Advising Styles Observable In Practice: Counselor, Scheduler, and Teacher

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Ten professional academic advisors were observed in advising sessions with 35 traditional-aged undergraduates to determine if advising styles are observable and if conceptual differences between prescriptive and developmental advising approaches are distinguishable. Individual advisors were found to use one of three styles and were not observed to vary their style among students. Findings challenge the assumption that prescriptive and developmental behaviors are used as distinct and contrasting approaches to advising.

Authoritarian advisors who provide academic information to students are said to use the prescriptive approach. The developmental approach is used by advisors who foster a relationship with a student so that teaching and learning about crucial academic and life concerns occurs. Since Crookston (1972) first described the two advising approaches, the assumption of distinctive use between them has been commonplace in the literature. When O'Banion (1972) applied student development theory to a diversified set of advising functions, researchers and practitioners accepted the developmental and prescriptive methods as inclusive of those used in practice.

Descriptions of the two academic advising approaches have served reliably for advising research. Work by Winston and Sandor (1984a, 1984b) has led to a fuller understanding of advising practices. In addition, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (1986) promulgated standards for practice that explicitly rest upon the assumption that developmental advising is the superior approach of guiding students in important educational decisions. Also, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) (1996) endorsed a statement of core values that underscores the importance of academic advising, then articulated core values about education that advocate a developmental advising approach.

The developmental approach, or at least a developmental orientation, to academic advising is popular and is generally preferred by advisors in most academic settings (Winston, Miller, Ender, Grites, & Associates, 1984). As shown in earlier work by Creamer and Creamer (1994), the developmental approach is seen by many as an effective method of improving student persistence (Lopez, Yanez, Clayton, & Thompson, 1988), integrating important educational functions of both academic and student affairs (O'Banion, 1972), and enhancing institutional effectiveness (Habley, 1988). The developmental approach has also been shown to be preferred by most students (Fielstein, 1989; Winston & Sandor, 1984b).

Students' advising needs and preferences vary by demographic characteristics, including gender and race. For instance, women students express a significantly higher preference for developmental advising than do men students (Crockett & Crawford, 1989; Herndon, Kaiser, & Creamer, 1996), and there is evidence of its preference by African American students (Herndon et al., 1996). White and Black students on a predominantly white campus reported significantly different advising needs (Burrell & Trombley, 1983) and have received varied types of advising (Herndon et al., 1996). Some researchers have suggested that students of color prefer working with advisors who share their ethnicity (Padilla & Pavel, 1994; Sanchez & Atkinson, 1983). Others have noted that cultural differences can undermine communication between advisors and students who belong to different ethnic groups (Brown & Rivas, 1992). As Frost (1991) noted, focusing on individual student needs and differences, not stereotypical differences, is the key to developmental advising of diverse students.

An important question about the developmental approach to academic advising is whether it appears as a distinct dimension on a prescriptive-developmental approach continuum.

A spectrum of advising approaches clearly is assumed in the most widely used research instrument in the field of advising, the Academic Advising Inventory (AAI) (Winston & Sandor, 1984a). The distinction is reflected between approaches in the AAI structure, which is based on student characterizations of advisor behaviors. For example, in one of a series of dichotomous

scenario pairs, the advisor is described as either a) being interested in helping the student learn how to find out about courses and programs (a developmental approach) or b) as someone who tells the student what they need to know about academic courses and programs (a prescriptive approach). Evidence from at least one study suggests that most students score their advising experience very near the central point on the prescriptive-developmental continuum, and that while researchers label some scores as prescriptive and some scores as developmental, most respondents indicate that they prefer performance that does not represent extremes of either approach (Herndon, 1993).

To determine whether the approaches utilized by professional academic advisors reflect a prescriptive and developmental dichotomy, a project was structured to explore advising practices at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, a research institution. It is based on work by Daller (1997) and designed to answer the following questions:

1. What observable styles of advising are used by professional advisors?
2. Are conceptual differences between prescriptive and developmental advising distinguishable in advising practice?

Methods

Sample

Advisors. Of the 17 invited to participate, 10 professional academic advisors from two administrative units of Virginia Tech—a large, mid-Atlantic region, research university—voluntarily participated in this exploratory study: six Caucasian women, two African American women, and two African American men. Five of the participants were professional advisors in a university center devoted to advising undecided students, and five participants were professional advisors from a university center devoted to advising academically disadvantaged students and student athletes. In addition to agreeing to volunteer in the study, the advisors shared several characteristics: They were employed in positions with primary responsibility for the delivery of academic advising—rather than teaching or research—and they worked in units with missions to advise students in a wide range of academic majors. Each held a master's degree and possessed specialized advising training.

