

Use of a Collective Narrative Process to Articulate Practice-Based Advising Competencies

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A set of advising competencies was developed by a collective examination of actual practices among faculty and staff who provide advising services to adult learners. A storytelling methodology provided the data from which skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values reflective of good advising practices were extracted and described. This methodology served as professional and organizational development and as a collective statement about values and valued behaviors of advising in a college oriented to adult learners.

Advising is a complex activity that involves an integration of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values. The complexity is deepened when working with adult learners who bring to their formal education a host of experiences, responsibilities, goals, and emotions. In addition, adults possess knowledge and skills developed and applied in a variety of contexts.

Creamer & Creamer (1994) recently abstracted major themes from a growing literature on developmental advising (Crookston, 1972; O'Banion, 1972) to extract a variety of advisor roles and responsibilities. However, the translation of the themes into a descriptive set of effective behaviors is not evident. We describe a process for articulating a set of competencies (i.e., skills, knowledge, and attitudes) derived from a collective examination of the experiences and practices of advisors who serve adult learners by engaging in developmental advising activities. The outcome of the process—a set of advising competencies—is reported here.

Because advising is primarily a private exchange between an advisor and a learner, a shared understanding of advising strategies, philosophies, techniques, behaviors, and attitudes, as well as roles and responsibilities of an advisor, may not develop within an academic unit or organization. While regard for the importance of advising as an element of academic success and student retention has been elevated in recent years (Shields, 1994), training and professional development of all advisors may be inadequate for quality assurance and improvement; more academic personnel are advising a growing number of adult learners.

The assurance of learning and the progressive improvement of what learners experience in advis-

ing encounters rests, in part, on a shared understanding of what comprises excellent advising. The articulation of competencies that reflect good advising practices offers a shared understanding for mutual, systematic advising improvement (King, 1994).

While the competencies reported here emerged from specific examination of advising experiences within an adult education setting, we believe they have universal applicability for different student populations in different institutions. Our hope, however, is not only that advisors will adopt the competencies that seem appropriate to their experiences, but that other institutions will undertake a process similar to the one described here to develop setting-specific advising competencies.

Context

As one of eight colleges of DePaul University (Chicago), the School for New Learning (SNL) exclusively serves adults (≥ 24 years) through competence-based undergraduate and graduate programs. Progress toward a degree is predicated by a student's demonstration of a set of competencies, organized into a framework reflecting skills of inquiry and liberal learning and development of specialized abilities and knowledge for professional development. A more expansive discussion of the college may be found elsewhere (Justice & Marienau, 1988).

Several elements of the college's mission and history have led to advising as a central avenue of student learning and development. Among these elements are the school's individualized curriculum, the goal of developing self-managed learning, and an ethos of personalism and learning-centeredness. A critical philosophical premise of the college is that the learner is the primary agent of her or his learning and that the curriculum is both an outgrowth of "learner centeredness" and a contributor to it.

Almost any encounter between college personnel and a student (or potential student) is viewed as an advising opportunity. A student may encounter approximately 15 different contexts for advising over the course of his or her involvement with the school. These various contexts include initial

inquiries about programs or courses, decisions about returning to college and selection of a school, admissions procedures, exploration of educational and professional goals, program and learning-plan development, independent learning activities, assessment of prior or independent learning, major project(s) development, and special services. Each student admitted to one of the degree programs is linked to a member of the faculty and an individual external to the school who counsel the student about general program and professional development. Students also engage in advising interactions with an advising staff member prior to and through the admissions process, as well as during the course of their programs; with an administrative staff member prior to and during their programs; and with other faculty who primarily teach courses. Additionally, the school also recognizes that exchanges with peers, friends, alumni, family, and community members constitute an additional, informal source of advising for adult learners. Thus, the merging of these contexts and people forms a complex matrix to describe what a student experiences under the umbrella of "advising." This is certainly not unique to adult learners at this school but representative of many, if not most, adult-oriented degree programs and possibly many other academic institutions.

Methods

Faculty and advising staff were invited to a workshop "to engage in a dialogue and process toward developing a set of advising competencies through reflection on practice." Prior to the meeting each participant was asked to a) write details about two significant advising encounters, and b) list behaviors, skills, and attitudes that she or he considered to be a competency of good advising. The first of these assignments was intended to get participants in the frame of mind to work with narrative during the workshop; the second was used later in the workshop to augment the information obtained from the narrative process.

