



Dr. Robert Wilkins

Making friends, keeping students

Relationship-oriented advising at Andrews

*Story and photos
by Chris Carey*



Kelwy El-Haj

How much difference does academic advising make to the success of Andrews University students? There is no recognized yardstick, like a grade point average, but there is plenty of evidence:

Dr. Ruben Alarcon, a 1986 AU graduate who is now a dentist in Hinsdale, Illinois, was an advisee of Bill Chobotar in the biology department. "I'll never forget what he did for me," Alarcon said. "There were several professors who didn't see me as going on to professional school, but he saw things in me that I didn't even see myself. Thanks to Dr. Chobotar, I'm able to do what I love."

Last spring, when new graduates of the School of Education chose someone significant in their lives to affix the pin symbolizing dedication as Christian teachers, eight of them asked Paul Denton to do the honors.

"I can honestly say Dr. Denton has been the best adviser I ever had," said Kelwy El-Haj, who will get her elementary school teaching certification this spring. "It's reassuring to know that he is there for you and you can always turn to him. When I feel overwhelmed or discouraged, he tells me, 'Keep your head up, you can do this, I'm praying for you, you're going to make it, we didn't bring you this far for you to fail.'"

In the fall of 1999, pre-medical student Sarah Wegner, whose grades are nearly all A's, organized a study group for B and C students who were struggling in a tough physiology course. One of those students pulled his grade up to second highest in the class. "He said, 'Sarah, I think I should dedicate my graduation to you, because you really helped. You motivated me to study,'" Wegner recalled. "That was really cool. He's graduating this year with me."

Maria Kayereka, a business student from Zimbabwe who is not an Adventist, had trouble adjusting to Andrews, especially to the straightforward language required by English teachers and to the vegetarian fare in the cafeteria. Her adviser, Jamaican-born accounting professor Patrick Williams, helped on both counts.

"He understood what I was going through," Kayereka said. "He said I shouldn't use all those big words like in the British educational system. The first grade I got in English was a C, but by the end of the term I had an A."

The food was a tougher issue. "I was always in his office complaining 'I cannot eat this stuff.' One time Dr. Williams' wife cooked some chicken and rice and peas and sent it to me. He's more like a parent."

Academic advising is part of the job description for 150 or so faculty members in the four undergraduate colleges. The process has been underway for years but it's getting new emphasis now as enrollment shrinks.

At minimum, the advisers' obligation is to make sure their advisees get the courses they need to complete their degrees and launch their careers.

But the job is going beyond that now, according to Linda Closser, who until recently was the director of Academic Support and Advising Services. That office trains advisers and coordinates their activity.

"We want to develop the advisers more as mentors for the students," Closser said. "We want them to establish relationships that will continue."

One step in that direction is a lengthy questionnaire called the College Student Inventory, which is completed by every incoming freshman. It asks 100 questions to gauge academic motivation, coping skills and receptivity to support services.

The questionnaire was developed by Noel-Levitz, a company that specializes in systems colleges can employ to retain students. Results of the questionnaire help predict the academic difficulty or ease a student will face, a student's potential academic stress and the likelihood that a student will drop out. Each academic adviser sees his or her advisees' results and can use them as a springboard toward conversation that will lead to deeper understanding.

Closser believes good advising is a key to student retention. That

is an important issue because about 33 percent of Andrews' first-year students drop out or transfer to another school, according to figures the university furnishes to *U.S. News & World Report*. "Studies have shown that first-time freshmen may make their decision to stay or leave within the first three to six weeks," Closser said. "But if they've made that connection with someone on campus, particularly a faculty member, and started a relationship, chances are that the decision is to stay. We want to make that happen."

Don May, assistant dean in the College of Arts and Sciences, underlines the point. "A sense of belonging is the No. 1 reason why students persist or don't persist," he said. "National studies show that it's not academics or finances—those are right behind—but the No. 1 reason students disconnect from an institution is that they don't feel they belong, that no one cares."

Andrews' best academic advisers not only care about the students but also make sure the students know it.

"In some cases I go out on a limb," said Robert Wilkins, who has been advising students in the chemistry department for 30 years. "One student last year was struggling financially. I tried to help her find housing off campus so it would be less costly, and to get her a job that would help earn her some more money. She's not here this semester, but she'll be back next semester. We worked it out so she could keep her scholarship award, which will be essential for her."

Is that kind of help a good idea? "My wife thinks that's crazy," Wilkins conceded. "She thinks maybe students develop better if you let them make all the decisions themselves. They may grow up quicker in some ways. On the other hand, for freshmen particularly, I know the ropes around here far better than they do and the object is to try to make things run smoothly for them."

Wilkins has made things run smoothly for Caleb Behrend, a senior. "Each time the new semester comes, he's already looked ahead," Behrend said. "He knows what courses I need. He's got every option written down. If I had something I really wanted to do, he'd work with me through my schedule to find a way."

