Slide One: Welcome, and thank you for choosing this presentation. My name is Sara Jones, I am an academic advisor in the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University, in the beautiful city of Richmond, Virginia. I’m looking forward to speaking with you today about Creating a Questioning Culture in Advising.

Slide Two: Today’s presentation is all about questions: why it’s important to ask questions, what makes an effective question, and what stops us from asking questions? If you’ve been advising for a long time, this might feel like a pretty basic concept to you. But something I truly believe is that the fundamentals are always worth returning to. I started my career teaching music to elementary school students, and that experience taught me a lot. It taught me how to tell when a six-year-old was truly about to pee their pants. It taught me how to be able to look across a crowded lunchroom and spot a kid with a fever. If you have young kids, you’ll know what I’m talking about; it’s all in the eyes. And, it also taught me that the best way to build excellence is to focus on the building blocks. Break a discipline down to its most basic elements, learn to really understand those, and then you’re going to get somewhere. The building block, or the element, of advising that I want to focus on today is that of asking effective questions.

Now, I’m hoping that I’m speaking to an audience like me today, and what I mean by that is, if you think to yourself on a regular basis: “Wow, I wish I had a counseling degree,” then you and I are in the same boat. As I mentioned, my background is in education, and while teaching did give me a lot of skills that I use every day in advising, it is just not the same. We’re not counselors. I tell my students that, I tell myself that. The best help that we can give, is the help that we are qualified to give, right? And that means that I try to stay away from counseling. However, students come to us for help in so many areas, and the help that they are seeking is
not always as straightforward as, “This is the class you should take next semester.” While we may not be licensed therapists, or counselors, we are often in the role of coach, facilitator, and just a resource, a sounding board. In that role, we need to have the basic skills to help students reflect, and to empower them to find the answers on their own. Questions can help us do that.

Slide Three: Let me tell you about something that happened earlier this summer. I was preparing to meet with a new transfer student for the first time, and when I reviewed her past transcripts, she only had six credits of music coursework from one institution. I’m the music advisor. I built her degree plan based on what she still needed, and I had everything ready for her. When we started our meeting, she introduced herself, I introduced myself, and then I just launched in. I started explaining her degree requirements, what she still had to take, on and on and on. Finally, about ten minutes in, she tentatively asked, “So, do I still have to take all of this if I already took it in undergrad?” Turns out, she had an entire previous Bachelor of Music degree that wasn't showing up in our system yet. If I had taken two seconds to ask her to tell me about herself, or tell me about her prior experience, or, why was she choosing this degree, she would have told me that and I wouldn't have wasted ten minutes of our time. At the most basic level, questions are important because they help us avoid giving the wrong answers.

Slide Four: We often hear the same scenarios from students, the same problems, even the same questions, over and over again throughout the year. And, it can become a habit to hear a student begin to speak and immediately connect their words with a perceived pattern, and then give out advice based on prior experience. It’s fast, it’s efficient, and it often seems to work. But, as my story illustrates and as any advanced or experienced advisor can tell you, dispensing advice without knowing the whole picture leads to problems.
Slide Five: But, an even more crucial reason that I believe every advisor should lead with asking questions, is that questions empower students and redistribute the power balance in the room. By beginning with questions, instead of just rattling off information, we are admitting to students that we don’t know everything. One of the best student counselors that I’ve ever worked with has a saying that I love that she says to students: You are the expert of your own experience. Especially for students from underrepresented populations, adopting a posture that says, “Let me ask questions to understand and to learn from you how best to help you,” is so important. When we give advice with our own biases built in, based on our own experiences, we are pushing our assumptions on students. Asking questions moves us from that all-seeing expert, to the posture of a facilitator, coming alongside them and encouraging them to use their own expertise to solve a problem. In the words of Tony Stoltzfus, a certified professional coach and author, asking students questions honors them as a person, and communicates their value as an equal.

Slide Six: Now, it can be hard to look back on our failures and our mistakes. I did not love telling you that transfer student story a minute ago. But I heard someone say once that “Failure is data,” and I love that. We can look at our failures as information, and ask questions: why didn’t that work? What can I do differently?
Slide Seven: So I’d like to extend an invitation to you now, to think of a time in your advising when you think it could have gone better, or been more effective, if you’d asked more or better questions. Take a moment to pause this presentation and write it down. Think about a time that you wish you had asked some better questions.

