

Renewing the Vision for Faculty Advisors in the Campus Ministry of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

The role of faculty members as advisors to students and student groups has been in eclipse for some time. In the not too distant past, colleges and universities characteristically required all recognized student groups to identify and “work with” a faculty advisor. IVCF in its early days depended on these men and women to offer direction and spiritual guidance to student leaders in our chapters. Some universities and colleges still require student groups to identify a faculty advisor, and some are actually attempting to strengthen this role. For example, The Ohio State University is offering training to faculty who serve as faculty advisors to student groups.

However, on most campuses this requirement is no longer the norm. The rising tide of student activism and distrust of leadership in the late 60’s (you remember the mantra, “Don’t trust anyone over 30”) made it increasingly easier to de-emphasize this role where it was retained, or to completely pass on any requirement for students to relate to faculty in non-curricular campus activities. On campuses where the formal role of faculty advisor has been retained, these folk and this role seems much ado about nothing. Students stumble into the faculty member’s office early in the academic year seeking the required signatures and are not seen again until the next academic year. Like a sort of communal appendix, we are hard pressed to find any real purpose for a faculty advisor.



Academic advising is a common form of faculty service, and one in which they have a much greater professional stake. However, it has followed this same dispiriting track, even though it is still universally required of faculty and students. Many students seek out their advisor only if they need a signature to approve their program on the brink of a new semester or if they find themselves at great academic peril, and then often very late in the game. They approach faculty with whom they have no relationship, even though the faculty member is their official advisor. Frequently they show up with very self-serving motives, engage in special pleading, and sometimes they are unable to summon even basic honesty in their eagerness to solve their problems. Faculty, for their part, also do not characteristically invest much in the advising role. Pressures of time alone can account for this shortcoming. And since the issue almost never comes up in a tenure or promotion review, there is little real reason to give it much attention. In the hurly-burly of academic life the faculty advisor’s role is squeezed to the minimum of perfunctorily signing required forms after the briefest conversation. Small wonder, then, that the role of advising non-curricular student groups has fallen on even harder times.

The purpose of this article is not primarily to lament this sad state of affairs, nor is it to bury the practice of faculty advising Christian student fellowships like many “dated” practices of a romanticized past. The purpose of this little article is to raise vision for the role of Faculty Advisors in the ministry of IVCF and serve its renewal. In the end, we argue that all IV student chapters should actually seek a faculty advisor even where the university does not make this requirement! That is how valuable we are convinced faculty can be in our mission to advance the Gospel on campus. Renewal, of course, requires clear sightedness of our present situation and openness toward new means of accomplishing the good aims of an older practice.

One further observation about contemporary student culture deserves mention at this point: students have largely abandoned the foolish late 60’s mantra, “Don’t trust anyone older than 30.” They are characteristically open to the counsel of older folk, including authority figures like parents and teachers, and in some cases long or an opportunity to interact with others outside their peer group. This sea change has seemed clear from my own experience, but we now have academically credible sociological research that demonstrates this openness. The best of this work has been done by Christian Smith (a believing Christian sociologist at Notre Dame) in his massive and very impressive study of adolescent spirituality, *Soul Searching* (Oxford, 2005). Perhaps you have heard student affairs personnel at your university or read published comments decrying “Helicopter Parents.” Whatever the potential or actual abuses, it certainly is good news that the young are open to their parents, find in them worthy counselors, and seek their opinion and direction. This is a most hopeful development as we think of renewing the role of Faculty Advisors in the ministry of IVCF.

The Role of a Faculty Advisor

So, what can a Faculty Advisor (hereafter FA) offer to the ministry of IVCF among students and to our student fellowships on campus? What could we reasonably expect such a person to contribute to our mission? In answering these questions we sketch a vision for the ministry and mission of a Faculty Advisor in the mission of IVCF.

Here are three basic but significant contributions:

1. Perspective: Faculty often have a wider and longer-term outlook on the challenges and opportunities on campus. They can keep us from heading in wrong directions because we lack adequate background knowledge.
2. Understanding about how things work at the university: Especially on larger Campuses, navigating bureaucracies can be time consuming and involve a lot of unnecessary dead-ends. Faculty who have been through some of this run-around can help us make the best moves and even cut through some red tape.
3. An ally in times of conflict and controversy: A sympathetic faculty member can head off trouble before it becomes a political football. To be effective in these times of conflict, students need to have developed a relationship with faculty before the conflict arises. And, sometimes, the fact that the faculty member is not a practicing Christian can make her advocacy even more powerful.

