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Everything You Have Always Wanted to Know About Academic Advising (Well, Almost)

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Answering the question "What occurs in an academic advising interaction?" is not as easy as one might think. Many factors contribute to the academic advising process, and no two advising interactions are the same. This article discusses the different factors involved in an academic advising interaction, emphasizing the need for psychological counselors to become familiar with the specific aspects of the advising processes that occur at their respective institutions.

KEYWORDS academic advising, developmental advising, prescriptive advising

Kuhn, Gordon, and Webber (2006) delineated a continuum of responsibilities shared by academic advisors and personal counselors in higher education, and discussed when it is appropriate for advisors to refer to counseling services, offering a sample list of "triggers" for academic advisors to do so. For example, the expressed inability to cope with day-to-day responsibilities of being a student such as attending classes, studying, and completing assignments on time may be influenced by personal problems, emotional disorders, or other sources of stress that advisors are not trained to handle. An anxious, angry, or withdrawn affect should also alert the need for referral. At the extreme, any threat to commit suicide or harm self or others is a definite trigger. Kuhn, Gordon, and Webber (2006) discuss additional triggers as well, and others (e.g., Harper & Peterson, 2005; Wilcox, Harper, & Herman, 2007; Wilcox, 2011) have further provided academic advisors with tips on recognizing students in distress, guidelines regarding how to deal with these students, and steps to take when referral to a professional mental

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health counselor is warranted. Although academic advisors are typically not also mental health counselors, their roles require frequent interaction with students and therefore they may be the first to recognize or be informed that the student is experiencing some form of distress (Harper & Peterson, 2005).

Academic advisors in higher education, therefore, have resources available to inform them when students require assistance beyond advising. But what do college counselors and mental health professionals know about what occurs in academic advising meetings? Describing what exactly occurs in a given academic advising session is not as easy as one may think, as many factors are involved. Miller (2011) discusses how difficult it is to even identify what structure for advising is in place at a given institution, suggesting that four questions—"Who is advised?," "Who advises?," "Where is advising done?," and "How are advising responsibilities divided?"—need to be answered in order to determine the academic advising structure in place. In addition to these questions concerning the advising structure, a number of other factors affect advising interactions, as I shall discuss in the following sections.

WHO ADVISES?

In higher education, those who perform academic advising include professional full-time staff advisors, faculty advisors, paraprofessionals, peer advisors, graduate assistants, interns, staff who serve dual roles as academic advisors and career advisors, staff with dual roles of academic advisors and mental health counselors, and even institutional administrators with titles of deans, associate and assistant deans, directors, associate and assistant directors, coordinators—as well as others with titles not included here! In fact, different institutions use the titles "advisor" and "counselor" for staff who may provide the same services (Kuhn, Gordon, & Webber, 2006), one of the most common being an advisor at a 4-year institution playing the same role as a counselor at a 2-year community college. Who among these many groups does the advising can have an impact on how advising is delivered and of what the advising process consists. In addition, most who advise—even the full-time professional staff advisors—have additional responsibilities other than advising students. Teaching 1st-year seminars, holding workshops, performing committee work, working at institutional events, and carrying out various other duties take time away from performing academic advising with students. When faculty serve as academic advisors, some campuses or programs allow (or require) it of new faculty, while others allow new faculty members a year to transition to their roles before advising students. As a further variable, in some cases academic advising is included as part of faculty's teaching load, and in others it falls under

service. In very few institutions is advising truly evaluated or weighed as part of promotion, merit, and tenure considerations.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ADVISORS

Creamer (2000) suggested that academic advising theories per se do not exist. Hagen and Jordan (2008) agree that indeed there is no unified theory of academic advising, but state that a multitude of theories are relevant to it. As evidenced by Crookston's (1972) and O'Banion's (1972) seminal works, developmental theory has served as one of the historically dominant bases for academic advising theory, research, and practice (Robbins, 2010). Developmental theories such as those offered by Chickering and Reisser (1993), Erikson (1950, 1968), Kohlberg (1964), Perry (1970), and Piaget (1932, 1952), among others, have been very influential. More recently, academic advisors have turned to educational theory and personality theory in their academic advising practices (Robbins, 2010).