Beyond that, Behrend said, "Dr. Wilkins puts himself on the stretch to do as much for as many students as he can. He's almost frantic sometimes. He's here late at night. He really goes all out."

There are other signs of caring all over the advising offices.

Chobotar posts an appointment sign-up sheet next to his door and frequently phones or sends an e-mail message to a student he thinks needs help or encouragement. Moreover, "I make sure they know how to reach me. 'Don't sit frustrated in your room,' I tell them. 'If somebody mistreated you or you don't know where to go, call me.' I give them my office number and my home phone. I say,

'If it's an emergency call me, 24 hours a day.'" He gets such calls often at the office and every week or two at home.

Chobotar, like most academic advisers, will refer students to professional counseling for help beyond academic life. He goes a step further, though, walking with his students to the counseling office and introducing them to the counselors.

Chobotar meets his freshman advisees as a group at the start of the year to get acquainted, to talk about the transition from high school to college, to deal with their concerns. Then he meets with them individually to lay out a program of courses and learn their individual needs and aspirations.

"This provides an environment in which the advisee is comfortable in the department and with the university," Chobotar said. "And sometimes you can detect habits that are detrimental to a student's development. You can get help for him."

Chobotar's relationship with students continues through their years at Andrews and, sometimes, long afterward.

Once Chobotar had to chew out a student who was sleeping in class and flunking tests. "I told him, 'I want you to succeed, but you won't if you continue like this. I can tell you I had some academic problems myself.' I even pulled out my old grades to show him."

Thirteen years later, that student phoned Chobotar. "I remember the time you called me in," he said. "I just want you to know that that talk turned my life around." The former student now is a successful family counselor.

Dr. John Francis, who was a resident adviser in a dormitory before he graduated in 1991, remembers Chobotar tracking down one of his advisees in the dorm. "I always had the feeling that he really cared for the people he was advising," Francis said of Chobotar. "When you went to see him, it felt like you were going to see your father." Francis, now a resident in internal medicine at Yale New Haven Hospital in Connecticut, credits Chobotar with leading him to specialize in microbiology.

"To be a good adviser you have to develop relationships," said Denton in the School of Education. "A relationship is just sitting and chatting with them about life. When you establish that rapport, you can talk about anything with them.... I try to give them advice from a father's or grandfather's point of view.... We talk about everything under the sun, not just class schedules. We talk about life goals. We talk about religious experiences. We talk about boyfriends, girlfriends, whatever."

Denton has that rapport with Carmalita Bowen, a senior. "He's a great storyteller," she said. "He's very willing to share parts of his life and things he's learned the hard way, which helps you reflect about how you're going to deal with some things later, 10 years down the road."

Denton, like others, has had some tough

cases. "I've had young ladies come in and say, 'I'm pregnant.' I say, 'Don't worry about the mistake. Let's worry about how we can get by it. Get your eyes on your goals and let's go after them.'"

"I've had them go and have the child and come back to school and finish up. I work a lot on goals, what they're really after."

Beverly Matiko looks beyond the course requirements for the communications students she advises. "I try to take an interest in the bigger picture. Are they having fun while they're learning? If not, what would it take to build a fun component into their term?"

"For some students a fun class would be creative writing, but for others that would be very frightening and not fun at all. By getting to know the students you can help them put together a package that is going to teach them what they need to know but have a pretty healthy joy component as well."

Paula Dronen advises all 86 students in the Division of Architecture. The academic advising is relatively easy, because the architecture program is structured so rigidly. But occasionally students go to her with family or health problems. "I want the students to know I am here," she said. "I don't want to be mistaken for a counselor, but I will listen to students who are having troubles and need to unburden themselves. I don't mind praying with them."

Don May and Karen Tilstra, though not classified as faculty advisers, get a lot of the tough cases.

May, now in his second year as assistant dean after many years as professor of photography, sees all Arts and Sciences students whose poor grades put them on academic probation. Together, May and his troubled students draw up and sign a plan of action—in essence, a contract—that deals with such things as class attendance, limiting part-time jobs and extracurricular activities, even temporarily dropping courses that may be required for one's degree. May monitors each student's progress continually.

"It's a doable plan," May said. "The plan is a box, and they can't break out of it. We go incrementally. We succeed in one term, and then we step it up a little more. Success breeds success."

"When I came in here everything was a prayer. I believe in prayer, but that doesn't help define the box. We've got a lot of faith going, but students need to know what the box is. We have to come up with a plan so they don't waste time by getting into school and then not succeeding."

Although May has a list of success stories, not every case ends well. Of the 99 students he had seen between September 1999 and October 2000, nearly half fell short of their goals and had to leave school.

The students Tilstra sees need not be on academic probation to get her help. The educational psychologist joined Andrews in July

2000 with the title of student success coordinator. In her first few months she saw more than 150 students.

"I work with students who are struggling in one way or another, academically or behaviorally. We talk and find out what's going on, and I make recommendations if I think they should get counseling or go to any of the tutoring centers or make modifications in their lives."

