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## Advising Honors Students: Motivational Interviewing as a Tool for Identity Building and Development

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## CHAPTER FOUR

# Advising Honors Students: Motivational Interviewing as a Tool for Identity Building and Development

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Even though honors students are academically successful, they are a college population facing unique challenges related to stress management, identity, and the setting of realistic expectations (Clark et al., 2018). The identification of students as talented or gifted, while seemingly positive, can carry with it a necessity to perform above the norm, which may contribute to a sense of maladaptive perfectionism within the student. Additionally, Clark et al. (2018) note that admission to an honors college does not necessarily provide students with the skills or dispositions to navigate through a college environment with ease.

These challenges become acutely problematic when honors students compete with one another for coveted opportunities and some lose their sense of achievement vis-à-vis their peers. As the

need to achieve individual perfection increases, the standards of the community intensify, and fewer students are able to attain their own definition of academic success. Robert W. Baker and Bohdan Siryk (1984) refer to the myth-versus-reality phenomenon in which the unrealistically high expectations that students set are unattainable, resulting in a disappointing reappraisal of their goals and a lack of adequate adjustment to the higher education institution. This lack of appropriate adaptation to a new environment can lead students to question their own sense of self. When students' self-efficacy and identity are linked to their academic achievement and success is not attained, their identities are challenged.

Alan M. Schwitzer's (2005) research on at-risk undergraduate student populations revealed that students are more likely to succeed if they have accurate self-appraisals and understand institutional resources. Advising honors students requires that special attention and time be devoted to identity building and self-efficacy. Moreover, advisors may need to build student autonomy and identity within the academic advising setting itself (Simon & Ward, 2014) because honors students have a tendency to rely on the input and guidance of parents and other authorities rather than their own autonomy (Kampfe et al., 2016). These complexities necessitate a change in the scope and direction of advising practice for honors students.

This chapter describes a new advising model for meeting the needs of the honors student population. Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a directive-counseling approach that utilizes person-to-person interactions and enhances motivation for change (Iarussi, 2013). While MI has historically been used in clinical counseling to support adults with substance abuse and other problem behaviors, it has also been found to have broader applications (Frey et al., 2011). On the continuum of styles for facilitating helping conversations, MI is a guiding style that "lives in the middle ground between direction and following, incorporating aspects of each" (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 5). MI's collaborative conversation style fosters a person's own motivation and commitment to change through person-centered care. The primary purpose of MI is to "strengthen a person's own motivation for change" and to celebrate the autonomy

of an individual (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 4). Given the special struggles and needs of the honors population—especially the necessity for identity building outside of academics, managing emotions and stress levels, developing purpose, and establishing individual autonomy—MI's spirit, required skills, and processes can provide a thorough and workable advising model.

This chapter will explore common challenges advisors face when working with honors students, particularly the difficulties students have with identity building related to academic achievement. It also highlights the spirit, skills, and processes of MI and its practical use as a tool for special populations. Finally, it presents a new advising model for honors students that incorporates the skills and processes of MI practice. MI skills and processes represent a promising solution to meeting the specific needs of honors students and can be effectively implemented in an advising setting. Specifically, MI enables advisors to reach students in meaningful ways and to empower students to be active agents of change in their own education.

## **ADVISING NEEDS OF THE HONORS POPULATION**

The transition to college represents one of the most challenging developmental periods that a student may face. The increased rigor of academics coupled with changes to students' support systems can leave new college students feeling isolated and inadequate. It is vitally important that people involved with helping students construct new support systems recognize these changes and provide meaningful care.

Christina Clark et al. (2018) found that honors students “expressed less academic and personal self-confidence than their peers outside of the Honors College” (p. 24); they also noted that honors students were also less likely to reflect their own personal autonomy in their college selection, relying more heavily on external factors such as school counselors or family input. Unfortunately, self-efficacy, or one's belief in one's own ability to succeed, is often tied to academic achievement for honors students; nevertheless,

students' belief in their ability to succeed academically does not necessarily affirm their overall identity and self-confidence. Thus, the honors student population may benefit from attention to identity building and positive self-efficacy outside the realm of academics.

In Baker and Siryk's (1984) study of college adjustment and the myth-versus-reality phenomenon, they noted that students' unrealistically high self-evaluations and self-expectations caused them to assess their environment inaccurately. Such inaccurate perceptions of their own abilities made students' adjustment to college life more difficult. Conversely, students who had accurate self-appraisals and understanding of their own academic achievement had better personal adjustment to the college experience (Jackson et al., 2006). Anne N. Rinn (2007) noted that students may struggle when they discover that they are not the top performer they had been previously in high school. Therefore, honors students must have a supportive advising model that encourages them to self-reflect accurately and to build a positive self-image.

