

ADVISING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING SUCCESS

LINKING THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY WITH
INTENTIONAL PRACTICE

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“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,”

said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get SOMEWHERE,” Alice added as an explanation.

*“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk
long enough.”*

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865

This chapter, like this book, begins from the simple premise that students’ choices and behaviors in college matter to their success (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Light, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and that through careful attention to their own practices, advisors can help to create the conditions necessary for students to achieve success. To support student success, however, academic advisors must work in a highly intentional manner. They cannot just promise that students will get “somewhere” and send them on a path alone, as did the Cheshire Cat in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, but instead they must be prepared to offer direction and assistance while undertaking the journey along with students. That is, advisors must act purposefully to achieve the important goals set for their practice and students. As stated in the NACADA Concept of Academic Advising (National Academic Advising Association [NACADA], 2006, para. 6): “Through academic advising, students learn to become members of their higher education community, to think critically about their roles and responsibilities as students, and to prepare to be educated citizens of a democratic society and a global community.” Such intentionality is particularly important because higher education institutions are being asked to

focus on the development of the whole person (Joint Statement, 2004, 2006) and to be accountable for producing clear learning outcomes (Shavelson, 2010).

However, those charged with achieving the goals set for the profession face challenges. Advising is paradoxically a relatively new profession with a long history. Though NACADA did not form until the late 1970s (Beatty, 1991), academic advising has always been a part of higher education—first as the work of college faculty members, later of student affairs personnel, and finally of professional advisors. Likewise, though a scholarly advising journal did not appear until 1981, a long history of relevant scholarly work undergirds the profession—including clear connections to the important American intellectual traditions of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism. As an interdisciplinary field of study, academic advising also draws from many different disciplines as scholars attempt to capture the experiential nature of student learning and development (Hagen, 2005; Hagen & Jordan, 2008; Kuhn, 2008). Consequently, the problem for advisors may not be an absence of useful information but rather a surfeit.

To assist in thinking about this wealth of information, we begin this chapter with a consideration of academic advising as an intentional process shaped by several different ways of thinking about students. We next review key foundational literature linking academic advising to student persistence and success. This chapter and, indeed, this volume acknowledge that students are individuals and each exhibits a specific, personal, learning style. Likewise, each advisor uniquely interprets academic advising as an educational process. As a result, approaches to academic advising mirror personal values and beliefs as well as the diversity of ways students learn, grow, and develop. We celebrate that diversity.

The Philosophical and Sociological Basis of Advising

Philosophically, academic advising is rooted in pragmatism where, according to William James (1907/1969), “Truth . . . becomes a class-name for all sorts of definite working-values in experience” (1969, p. 54). Through one’s experiences personal definitions of reality and truth emerge. Through academic advising, experiences are translated and the consequences of action, anticipated or actual, are examined, embraced, or discarded in relationship to the individual’s current beliefs and future dreams. A dictionary definition of *pragmatism* (Merriam-Webster’s, 2012) belies its complexity:

An American movement in philosophy founded by C. S. Peirce and William James and marked by the doctrines that the meaning of conceptions is to be sought in their practical bearings, that the function of thought is to guide action, and that truth is pre-eminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief.

In a fundamental aspect, pragmatism is based on actions grounded in beliefs; in turn, these actions lead to consequences, and these consequences potentially reform beliefs, including those resistant to change. The pragmatist’s world constantly changes

as a result of action. Some debate, which is beyond the scope of this chapter, centers on whether or not pragmatism is a philosophy or a method of analysis. However, Reynolds (1993, p. 16) provided a summary of several key characteristics of American pragmatism:

- Humans are not passive recipients of stimuli; they are creative, active agents.
- [Because] people inhabit a world that they . . . have helped shape, even as this self-made world limits and places constraints on the activities of its creators, the world is [repeatedly] subject to planned change.
- Subjective experience flows from behavior and does not exist prior to it. From behavior, consciousness and meaning emerge, and an object's meaning resides in the behavior directed toward it and not in the object itself (Manis & Meltzer, 1978: 3).
- The same basic assumptions that shore up and guide empirical science should also guide philosophical analysis.
- The solution of practical problems and the analysis of social issues should be the prime focus of philosophical concern (Lauer & Handel, 1977: 10).
- It is necessary and desirable to reconcile science with idealism.
- Action is the means for checking the accuracy of a hypothesis and hence the focus of reality (Weinberg, 1962).
- [The interest theory—that which is good satisfies an impulse or an interest—is the best theory of value.]