Slide Eight: Effective questions begin with the environment in which they are asked. If a student is not comfortable with their advisor, even well-intentioned questions could seem like an attack. The first step to inviting growth through questions is for advisors to encourage a questioning culture within their advising meetings. When we look at models for leadership within the world of business, the idea of a ‘questioning culture’ is one in which people have a shared responsibility to solve problems, and are willing to take risks and ask questions to make it happen. In a questioning culture, it is acceptable to say, “I don’t know, let’s find out.” And in a questioning culture, we emphasize the process rather than the result. So how do we establish a culture like this with our students? I think the first and most vital thing we can do is to examine our beliefs about our role in a student’s life.
Slide Nine: What roles do you believe an advisor should play in the life of a student? Take a moment now to pause this presentation, and to write down some words that you think should describe the role that an advisor plays in the life of a student.

Slide 10: I want to introduce a term to you that I would suggest is a great way to think about advising: that of a "content-neutral facilitator." Advisors are in a unique position in the university because we can largely remain content-neutral. Like a facilitator, a third-party person coming in to help a business restructure, or work through a problem, we can help a student see all sides of an issue, without having a significant personal stake in which way their decision goes. The only stake that we have, or should have, is what is best for you, the student. For example, I advise music majors. Let's say that a talented violin player comes into my office and tells me that she's conflicted about her future and she's thinking about changing her major. Now, in this scenario, a professor might have good advice. But their inherent bias is going to be, "I want to retain you for my program." So they might push the student to stay. A parent might have good advice, but their inherent bias might be, "I want you to have a steady paycheck." So they might push the student to change majors. As the neutral advisor, rather than pushing for one outcome over another, I can ask questions, helping the student clarify her frustrations, her dreams, and her goals.
Slide 11: By being curious and open, and taking a posture that says, “I am coming alongside you to help you discover the answer,” I can create an environment in which the student can truly think about what she wants to do. Now, there may be times in advising when we know the right answer, right? “If you don’t take this class next semester, you won’t graduate.” Pretty cut and dry. And there are times when we might be teaching through advising, and we may want to ask questions in such a way that the student discovers a right answer. But more often, we are simply a facilitator; a participant-observer, who wants to nurture the student’s leadership abilities and problem-solving skills. In these meetings, students who feel empowered and supported are more likely to have that “Aha!” moment, that allows them to be their own hero. When students feel like there’s a right answer and they can’t find it; or, if they’re nervous about disappointing the advisor and making the wrong choice, they’re much less likely to think divergently and creatively. They are more likely to keep quiet, take the advice we give, leave our office, and make no significant changes. Now, it might be tempting to feel that we must push students to succeed by acting as a stern teacher or disappointed mentor when they fail. And, while this strategy may work for individual students, or for individual advisors, I respectfully submit the idea that most students already have enough authority figures to let down, and rarely need another one. Between professors, family, and their own inner critic, I’ve discovered that most of my students understand exactly how badly they’re doing, and they understand how much harder they should be working. What students might not have is a safe space with someone who is neutral, and who encourages them to think through their problems with honesty and self-compassion.

Slide 12: One of my favorite ways to think of myself as an advisor is as an archeologist: what clues can we find? What patterns can we discern? What new plan of action can we form, based on these discoveries? In that kind of environment, free from the fear of failure, disappointment, or shame, I’ve seen many students find the answers lurking beneath their behavior, their
attitudes, or their assumptions about themselves and others. So, here’s a story for you. I met a couple of years ago with a freshman during the first week of their classes. He had just placed into an advanced music ensemble, but he was thinking about dropping it, which was surprising, because this was an exclusive and coveted spot in this ensemble. He came in to talk to me about it, and seemed upset—he said, “I just know all of these students are sitting in there, they’re judging me, because I’m different, and my musical background is different, and I just feel like the director looks down on me too.” Now, in that moment, I had some options. I could have reassured the student, hand waved his concerns: “No, I know that director, and she doesn’t feel that way about anybody. I’m sure that’s not what they’re thinking about you. Everyone’s nervous.” Or I could have given him some tough love: “Hey, people really want to get into that ensemble and you got in. You’re really going to give up your spot?” Or I could have told him the story of my first week as a music major in my own undergrad experience, singing in advanced college-level ensembles, and feeling really nervous. But instead of all of that, I decided I would lead with questions. So I asked him: “Let’s say that all of those things you’re telling yourself about those other people are true. What would that mean for you?” He paused, thought about it, and then he said, “It would be just like high school all over again.” I said, “Okay, can you tell me more about that? What do you mean?” The student went on to describe a clique-y, self-conscious high school choral experience, where he was one of the only lower-income students in the program. He always felt out of place and he didn’t trust the teacher, who contributed to the clique-y atmosphere. We talked about that experience, and how VCU could be different, and he left feeling encouraged and realizing how he had been projecting his past experiences onto these new people. The decision that he made after that whether or not to stay in that ensemble didn’t matter as much as the fact that in that moment, I truly listened to him and tried to understand, instead of dismissing his concerns. And, he had an opportunity to self-reflect about how his own assumptions and experiences were causing him to perceive and respond to others. We laid down a lot of groundwork for trust between us that day, and it’s only grown since then.