It seems clear that these contributions could be made by a faculty who was not a personal follower of the Lord Jesus. All that would be needed in such an advisor is a conviction that a Christian student group should be allowed to exist in the campus community and a sympathetic desire for the group to "succeed." Indeed, we are urging InterVarsity folk to identify a Faculty Advisor even where no known Christian faculty can be identified.

One further observation should be made about the situation where a FA is not known to be a believer. Students should not underestimate the effect of their witness on faculty. Consider the case of my wife Barbara's experience as an undergraduate at Bowling Green (Ohio) State University. Barbara was helped to become a follower of the Lord Jesus through a fledgling IV fellowship. A number of her IV friends were, like Barbara, music students. This young fellowship was expected by both InterVarsity and the university to find a faculty advisor. They knew of no Christian faculty to approach and were quite reticent to approach faculty.

One day a couple of students from the fellowship were talking about attending Urbana in the hallway of the music building, and were overheard by the Dean of the music school. To their amazement, he asked them what they knew about Urbana, as it turned out, because his own son was hoping to attend and he knew nothing about IVCF or the missions convention. Well, here was an opportunity! The students did not know the Dean to be a Christian and he was not then open about his faith on campus. But at least he seemed interested. So they determined to ask him to be their faculty sponsor. Thus began a relationship that not only served a small but growing student fellowship, but also encouraged a senior faculty member to be a more committed and open follower of the Lord Jesus. The Dean was encouraged and changed spiritually because some fearful undergraduate students took initiative to establish a relationship with him. So, in the Kingdom of God, the weak become an instrument of grace to really strengthen the strong. This story could be repeated in any number of other campuses. It was not so much the students' ability to communicate the Gospel verbally or to answer skeptical questions, as the genuineness of their faith and life that was impressive. There is a ministry here to faculty for students and staff. We should not, must not, lose sight of it!

Thankfully, on most campuses there are several Christian faculty who could serve as FAs. When this is the case, we can expect the three contributions mentioned above to be deepened and expanded, because the faculty member shares our Christian faith and mission.

Vision

There are several additional ways, then, that Christian faculty can and should contribute to our mission on campus as a FA:

1. Endorsement and Affirmation: Beyond allies, student Christian fellowships need to be endorsed and affirmed by faculty. Indeed, faculty should not underestimate the importance of this kind of involvement. The atmosphere in the academy is quite hostile toward Christians of Biblical and traditional conviction. When faculty endorse and affirm Christian students and affirm that they belong in the university, they pour a much needed and sought after blessing upon these young Christian folk.
2. Encouragement: As older, more experienced folk, these women and men can offer us support. Students need their wisdom, and seem increasingly open to advice from older folk. Their greater experience with the campus can help us navigate more effectively and live more wisely and faithfully.

3. Hospitality: Most faculty are eager to open their homes to students on occasion, and most students would love to be around a loving Christian family. It is arguable that among the most important things we can do for contemporary students, so often the products of splintered families, is to expose them to real, loving Christian families with faithful marriages where parents and children love each other.
4. A mentoring resource: Faculty have a lot to offer students in their journey through the academic world. Linking students and student led small groups to faculty mentors can deepen and extend our ministry. This is especially the case for students interested in exploring academic vocations (see [the Emerging Scholar's Network](#) for more information).
5. A teacher in the faith and the relationship of the faith to academic life. While not all faculty will be comfortable or effective in speaking to a large group gathering, many have thought deeply about faith and are working at relating their faith to academic life. And almost all faculty teach! Some are outstanding teachers. Particularly important is the witness that faculty can provide that serious Christian faith and the life of the mind are not incompatible. We are missing a rich resource if we do not draw on these good folk.

Beyond these important contributions, in many cases FAs were themselves involved in campus ministry as students. They will have much to contribute directly to our mission to campus. In my own undergraduate days, a younger tenured faculty member (who went on to become the university Provost in a long and distinguished career) encouraged us to reach out to the whole campus with the gospel and offered to make a presentation of the gospel in fraternities on our campus if we students would secure the opportunities and come along with him to offer our personal testimony. Over three semesters we presented the Gospel in 80% of the fraternity houses on our campus, identified a score of Christian students unknown to us, and saw folk come to trust the Lord.

This vision suggests there is a compelling case for seeking to revitalize the role of a FA. It also raises several pressing questions in the minds of most faculty members. I can hear faculty I know personally asking:

- “Your list of contributions is long enough to be a full-time job. How could any faculty member find the kind of time required to do all of that?”
- “Your list sounds like the job description of a pastor. I have no such training. How could you expect someone like me, like most faculty, to perform these functions? Isn’t that why there are campus staff members?”
- “I can see how this sort of involvement would be good for the student fellowship. But what good could it be for the faculty member?”

