten-thousandths of the memory in one of today's chips.

Technological advances have put enormous amounts of information at the disposal of every student. Not only the Harvard Library catalog, but the catalog of every other major university library is available electronically from every student room. The course catalog, the weekly calendar of seminars and concerts, the athletic schedules, and the dining hall menus can all be checked out online.

As more and more information is available online (see the box in this issue), I am often asked if personal contact between students and faculty is being diminished: is personal attention being replaced by huge electronic data banks through which students are expected to find their own way? The answer to this question is certainly no --- in fact most people think the use of electronic mail between students and faculty has increased the number of student-faculty interactions. Students report that it requires less courage to contact a professor by e-mail than by telephone or an office visit. (Also, students can send e-mail at prime student time, say midnight, and professors can answer it at prime professor time, say 9:00 AM.) Many of us use e-mail extensively to keep in touch with our large classes, answering dozens of specific inquiries from our students every week.

But do students know where to go and how to get answers to deeper and harder questions that cut across their whole educational experience? Questions like: what will happen to me if I change concentrations from Physics to English, and is there any way to keep up with both fields? Or: why am I having so much trouble studying, a problem I never had in high school? Such questions to come up most naturally with the House tutors and affiliates that students see every day; the most informed places to seek informed and professional answers are in offices such as Career Services and Study Counsel, as well as from knowledgeable individuals in the academic departments. To be as sure as we can that the Houses can give good support to students who want to raise such vague but important questions, the faculty Committee on Advising and Counseling is looking at the experience of students, and the training of tutors, across the House system. It will never be easy to get answers to hard questions, but we are working to see that as many people as possible know the places to look. One ambition would be to make the staff in the Houses as highly appreciated by students as are parents: about 40% of freshmen, and only a slightly smaller percentage of seniors, report that they are "very satisfied" with the advice they have received from their parents!