A narrative strategy was used for several reasons. The exchange of stories about advising students is a commonplace activity in the organization. The faculty members and staff informally use each other's stories as reference points for their own work. Thus, storytelling was a way to take an everyday practice into a slightly more formal setting and draw on aspects of critical incident techniques (Flanagan, 1954). To focus stories and to extract the competencies from the narrative, we used behavioral event interview strategies (McClelland, 1978) that slow the narrative process.

Figure 1 is an overview of the process in which we engaged 35 members of the college (administrators, advisors, and faculty members) via two 3.5 hour workshops to develop a set of competencies drawn from their experiences. Detail regarding each of the steps follow.

Introduction and Objectives. We welcomed and provided the whole group (approximately 18 people/group) a brief statement outlining the desired workshop outcomes: a) to develop a preliminary set of statements that describe the competencies of excellent advising to learners, and b) to provide an opportunity for self-assessment of advisor knowledge and practice and to frame both in a practice-based orientation. We intentionally avoided describing the sequence and purpose of ensuing events so that participants would not circumvent any of the steps, particularly the storytelling phase.

Storytelling—describing advising encounters. The group was divided into smaller groups of 3–5 people and asked to focus their attention on a specific advising context. Each group was given a context from among a variety described above such as program planning, developing major projects, as well as helping prospective students with information needs, with admissions procedures, with independent learning, and so forth. The small groups were asked to have 1–2 people take 30 minutes to relate a specific encounter within the assigned context while the other members of the group probed, through non-directive questions, for specificity of behaviors, thoughts, and dialogue. The stories need not have been ones of positive encounters but could be narratives that conveyed sufficient interactions to examine a range of behaviors and skills. One member of the group was also asked to record the narrative in detail.

Identifying competencies in the narratives. We briefly reconvened the full group and we asked the small groups to analyze their notes for the skills, knowledge, and attitudes reflected in the stories. The groups were requested to use the general syntax of a competency statement in which the third person is understood and the format is "Can" For example, "can help students to develop skills of self-assessment to mutually and continuously assess learner's capabilities, progress areas, barriers, learning needs, and developmental states." We placed special attention to the choice of verbs that reflected the abilities expressed in the narratives.

Refining the competencies. Once a draft had been generated, we asked each group to review each statement for clarity; in addition, if underlying or contributing areas of knowledge could be identified, the statement was to be extended into the form:

"Can . . . based on an understanding of . . ." For example, a group could develop a statement such as: "can promote developmental learning by helping a student view issues, information, and self from multiple perspectives based on an understanding of adult development theories."

Reporting out. We gathered together the whole group for reporting the sets of statements. A useful strategy for this step was to have the first group, arbitrarily designated, share its full set, the second group add only those statements that did not duplicate any from the first, the third group add only the statements that were unique to the growing set, and so forth.

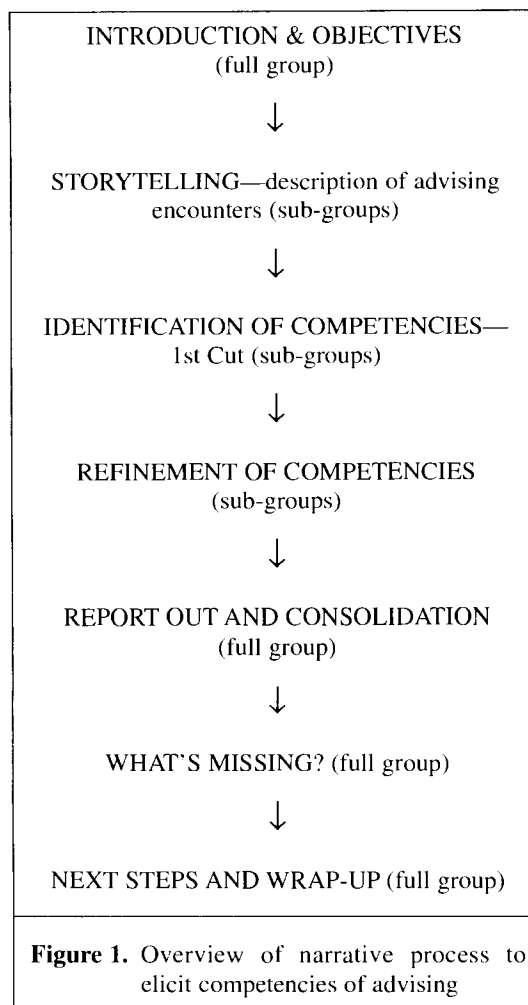
What's Missing? Once all the groups had reported out, thus creating the first full draft of a collective set of competency statements, each member of the group was asked to examine the statements and to reflect on "What's missing?" from the list. The competencies that each person drafted in preparation for the workshop were used to supplement the advising competencies that had emerged from the groups' effort.

