The Prescriptive Relationship in Academic Advising as an Appropriate Developmental Intervention With Multicultural Populations

Thomas Brown, Saint Mary's College of California
Mario Rivas, San Francisco State University

In his seminal 1972 article on academic advising, Burns B. Crookston set a prescriptive advising relationship in opposition to a developmental advising relationship, with the developmental approach proffered as the better way of working with students to promote their growth. We argue that prescriptive advising, rather than being incompatible with a developmental approach to advising, is in fact a significant and necessary part of a thorough developmental advising methodology, one which gives due consideration to individual and group differences and needs. Additionally, it is our position that as part of a developmental advising continuum, the prescriptive advising relationship is relevant and appropriate for many students of color.

Crookston writes that "the traditional relationship between the academic advisor and the student may be described as *prescriptive* . . . [wherein] the advisor is the doctor and the student the patient." He goes on to argue that in prescriptive advising the student seldom takes responsibility for wrong decisions because the onus of responsibility is placed on the advisor; "if the advice turns out badly the student doesn't feel responsible; he can place the blame on the advisor."

In contrast, Crookston suggests that a developmental relationship between advisor and student is one that is more egalitarian, wherein they learn together and share developmental tasks that "include reaching an agreement on who takes the initiative, who takes responsibility, who supplies knowledge and skill and how they are obtained and applied." Crookston paints the developmental relationship as being more facilitative of student growth and development.

There is no question that an egalitarian relationship is essential to effective developmental advising: however, it does not necessarily follow that a prescriptive relationship is antithetical to this end. To argue this point, it is important to clarify the concept of development. Sanford (1967) notes that "development means, most essentially, the organization of increasing complexity." Miller and McCaffrey (1982) offer that "as one continues to grow and change, one accumulates new experiences that are additive. One thereby grows more mature and able to function more successfully at higher levels of abstraction and complexity . . . human development follows a simple to complex continuum."

With regard to cognitive development, development is defined as movement from perceiving ideas and/or concepts in a simplistic or dualistic good-badlright-wrong orientation to a more complex way of making meaning (Perry, 1970). As individuals develop. they move from a concrete, dualistic stance in their thinking to a more abstract, relativistic one, going from a stance that sees only two options from which to choose to one that sees many possible explanations for phenomena beyond good or bad, right or wrong. At the relativistic stage of development, information and situations are evaluated as being multifaceted and varied, ones in which many factors must be considered if true understanding or mastery is to be achieved.

By way of an example that illustrates how a person might think dualistically versus relativistically, we can look at Crookston's notion of prescriptive advising. If advisors are focused on asserting their authoritarian nature or if advisors do not believe in a student's ability to be independent and assume responsibility, advisors might well choose to tell a student what to do. If, on the other hand, advisors are caring, concerned, and committed to students' welfare, they might note that a student is somewhat uninformed, confused, or upset about how to approach college and then elect to be prescriptive. In such an instance, advisors might prescribe courses of action that they know are likely to lead to success.

Keeping the above paragraph in mind, it is apparent that Crookston presented prescriptive advising in much too limited a way, one that was narrow and overly negative. Furthermore, Crookston only identified one aspect of prescriptive advising, namely one that was motivated more by expediency than by concern for the development of the student. As demon-

strated above where we show that there can be more than a bad reason for using prescriptive advising, prescriptive advising can and should be seen from more than a right/wrong or dualistic perspective. In fact, this is where we feel that Crookston erred in his presentatiun of the prescriptive versus relational aspect of advising. These two advising approaches should not be placed in opposition. Rather, they are better placed on a developmental continuum, one where an advisor at first notes that a student needs a more prescriptive advising relationship to get grounded both within the advising relationship and the college experience. Later, when the advisor sees the student moving to greater complexity and knowledge, the advising methodology would shift to a more relational advising mode where the advisor and the student work together to arrive at alternative courses of action.

With regard to the usefulness of a prescriptive approach in advising, much in the advising and counseling literature attests to the tact that many persons of color prefer and profit from a more directive (i.e., prescriptive) helping relationship (Brown & Rivas, 1993). In a related vein, Wright (1987) observed that current student development theories ignore factors that could promote the intellectual, psychological, and personal development of minority students. Thus, our position is that Crookston's view of prescriptive advising falls short in setting forth an advising methodology that is appropriate for diverse student populations because this view does not consider individual and group differences and the need many of these students have for more structure and guidance early in the advising relationship.

In describing third-world group variables for counseling, Sue and Sue (1990) identified the need that many people of color have for concrete, tangible, structured approaches to addressing and resolving issues and problems. Many students of color see advisors as experts who have the right answers and know what students should do. An advisor's unwillingness to accept a directive or prescriptive role may be unsettling to many students of color, as well as to international students, first generation students, and others who lack a predisposition to the college milieu and to academic advising. The nondirective approach can leave many such students feeling confused, disoriented, and dissatisfied with the advising encounter. This may account in part for the underuse of student services by these students. In short, the advisor must connect with students at their current stage of development to facilitate continuing growth, involvement, and achievement.