In developing their identity and a positive self-image, honors students need to view themselves accurately beyond their academic pursuits. Honors students may appear to be successful when rated using metrics such as GPA or graduation rate, but further research is needed on the population's psychological and social health. Amanda Cuevas et al. (2017) delineated the difference between succeeding and thriving in an academic institution. They noted that "thriving measures malleable psychosocial factors—including academic determination, engaged learning, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness," which enable students to engage fully and to get the most out of their experience (p. 80). Conversely, succeeding had more to do with GPA and other quantifiable academic metrics. In order for honors students to thrive rather than simply succeed, attention and time need to be devoted to supporting their psychological health and self-image.

Mary Walker (2012) explained that one common characteristic of honors students—a desire for perfection—can impede their psychological well-being. Honors students who let the stress of academic obstacles control their lives may experience their own

negative qualities as defining their identity and self-image (Walker, 2012). Students who struggle with perfectionism and allow it to become maladaptive could suffer from illnesses such as headaches, disorders, substance abuse, depression, and anxiety (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt (2002) likewise remarked that honors students' perfectionist tendencies can interfere with their positivity and cause them to experience increased anxiety and depression. While academic achievement is a driving factor for most honors students, it needs to be separated from the students' self-identity. Advising settings that support personal autonomy and accurate self-reflection and help to build a positive self-image are an important venue for honors students.

In addition to academics and self-image, honors students often look to advising for vocational support and motivation (Hause, 2017). While university academic advising typically addresses degree planning and coursework, it does not necessarily help advisees to discern their vocation or larger life goals (Hause, 2017). Vocations represent a deeper calling and understanding of self-purpose than does a traditional job. Jeffrey P. Hause (2017) noted that many students "appear to have their futures mapped out with well-formulated, multi-year plans for college, and can articulate in detail what they want to pursue after graduation" (p. 152). This illusion of certainty, however, does not account for the continuing need to reevaluate and provide support to students pursuing vocational goals. The appearance of having everything planned out is often misleading, and students can experience a crisis when their concept of the future is challenged. Jon C. Dalton (2001) discussed the importance of students having a link between "head and heart," such that they are encouraged to think beyond academics to a broader vocational calling (p. 22). This concept of vocational advising encourages students to think beyond the traditional degree plan and coursework to what really inspires and motivates them. Furthermore, many honors students also struggle with long-term vocational goal setting because of the multipotentiality represented by their variety of interests (Carduner et al., 2011). In this volume, Philip L. Frana (2023) underscores the variety of questions that

advisors field because of their students' multipotentiality. Having so many areas of curiosity and talent can overwhelm students, especially when they feel conditioned to choose a specific path early in their academic career. The stress and anxiety related to changing a major or minor can be navigated more successfully by students when their degree choice is only one facet of their larger life goal. There is a need for students to be able to look inward and to reflect on their abilities and passions. "People's vocations," Hause (2017) argues, "largely constitute their identity, and discernment of a vocation begins with reflection on their values . . ." (p. 159). This process of reflection and discussion may help students to find greater self-meaning. Advising does not typically ask students to engage in thorough self-reflection and discussion about larger goals; however, such vocational discernment and discussion are important for the honors student population and should be a common practice in advising settings.

A final advising need for honors students relates to their connectivity to the host institution and resources of that community. David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis (1986) noted that a sense of community is the greatest contributor to students' ability to thrive in college. Students who have connections to others and who have a valued sense of purpose are most likely to be retained by the institution (Cuevas et al., 2017; Tinto, 2017). When asked about the value of advising and the relationship students have with their academic advisor, a student at Macaulay Honors College noted, "The biggest benefit of having a full-time designated honors advisor is a psychological one. To know that there is someone on campus who knows me by face, someone to whom I can come and ask any question, someone who genuinely cares about me and my academic endeavors . . ." (Klein et al., 2007, p. 103). Students realize the value in having a personal connection to their advisor and the community. Students maintained higher GPAs, as Cuevas et al. (2017) noted, when they had a reasonable amount of campus involvement rather than too much or too little. Part of an advisor's role is to help students regulate their co-curricular activities and find meaningful interactions. Furthermore, James H. Young III et al. (2016) noted that honors

students highlighted experiencing connectedness and community as one of the most important benefits of participating in honors and sought out that resource. Honors students see the value in the connection to campus involvement and community, and advising provides an outlet to connect and accommodate student needs.