Outcome of the process. A total of 108 competency statements were generated by the 35 staff and faculty members over the course of two workshops. We, along with several colleagues who participated in the workshops, analyzed the competencies with respect to themes, redundancy, and consistency. The 108 statements of the base list were distilled to 30 and organized into 5 categories. Items from the base list that expressed values and attitudes regarding a dimension of advising were also used to provide explanatory text for the competency statements. Twice during the process of consolidation and thematic analysis, the interim drafts were circulated among workshop participants for their interpretations, commentaries, and suggestions.

Outcomes of the Process

The set of advising competencies that ultimately emerged from this reiterative narrative process were distributed among faculty and staff for use at the School of New Learning at DePaul University in 1995. They are offered below with minor changes that do not change the content of the competencies. Reference to specific aspects of the School for New Learning, for example, have been removed and replaced by more generic language to reflect general adult-oriented degree programs or broader institutional perspectives.

Practice-Based Advising Competencies—Preamble: The role of advising is highly valued to help unlock learners' potential for maximum growth, development, and the demon-



stration of competence. Advising is made available to adult learners from the initial contact with the school through a student's completion of a degree program. Advising is a primary avenue by which the school's mission to provide individualized programs of study for adult learners is realized; thus, advising is a key and integral part of each student's educational experience.

Advising poses unique challenges, opportunities, and rewards; and, it requires a diverse range of abilities. The advising competencies that follow emerged through dialogue among staff and faculty in an examination of experience and both current and desired practices. The competencies reflect the multiple roles advisors play as well as a multiplicity of purposes that advising serves. The overall focus on abilities that provide a

supportive environment for learning rather than on expertise in various areas of knowledge underscores a commitment to learning-centeredness.

Advising as represented in these competencies rests on a number of assumptions and beliefs; among the most salient are that a) individualized learning is best promoted by a sense of partnership between learner and advisor; b) the promotion of self-management will serve the adult learner in a multitude of contexts; c) decision-making by adult students is guided by various contexts and goals (personal, career, education) each requiring student attention; and d) learning has cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Advising at its best is a transaction that is holistic, interactive, and honors each learner's individuality; advisors are their best when proactively seeking and responding to the opportunity to engage students in the joys and struggles of learning.

The competencies:

A. Planning and Organizing

Strong organization and planning skills can contribute to effective and efficient advising sessions. These skills can also enhance advisors' abilities to maintain contacts and communications with advisees outside of a face-to-face advising situation. Maintaining communication between a student and advisor is a shared responsibility with subtleties that may require negotiation (e.g., advisor follow-up—student paced timetables) as well as advance thought, planning, and organizing.

1. Can develop methods for maintaining communication and accessibility to students to meet their needs.
2. Can access and use student program data through various institutional and program information systems and sources.
3. Is familiar with institutional policies and services relevant to addressing student learning and professional needs and aspirations.
4. Can maintain accurate, current, and useful notes and records of students' progress.

B. Assessment

A central function of advising is assessing student needs, capabilities, and levels of learning. The quality of assessment may be measured by its clarity, integrity, flexibility, and empathy. The abilities associated with the assessment aspects of advising involve inter-

preting and evaluating data and information gained through both records and interactions with a learner. Intuition and insight derived from experience can be important dimensions of this process. Emphasis is placed on promoting a sense of partnership between advisor and learner through assessment strategies that engender student confidence in making choices and managing their learning, particularly through self-assessment strategies.

5. Can elicit cognitive, affective, and behavioral information, including viewpoints and attitudes about learning itself, appropriate to short and long-term goals of advising and learning.

6. Can help students develop skills of self-assessment to mutually (learner and advisor) and continuously assess learner's capabilities, progress, barriers, learning needs, and developmental state.

7. Can analyze admissions data for indicators of admissions criteria and make sound admissions decisions.

8. Can assist the learner in identifying learning needs based on the clarification and articulation of goals (academic and professional).

9. Can recognize special learning needs and make recommendations to student in a clear and sensitive manner.

10. Can interpret learner's educational goals and learning history in terms of program opportunities and provide recommendations or options regarding career, learning, and academic goals.