Just as no unified psychological theory can explain all human behavior, neither is academic advising defined by a single theory. The many facets of academic advising, including the numerous environments and modes in which it is it is used and delivered, result in any given academic advising event being based on the developmental and educational theories most appropriate to the specific advising situation (Robbins, 2010).

ADVISOR TRAINING

King (2000) and Brown (2008) both emphasize three components or elements of effective advisor training: informational, relational, and conceptual. The informational component includes detailed information on institutional and programmatic policies and procedures that advisors need to be aware of when working with students. The relational component includes the interpersonal skills an advisor needs in order to engage students in the advising process. The conceptual component includes what advisors need to know about the institutional mission, student learning, and the developmental theories that guide and support students in the academic careers. This component incorporates the idea that academic advising is much more than simply helping the student select and schedule courses.

Most advisor training involves a one-half or one full day workshop offered once a year, typically before or at the start of the academic year. In some cases, additional training continues throughout the year, while in other cases advisors receive no further training. Given the massive amount of information both advisors and students must know—including curricular information, policies, procedures, deadlines, the use of technology (student

information systems, degree audits, etc.), and the names and locations of campus resources—the informational component is the one typically emphasized in advisor training and development. This is unfortunate, because it means little time is typically spent on the relational and conceptual aspects of academic advising.

HOW ADVISING IS DELIVERED

Regardless of who academically advises students, the delivery mode of advising is also important. Although one-on-one in-person advising remains the primary mode of delivery (King, 2008), other modes are used as well, either in addition to one-on-one advising, as the primary means, or even as one of multiple modes of delivery. Group advising has become popular, because of course it allows a large number of students to be advised together and is also an efficient way to get important information to many students at once (King, 2008). When student:advisor ratios are very high, or when time does not allow for one-on-one advising, group advising is utilized. First-year seminars typically involve group advising, and group advising may be viable for specific academic cohorts of students, e.g., premedical, prelaw, or undecided students. Because the information provided is general, often one-on-one follow-up advising is necessary for students who have more detailed issues or questions that cannot be addressed in the group session due to time or to Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws.

Probably the most significant change in delivery of academic advising is the use of technology. According to Leonard (2008), technology had a greater impact on academic advising than anything else in the decade prior to his publication. The use of informational Web sites, e-mail, student information systems, degree audit programs, transfer articulation systems, career guidance programs, podcasts, webinars, texting, and even social networking sites to provide academic advising has become common, and the use of technology not only for academic advising but in other areas of higher education will only increase. However, the face-to-face component of academic advising remains critical, and technology should be considered complementary rather than primary (Esposito, Pasquini, Stoller, & Steele, 2011).

TYPE OF ADVISING PROCESS

Crookston (1972) proposed a continuum model for the advising interaction, ranging from an authoritarian, advisor-dominated, prescriptive interaction focusing on course selection to a holistic, shared, developmental style of interaction. In a similar vein, O'Banion (1972) emphasized that the focus of academic advising needs to go beyond course selection and registration to

include an emphasis on students' goals and values. He provided a five-step approach to developmental advising involving (a) exploration of life goals, (b) exploration of career goals, (c) selection of a major, (d) selection of courses, and (e) scheduling of courses. Developmental advising continues to be considered the most effective form of advising, but there are times when prescriptive advising may be more appropriate. For example, research has suggested that incoming 1st-year students prefer prescriptive advising, wanting primarily to know what classes they need to take their first semester (Dadonna & Cooper, 2002; Smith, 2002). Creamer (2000) identified the advising needs of students as being more informational and prescriptive for incoming 1st-year students and becoming more consultative and developmental over students' sophomore and junior years. A hybrid of prescriptive and developmental advising has recently emerged, known as praxis advising (Smith, 2002), which combines providing students with expert advice on course selection while also engaging them in discussions regarding their academic majors (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999; Smith, 2002). The timing of academic advising, the individual student situation, the training of the advisor, and other factors will determine what type of academic advising is actually practiced in any given advising interaction.