Students. Thirty-five (16 females, 19 males; 25 Caucasians, 8 African Americans, and 2 Asian Americans) undergraduates were observed in advising sessions with the professional advisors during the 1996 fall semester.

Instruments

Observation sheet. An observation sheet was used to record notes about observations during each one-on-one advising session. (See Figure 1.) The sheet was designed to create operational key dimensions of the AAI and to collect descriptions of advising sessions—including topics covered and the source of topic initiation, the student, the relationship of the student and advisor, and the advisor's comments and behaviors.

Interview protocol sheet. An interview protocol sheet was developed to permit the principal researcher to systematically explore issues with each advisor following the observation period. Each advisor was asked to address the following requests and questions:

1. Please describe your philosophy of advising or what you would say is your general approach to advising.
2. Were the advising sessions I just observed in any way different from what you normally do?
3. I would like for a moment to look back at the advising sessions I just observed. Were there differences in terms of approach in the students you just advised? If so, how did they differ and why did you choose to vary your approach?

One interview protocol sheet per advisor was completed.

Procedures

Each advisor agreed to permit the principal researcher two hours of observation time, during which at least three students were advised, and one hour to complete a semistructured interview. The individual advisor interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Because a detailed observation sheet was utilized and most advisors felt it would be intrusive, the student sessions were not tape recorded.

Analysis

The analyses of the interview protocol and observation sheets were conducted thematically as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984). The study explored advising styles employed by the professional advisors, not student behaviors. No predetermined presumptions of advising approaches were set a priori; however, since dimensions of the developmental model were

Observation Sheet

I. Demographics

Advisor ID : _____ Race : _____ Gender : _____
Student ID : _____
Date/Time of Observation : _____
Length of Advising Session (minutes) : _____
Purpose for the advising session (student's presenting concern) :

_____

_____

Year of Student : 1 2 3 4
Student Race : _____ Gender : _____

II. Content of Advising Session

A = Advisor initiated or raised S = Student initiated or raised

Exploring Institutional Politics (EIP)
___ college policies
___ transfer credits
___ advanced placement or exempting courses
___ suspension, probation, or dismissal
___ declaring a major

Providing Information (PI)
___ content of courses
___ financial aid
___ other campus offices
___ special academic programs (e.g. study abroad)
___ internships or cooperative education
___ job placement opportunities

Personal Development and Interpersonal Relationships (PDIR)
___ personal values
___ possible majors
___ political or social issues
___ career alternatives
___ degree or major requirements
___ personal concerns or problems
___ evaluating academic progress
___ getting to know each other
___ extracurricular activities
___ the purpose of a college education
___ experiences in different classes
___ involvement outside of the classroom

Registration and Class Scheduling (RCS)
___ dropping or adding courses
___ signing registration forms
___ selecting courses for next term
___ planning a class schedule for next term

Teaching Personal Skills (TPS)
___ study skills and tips
___ setting personal goals
___ time management

Other Areas
___ Other areas _____

III. Nature of the Advising Relationship

1. Personalizes the advising session (e. g. Does the advisor express personal concern? Is their a closeness between the advisor and student? Does the advisor's approach vary among students?)
2. Decision making (e. g. Who has the responsibility for making and carrying out the decisions?)

IV. Intent or Purpose for Advising

What does the advisor do or say that reveals his or her advising philosophy?

Figure 1 Observation Sheet

used to construct the observation sheet, a developmental view of advising provided the starting point of data collection. Analysis was performed to determine which developmental dimensions of advising, as described in literature, are observable in practice and how other advising approaches might be observed.

The principal researcher's initial impressions were recorded in extensive field notes following each student advising session and advisor interview. Analysis of each advising session content depended upon classifying information according to whether the student or advisor initiated the topic of discussion. Topical discussions could be analyzed according to advisor characteristics and behaviors, student characteristics and inquiries, and intent of the advisor.

The nature of advising relationships was determined by the manner in which the advisor addressed the student. Expressions of personal

concern, indications of closeness between the advisor and student, the extent of variation in the advisor's approach between students, which party assumed responsibility for making the final decision about discussions, and indications of underlying advising philosophy—as revealed in advisor behaviors—were noted.