The first three characteristics have particular relevance to academic advising and the myriad approaches to this educational process. In sum, they suggest that human actions are shaped by one's initial interpretations of situations. In turn, the consequences of actions in those situations reinforce or change the interpretation of the initial situation.

Sociologically, academic advising draws from interactionist theory; that is, individual views are modified or reinforced through interactions with others. Furthermore, through actions and interactions, individuals influence, and are influenced by, happenings in the culture. It is a relationship-based enterprise not dominated by a single truth or reality; multiple realities coexist.

Symbolic interactionism offers a perspective with particular relevance to academic advising. Rooted in pragmatism, this perspective maintains that reality emerges from the meaning that individuals share regarding the physical, ideological, and social aspects of their environment. The crux of symbolic interactionism, with pragmatism as a guiding philosophy, lies in understanding how people interpret and experience their worlds through analyzing the ways they act.

Blumer (1986), the founder of symbolic interactionism, suggested that the essence of this sociological perspective

rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. . . . The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (p. 2)

Pragmatism and symbolic interactionism portray one's reality as being socially constructed based on the meaning that one gives to situations and objects. Meaning is subjective and based on one's interpretation of events. Human beings are not passive in this regard; indeed, they are active agents both influencing and being influenced by their interactions with others as well as other experiences.

Academic Advising and Meaning Making

Academic advising facilitates the development of meaning through engagement in experiences and interaction with others. Academic advising—done well—assists students in interpreting their values, beliefs, and experiences so, unlike Alice, they get somewhere they want to go. Because all students interpret their experiences in ways particular to them, no single approach or advising strategy will sufficiently assist everyone optimally. Advisors should understand and incorporate into advising strategy the following important lesson from philosophy and sociology: Actions or behaviors reflect meaning. To influence behavior and guide action, then, advisors must understand the meaning behind actions and acknowledge them as the drivers of behavior. Furthermore, if meaning is derived from interaction with others, then to influence meaning, advisors must encourage students to be involved in experiences and contexts that support, promote, and challenge current values and beliefs. In essence, one size does not fit all with regard to academic advising. The field needs, and indeed, requires, multiple strategies so advisors effectively respond to multiple and unique audiences. The field needs flexible, eclectic practitioners able to adapt their advising strategies in accordance with the needs of their students. Being married to a single approach to academic advising, advisors potentially disregard the diverse ways in which students learn and presume a single, linear developmental path that is clearly more idealistic than realistic.

Advising as an Intentional Process

Because of the breadth of scholarship and practice, four related thoughts about student experience and advising practice shape the field (each of which we describe in more detail): a) one's own values, beliefs, and assumptions; b) scholarly theories; c) advising approaches; and d) advising strategies. Though other contributors to this book address items related to scholarly theories and advising approaches, we discuss values, beliefs, and assumptions because they shape responses to the other ways advisors think about students and can powerfully influence advising (Bensimon, 2007;

Bloiland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994; Parker, 1977). Thinking carefully and reflecting critically on the content and role of each of these elements, advisors develop the intentional advising practices necessary to support student success.

Pragmatism and symbolic interactionism both stress the importance of experience in shaping one's values, beliefs, and assumptions (or mental framework) as well as the importance of that framework in shaping behavior. For academic advising, these theories suggest that students should engage in experiences that allow them to test their values, beliefs, and assumptions about their present and future selves. At the same time, they also indicate that the mental frameworks employed by academic advisors matter a great deal and that advisors need to be aware of the ways these paradigms affect student success. For example, Bensimon (2007) suggested that rendering the implicit theories of student behavior held by practitioners explicit and then interrogating them through evidence helps create, in part, educational equity, and that absent this investigation they may internalize potentially problematic thinking about student experience. Likewise, Parker (1977) distinguished between formal and informal theories created by student affairs practitioners. Finally, research reveals that classroom teacher performance is largely consistent with the personal practical theories that combine personal values, beliefs, and assumptions with formal academic training (Cornett, Yeotis, & Terwilliger, 1990; Levin & He, 2008). In short, values, beliefs, and assumptions not only shape behavior directly, but they also likely influence the way that educators employ scholarly theories, advising approaches, and advising strategies.