Slide 13: So, what stops us from asking questions? What keeps us from exploring with students, from having the curiosity of an archeologist? Well, there are a lot of things. I mean, one common problem is lack of time. Advisors see students in a limited set of constraints, right: often once a semester for 30 minutes. Since open-ended questions, by definition, do not have a destination, it can feel really alarming to sacrifice an unknown amount of time to this questioning process. But I believe that if our goal is to make advising appointments less transactional and more focused on the student’s ability to problem solve, this open space is essential. We might be able
to check more items off of our “to-do” list, but the long term impact and real change on the student’s life will be diminished. Another problem with questions is that it can feel risky. There’s no script, right? You don’t know where the student is going to take it, they may not even engage, they may not answer. It can be uncomfortable. Questions require silence, and a lot of us are really uncomfortable with silence. We got into advising because we like to talk, right? You might also feel a fear of inadequacy. What if I ask the wrong question? What if the student takes it the wrong way? What if they think that I don’t know everything, because instead of telling them stuff, I’m asking them questions? I believe that all of these risks are worth the reward. The reward is: a relationship with the student built on mutual trust and respect, and an empowered student who has the confidence to find their own solutions.

Slide 14: So, let’s take a moment to pause, and look at what we’ve talked about so far. I’ve hopefully made the case to you that the art of asking effective questions can enrich your advising by establishing you as a collaborator and a facilitator, who is coming alongside your students to help them solve their problems. We’ve talked about what that could look like, having a ‘questioning culture’ in your advising, and we’ve talked about what stops us from asking questions, that it can be hard to do this. So in the time we have remaining, I’m going to share with you some practical information about types of questions that you can practice and plan to use in your advising, starting tomorrow. We are going to look at some ineffective types of questions, and their effective counterparts. We’re going to look at some frameworks that questions can help provide, and we will finish by going over a “toolbox” of effective questions that you can keep handy and have ready to use in your advising appointments. So let’s go!

Slide 15: A common saying is that there are no stupid questions. However, there can certainly be questions that are ineffective. There are several types of questions to generally avoid in an advising context, because they shut down conversation and they disempower students. One
type of question to avoid is a closed question. These are questions with clear-cut, yes or no answers. For example, “Do you think that taking so many credits is going to set you up for success?” That’s a yes or no question, and there is an implied correct answer there: no. This question could be asked in a more open-ended way through a simple re-phrasing: “What will you need to do to be successful with an 18-credit semester?” Phrased in this way, the student begins to think through the challenges presented by their schedule, without the pre-assumed failure, and with more reply options than “yes” or “no.”

Slide 16: Another type of ineffective question is a rhetorical question. This is a very judgment-laced kind of questioning. Rhetorical questions have an answer built in, and they are not asked in good faith. These are judgments disguised as questions, and while they may feel good to say, they will do nothing to build a relationship with the student and little to help them come to a solution for their problems. An example of this is, “Why can’t you just go to class? Why can’t you just go to class?” This positions the advisor as a disappointed authority, and the student as a child. This is a quick way to get the student to shut down and mentally check out, leaving no room for positive change or growth. The cure, the opposite of a rhetorical question is questions asked in good faith. Let’s say in that scenario, you truly are frustrated. You truly are confused: why won’t they just go to class? So phrasing it in a way that communicates your genuine care for the student: “Can you help me understand why you haven’t been going to class? Help me understand.” This is a question asked in good faith, and it shows the student that yes, I’m being honest with you, I want to know more. It also shows them that you care.