The collection and analysis of data proceeded simultaneously. Notes made following each observation and interview highlighted insights by the principal researcher. Some data were used to guide new observations and interviews. Information supporting the major advising dimensions and styles were noted and detailed after each interaction between advisor and student. Confirmatory information from advisor interviews provided additional validity to observation notes as it either confirmed or challenged the researcher's insights into themes emerging from the data. Transcripts of the interviews with advisors were utilized to provide details on the interview protocol sheet, to scrutinize differences in statements about philosophies of advising among those interviewed, and to collect quotes to illustrate the key advising dimensions. Three advising styles were subsequently identified: counselor, teacher, and scheduler.

Findings

Advising Styles

The counselor, scheduler, and teacher styles were identified and defined according to the philosophy stated by each advisor during the personal interview and the following characteristics observed during advising sessions: a) breadth of content covered, b) amount of personalization, and c) handling of decision making. These characteristics were identified by the principal researcher as central differing factors between prescriptive and developmental styles as defined by the AAI.

Counselor. Of the 10 professional academic advisors observed, 3 fit the counselor style. Counselors stated that making students feel comfortable was one of their main objectives. The Counselor was a helper who encouraged and supported students. All Counselors made statements, such as the following, reflecting concern for the whole student:

> To me the advisor is someone there for the student as a total person and should be able to talk to the student about the total person . . . I ask students, "What is it that you need to do to keep a total balance of yourself?"

Counselors consistently initiated topics relating to personal development and interpersonal relationships, not course scheduling or academics. Counselors were familiar with the students' personal and academic backgrounds. In no cases did Counselors make decisions for students. Counselors frequently made statements that reflected the philosophy that responsibility for academic success lies with the student.

Scheduler. Four observed advisors were Schedulers. The main function of the Scheduler was to be knowledgeable about university policies, processes, and other available resources on campus. The emphasis on academic issues, central to the Scheduler's central focus, is reflected in the statement made by one, ". . . certainly with an emphasis on academics. Getting settled in classes, figuring out the system. How to be a good time manager and good studier."

Schedulers did not inquire about the students' personal lives or backgrounds. Decisions in the Schedulers' advising sessions were made according to checklists, core curriculum requirements, and computerized information available about the students' grades and past course histories.

Teacher. The main objective of Teachers was to enable students to become self-sufficient through education and instruction. Three of 10 advisors fit the teacher profile. Teachers stressed the importance of educating students about university policies, processes, and resources.

One of the most prominent characteristics of Teachers was that, regardless of the student's presenting concern, the advisor initiated topics related to both academic and personal issues. For example, when students wanted to schedule classes or change their final exam schedules, Teachers initiated topics relating to personal development and skills, interpersonal relationships, and institutional policies. Like Counselors, Teachers talked about issues that arise outside of the classroom.

Relationships of Teachers and students were personalized in that the advisors expressed personal concern for the students, were familiar with the students' backgrounds, and discussed past advising sessions and conversations. Teachers helped students with processes and procedures—such as how to fill out the registration form—but left each student responsible for carrying out the task. For example, when discussing a student's course schedule for the following semester, one Teacher said, "You decide what you want to take. I don't decide. I'll write down your options and you decide."

The Prescriptive-Developmental Continuum

As previously suggested, prescriptive and developmental advising models have been presented in the literature as two different approaches to academic advising. Evidence was not found in this study to support the idea that developmental and prescriptive approaches to advising are distinctly used. Each advisor consistently utilized one of three styles and each of these styles combined behaviors that have been identified both as prescriptive and as developmental. The prescriptive–developmental labels did not provide a meaningful way to classify the approach of advisors.

In Figure 2, a range of advising behaviors and styles are shown within the prescriptive-developmental continuum. The location of the style circles on the figure represent observable behaviors