We offer four points that advisors must understand with regard to how a prescriptive advising relationship might be relevant and appropriate for many students of color, particularly traditional age undergraduates new to the postsecondary experience. We also offer that this approach is particularly relevant in the formative stages of the advising relationship because it is here that rapport must be established if there is to be further interaction at a higher stage (e.g., moving along a simple-to-complex continuum).

First, a relational or nondirective approach to advising, which Crookston describes as the sole developmental approach, may be in conflict with the cultural experiences of students of color. The egalitarian presumption that calls for the advisor to set forth a range of alternatives with the advisee making the decision about an appropriate course of action often conflicts with the role relationship socialization experiences of many ethnic minority students, experiences that have stressed hierarchical patterns of interaction and deference to authority.

Many students of color come from family situations where roles are well defined and expectations clear. For example, many Vietnamese from traditional families are taught from an early age to listen to authority figures and to speak only when asked to do so. Advice, questions, and opinions are not encouraged (Do, 1983). In many American Indian social settings the dominant person is expected to be active and the subordinate person shows respect by quiet attentiveness (Attneave, 1982). Similar dynamics of interactions with authority figures have also been observed for Latinos (Bernal & Flores-Ortiz, 1982) and Puerto Ricans (Garcia-Preto, 1982). In a study of counseling style preferences, Exum and Lau (1988) find that Chinese students rate the directive approach more positively than a nondirective style. Similarly, Ruiz and Casas (1981) highlight the importance of using a directive style when engaging Chicano college students.

Second, as advisors, we must take seriouslv Ender, Winston, and Miller's (1982) injunction that "developmental advising requires the establishment of a caring, human relationship . . . [wherein] both parties must take responsibility for sustaining the relationship ***but the advisor***

must take primary responsibility for its initial establishment" [italics added]. If this means that students require direction and prescription to initiate their college studies, the advisor must respond accordingly in order to support the student's current stage of development. This is consistent with Crookston's directive that advisors must orient their advising methodology to the needs of the student and that advisors must recognize the need to change themselves if they are to keep in tune with students in a changing environment.

Third, advisors must recognize that many students of color have had socialization experiences that have made them mistrust bureaucracies and their agents (e.g., college advisors). It frequently has been the experience of such students that institutional agents (and this is how the advisor is viewed) do not seek to support individual goal achievement but rather may seek to undermine it. An advisor who is nondirective may be perceived as withholding information and not being trustworthy. This, in turn, can cause the student to pull back and not become engaged with the advisor. We suggest that advisors take the lead early in the advising relationship and provide as much information as possible to students of color to enhance feelings of trust within the student, feelings that support the student to move to a more complex level of relating to the advisor.

Fourth, while trustworthiness is a factor that is important to the advising relationship, expertness is even more crucial to the development of ongoing, evolving interactions between the advisor and the student. This fact has been borne out in counseling research that identifies expertness as a major variable leading to influence in communication (Barak, 1980; Strong & Schmidt, 1971). In advising we want to influence students of color to be confident in their abilities to succeed, to be persistent in their efforts in college, and to become more open to reaching out to appropriate sources of assistance in the campus community. We offer that when an advisor is prescriptive early in the relationship and shows the student what college is all about, the student is likely perceive the advisor as competent or expert and is more likely to listen carefully and intently. With regard to development, this also means that a student will become more engaged with the advisor even as the advisor begins to suggest that it is time for the student to take more responsibility for her or his actions.

In considering expertness, it is important to differentiate *authoritative* from ***authoritarian.*** An ***authoritative*** advisor is one who displays confidence in her or his knowledge about the college experience and the student's relationship thereto. In this instance, the advisor communicates assuredness, steadiness, and calm, qualities that help anxious, doubtful students feel safe and secure as they approach the challenges of college and decision-making processes. Needless to say, this is beneficial to learning. ***Authoritarian,*** on the other hand, communicates superiority, elitism, and condescension. These are qualities that can devalue, demean, and otherwise make the student feel negative. This, without doubt, would not facilitate feelings of confidence and enthusiasm about the advisor, the student, or the college.

We have tried to demonstrate that a prescriptive advising relationship is more than just a unidimensional advising methodology. Rather, there are many ways to be prescriptive, some that facilitate student development and others that do not. We have also presented key concepts in support of prescriptive advising as a valuable and appropriate intervention for use with many students of color. With regard to the developmental growth of students of color, we have introduced the concept that many of these students have needs in many significant areas, including trust versus mistrust, knowing versus not knowing, and being confident versus not being confident. Development in these areas proceeds along a continuum, from simple to more complex. Advising methodologies, in turn, must be appropriate to what a student is capable of accommodating at any point in her or his development. We strongly assert that an advisor who is sensitive to the developmental challenges that students of color face and who responds appropriately to these individual differences is the advisor who will make a difference in the lives of these students.

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Thomas Brown is Dean of Advising Services and Special Programs. Mario Rivas is Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Studies for Advising and Learning Assistance Services. Brown and Rivas cochair NACADA's Multicultural Concerns Commission. Address correspondence concerning this article to Thomas Brown, Office of Advising Services, PO Box 3316, Saint Mary's College, Moraga, CA 94575.