## **MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING**

The spirit, skills, and processes of Motivational Interviewing (MI) represent a viable advising model to engage with the struggles of honors students. MI is used in many different clinical counseling settings and operates on the belief that personal interactions influence motivation for change. Although MI's roots were in substance abuse counseling, the practice has translated well to other settings such as school counseling and peer mentorship because of its demonstrated ability to "remove motivational barriers and produce desirable changes in adult behavior" (Frey et al., 2017, p. 86). MI's goal-oriented, collaborative communication style fosters self-evaluation and focuses attention on the language of change. MI "elicits and explores the person's own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion" (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 29). MI provides both a relational understanding and a technical process to move forward.

### **The Spirit of Motivational Interviewing**

MI is not a set of technical interventions; it requires a mindset shift to an underlying perspective on the part of the practitioner. This mindfulness is known as the spirit of MI. The spirit of MI maintains that externally driven methods for motivating change can be coercive and may require people to accept changes that are incongruent with their own beliefs. According to William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick (2013), "MI is not a way of tricking people into changing; it is a way of activating their own motivation and resources for change" (p. 16). The four key elements that comprise the spirit of MI are partnership, acceptance, compassion, and evocation (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).



Partnership includes an active collaboration where the client is the undisputed expert and the practitioner is a helper. Acceptance means that the practitioner accepts whatever the client brings, regardless of the interviewer's personal approval. Acceptance includes valuing absolute worth, autonomy, accurate empathy, and affirmation (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Compassion is a "deliberate commitment to pursue the welfare and best interests of the other . . . and to give priority to the other's needs" (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 20). In this way, MI requires that one's heart be in the right place. Lastly, the spirit of MI requires evocation, which challenges the practitioner to avoid a "righting reflex" by providing answers; instead, evocation focuses on the clients' strengths and resources (Miller & Rollnick, 2013 p. 5). People already have within them what is needed, and the practitioner's role is to evoke rather than provide.

## The Four Processes of Motivational Interviewing

While the spirit of MI can be thought of as relational, the process of Motivational Interviewing is the technical aspect. MI can best be understood through four processes: engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning.

**Engaging.** Just as most relationships require a period of rapport building and engagement, MI uses the engaging process to establish a connection, create a working relationship, and foster a shared understanding (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). A productive engagement requires more than exchanging pleasantries and being friendly. The engaging process emphasizes exploring values and goals related to the client and should result in a mutually trusting relationship grounded in respect. The practitioner wants to know what is important to the client. Furthermore, fully embracing the spirit of MI wherein the client is the expert, the practitioner needs to avoid assessment, labeling of problem behaviors, and expert-driven directing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 47).

**Focusing.** As a natural next step after engagement, a focus will emerge to clarify the direction for the rest of the conversation. Focusing is the "process by which the practitioner develops and

maintains a specific direction in the conversation about change” (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 27). Focusing might require developing and evaluating an agenda of hopes, fears, expectations, goals, and more. The goal of focusing is to find one or more specific goals or outcomes that the client wants to work on, which may arise from the client, the context, or the clinician (Miller & Rollnick, 2013 p. 101).

**Evoking.** Perhaps the most important process in MI, evoking requires the client’s active participation. Evoking is “eliciting the client’s own motivation for change. . . . And having the person voice the argument for change . . .” (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 28). Another key feature of the evoking process is resolving ambivalence and having clients talk themselves into change. Miller and Rollnick (2013) note that people are more committed to what they hear themselves saying. Ambivalence—the presence of conflicting motivations—is normal for most people. Spending time in evoking includes asking evocative questions that cultivate change while softening language that does not.

**Planning.** The last process of MI is planning: in this phase the client develops a commitment to change and creates a plan of action to move forward (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). This involves a conversation about future action that includes autonomy in decision-making, developing solutions, and anticipating setbacks. The planning phase does not begin until a client has reached a certain “threshold of readiness” from the other three processes (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 29). Planning provides an opportunity for the practitioner and the client to share ideas, and the practitioner can share advice, provided the client is interested in it.

The four processes of MI—engagement, focusing, evoking, and planning—are not static: MI is often recursive. Depending on the conversation, reverting to an earlier process may be necessary. The four processes of MI are powerful because they frame all change, motivation, and progress around the client. Rather than being given external options or told which choices are the most meaningful, the client is the agent of transformation

## **MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING WITHIN AN HONORS ADVISING MODEL**

Because many of the advising needs of honors students relate back to psychosocial growth, including motivational and psychological processes, there is a need for an advising model that is predicated on supporting student development. Steven B. Robbins et al. (2004) noted that psychosocial factors are malleable and can be influenced through interventions. Therefore, an advising model that encourages student growth and intervention is key. MI spirit, processes, and skills provide a strong foundation for understanding the role of the advisor and student within interactions and provide a workable framework for hosting an advising session that emboldens students to participate in self-reflection, challenges the status quo of their identities, and strengthens the rapport between student and advisor. By reframing advising through the spirit of MI, utilizing MI skills, and including the four processes within advising sessions, advisors can improve the practices and strategies of honors advising to meet the needs of this special population.