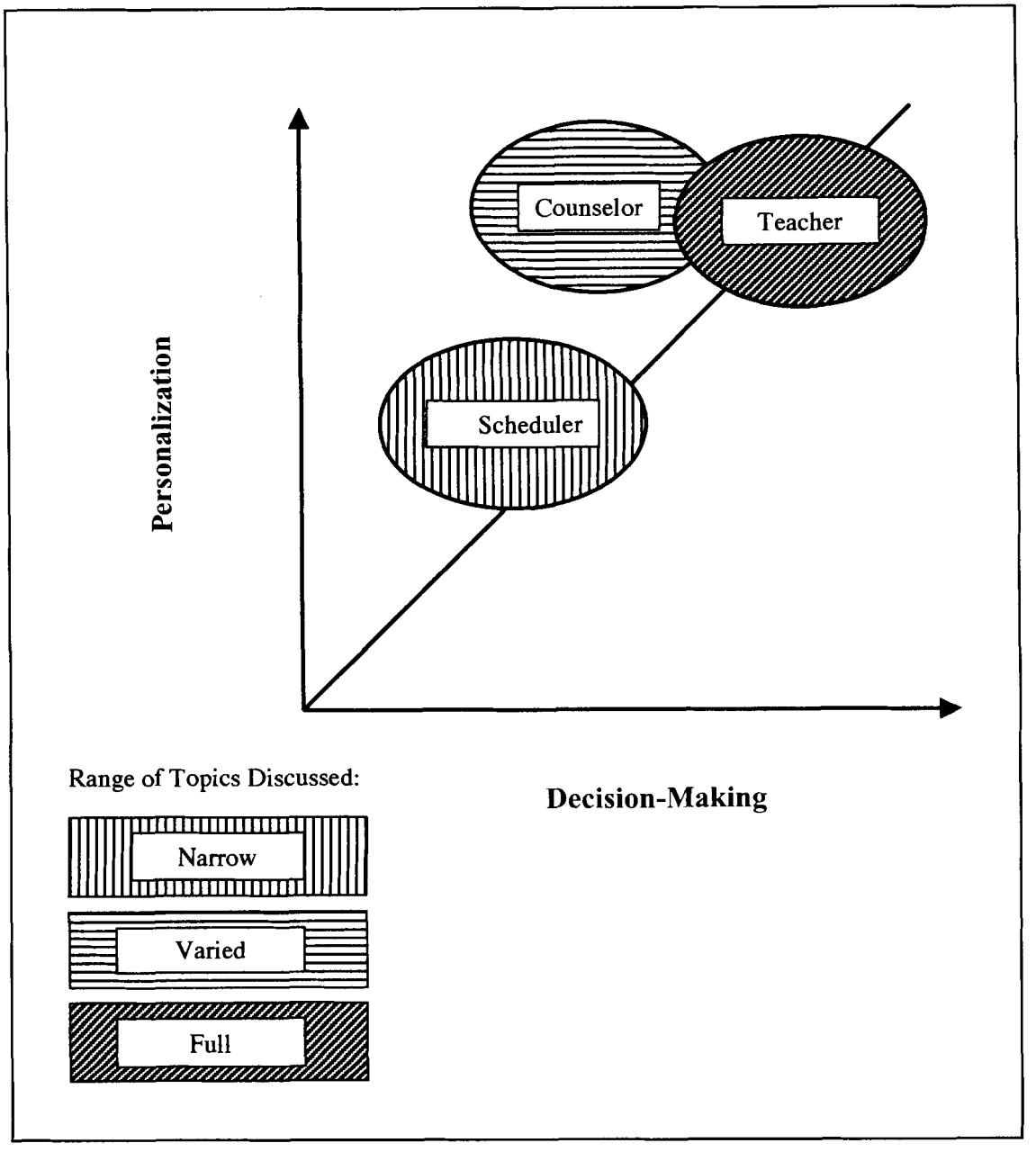

Figure 2 Advising Styles in Use Within a Prescriptive-Developmental Context

of each style and variation among styles. For example, the placement of the teacher style illustrates that the teacher approach is less personal than that of the Counselor, but is more personal than the scheduler method.

Note that the three observed advising styles are clustered in the middle of the prescriptive-developmental continuum. None of the observed styles were purely prescriptive or developmental. This result challenges the assumption that the prescriptive and developmental approaches to academic advising are dichotomous behaviors as reflected at the opposite ends of a single spectrum.

Also, while each style is distinct and each advisor consistently utilized a specific style, there is some overlap among the styles on certain dimensions, particularly between Counselors and Teachers. For example, although the Counselor and Scheduler were observed to have different styles of personalization, they approached decision making in a similar manner. This reinforces the conclusion that most advisors utilize an advising style that combines prescriptive and developmental behaviors and that the approach is more likely to vary by topic than by advisor. The three dimensions of personalization, decision making, and range of topics addressed may offer a more valid way to study advisor behaviors than does the continuum concept.

Advising for Individual Needs

During interviews none of the advisors mentioned race or gender as a factor that influenced their approach to academic advising. Neither the race or gender of the advisor nor the race or gender of the advisee were observed to affect the topics discussed, the extent of personalization, or how decision making was handled.