Slide 17: Another type of ineffective question is a rambling question. I’m very guilty of this. This happens when we string two of three questions together, presented as one. This can often happen when someone’s not confident in their ability to clearly communicate their question, or if you’re uncomfortable with silence. So, “Okay, so what’s stopping you from going to class? Are
you feeling nervous? Is the timing bad? Are you sleeping through your alarm? Blah, blah, blah.” I’m guilty of this, right? Asking a ton of questions like an avalanche. The solution to this?

Confident silence. Ask the question, and then embrace the silence. One of the best professors I had in undergrad, we used to joke that his style of questioning, his style of teaching, was like chemical warfare: he would lean forward, drop a bomb, and then sit back, and watch as it spread and we all [motion like mind exploding], amazed. He was confident and comfortable with the silence. Make it a practice to embrace the silence and to think before you speak. Allow the question to go where the student takes it, and if needed, ask for a follow up—ask a follow up question after the student responds.

Slide 18: Finally, the last type of ineffective question that I want to look at, is that of leading or solution-oriented questions. This is one of the most subtle and difficult types of unhelpful questions, because, um, it’s our way of disguising advice as a question. Or we might hope to lead the student through a certain idea or to a certain decision, but we do it through questioning. Neither of these are the actions of a true facilitator; they are the actions of a teacher or authority. In some cases this may be appropriate. However, if our goal is to allow students to truly problem solve, then this should be avoided; it’s just a more drawn out way to tell students what to do. Solution-oriented questions tend to have “Can you...” or “Should you...”, and have “you” as the second word. For example, a student comes to you, and says that they are struggling to stay on task while studying for Math, and that’s resulted in a failing grade. The advisor might be tempted to say, “Can you try studying with a group of people?” This is just advice: study with a group of people. It shuts down the conversation: “Okay, cool yeah, I guess I’ll try that.” And then that’s it. The student might have come up with better solutions on their own, or had you talked more with an open-ended question, but they’re happy with that one, okay great, they leave. Are they going to do it? Who knows. People are generally more likely to make a change if they came up with it by themselves. Instead, by asking an open-ended question, such as, “What study strategies have you not yet tried?”, the advisor leaves the door open for the student to come up with a strategy that the advisor may not have thought of. Or you might ask, “What have you done when you’ve struggled with math in the past?” Um, here’s another scenario: the student comes in and says, “I’m failing math, I’m doing really poorly.” You say, “Well, what study strategies have you not yet tried?” The student might take it in a different direction, they might say, “I’ve tried everything, nothing works, I’m just no good at math. There’s no use trying.” Well that can clue you in, then, to the fact that there might be something deeper than just lack of attention going on here. Maybe they’re following a script in their mind that success in math is impossible. Now you can begin to ask more questions to try to get to the underlying issue: “I’m hearing you say that
you don’t succeed in math. Why do you think that? Tell me about that.” And then, you can get a little deeper in.

Slide 19: Now let’s take a minute to talk about something really basic: body language, tone of voice. Remember how I said that a questioning culture starts with the environment? This includes the way students perceive you when you’re asking them questions. Two big areas that you have control over, that you can pay attention to, are your body language and your tone of voice. When you’re asking students questions, are you facing them, looking at them in the eyes, while asking them? Or are you staring at the computer, or sitting back with your arms crossed? When you ask a question, are you using a bright, neutral tone of voice? Or does your voice have, um, some judgment built into it? For example, consider the question, “What were you thinking?” This can be asked a couple of different ways: “What were you thinking?” We know what that means, right? It’s a little sarcastic, a little disappointed. Or, “What were you thinking?” [said in an even tone of voice] “What were you thinking? Tell me what you were thinking.” Depending on how you ask that, it can come across as open, earnest, ‘tell me what’s going on in your mind.’ If asking questions as a default is new to you, it’s a great idea to practice. Practice asking the questions that you hope to use often, so that when you do try them out, they’ll flow, and communicate what you want them to. Now, if questioning is new for you, you can try some frameworks, uh, some sort of patterns to follow, to use questions in what might feel like a bit of a safer way.

Slide 20: For example, this is a great, um, framework, again from the coach and author Tony Stoltzfus. If you see a student, have a student who is struggling with something they want to change; for example, waking up on time. And you want to move them towards action, but you want them to do the driving, you want them to come up with the solution, you can use questions. This specific model starts with exploring the possibilities. You can ask them: “What could you
do?” Let’s brainstorm some ideas, what could you do to fix this. Then choose a solution: “Okay, so from this list, what do you want to pursue?” And then once they’ve chosen a solution, have them commit to a step: “What will you specifically do, by when?” Then you’ve got something to check back in on, the next time that you meet.