## **HONORS ADVISING AND THE SPIRIT OF MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING**

The spirit of MI in advising involves a significant mindset shift: the advisor will no longer occupy the driver's seat in the conversation with the student. Typically, in advising settings, the advisor is the expert on degree requirements, course selection, and future planning. Embracing the spirit of MI, however, requires the advisor to assume the role of guide rather than director or follower. Because the spirit of MI relies on evocation, the student should speak more in a session than the advisor. The advisor must accept the student without conditions, even if that acceptance is at odds with the advisor's goals for the student.

For example, in a recent interaction with an advisor, the honors student shared the feeling of being overwhelmed with honors requirements, managing a difficult academic course load, and

balancing a full-time job. The student expressed a desire to withdraw from the honors college and to focus on major requirements. In an MI advising setting, the advisor avoided the desire to evaluate the student's desire as wrong or misguided (a retention-oriented approach); rather, the advisor used the spirit and skills of MI to guide the student toward self-expressed goals for attending to the student's own motivations and well-being. Rather than providing solutions, the advisor allowed the student to talk through obstacles, ambivalence, and ultimately the student's motivation to reduce some of the workload. The student's goal to withdraw from the honors college was at odds with the advisor's retention goals; however, the advisor accepted and supported the student's autonomy to make a qualified decision. That student became much more likely to confide in the advisor and seek further guidance because the advisor did not pressure the student into a decision.

### **HONORS ADVISING AND THE FOUR PROCESSES OF MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING**

MI processes used in advising would include spending time on building rapport (engagement) and understanding and letting the student drive the change-making process (focusing, evocation, planning). MI can assist in resolving students' ambivalence and enhancing their intrinsic motivation for change (Iarussi, 2013). Utilizing the four processes in student advising interactions includes helping students to come to their own conclusions about their current behaviors. Rather than telling students what the advisor sees or thinks, the advisor assists students in examining the relationship between their behaviors and larger goals. This orientation represents a significant mindset shift for advising because the advisor has typically been an advice-giver.

In an academic advising setting, many students arrive feeling overwhelmed and confused about their major selection. Perhaps students always thought they would become a doctor, but they were not performing well in their freshman year chemistry and biology classes and realized they hated the content. Utilizing the

four processes of MI, the advisor would encourage the students to explore their goals and interest areas. They might verbalize what makes them passionate and what subjects they enjoy, thus identifying a discrepancy between their major and their overall interest area. They might also articulate a discrepancy between their current major and their past expressed identity in the medical field. The students would direct the conversation toward potential changes and goals. Thus, the advisor is not directly eliciting change but is supporting the student's autonomy to make that choice. At the same time, the advisor is using the processes of MI to facilitate an important conversation about vocation. These types of advising conversations are difficult to have without an established framework.

Including the four processes within an advising encounter might include asking students questions about broader ambitions or motivations during the engagement process. For example, an advisor might ask students about what sort of life they would find worthwhile in the absence of financial constraints. This question may bring to light an incongruity between the real passion of students and their current major. Such questioning helps to facilitate a discussion about a larger vocation or calling. Similarly, an advisor might ask students about their favorite quality in themselves, which may reveal a discrepancy in how students see themselves and the profession toward which they are working. In this way, the students are generating the content of and dominating the discussion that will lead to them coming to their own conclusions. The advisor is merely a guide who helps to direct the students toward internal reflection without offering advice, opinion, or motivation.

## **Honors Advising and the Skills of Motivational Interviewing**

Implementing MI in an advising setting would include the use of core communication skills; these skills include asking open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections, and summarizing. Advisors should use them throughout an advising conversation. Together, they form the mnemonic OARS.

**Asking Open-Ended Questions.** An open-ended question provides plenty of latitude for a variety of answers and encourages the student to share. While closed questions collect specific short answers to questions, open-ended questions elicit more information and can initiate conversation about a particular topic (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 64).

**Affirming.** The process of affirming has the advisor focusing on the positive and accentuating the worth and autonomy of students. An advisor utilizing affirmations communicates important attitudes: “what you say matters, and I respect you. I want to understand what you think and feel” (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 64). The advisor should celebrate and affirm students’ autonomy and self-efficacy. Honors students in particular struggle with establishing their confidence and identity outside of academics, and allowing students to initiate positive change is the first step toward progress. The advisor serves as a support system and can suggest plans for change when prompted by students.