11. Can critique evidence of learning relative to criteria and document the assessment clearly and with sensitivity while supporting the learner.

12. Can determine effective intervention strategies along a continuum of directiveness depending on desired outcomes.

13. Can assess the role that social and cultural dimensions of the advisor/teacher-learner relationship may have on learning.

C. Communicating and Counseling

These advising abilities rest on respect for the individuality of each learner and the goal of establishing and sustaining rapport and trust with a richly diverse population of students. Advising occurs in the context of a program and institution; being aware of resources to meet student needs, from special services to avenues for grievances, contribute

to the most expansive set of possibilities for communicating with students. Through the dynamic of "challenge and support," and with the help of interpersonal skills, a non-judgmental advisor can establish a safe environment, inspire learning, and support a learner in developing confidence in himself(herself) as he or she pursues learning.

14. Can facilitate an advising relationship as a collaborative inquiry process.

15. Respects the differences in status and power between student and advisor and works to minimize their possible negative impact on the advising relationship.

16. Can draw on a variety of listening, verbal, and non-verbal strategies and techniques to counsel and communicate with students in a variety of contexts.

17. Can communicate program and institutional structures, policies, and criteria for the assessment of learning and the performance of requirements.

18. Can contribute to and support the various roles in the Academic Committee.

D. Teaching and Learning/Facilitating Learning

Emphasis in this area of advising is placed on assessment, facilitation, and feedback skills that encourage self-managed learning and the establishment of a relationship between the student and advisor that leads to learning. The high value the school places on experiential learning and the outcomes-based curricula of its programs help to shape the perspective and educational approaches to facilitating learning. Each advising encounter is a learning transaction of varying magnitude; equivalent in importance to teaching, advising shifts the emphasis to learning and magnifies the dynamics of learning through personal interaction.

19. Can promote developmental learning by helping a student view issues, information, and self from multiple perspectives.

20. Can apply principles of experiential learning and learning-centered practices to motivate student learning and assist in goal setting or design of learning activities that meet assessable learning objectives.

21. Can help students understand the relationship between ideas and practice.

22. Can honor and mediate multiple learning objectives and expectations as described by the learner, school, and other sources.

23. Can mediate student learning by reinforcing successes and helping the student to derive learning from experience.

24. Can assist in the selection of learning experiences (e.g., courses, independent studies, independent learning, etc.) consistent with learner goals, style, and interests as well as program requirements.

25. Can serve as a partner in learning with an advisee, recognizing the appropriate ethical and educational boundaries of one's responsibilities in adult learning relationships and encounters.

E. Professional Values, Ethics, and Development

This set of competencies recognizes advising as an interactive process that engages both the cognitive and affective dimensions of the advisor and learner. As such, they combine with and inform most, if not all, of the other competencies. Advising both provides an opportunity for mutual learning and challenges the limits of educational and personal boundaries. The ethical dimensions of advising are in a state of examination and evolution and very open to ongoing explorations. An advisor's ability to assess his or her own knowledge, limits, and values is increasingly important to effective advising. With strong self-assessment and collegial skills and a clear understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and policies that inform the professional interactions of an advisor, individuals can more effectively communicate to students the purposes of advising, be aware of how one's values and those of the institution inform advising decisions, continuously develop a repertoire of skills, and create plans for one's ongoing professional development.

26. Can assess one's advising capabilities and limitations as a basis for decision making and judgments during advising encounters, as well as for professional development.

27. Can articulate and act in congruence with a coherent philosophical and ethical framework for advising, being aware of its impact on decisions and interactions.

28. Can assess the ethical and educational boundaries of advising in an adult learning relationship.

29. Can articulate one's attitudes, values, and biases with respect to gender, race, age, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation as these pertain to learners, learning, academic programs, and influence on decision making.

30. Can elicit and use feedback from colleagues and advisees to improve practice with respect to specific skills, areas of knowledge, and ethno-socio-cultural considerations.

