Empowering Lifelong Self-Development

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Academic advisors ancient enough to be familiar with my work, and younger professionals who have chanced upon it, will not be surprised to hear me agree strongly with Burns Crookston's developmental view. The following lines from his article remind us of his orientation:

> higher learning is to be viewed as an opportunity in which the developing person may plan to achieve a self-fulfilling life; that the perspective of work and professional training more properly should be placed within the development of a life plan instead of the current tendency to prepare one's self for a profession and then build one's life around it. . . . It follows that developmental counseling and advising is concerned not only with a specific personal or vocational decision but also with facilitating the student's rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills.

My position here is that the fundamental purpose of academic advising is to help students become effective agents for their own lifelong learning and personal development. Our relationships with students — the questions we raise, the perspectives we share, the resources we suggest, the short-term decisions and long-range plans we help them think through — all should aim to increase their capacity to take charge of their own existence.

O'Banion says, "the purpose of academic advising is to help the student choose a program of study which will serve him in the development of his total potential." That's a good beginning, but a lot more needs to be learned and considered if we are to strengthen students' power to create their own futures. He suggests five dimensions: (a) exploration of life goals, (b) exploration of vocational goals, (c) program choice, (d) course choice, and (e) scheduling courses. From my perspective these are necessary but insufficient; they are good starting points, but we can't settle for just those.

How can we help students--of all ages — learn to take charge of their own development? How can we help them become more conscious of their purposes and talents so they can be more intentional about their own learning?

When I wrestle with these questions, it helps me to use Ann Lynch's ***Moving In, Moving Through,*** and ***Moving On*** conceptual framework for organizing student personnel services and academic advising. (See Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989, for detailed development of this framework.) This way of thinking about college is also a good way of thinking about entering, moving through, and moving on from other significant life experiences; it's a good way of thinking about major life transitions.

Moving In

In my view, helping students move into college effectively is far and away the most important responsibility for academic advisors. It is critically important for each student. Its consequences for student success and attrition make it critically important for the institution. Given its importance and complexity, the time, energy, and resources devoted to this transition fall far short of what's needed.

What should we address to help students move in? The key issues are helping them make the transition and helping them develop or discover motivation for learning.

Making Transitions

Every transition means coping with new roles, new routines, new relationships, and new assumptions — assumptions about self, about others, and about the culture being entered. Whether students are coming from high school and home with parents or from the work world and home with spouse and children, we need to help them understand the roles, routines, relationships, and assumptions that are part of this new environment. To make an effective transition, they must take stock of their situation, their supports, their coping strategies, and themselves. We can help students do that stocktaking, and we should. Perhaps the stocktaking will suggest enrolling in fewer courses, shifting from full- to part-time work, shucking off some responsibilities, or cutting back on some activities. It might even suggest withdrawing-or not enrolling — until the situation, supports, coping strategies, or self is more consistent with being

successful. (See Schlossberg, 1984, 1994, for more details on making effective transitions.)

Developing Motivation for Learning

It's helpful to distinguish between two learning agendas for college: learning important for career success and learning important for a good life. Successful careers call for well-developed cognitive skills, interpersonal competence, and motivation. Critical thinking and conceptualizing abilities, accompanied by high-level written and oral communication skills, are the most important factors in career success. It is not the knowledge acquired in college (which becomes quickly obsolete) but rather the cognitive skills developed there that distinguish persons with outstanding careers. So helping students recognize the importance of working on critical thinking skills is key.

Interpersonal competence is the second most important factor in successful careers. We need to know how to work effectively with others. to seek and offer help, to influence others, to help others become more competent and strong themselves, to perform well with persons from diverse backgrounds, and in various situations. About 80% of communication is nonverbal, and when verbal communication is ambiguous we usually trust the nonverbal messages. So skill in reading nonverbal communication is also key. Even more important is awareness and control of our own nonverbal signals.