However, a contradiction was found between what advisors said about treating students differently and how they practiced. During the personal interviews following the observed advising sessions, advisors uniformly stated that they did not vary their approach according to the race or gender of the student. Yet, when describing their advising philosophy, advisors uniformly voiced the belief that students were different from one another and each brought different needs to the advising sessions. For example, one Teacher stated, "If there are generalizations made, you better leave them at the door when you start advising a person, because everyone is different." One interpretation of this contradiction is that the advisors were uncomfortable suggesting that differences exist between students by race and gender. Another interpretation is that the advisors tried to differentiate between students according to individual qualities, rather than by stereotypical differences that might be associated with membership in an identifiable group.

While advisors were not observed to vary their advising style by observable student characteristics, each varied the extent that he or she personalized advising sessions. Advisor behaviors were interpreted to reflect personalization when they made reference to past meetings with the student, asked personal questions, or expressed concern for a student's well-being. As can be seen in Figure 2, Counselors demonstrated the most personalization and Schedulers exhibited the least. Counselors, Teachers, and Schedulers varied in the extent they personalized their advising sessions, but they did not individualize their session or vary their advising style according to observable characteristics of the student or the issues that were raised during the session.

The lack of session individualization supports the validity of the advising style approach to studying academic advising. In accordance with the observation data, advising style is superior to individual advising sessions as a unit of analysis.

Conclusions

This study confirms that studying the advisor is a useful strategy for researching academic advising practices. Several important conclusions can be drawn from this investigation:

1. Advisor behaviors appear to be remarkably consistent from student session to session and permit classification into distinct styles.
2. Observing the range of topics addressed, the assignment of responsibility for decision making, the extent of personalization evident, and the advisor's stated advising philosophy provides a way to identify advising styles.
3. Distinct prescriptive and developmental approaches to advising are not observable in advising sessions between students and professional advisors.

Discussion and Implications for Practice and Research

Though using the student experience as the unit of analysis is notably unenlightening from the educator's standpoint, student satisfaction is the usual dependent variable in academic advising research. Whether students are satisfied with an educational experience may be relatively

unimportant as compared to whether calculated educational outcomes occurred from deliberate acts of education. The outcomes intended by the advisor may not even be known to student advisees. Exclusive use of student perspective to study academic advising yields limited results.

By including the perceptions and behaviors of advisors, researchers can study a greater range of advising effects. Further studies might, for example, explore the relationship of advisor intentions to advising outcomes—such as student gains in specific knowledge or skills.

Research might study student responsibility for decisions made in the advising sessions. For example, inquiry into the development of personal skills or the transfer of these skills to other learning settings on campus—such as in classes or student leadership opportunities—would be of interest to academic advisors.

The relationship of content discussed, especially who acts to initiate the discussion, might be explored in the context of self-motivating behaviors employed in other educational experiences. For example, do students who routinely take charge of the content of their advising sessions demonstrate similar behavior in the classroom or is this phenomenon directly related to the climate of sessions set by the advisor?

The finding that advisors personalized their advising sessions without necessarily individualizing them in response to student needs is an unexpected one that challenges many of the models that direct the delivery of services, particularly to special populations. While premature to suggest that the findings should have immediate implications for practice, the result certainly offers implications for future research about the practice and theoretical underpinnings of advising.

By utilizing a similar observational protocol, but changing the unit of analysis from the advisor to advising session, this research could be extended to explore advising for individual difference. Is an advisor's style primarily a reflection of his or her personality or is it in response to characteristics and stated needs of the student? Further research would also provide a way to structure a training experience for advisors by giving them an instrument to self-assess the extent they varied their style in personalization, decision making, and range of topics explored among students with different characteristics.

The finding that distinct prescriptive and developmental approaches to advising were not observable in practice suggests a need for the continued development of advising models. The assumed importance of a personal relationship between an advisor and advisee is an underlying principle of the developmental academic advising model. Such relationships develop over time. Rather than assuming one model applies to all advising encounters, temporal models of advising might be developed that identify the components of different phases of the advisor–student relationship. This kind of model could be used to assess how content, personalization, decision making, and other dimensions of advising change over time between the initial and subsequent encounters of advisor and advisee.

Several important limitations to this study should be noted. First, the sample of advisors was small, possibly affecting both generalizability to the institution in which the study was conducted and to other universities in which curricular and student characteristics differ from those of Virginia Tech. Second, while representative of Virginia Tech, the small number of minority students and lack of nontraditional-aged students probably limited the number of advising styles observed and possibly, the extent that advisors individualized their approaches to students. For instance, most advisors would probably not approach a returning student and an undecided, first-year student in exactly the same manner. Advisors working with a less homogenous population or with students who they have known a long time may have been more likely to vary their advising styles in ways that more clearly acknowledged individual differences.

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