Seeing Students Through Parents' Eyes

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Barb Osborn sees a lot of her children in each student she advises.

Osborn says helping her children cope with transferring to Iowa State made her a better adviser for the horticulture department.

She’s the department’s head adviser, assigning students to advisers based on their commodity interests, such as turfgrass or fruit crops. But she keeps students who might not know what area they are interested in.

“I take a lot of the transfer students too, because I really enjoy looking at their transcripts to figure out how to best utilize their courses for a degree,” Osborn says.

Three of Osborn’s children are Iowa Staters. Her oldest daughter graduated with a food science degree, her second oldest daughter is a senior in the College of Human Sciences and her older son will transfer to horticulture’s turfgrass management program this fall. All went to community colleges and she helped them plan their courses to get needed credits.

In a way, Osborn becomes part of each advisee’s extended family.

“It is not uncommon for me to have a phone call from a parent at 10 o’clock at night or an email for no other reason than to check in or to say, ‘Hi,’” she says.

“Developing a rapport with them makes me a better adviser because I understand where the student comes from.”

Jeff Iles, horticulture department chair, says Osborn’s “ability to assist students and calm the fears of nervous parents is legendary.” Her abilities have garnered her the recognition of her peers. She won college awards for learning community coordination in 2009, student recruitment and retention in 2006 and outstanding advising in 2005. She was awarded the University Award for Academic Advising Impact in 2010.

Students frequently hang out in her office. “Some have likened Barb to the kindly camp counselor, dispensing equal amounts of guidance and support, and when necessary, a dash of tough love,” Iles says.

Osborn’s parents got her involved in horticulture. Helping them garden gave way to working at a golf course in high school. Turfgrass and landscaping are still her personal interests.

She earned a bachelor’s degree in agricultural education from Iowa State in 1983. Osborn applied her training to restore the vocational agriculture program at Dexfield High, using horticulture to attract urban students. After earning a master’s degree in 1988 in ag education she taught commercial horticulture at Des Moines Area Community College before taking her present position in 1998.

Besides advising, Osborn teaches an orientation course in which seeking employment is a key component. She sounds like a doting parent describing her goals for students.

“I want to see our students in a better place when they leave than when they come in, and by that I want them to be employed,” Osborn says.