In one recent example, an honors student shared a readiness to implement some new time management strategies to better organize classes and other responsibilities. The student had considered options and decided this change was the best way to meet goals. The advisor celebrated the autonomy exercised by the student to determine this change and partnered with the student to develop a plan to move forward. The advisor also affirmed the student’s strengths and values that had led to success in past endeavors and that would surely support achieving this goal.

**Reflecting.** When working with students, the advisor can utilize reflective listening strategies, specifically showcasing understanding to build rapport with students. This strategy is especially important because it can help to clarify what the student means when speaking to an advisor, ensuring that the advisor has a clear understanding of the student’s needs. Additionally, reflecting a student’s statements demonstrates concern and empathy and suggests that the advisor wants to learn more about the student and the student’s struggles. Because MI is a specific interpersonal style, advisors must meet students where they are, both mentally and emotionally, and seek to understand them in the moment.

For example, in a recent advising conversation a student shared, “I am just so worn out. I haven’t seen my family in a month, my professors are all giving me big assignments at once, and I hate having to take classes on Zoom.” The advisor could reflect what the student is saying by acknowledging the weariness and stress: “You are feeling overwhelmed and fatigued without the support of your family and in-person connection.” This comment validates the student’s feelings and creates the opportunity for a dialogue that will explore the situation more fully. It also demonstrates empathy and understanding.

**Summarizing.** Summaries help connect conversation points and pull together several ideas a student has mentioned. They “help students to hold and reflect on the various experiences they have expressed” and encourage students to continue sharing because the advisor has demonstrated a keen listening ear (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 67). Summaries can serve several functions including linking and transitioning to new areas of conversation. For example, an advisor might remark: “You feel a disconnect between your major and your interests, but you aren’t sure if you can make any big changes in your life right now. You would like to think about some classes you can take to explore new options. It would be helpful for you and me to explore the course catalog together. Is that correct?” In this way, the advisor is reflecting what the student has shared, confirming that the information was understood correctly, and shifting the conversation to an actionable item. Summaries also provide an opportunity for the advisor to reflect back what is helpful while softening talk that might not motivate change.

## MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING RESOURCES

This chapter outlines the theoretical perspectives guiding MI and identifies the possible positive outcomes of an MI advising framework. Becoming proficient in MI requires significant training, feedback, communities of practice, maintenance, and years of experience. Interested honors programs and colleges should first evaluate how this model fits in with existing program goals and objectives. Then, they should seek further information and training

before moving forward. One resource that universities can look to is the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (2021). The MINT website includes calendars of training events, training expectations, exercises, videos, and more. Additionally, those interested in MI will learn a great deal about the spirit, method, skills, and practice of MI from MI founders William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick's (2013) *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change*. (The fourth edition of this book is forthcoming in 2023.)

## CONCLUSION

Arthur W. Chickering and Linda Reisser (1993) noted that “to be effective in educating the whole student, colleges must hire and reinforce staff members who understand what student development looks like and how to foster it” (p. 44). Advising an honors student requires spending more time on the whole student rather than focusing on academics and degree requirements. Advising conversations should ideally involve looking at vocational goals and objectives, identity and self-image outside of academics, connections to the community and larger university, and building autonomy and self-efficacy. These conversations, while necessary, are difficult to have with students and require a great deal of rapport and trust between student and advisor. In addition, trusting relationships take time to build; consequently, it is essential that each advising interaction be meaningful.

Motivational Interviewing provides a mindset shift for advising that enables advisors to gain their students' respect and trust with each meeting. MI provides advisors with four processes for supporting change and growth and for guiding difficult conversations on problematic behaviors such as perfectionism and negative self-efficacy. Finally, it provides a set of four core communication skills that advisors can use during their interactions with students. Implementing the spirit, skills, and processes of MI can help advisors to navigate difficult conversations on stresses related to academic pressures and connection to a community. Although these needs are common within the honors student population, traditional advising models do not address them. Guided by MI,



however, academic advisors can meaningfully address problematic areas during an advising session. Most importantly, the changes brought about by MI are enacted by the students, so advisors are never fixing a situation; instead, students are always the agent of positive change. MI represents a deviation from standard advising practice but is flexible enough to allow for nuance and personal style.

Honors advising can often become transactional and focused on a style where advisors provide solutions and answers to students. This directive and retention-focused model fails to empower students to dig deeper into their own autonomy, which is a central need of the honors population (Clark et al., 2018). MI spirit, skills, and processes empower students to be agents of change in their own education and provide a workable advising model for the honors population.

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