These questions seem very appropriate for Christian faculty to raise and weigh carefully. To answer them requires clear thinking about theological and spiritual realities, creativity in reconceiving the role of the FA to fit campus realities, and assessment of the particularities of the faculty member’s professional and personal life. Sometimes, the most faithful response is, of course, to decline an invitation to serve worthy causes, so that we can be fully and freely engaged in the Lord’s priorities in our personal callings. InterVarsity Faculty Ministry would applaud such a decision by faculty and be eager to support faculty men and women in those particular callings within the academy and our families and churches. But, at other times, an invitation to serve, even those that take us outside our professional and personal comfort zones are exactly the voice of the Lord bidding us to follow and grow in grace and faith. As I seek to respond briefly to the questions above, I am praying that for some this article will be “exactly the voice of the Lord,” and that you will use the freedom of God’s grace to accept the invitation, as it comes to you, to serve in some capacity as a FA to the IVCF student fellowship on your campus.

1. Yes, the list is too long for any single faculty member to fulfill! But if each item on the list seems to be a reasonable form of faculty service, then three responses to the first question commend themselves to me:

- The simplest, least time-consuming, and most significant items on the list are “Endorsing, affirming” and thereby, “Encouraging,” the existence of the student Christian fellowship. This act alone has great spiritual power in the current campus environment. So, we would invite you to join a Faculty Council of Reference for IVCF on your campus, offering your endorsement in a public way to our presence and mission. This would mean affirming our doctrinal basis, our vision, and the particular mission of the local student fellowship. If you can do nothing more, this alone will be a very rich blessing.
- If there is no Council of Reference on your campus and you have a bit more margin for service in your life, perhaps the most important thing you could do is to work together with the IVCF staff to form such a council. Just a bit of networking on most campuses would direct us to other faculty who would be willing to lend their names to such a council.

2. No, we do not expect you to be a campus pastor or an InterVarsity staff member! But we do believe you to be a Holy Spirit-gifted disciple of the Lord Jesus. Your gifts have been given to enrich Christ's body and serve His mission in the world. An invitation to join a Faculty Council of Reference and to serve in fulfilling the various functions of a FA is recognition of these profound truths about you and all believing faculty. This being so, the main limitations are a matter of time and your particular interests. More specifically:

- Survey the list and ask, "Where might I find a small place in this ministry, a place that I am convinced I could make a contribution to the advancement of the Gospel?" Express your interest to the IVCF staff and/or student leaders, as God leads you. Communicate both your interest and the limits you see on your availability. That will help you and the student fellowship and the IV staff. Even if you are the only faculty involved what you are able to contribute will be magnified by the grace of God in a way that enriches the student fellowship. Being unable to do everything that needs to be done should never be a veto on doing what we are able under God to do.
- If there is a wider circle of interested Christian faculty or even a formal council of reference it seems reasonable to expect that the FA's job will be distributed among these folk. If you do what you feel able and free to do in the company of others, the very diversity of faculty involvements will enrich the ministry of the fellowship.

3. Yes, we do believe that there is good for you in being a FA. But we do want to be careful not to fall into a grace denying moralism or an academic world sort of prosperity doctrine ("Become an IVCF FA and "god" will give you the desires of your heart: tenure, promotion, research productivity, professional respect and fame, teaching awards, etc."). Indeed, the grace of the living God (not some easy to manipulate "god") works according to the pithy aphorism of Jesus, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35). So what might be in your serving as an IVCF FA is an experience of the smile of our Lord as you use the influence the Lord has given you to affirm and endorse thoughtful and faithful witness to the gospel, to shape that witness to a form most fully appropriate to the academic world, to stand with younger sisters and brothers in the gospel of grace. None of this will necessarily be easy, sometimes it will be very challenging and trying, but always it will be good, good for finding your life.

Since this answer to "what's in it for me" is heard all too rarely these days, let me direct you to two Christian faculty who bear witness to the truth of Jesus' aphorism. As a matter of vision I would urge you to take a look at the [inaugural address by Richard Hays](#) at his installation as Dean of the Divinity School at Duke University. And for the strange spiritual clarity and joy that comes from enduring opposition and scorn for the sake of the gospel and its Lord, consider this article by Gilbert Meilaender, Bio-Ethicist at Valparaiso University, "[On Bringing One's Life to a Point.](#)" Both of these statements make for fruitful meditation as we come to the beginning of a new academic year.

We would be eager to hear your answers to the three questions. Please comment on any or all of them. Or, perhaps there is another question as worthy of discussion as these three. Please address that question to us and offer your first pass at any answer. And, finally, please offer your comment on the concept of a Faculty Council of Reference. It is only an idea at present, and it would certainly help us to have your counsel about whether it is a fruitful idea to pursue.



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