How Far Have We Come—Really?

Bonnie S. Titley, Colorado State University

Writing this article has occasioned for me a pleasant yet slightly stressful review of advising since the early 70s. The pleasantness derived from pride in NACADA; the stress from wondering just where in our professional developmental cycle we really are.

We have come far from that first National Conference on Academic Advising. A national organization then was quite a dream; would we wake up before it could come into being? Yet here we are, in 1994, several thousand strong going into our 18th annual conference. We have so many members that we color code the badges! In 1977 the program could be listed on 4 typed pages; in 1993 it took 56 typeset pages.

We have expanded to 10 regions (many of which hold their own annual gatherings). We have over a dozen standing committees. We have commissions, task forces, national awards, a placement service, a mechanism for gaining educational credits, a listserv, business meetings that generate vigorous debate, and a thriving journal that reflects a maturity stemming from research-based articles.

We have much cause for pride.

Why then even suggest the existence of stress?

Every advisor alive knows why! Time. Reward. Budget. Stress for advisors issues forth from the same fountains that serve all Academe: we are expected to do more for greater numbers with fewer staff and shrinking resources. And as if that weren't enough—we are frustrated by many of the same issues and questions raised in the early 70s and before:

- When will we become a profession? (This was asked in ***Academic Advising News,*** January 4, 1990.)
- When will we finally define what we do?
- When will we be able to say just who should advise?
- When will professional advisors be respected by the administration? (This is a recurring topic of ACADV network discussions.)
- When will our efforts be appropriately reflected in the content of our wallets?
- Etc., etc., etc.

Are we suffering from a collective professional mid-life crisis? It wouldn't be surprising. It happens to most professionals; why not to an organization?

Perhaps, if we looked at some of the questions we are all trying to answer in terms of such a crisis, they would look less unanswerable.

Who should advise? Which model should be used? Should only faculty advise? Should only professional advisors advise? Should peer advisors be used? Should there be a central institutional office? Should there be department- or college-specific advising centers? Should there be some combination of several of the above? How do we determine which model will work for our institution? I submit that almost any institution during the last 10-20 years will have had some part of each of these in one form or another. The key: Advising has to be flexible to meet changing student and institutional needs.

What training should be done? Who should do it? That depends on the model and on local definitions of ***advising*** and ***registration.*** The clerical stuff can be delegated to the students themselves for the most part. It is the informational and integrational stuff that they need help with. The former is more registration; the latter is more advising. Training is guided by who is doing what and why. Who does the training follows almost naturally at most institutions. And there are a lot of us who have been down the road who are happy to consult and help others get started.

Can we "advise in groups"? Of course we can. Our students have common questions and gain some comfort from knowing they are not alone in having those questions. Individual needs can then be attended to in individual sessions. Group sessions ***do*** save time—but not much. They merely cut down on the number of times we have to repeat some things. And handled with care, group sessions do not say to students that we don't have individual time for them!

Is advising a discipline per se or an applied art/science? In a way this is like asking whether bread-making is applied chemistry or a pure culinary art. If it is done well and satisfies both the maker and the eater, one could ask, does it really make any difference? Professionals always like to think their work is "pure," but most of

what we advisors do is applied. And there is nothing wrong with belonging to an applied discipline. The key is not becoming defensive about the term.

Why is advising still so little regarded in promotion and tenure? One reason may be that we give administrators mixed messages. Consider on one hand telling them that "advising is teaching" and on the other hand asking for more professional advisors "because faculty aren't doing the job." With the same dichotomy in mind, consider: Might faculty wonder just where our loyalties lie?

Why are we still trying to find another term for "undecided"? The term seems to bother us more than it does students. My own research work on creativity would suggest that we might be a bigger part of the issue than the student's developmental stage. We use a lot of *un-* words in higher education, many of them decidedly more negative than ***undecided.*** Perhaps we should refocus on the needs, not the name.