In addition to cognitive skills and interpersonal competence, motivation is critical for career success. People who succeed exhibit shared characteristics. They are clear about what's driving them, what they want to do, and where they want to go. They have clear purposes. They set high standards, work hard, and take risks. They are self-confident, possessing a strong sense of competence.

These characteristics necessary for career success also contribute to creating a good life. But they are not enough. To live a good life, we all need to learn how to manage our emotions. Anxiety, anger, depression, lust, or shame can derail any of us. One can't learn when grabbed by such powerful emotions. So learning how to manage emotions is also key.

Moving from dependence on others through autonomy toward interdependence is another significant area for learning. Interdependence involves mutual support, with others relying on us as we rely on them. Becoming a mature adult means moving beyond individual independence to relationships of mutual respect and support.

Finally, we need to develop integrity, the condition of being whole, of undivided completeness. One has integrity when what one says in a given situation is consistent with what one says in an other. Most importantly, words are consistent with actions. Rather than merely talking the talk, one walks the walk.

Academic advisors can play a key role in helping students understand the importance of developing these characteristics through courses and classes, extracurricular activities, opportunities at work and in the community, and even family responsibilities. By helping students recognize the importance of pursuing these critical learnings for career success and a good life, advisors will strengthen student motivation for tackling diverse opportunities. Students will be better positioned to make an effective transition.

Moving Through

Moving through college in ways that optimize learning involves defining a suitable major, understanding how to get the most out of courses and classes as well as extracurricular activities, and developing mature relationships.

Defining a Major

Defining an appropriate major is critical. As we all recognize, that decision configures much of the college experience and eliminates many things that will not be pursued. But more importantly, when the choice really fits, it has great motivational force; it releases energy and enthusiasm that can power a wide range of significant learning and personal development.

I use ***defining*** for a good reason. Most students assume that it is possible to select only from among the predefined alternatives. But many persons have interests or occupational orientations that don't conform to the ways we academics box knowledge and competence. Many of our boxes don't fit the real world of work and effective living very well. Most institutions have opportunities for individualized majors, but these are seldom used. Advisors can play a key role in helping students create majors that really respond to their particular interests and purposes. We can help them remember that a satisfying life means integrating vocational plans, personal interests and values, and issues concerning life-style and family. We can help them to recall and readdress some of the learnings for

career success and a good life that we looked at when they were starting out and to think about how their major carries forward these purposes. We can encourage them to make effective use of institutional resources such as the career planning office, faculty members, field experiences, and library resources. Most importantly, perhaps, we can help them invest the time and energy to get information and explore alternatives that this significant decision calls for. We can help them work through issues that arise when institutional timing for a decision is premature in relation to their readiness or when family pressures conflict with their own interests.

Optimizing Learning

Helping students optimize learning from the welter of activities and resources available is one of our most important responsibilities. In my judgment our best leverage here is helping students recognize that their long-run payoffs come not from good grades but from learning that lasts. Several metaanalyses from the 1960s to the late 1980s document that college grades are poor predictors of success at work or in living a good life. The only future for which a high grade point average is important is entering a selective graduate school. Of course if grades are so poor a student flunks out, that's different — because the critical factor is having the degree. It's hard to help students get grades in perspective given the heavy emphasis on grades throughout the system. But we want to help students focus on learning.

The best thing we can do is help students understand how learning occurs and the strengths and weaknesses of their own learning styles. There are several conceptual frameworks that can be helpful. I like David Kolb's experiential learning theory because it helps students manage both academic and extraacademic opportunities for learning in ways that fit the particular contexts, the desired outcomes, and their own styles.

According to Kolb (1981), learning starts with concrete experience. We observe and reflect on that experience. As our experiences accumulate, we develop concepts, hunches, theories that explain why something happens in recurring fashion. Such concepts become the basis for how we think and act when we encounter similar experiences. Many courses and classes are strong on conceptual abstractions but short on concrete experiences — active application, experimentation, and reflection. Many extraacademic opportunities can provide powerful experiences and contexts for application but are short on concepts or reflection. When students learn how to build in the missing elements and create the appropriate mix of all four elements, then their learning throughout college is greatly strengthened.

