

Dear Faculty Awards Committee members,

I am truly and extremely honored to have been nominated for the Distinguished Faculty Advisor Award. While I do not have any real familiarity with the literature on advising, I have had some excellent mentors and role models whose interactions with students I now emulate. Below, I will describe how I meet the criteria for this award, and this will be corroborated by the dozen letters of support I have attached.

“In biology, nothing is clear, everything is too complicated, everything is a mess, and just when you think you understand something, you peel off a layer and find deeper complications beneath. Nature is anything but simple.” So says author Richard Preston in *The Hot Zone*. The same sentiment may be applied to advising in the time of COVID, dual-enrollment and transfer courses, and other complexities. Our student population at Radford brings a hugely diverse set of experiences, backgrounds, and needs, which can make advising a challenge. One student may come in with a fully prepared four-year plan, while the next may not have the slightest idea of what they’re even doing in college. Many are working nearly full-time, and most don’t know what policies are in the catalog and how they will affect their set of circumstances. Thus, advising cannot be one-size-fits-all. For me, the key to good advising is to build relationships with my students, so that I can better offer recommendations and so they feel comfortable talking with me. To build those relationships, I have to listen to each of my advisees, students, and majors.

I serve as the academic advisor for all new biology majors in their first year – 80-120 advisees in a given semester. My relationship with these students typically starts at Quest, where I take a few minutes to introduce myself, help our Quest Advisor, and recruit students into my virus-hunter class (see below). I then ask them to join me during the first week of the semester for what I call a RE-Quest, an hour-long reminder of some of the things they’ll need to know during the first couple weeks of classes. Usually, I’ll bring along someone from our Advising Center and representatives from our Beta Beta Beta biology honors society to answer questions from the student perspective and to recruit new members. This helps connect our new students to more people who can help them. Our majors usually enroll in our Introductory Seminar in Biology in their first semester. This is where I meet for academic advising with most of them, since their instructor has started to give them some guidance that I can supplement. Students then have two biology faculty to turn to for assistance, which is important for us as we learn what interests each student. Follow-up meetings are then scheduled upon request.

During their second semester, I meet with each student individually for a more in-depth advising session. Here I learn about their backgrounds, their career goals, how they’re adjusting to college, and more. I spend this extra time so that I can help them decide on what classes they might need, but also to help them think about what programs (e.g. minors) they might consider or what opportunities they might have to expand their experiences over the course of their careers at Radford. This could be research projects in our department or in others, internship openings, or other resources available on campus. Once I know more about each student, I can also properly assign their next faculty advisor. Because biology is a broad and varied field, I match each student with an advisor whose interests align with theirs. Note that this does not end my interactions with our majors. They regularly brighten my door to ask questions, to verify their understanding of policies or programs, or just to say hi. Inevitably, we wind up chatting for a while, during which time I’m able to see how things are going. These check-ins are extremely helpful, as it is also my job to verify that students meet all requirements prior to graduation, and I do so well in advance so any issues can be corrected.

My students are biology majors, so it is important to train them to **be** biologists. In my classes, I give them chances to do biology. For example, my BIOL132: Cell Biology course uses the

Howard Hughes Medical Institute's SEA-PHAGES project as its laboratory component. In this class, *first-semester* students isolate and characterize their own new-to-science phage (a virus that infects bacteria) from soil samples, then figure out what each of the genes does for a subset of those viruses during their second semester. The project demonstrates:

- a. The excitement of science. I don't know what's going to happen! Therefore, every student success is something to be celebrated, and I get very animated when we have a possible new isolate. This, I hope, serves to model for my students that science is fun and worth pursuing, even in the face of
- b. The uncertainty of science. This is a fishing expedition, though, and not everyone is going to catch a fish...er, phage. One of the lessons here is that negative results are still results. In this case, a particular soil sample may not have a virus that infects our host bacteria, but that is still a data point. The uncertainty also emphasizes the need for
- c. The carefulness of science. To ensure reproducibility of experiments and to facilitate collection of accurate results, students need to learn to be meticulous. Using proper procedure and following the proper steps minimizes the error and maximizes the likelihood of success. Here, too, they learn that failure is a part of scientific investigation, and that it is actually ok to make mistakes. I will often regale them with tales of my careless mistakes, so they know they can still succeed.

During this class, I offer the opportunity for these students to present at our state microbiology conference. In my first year doing so, two freshmen volunteered to present posters of their new phage, and they were able to network with students and faculty from many of Virginia's colleges. Thus, I help them become professional scientists very early on in their undergraduate careers.

I also provide opportunities for students in other majors to gain experience when I am able. During my recent term as president of the state microbiology society, I noted that we didn't have a logo, so I had Ken Smith's Branding Design class use us as a client, and one of his students designed the society's new logo. This semester, I have established an internship opportunity for two Communications majors to assist our department in advertising our newly renovated greenhouse and to promote our department in our efforts to recruit new students.

I work with stakeholders and resource offices across campus to help our students. With the formation of the Academic Success Center, I have begun advising the advisors so they have some understanding of what the study of biology entails. I routinely direct our students to the Center for Career & Talent Development, and also help them find a new home when they realize that biology is not for them. Students changing majors to biology will find that I'm going to have a sit-down with them to get to know them, as I described above, before I'm willing to approve their change of major. Whether helping a biology major figure out how to add a second major in dance or gain teaching certification, I will make sure that my advisees' questions are answered and they know whom to contact for assistance. Finally, I serve as the faculty advisor for the Iota Zeta Chapter of Theta Chi on our campus. I am helping those men as they struggle to change the direction of their brotherhood to become productive members of their fraternity and the Radford community. I have led a workshop on substance abuse and mannerly behavior, provide wisdom and guidance during chapter meetings, and facilitate alumni relations.

The summary above describes my approach to advising. It essentially comes down to how I can help each of my students complete their bachelor's degree and reach their goals, while clearing obstacles in their paths. The following letters will provide further context and support for my nomination. While this is already one of the more rewarding aspects of my job, I sincerely thank you for considering me for this recognition.