Those in the social sciences typically regard theory as comprised of a coherent group of generalizable conditions that have been tested and commonly held by a given community to be true and/or accurate (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010). Once produced, theory is generally expected to influence behavior in an explanatory and often predictive manner (Godfrey-Smith, 2003); that is, theory contributes to ideas about the present as well as generates expectations about the future. The advising profession, as an interdisciplinary field, does not profess a theoretical base; instead, advising scholars borrow key theoretical insights from other disciplines to form the current knowledge base. Concerned with how students learn and develop over time, contributors to advising literature rely heavily on philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and psychology—among other disciplines—to explain the influences on the profession. In practice, effective academic advising also actively incorporates and interprets the research and scholarship on student persistence and success. At the theoretical level, some of the most important scholarship to advising comes from work on student development (e.g., Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito, Patton, & Renn, 2010) and student experience within the campus environment (e.g., Harper & Quaye, 2009; Strange & Banning, 2001).

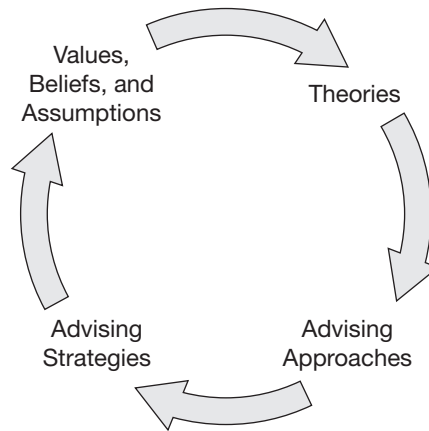
One's advising approach typically comes from one's philosophy of academic advising, which reflects an interpretation of relevant theories and empirical literature. Advisors further refine their approaches in conversations with colleagues and through interactions with individual students or groups of students. Thus, an advising approach

emerges through a heuristic process guided by individual interpretations about how best to support the developmental needs of students. Advisors must offer intentional support, for without a clear approach or plan for purposeful action, academic advising merely consists of a series of tactics that may or may not lead to desired outcomes. Because advisors strive to facilitate student development toward a desired end, which is ultimately defined by the student in ways consistent with his or her beliefs and values, the advising approach provides the lens through which these goals might be clarified.

Ideally, every advising strategy employed is consistent with the overall approach adopted by an institution, college, or individual advisor. However, an advising strategy includes all of the specific steps or actions an advisor takes within a specific advising approach whether they are consistent with that approach or not. An advising strategy is a purposeful attempt to facilitate student learning and the development of a holistic and appropriate educational plan. An educational plan, while it may be more, is never less than a plan for purposeful action. While the structure of an educational plan may vary, all designs should serve to guide students toward learning experiences to enhance and enrich their knowledge and skills and allow them to test ideas and values that may—or may not—be incorporated into their future goals. Thought of in this way, good advising practice is a form of teaching.

The specific pedagogy or instructional method employed to facilitate student goal achievement may, and probably will, be different for each individual. For example, many advisors prefer to utilize a one-on-one approach, engaging students in conversation and reflection specifically about the content and methods of learning and how both relate to students' images of the future, particularly with respect to career interests. Others may effectively employ a group setting using a peer-led method that engages students in advisor-guided discussions with each other. Still others may use a mixed approach with one-on-one and pre-designed materials that guide the conversation toward a desired end. Academic advisors working with students taking courses online face more complexity and must address questions about effectively utilizing technologies available to connect with students and build an advising relationship. The extensive list of potential advising plans in many ways reflects the multiple approaches to academic advising proffered in succeeding chapters of this book. In the end, no singular strategy works in all situations, and no single educational plan or endgame best characterizes every student's situation. Only the strategy that works best for the individual advisor and the student with whom he or she is working can be optimally effective; only the educational plan that embraces and reflects the student's beliefs, values, and goals—as well as actions to achieve those goals—will best meet the objectives of advising.

No universal prescription applies to academic advising because each situation and the ways individuals interpret it differ. Academic advisors must first and foremost understand how a student interprets her or his situation: What has meaning? What has value? The answers inform the strategy the advisor employs. This focus on meaning leads to consideration of the philosophical and sociological underpinnings

Figure 1.1. Levels of advising knowledge


of academic advising as well as the key foundational literature that, to date, informs practice. Ultimately, the uniqueness of each advising relationship requires that the academic advisor make a series of well-informed judgments such that she or he considers more than personal values, beliefs, and assumptions and applies scholarly theories to advising strategies. The necessity of this practice reiterates the importance of Hutson, Bloom, and He's (2009) call for reflective advising. It also echoes Reason and Kimball's (2012) suggestion that advisors regard theory-to-practice translations in student development work as a form of assessment wherein they shift their attention from scholarly (formal) theory to reflective practice by carefully regarding institutional context and informal theories of student development.