We can also help students optimize learning by informing them about more general principles for getting the most of college and helping them act accordingly: Build relationships with faculty members. Work collaboratively with other students. Learn actively. Get prompt feedback. Emphasize time on task. Set high expectations. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

Developing Mature Relationships

A student's most important teachers are usually other students. Numerous studies show that peer relationships play a significant role in student persistence and degree completion and are major influences on learning and personal development. Loneliness and social isolation can become serious impediments. Students need to be connected with a network or group and to have at least one intimate friend.

Developing mature relationships also means being comfortable with and open to persons different from oneself. It means responding to persons in their own right and not as members of some group. It means recognizing our stereotypes and prejudices and learning to suspend judgments.

Advisors are the most important single resource for helping students move through college. How well we help students define their majors, understand and manage their learning, and develop mature relationships can make the difference between success and failure. More importantly it can make the difference between simply getting through and achieving learning that lasts.

Moving On

Helping students move on after we have worked with them to move in and move through college can be one of our most satisfying experiences. When students have defined a major that has worked for them, when they have learned how to learn from both academic and extraacademic experiences, and when they have developed a rich set of diverse, mature re-

lationships, they are well positioned for work, for further education, or for moving toward marriage and starting a family.

There are two sets of issues in making this transition: clarifying their new identity as it relates to vocation, avocation, and life-style; and putting their immediate plans in a life-span perspective.

Clarifying the New Identity

Many students find it difficult to leave the structured world of college and the friends they have made and move on to an uncertain future. College is promoted as the route to success, and college graduates do much better than others. But realistic expectations are essential for this transition. Life is full of discontinuities. Being realistic means recognizing there may be temporary downward mobility. Graduates who have enjoyed formal or informal leadership roles may find it hard to start at the bottom again. It is difficult to take entry-level jobs, or even short-term menial jobs, that don't tap all the wonderful talents they have and make use of the visions and perspectives they have developed. So helping them be realistic about those possibilities is an important first step.

Then there is the broader struggle with defining this new identity. Moving into and through college supplied one kind of identity, whether one entered college at 18 or 48. It answered, at least temporarily and tentatively, questions about who I am, who I want to become, and where I want to go. But with graduation those questions rise brightly to the surface once again.

Developing a Life-Span Perspective

Learning doesn't stop with graduation. We don't get grown up once and for all. If we become static, we berome in some ways dead. Career success and a good life depend on continuous learning and self-development. Leading a rich, full life depends on our capacity to put ourselves in challenging situations and to learn from them. To stay in charge of our own learning and development, two things are helpful. First it is useful to have some sense of what lies ahead, of the adult life span. Second it is useful to be clear about the knowledge, competence, and personal characteristics we are taking with us.

The adult life span is not a new idea. Philosophers, poets, playwrights, and novelists have given us numerous ancient and modern descriptions. Behavioral science research has documented various patterns. Knowledge of these artistic descriptions and research findings can help students anticipate some challenges and opportunities for learning and self-development. With this knowledge they can assess those challenges they have already met, those that are coming soon, and those that are still over the horizon. Although we are increasingly becoming an "age irrelevant" society, we all still face, at one time or another, a variety of developmental tasks provoked by biological and social forces or by our own constantly evolving personalities. These developmental tasks can provide a useful framework for self-assessment and planning as students move on from college.

As academic advisors we can be mightily helpful to students of whatever age who are facing the graduation transition. We can be sounding boards for thoughts concerning refashioned identities. We can help integrate information from the career planning center, from job interviews, and from conversations with family, friends, and faculty members. We can introduce them to pertinent literature concerning the adult life span. We can help identify developmental tasks they have completed and those to come. We can help identify further learnings that may be required or that they will want to initiate. By so doing, we can help students leave with optimism, enthusiasm, and a sense of being in charge of their own futures.

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