Have we paid enough attention to individual differences? I could almost as easily ask whether we have paid too much attention to individual differences. In all our attempts in the past decade or so to recognize cultural and ethnic differences, 1 fear we may have forgotten to identify the merely human differences among the students we advise. We have gotten too caught up in the label and forgotten to examine the contents. We put too much weight on the politically correct approach and not enough weight on the academically sound result. And we have given virtually no attention at all to the real individual differences amongst faculty advisors.

Do assessment instruments give us decisive help? Are we using assessment instruments because they help, because they reinforce what we suspect, or because we need time to think through how to help someone? In my experience, they have served all three purposes—but often they gave me less help than a long conversation with the student would have. We need to put such instruments in perspective, especially for advisors just entering the profession.

Does our research have a significant impact on the profession? On our product? On our basic activities? *I* don't know, really. I just feel in my soul that we are trying to be something in Academe that we need not be. And, believe me, I am not saying we should not do research. (If I had not done some research, I would have not written the articles that brought about the invitation to write this!) I just want us not to do research for its own sake and get results that we don't translate into daily use. We must guard against that at all costs.

What can we do to improve retention and graduation rates? This question causes me concern about definition of terms. I wonder if some of the older students of today aren't the dropouts and stopouts of yesterday. They have returned because they are ready now for the help we tried to give them then. Yesterday's definition of ***retention*** may no longer be right for today's educational milieu.

What has technology done for us? Nationally it paved the way for the ACADV network. Locally it has made record keeping and student tracking easier. But we must guard against technology hooking us into a mentality that says that building a database on students is tantamount to face-to-face encounters with them. I could not survive without my computer and all that it brings to me and allows me to do and know. But give me a live student beside me at my desk any day!

Has the societal fad of suing made us overcautious . . . even with each other? We must answer this one for ourselves.

Why aren't we considered educators? Back in ***1972*** Burns Crookston discussed developmental advising as teaching, and only a few years ago, Carol Ryan addressed our national conference on "Advising as Teaching." Of course we are educators; for years we have considered ourselves educators. We need not be defensive about our roles in shaping students' lives. Only when we become sensitive to how others handle this terminology do we begin to question ourselves. Let us learn to be comfortable with our role, perform our duties, and give of our knowledge. Those who learn from us will add us to the right list.

So . . . are we suffering from a professional mid-life crisis? Those of us who are new enough to the profession of advising that we are just beginning to ask these questions probably wonder what all the fuss is about. But those of us who have been in this business for nigh on to 20 years or more are in crisis because we realize that we haven't answered all the questions that we posed so long ago. I don't think we can. I'm not at all certain we ever will.

It is good that we ask the questions. It is good that we question ourselves—but not from a defensive posture. We should stop trying to ***legitimize*** ourselves and just ***be*** the legitimate professionals we are. We must not allow our research

to overshadow our ability to nurture the minds that live in the bodies of the students we meet; we cannot afford to let the publish-or-perish mentality determine our definition of quality performance. And we should not get so caught up in current fads of performance and behavior and terminology that we forget the individual student knocking at our door.

We cannot succumb to the "what's in it for me!" or the "what's the use?" or the "it's not my fault" philosophies rampant today. We don't have to.

Let's face it. Developmental stages never really differ for any group— youand I went through the same stages that today's students go through. The names for the stages have been changed, and they have been explained and discussed many times over and applied to special groups in various ways—but they are basically the same.

If this be true, then, how far have we, as an organization, come—really? We are a national organization several thousand strong going into our 18th annual conference, with color-coded badges and a program of about 60 pages. We have 10 regions. We have over a dozen standing committees. We have commissions, task forces, national awards, a placement service, a mechanism for gaining educational credits, a listserv, and a thriving journal. And we ask hard questions—boy, do we ask questions!

We question because we value what we do.

We must be valued by someone, or we would not have survived.

We are valued by our peers, or our numbers would not be growing.

And the tens of thousands of students whom we have helped--don't forget them.

We have come a long way since the early 70s. We have much cause for pride.

Bonnie S. Titley is Assistant to the Dean and an assistant professor in the College of Applied Human Sciences. Address correspondence concerning this article to her at the College of Applied Human Sciences, 104 Gibbons, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523.