When conceptualizing the relationship between the four levels of advising knowledge, as depicted in Figure 1.1, advisors initiate an assessment cycle that enhances their thinking about advising practice.

This model suggests that values, beliefs, and assumptions might lead to preference of certain theories or parts of theories above others. One's theoretical foundation dictates the sort of advising approach adopted, which shapes the strategies employed. Finally, based upon the relative success of these strategies and self-observations, a theory-to-practice model calls for a purposeful refinement of values, beliefs, and assumptions—starting the assessment cycle anew. By connecting personal experience and scholarly knowledge in this way, academic advisors can negotiate the problematic task of using scholarly theories, which are generally true but often difficult to apply in specific cases, to inform the selection of advising practices designed to be contextually appropriate to the relationship between a specific student and advisor.

The Role of Advising in Student Success

As advisors redirect their attention from the intellectual, theoretical, and practical foundations of the advising profession and toward its impact, the power of

high-quality advising becomes all the more clear and with it the need to continue to expand advisor knowledge of best practices within the profession. In this section, to provide clarity regarding the kinds of experiences in which student learning thrives, we review some of the key literature that links academic advising to student persistence and success. The literature stresses the importance of relationship development in creating positive contexts to support student learning. Indeed, this literature informs practice and can help to provide a framework for intentionality.

The retention literature offers clear evidence of the importance of academic advising to a successful student experience. The pool of research about academic advising continues to grow; yet a few pieces of scholarship have been instrumental in helping to shape the direction of that research and the development of academic advising as a field and profession. In particular, the works of Bean and Eaton (2002), Kuh et al. (2005), and Tinto (1993) all point to the significant role that academic advising plays in effective retention programs and, more importantly, in the individual experiences of students.

Few would argue that Tinto (1993) provided extraordinary leadership in helping colleges and universities understand the importance of constructing educational experiences for students that support academic and social integration. His longitudinal model of student departure explains student characteristics, internal and external commitments, as well as the interaction effects of the institutional academic and social contexts on student leaving behavior. The model illustrates a college impact model of student development.

Tinto's (1993) research proved instrumental in capturing themes regarding college student voluntary leaving behavior as well as furthering educators' understanding of the college student experience. Of particular importance and relevance, Tinto suggested that retention is a by-product of a good educational experience. He also identified a set of effective principles among institutions with successful retention programs. In his words, institutions with effective, successful, retention programs demonstrate "an enduring commitment to student welfare, a broader commitment to the education, not mere retention, of all students, and an emphasis upon the importance of social and intellectual community in the education of students" (pp. 145–146).

To successfully achieve retention goals, everyone at colleges and universities must focus on intentionally defining and shaping a quality educational experience for all students. They must look holistically at the student experience and reflect the institution's commitment to the education of students. While the student educational experience may—and will—vary from institution to institution, Tinto suggested that some commonalities characterize myriad campus initiatives, and also some specific conditions influence student persistence and success.

Tinto (n.d., 1999) posited five institutional conditions that stand out as particularly supportive of student success and clearly articulated the role of academic advising in supporting student success:

- students are more likely to persist and graduate if they are in settings in which expectations are high, clear, and consistent;
- support is available;
- feedback that supports early understanding of academic performance is utilized;
- involvement with the community and, in particular, with faculty members, staff, and peers is available; and
- learning is relevant and constitutes value added (Tinto, 1999, pp. 5–6).

With regard to academic advising, Tinto (n.d.) noted:

Students do best in settings where expectations are clear and consistent. This is particularly evident in the domain of academic advising. Students need to be clear about what is expected of them and what is required for successful completion of both courses and programs of study. Students, especially the many who are undecided about their plans, need to understand the road map to completion and know how to use it to achieve personal goals. (p. 2)

Academic advising plays an important role in supporting student achievement, particularly in helping students reach their potential. In fact, according to Tinto (1993), effective retention programs reflect policy maker understanding that academic advising underpins student success.

Kuh et al. (2005) further affirm the role of academic advising in supporting students. These researchers suggested that “advising is viewed as a way to connect students to the campus and help them feel that someone is looking out for them” (p. 214). This connection reflects an institutional commitment to the student and his or her education, which Tinto also finds essential to effective retention programs.