WHO IS ADVISED?

Who advises, how academic advising is delivered, what occurs during the advising interaction, and where it falls on the prescriptive versus developmental continuum are all dependent on the student being advised. Different students have different circumstances and needs. Although Creamer (2000) correctly suggests that the advising needs of students evolves from more informational and prescriptive as incoming 1st-year students to more consultative and developmental over students' sophomore and junior years to more mentoring and career-oriented as seniors, this generalization is clearly too broad. For example, a first generation, first semester 1st-year student from a large urban public high school with no honors or Advanced Placement (AP) programs will come to college with different needs compared to a second-generation 1st-year student from a private preparatory school coming to the same college with several AP credits and a strong familial support system. Both students are members of the 1st-year cohort, but with different needs. When one considers the many other differences among students (e.g., adult students, ethnic and racial minority students, international students, distance students, preprofessional students, military veterans, LGBT students, students on academic probation, students returning from academic dismissal, students with emotional or mental health issues), it becomes clear that each individual academic advising interaction is unique.

THE TIMING OF ADVISING

In some cases, academic advising occurs at a designated time during the semester, quarter, or academic session, when students are expected to schedule meetings with their respective advisors. In other cases, while there is a time period reserved for the prescriptive advising process, advisors are also available at other times during the semester for more developmental advising. In still other cases, prescriptive advising is delivered via technology or group advising, followed by one-on-one developmental advising as needed. A meeting with a student for 15 minutes once a semester at a designated time hardly allows for anything beyond prescriptive advising. Even when advisors are available throughout the semester, there may be "peak" times for academic advising that prevent the advising interaction from being developmental. The timing of the provision of academic advising thus plays a role in what occurs in the advising interaction.

IMPORTANCE OF MISSIONS, GOALS, AND OBJECTIVES

If a delineated mission statement and identified goals and objectives for the academic advising program exist, these can also inform what occurs in the advising interaction. Mission statements follow from value statements and vision statements. A value statement is a declaration of what is considered important in regard to academic advising (e.g., "academic advising at X institution is an integral part of students' successes"), while a vision is the institution's statement of the aspiration for academic advising (e.g., "The academic advising program at X institution aspires to be the recognized model for career advising regionally") (Robbins, 2009, 2011).

A mission statement reflects the specific purpose of advising on the campus and serves as the roadmap to achieve the vision and affirm the stated values for academic advising (Campbell, Nutt, Robbins, Kirk-Kuwaye, & Higa, 2005; Campbell, 2008) (e.g., "The mission of academic advising at X institution is to assist students in realizing their fullest potential by offering superior advising to our students"). It is descriptive regarding the academic advising program, those it serves and how it serves students, while also reflective of the institutional mission statement (Robbins, 2009, 2011).

Goals follow from the mission statement and identify exactly what the advising program should achieve by describing how the values, vision, and mission will be enacted (Robbins, 2009, 2011). Goal statements are more specific than mission statements (e.g., "academic advising at X institution is based on developmental and learning theories" or "academic advising at X institution is responsive to the developmental needs of the students"). Taken together, these statements indicate what should occur in the advising process regardless of who is advised, who advises, and how advising is delivered.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Taken a step further, evaluation of advisors and/or assessment of the academic advising program provide even more specific information. Although the terms are often used interchangeably (e.g., Creamer & Scott, 2000; Cuseo, 2008; Lynch, 2000; Troxel, 2008), there are differences between evaluation and assessment (Robbins, 2009, 2011; Robbins & Zarges, 2011). Evaluation focuses on the performance of the individual academic advisor, while assessment is concerned with the academic advising program and services overall, primarily in regard to achievement of student learning outcomes. Evaluation of individual academic advisor performance may be part of an assessment process (Robbins, 2010, 2011; Robbins & Zarges, 2011), but evaluation is individually focused and typically episodic, whereas assessment is a continuous process conducted at the programmatic level. Whether academic advising is evaluated or assessed, the specific phenomena measured are the outcomes of advising. These outcomes can be in the form of process/delivery outcomes or student learning outcomes.