Slide 21: Another way that you can think of questions is to help students, to help draw students out, to help the conversation keep going. If students are used to coming in, laying it out there, and getting advice, they might come in, tell you about what’s going on, and then stop talking and sit back and—“Alright, well? Tell me what to do.” In those moments, when you want them to keep going, questions can help them get closer to their own solutions. Here are some examples. You can help them clarify: “Hey, what did you mean when you said…” Help them dig a little bit deeper: “What have you done when you faced this problem before?” You can prompt them: “What would you say to a friend if they were in this situation?” It’s amazing to me how students can be so self-critical, in a really unproductive way, when they’re speaking to themselves. But as soon as you tell them, “Hey, what would you say to a friend who’s going through this?”, suddenly they’ve got great advice, when they’re thinking about the way they would speak kindly to a friend. So I love that prompt.

Slide 22: If asking questions makes you feel a little nervous, one of the best things you can do is to set yourself up for success by having a toolbox of effective questions, ready to ask when the opportunity arises. These basic questions can open up your conversations with students, and begin the move from a transactional to a questioning culture in your meetings. For example, in his book “The Coaching Habit,” Michael Stanier points to one question as the single most effective way to dig deeper with clients (or in our case, students.) He calls this the “AWE Question,” and it is made up of three simple words: “And what else?”
Slide 23: “What else?” Personally, I have started using this question a lot in advising. I will often ask it twice: I’ll ask it at the beginning, so the student comes in, we say hello, I say, “Okay, tell me how I can help you today.” And they’ll say, “Oh, I need help, I need an override into this class.” I’ll say, “Okay great, and what else?” Sometimes they say, “Well that’s all.” But more often they say, “Actually yeah, there’s something else I wanted to talk about.” Then we go through our meeting, and at the end, I’ll say “Okay, I’m going to send you my follow-up email with what we talked about today. Is there anything else I can help you with? Anything else you want to talk about?” I always extend that invitation by using this question, or a variation of it: “What else?” And sometimes it works; the student, again at the end, will say, “Actually, yes…” And then they might tell me something, or talk about something that was even a little bit harder for them to bring up. In addition to the “AWE” question, these are some of the other questions that I’ve added to my toolbox over the last couple of years, and I’ve found them to be reliable and helpful in opening up conversation. Asking a student, “What do you think?” Sometimes they’ll come in, I’ll give them a couple of—they’ll lay out the issue, and I might give them a few different possibilities, and say, “What do you think?” It gives them a chance to let me know what they think. “What if?” “What if you did this. What if that were true? What if you believed this, what would change?” Sometimes, just telling them what I’ve heard: “What I’m hearing is this. Is that true? Is that right?” Or, “Can you tell more about this thing?” And then, “How can I support you right now?” Sometimes students will come in and tell me something really hard, and I might feel helpless because I want to just give some sort of platitude or advice or whatever right off the bat. I’ve found that this, “How can I support you right now?”, has been a really great response to help me actually be supportive of students.

Slide 24: I’d like to invite you to take a moment to pause this presentation and think: is there a question that you often ask students that opens up dialogue for you? What questions are in your
toolbox? Write some down on the hand-out, and I’d love for you to email me if you have some that weren’t on my toolbox. I’d love to learn.

Slide 25: Creating a questioning culture in your advising appointments isn’t about thinking the quickest on your feet, or having the right knowledge about the best types of questions to ask, or even being as experienced or qualified as a counselor or a therapist. It’s about your posture and how you think of yourself and your students. Do you believe that they have the ability to be their own hero and come up with their own best solutions? Do you believe that they are the expert of their own lived experience? Do you believe that you are a facilitator, not a judge? If you begin with that posture, you will find opportunities to ask your students good questions, and in return, they will begin to open up, to reflect, to problem solve, and to truly grow, in the way that we know they can. Thank you so much for being here today. I hope you get to go out and ask some good questions.

Slide 26: My contact information is on this slide, again my name is Sara Jones and I’m at Virginia Commonwealth University. Please be in touch! I would love to hear if you use any of these questions and find success with them, or if you’ve got some go-to questions that you love to use.
Slide 27: You’ll see in your hand out and on this last slide, I’ve got references. These are all books that really helped me, even though there’s some crossover in the genre, and the field, these books were really helpful for me in establishing a questioning culture in my advising.

**REFERENCES**