Few in the field are unaware of Kuh’s involvement with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the impact NSSE has exerted on understanding the college student experience, particularly in terms of engagement. At its basic level, *engagement* represents the intersection of institutional conditions and student behaviors over which the institution can maintain, at least, marginal control. As Tinto (1993) and others have argued, some aspects of a student’s life remain out of the purview of institutional influence. External commitments of students, particularly those related to family, are not easily affected by institutional programs and services. Understanding these commitments can be important to academic advising; they are clearly important in understanding students.

To encourage engagement, effective institutions direct students toward appropriate extracurricular activities, directly addressing the challenge of getting students in venues that will optimize their learning. These high-impact efforts require student initiative, involve faculty–student interaction, and provide opportunities to apply knowledge obtained in other settings. Kuh (2008) identified the following activities as high impact:

- first-year seminars and experiences,
- common intellectual experience,
- learning communities,
- writing-intensive courses,
- collaborative assignments and projects,
- undergraduate research,
- diversity/global learning,
- service and community-based learning,
- internships, and
- capstone courses and projects (pp. 9–11).

Researchers on the psychology of leaving (Bean, 2005; Bean & Eaton, 2002) examined individual attributes that influence student persistence and retention. They found that a student's intention to leave an institution is the best predictor of actual departure, and intentions are the by-product of interactions between the student and the institution (i.e., faculty members, staff, administrators, and students). An additional layer of complexity in the psychology of leaving framework involves attitudes about attachment to the institution and being a student. Satisfaction, self-efficacy, and competence comprise important aspects of attitude. Understanding the relationship between topics of study and one's imagined future (i.e., students ask if a program will help them reach their goals) is only slightly less critical.

Bean (2005) clearly explained that good academic advising affects a student's desire to persist and graduate:

Good advising should link a student's academic capabilities with his or her choice of courses and major, access to learning resources, and a belief that the academic pathway a student is traveling will lead to employment after college. Advising should be done well so students recognize their abilities and make informed choices.
(p. 226)

By extension good advising should contribute to academic and social integration resulting from positive experiences that increase satisfaction with being a student at a given institution, confidence in one's ability, academic competence, and one's understanding about educational, career, and life goals.

How should scholarly knowledge affect academic advising practice? The works of Bean (2005), Bean and Eaton (2002), Kuh (2008), Kuh et al. (2005), and Tinto (1993) offer guidance regarding experiences that support student success and provide a framework for intentionality. Tinto instructed postsecondary personnel to focus on the education of students and the contexts, holistic in nature, in which they learn best. He stressed that students learn best when challenged with expectations that are high, clear, and consistent; they achieve more with readily available support as well as early and frequent feedback regarding their academic performance. In addition to pointing to the link between current studies and future plans, Tinto emphasized the

importance of ensuring that students get involved in the institution and feel valued as community members. Academic advising helps students set expectations and connect their learning and their imagined futures.

Kuh et al. (2005) spoke directly to academic advising as a means of connecting institutions with students. Practitioners and administrators exert some level of control over the delivery of academic advising. They need to consider the ways that academic advising acts as a vehicle through which students make meaningful connections at the institutions and get involved in learning experiences that result in positive gains in learning. They need to ask about the manner in which academic advising can help students establish important relationships with faculty and staff members who can engage them in conversations about their studies and their career aspirations. They need to create and advocate for employing high-impact activities into educational plans.

Bean and Eaton (2002) turned their attention to the individual and linked beliefs, attitudes, and intentions with behavior. Their research also affirms the important role that everyone on a campus plays in supporting student persistence. As a synthesis of this work, Bean (2005) affirmed this notion: “Students evaluate their experiences and form attitudes toward the college that influence their intentions to stay enrolled and their decision to stay or leave. Anyone and everyone on campus can affect these attitudes . . .” (p. 220).

Summary

We began this chapter with a quote from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in which the Cheshire Cat promises Alice that she will get “somewhere” provided she “walk long enough.” In today’s higher education institutions, however, getting students “somewhere” is not enough. Students, society, and the advising profession all demand that advisors do more. A key step in delivering upon a commitment to student success includes the creation of the conditions necessary to engage in intentional, purposeful advising practice. To do so, we suggest, requires not only an understanding of the history of the advising profession but also its future. With a wide array of knowledge about students coming from personal experiences, scholarly theories, advising approaches, and advising strategies, advisors have more tools at their disposal than ever before. To use them effectively, they need to use critical reflection to convert theory to practice and apply knowledge of relevant literature to garnering student success. A complex and challenging process to be sure, these efforts lead to a meaningful and intentionally charted place where the diverse needs of students are met and they receive optimal opportunities to succeed.

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