Discussion

The strategy of drawing on a commonplace means of communication—storytelling—and exploiting it by providing structure, focus, and intentionality to the interaction between narrator and audience proved to be an effective means to foster reflection and analysis. Storytelling is also a powerful means of capturing the complexities, spontaneity, and interpretive nature of advising. It allowed us to communicate seemingly paradoxical or contradictory experiences (e.g., experiences of serving as both an advocate and evaluator). The narrative process illuminated many of these apparent inconsistencies and permitted us to capture those aspects of advising that are nonlinear and subjective (Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Storytelling integrates abstract theories and concepts to the particular case (Montgomery-Hunter, 1991) and thus allowed the participants to join together thoughts, feelings, values, and attitudes. This provided a rich data source from which to extract competencies. As a collective statement of ethics and values, articulated advising competencies can build on growing efforts to identify the core values and to outline the ethical dimensions of academic advising. These efforts are represented in NACADA's "Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising" (1995, p. 5) and, as Lowenstein & Grites (1993, p. 60) point out, by NACADA's adoption of "the 1988 'Standards and Guidelines' developed by the Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services/Development Programs." Lowenstein & Grites (1993) have outlined a set of ethical principles advisors can use to guide their practices.

While a full meta-analysis of the competencies is beyond the scope of this report (Alicia & Fiddler, in preparation), the competencies reported here reflect many of the themes that have accompanied the elevation of developmental advising to its current status. While there are other ways to organize the competencies and to phrase them, on the whole they reflect overarching beliefs that a fundamental purpose of academic advising is to help students "... become effective agents for their own lifelong learning and personal development" (Chickering, 1994, p. 50) and that advisors serve as mentors, in almost every context, in the process of that development (Dalosz, 1988). While these dimensions were already an understanding of most of those who par-

ticipated in the articulation of the competencies, the recognition of this ethos in advising practices underscored the importance of the competencies to the entire academic unit.

Each workshop took approximately 3.5 hours; follow-up work to refine, consolidate, organize, and circulate the base list for feedback took another 15–20 hours. In both workshops, the participants continued the conversation beyond the structured time, particularly to explore assumptions each person held about adult learners, dimensions of advising, and advisor roles and responsibilities. Thus, the process of eliciting a set of competencies proved to be a stimulus for discussion about advising and professional development beyond the focused task. The inquiry process became embedded in a collective act of reflection and development. Participants expressed both enjoyment in the process and appreciation for the outcomes; we anticipate that their engagement in the effort to produce a statement of good practices will result in a greater sense of ownership as they draw on the competencies for professional development and performance assessment. Our early observations are supporting this belief.

Use of this narrative methodology in other settings would undoubtedly surface other values and beliefs that inform and underlie practices in units with different missions, histories, and populations. From an organizational viewpoint, a set of competencies may also be seen as a collective statement of ethics, offering expectations for advising that reflect assumptions and values across the organization.

The competencies may be used in several ways: a) to expand advisor awareness of the activities in which they participate; b) to provide a basis for assuming responsibility for and assessing one's own performance; c) to provide a framework for designing and engaging in continuous professional development; d) to review performance or credentials of new hires; and e) to serve as a catalyst and platform for research efforts around specific advising issues or skills. We foresee that the use of the competencies will proceed incrementally as they are adopted initially for self-assessment and as a basis for professional development activities. Assessment and the recognition of quality competencies becomes a basis for periodic performance review of staff and faculty; often they are used to consider promotions, including tenure. The competencies are a testimony to the complexity of advising and the responsibilities of an advisor; indeed, taken as a whole, they can be overwhelming in their breadth or invigorating in their actualization. Recognizing that a set of competencies drawn from actual practice and articulated by a collective process helps to keep a focus on the latter.

While certainly not a new approach to describing elements of good practice (e.g., Schneider, Klemp & Kastendiek, 1981), the use of articulated competencies has been gaining currency. For example, the American College of Preventive Medicine has recently adopted a set of competencies for residents in that medical specialty (Lane, Ross, Parkinson, & Chen, 1995). The competencies were developed through a process that engaged various practitioners and medical educators in a consensus building process (Lane & Ross, 1994). The American Board of Genetic Counselors has integrated a set of competencies into its program accreditation documentation; those competencies were developed through the process described here (Fiddler, M., Fine, B., Baker, D., & the American Board of Genetic Counseling Consensus Development Consortium, 1996; Fine, B., Baker, D., Fiddler, M., & the American Board of Genetic Counseling Consensus Development Consortium, 1996) with a group of graduate training program directors for whom storytelling amongst themselves was not a routine source of exchange. The use of narrative by the American Board of Genetic Counselors supports our contention that the strength of this method is not reliant on prior familiarity with narrative within an organization's culture.

Stories attach us to others and provide connections to our own personal histories. Through narrative, we can reorganize, reassess, and realign our experiences and current practices.

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