Process/delivery outcomes are statements which articulate the expectations regarding how academic advising is delivered and what information should be delivered during the academic advising experience (Campbell et al., 2005; Robbins, 2009, 2011; Robbins & Zarges, 2011). These outcomes, anchored in the academic advising interaction, concern what occurs and what information is exchanged during that interaction. Student learning outcomes are what students are expected to know (cognitive learning), do (behavioral learning), and value (affective learning) as a result of involvement in the academic advising experience (Campbell et al., 2005, Robbins, 2009, 2011; Robbins & Zarges, 2011).

These different types of outcomes complement one another (Robbins, 2009, 2011). For example, the degree to which any form of student learning occurs is, in part, due to the processes involved in the delivery of academic advising. Knowing the desired student learning outcomes for academic advising can implicitly convey what needs to be involved in the advising process in order for these outcomes to be achieved.

ADVISING AS TEACHING

That academic advising is also teaching is well established in higher education (Appleby, 2008; Creamer, 2000; Crookston, 1972; Ender, Winston, & Miller, 1984; Frost, Habley, King, Vowell, & White, 1995; Grites, 1994; Hagen, 1994; Miller & Alberts, 1994; Ryan, 1992). Advisors are teachers and their discipline is academic advising (Thurmond, 2007). Stated another way, academic advising involves a discipline, subject matter, and pedagogy. There are, in fact, multiple pedagogies, each one contextually dependent upon

the mission, goals, objectives, and desired outcomes of the respective institution and the individual advising program, as well as upon the needs of the students utilizing that specific service (Robbins, 2009, 2011). One needs to consider the following: What is taught in academic advising? What are the theories from which academic advising operates? What are the core values of the discipline of academic advising? What are students expected to learn as the result of academic advising? What is expected of students in the academic advising process? What is expected of academic advisors in this process? The answers to these questions will vary from advising unit to advising unit and from institution to institution (Robbins, 2009, 2011).

REFERRALS TO ACADEMIC ADVISORS

In the opening paragraph of this article, I briefly described several examples of when academic advisors refer students to mental health counselors. Counselors often refer students to academic advisors as well. For example, if a student discloses to a counselor issues that are affecting his or her academic performance, the counselor may contact the advisor with a request to ask the student's instructors for extended deadlines for assignments, excused absences from class, and even grades of "incomplete" at the end of an academic term to allow extra time to complete the course assignments. Similarly, if because of a student's personal issues a counselor suggests the student drop or withdraw from a course or even an entire term, a referral to the student's academic advisor is warranted to discuss the academic consequences of such a decision. Normally communications between counselors and the academic advisor would require a student's release of information, but in extreme cases, notably where there is a suicidal threat, the counselor might intervene directly with the advisor even without the student's release of information. Many campuses, of course, also have some form of a campus-wide alert team consisting of academic advisors and mental health counselors as well as representatives from other relevant offices, another way communications and collaborations may occur.

CONCLUSION

Academic advisors are definitely stakeholders for counseling programs, given that the issues students present to advisors sometimes have a psychological component and call for referrals to counselors. Likewise, counseling services are stakeholders for advising programs. The collaboration between counselors and academic advisors can begin with either party, and often involve multiple referrals and exchanges of information to assist a student through a difficult time.

However, describing what occurs during and as a result of academic advising is not as simple as those outside of the academic advising role may think. Advising varies based on many factors: who on campus provides the academic advising; from what theoretical perspective students are advised; the training and development advisors receive; how academic advising is delivered; the type of advising students experience at any given point in their academic careers; whether academic advising on a campus is accepted as a form of teaching; whether advising is valued (as reflected by evaluation, reward, and recognition of individual advisors); and the mission, goals and desired outcomes for academic advising. Together, these factors provide the information about what actually occurs during a given advising interaction. These factors are interdependent, and also depend upon the campus culture and climate, and the political, financial, and leadership characteristics of the institution.

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