Tilstra works closely with all the campus support offices—Academic Support and Advising Services, the counseling center, the math, reading and writing centers, the tutoring offices, the career center, the computer center, even the financial aid office.

Tilstra usually refers students to places where they can get help tailored to specific needs. But she handles several dozen students herself.

"Most kids who underachieve are really quite intelligent, I've found. They have good intentions, but they sabotage themselves. I'm talking about time management, rational thinking, lying to themselves, failing to take responsibility, not knowing how to step up to the plate."

Tilstra encourages faculty members to refer students to her, but also tries to attract students on her own. "I try to stay very visible. Every day I go around campus, spend time up in the caf. I try to dress a little more like a college student, be a little more approachable than a faculty member. Students see me around and they know my purpose."

Sometimes the job involves crisis intervention. Not long ago Tilstra got a cryptic e-mail message from a student. "I sensed it was urgent so I called her room. She was crying. I went over to the dorm. She had done poorly on a test and she had had a fight with a friend. She was so discouraged that she was packed and ready to go home. I sat with her quite a while and we worked things out. She eventually realized that going home was not going to solve anything. Now she's back on a success track."

Academic advising is the front door to Tilstra's office, the counseling center, the tutors and all the other Andrews support systems, as well as information on what courses to take.

For unvarnished academic advice, the back door is the student body itself.

Sarah Wegner's physiology study group is one example of students advising students.

Wegner, a part-time unit secretary at Lakeland Medical Center in St. Joseph, also revived the long dormant Pre-Medical Society in 1999. "We publish a newsletter every couple of months. I just wrote an article about how [pre-med students] need to start planning now and be active like working in a hospital and studying for the MCAT [Medical College Admissions Test]. And all the articles I wrote and others wrote had our e-mail addresses if students had any questions.

"And I'd get e-mail, 'Sarah, I'd like to do this or that, can you give me some direction?' When I was a freshman or sophomore, even a junior, I didn't know what to ask or who to ask. The upper classmen didn't share what they had gone through. They probably would have been willing, but they just weren't asked. We're

changing that."

With Chobotar's help, the society is bringing in physicians and medical students to share their experiences at Friday night vespers, which commonly draw 30 to 50 students.

"At these vespers you see the people you want to ask, the upper classmen," said Sandra Caballero, a sophomore pre-med student. "You can ask about all sorts of things, like volunteering, how important is research, which teacher should I take for chemistry."

Another student-to-student advising program is Mission Possible, a project of the honors program organized this year by senior Elizabeth Chung.

Thirty-five freshmen and first-year transfer students, called protégés, are paired with a like number of honors upper classmen, called men-



Karen Tilstra

tors. The pairs are to meet every two weeks to discuss such things as goals, study habits and service opportunities. The expectation is that there will be some informal advising about which courses to take and which teachers require heavy homework assignments.

"It's such a simple idea just to ask an upper classmen who has been through it already," Chung said. "I had a plan made out when I came here but other people come in more undecided. I feel like this kind of program really empowers people to start thinking about things earlier."

Men living in Meier Hall go to resident adviser Jamie Lee half a dozen times each term to ask which teacher to take for a certain course.

"About the only way that information is relayed is by upper classmen," said Lee, a fifth-year senior in computer science. "Quite often the [faculty] advisers don't know the particulars about one teacher versus another teacher.

"I think most freshmen and sophomores take advantage of upper classmen this way. I know I did."

These informal student evaluations have considerable value. In the polite atmosphere of a college campus, some faculty advisers refuse to compare teachers in any way. Some others stress the good points of certain professors about whom students may have heard bad things. A few say they "nudge" students toward some professors and away from others without expressing value judgments openly.

Behrend, the chemistry senior, sees virtue in

this informal advising system: "No one professor has met all the other professors. They don't always know if one will be a bad teacher or a course will be bad. And a professor is not going to discredit another professor, whereas students are kind of vulgar and mean sometimes. They'll give you exactly how they feel."

Bowen, the education senior, was approached by five or six students early in the fall term with questions about classes or professors. "I'm very willing to say, 'That class is hard, so don't take it at the same time as that other one.' I find myself repeating things that I was told or that I experienced."

Advising, by professors or by students, has a trickle-down effect that may go on for generations.

Francis, the doctor at Yale, still can name the older Andrews students who gave him good advice when he was a freshman and sophomore: Alex Tambrini, John Kim and Mark Johansen. "Those people became models for me because of their dedication," he said.

Chobotar bases his advising techniques on his experience with his professors, both good and bad, at Walla Walla College and Utah State University.

Alarcon, the dentist, is carrying on the tradition. "There was somebody behind me in dental school who could not pass her board exams a couple of times. I learned about this and I remembered what Dr. Chobotar did for me. So she and I sat together for many Sundays for several months and studied all day long. And the next time she took her boards she did extremely well.

"I asked her to do the same for somebody else someday."

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