

Potential Applications of Social Norms Theory to Academic Advising

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Since the mid-1990s, social norms theory has become prevalent in student development literature and research. Subsequently, social norms interventions to change student behavior have spread across campuses nationwide through marketing campaigns. Theorists and practitioners have applied the social norms approach to primarily health-related student behaviors such as drinking, smoking, violence prevention, and sexual assault. While documented social norms interventions have changed attitudes and behaviors of varying kinds, significant research into its impact on students' academic behaviors and attitudes has not been completed. This article was written to start a conversation about the potential applications of the social norms approach to academic advising.

KEY WORDS: advisor as change agent, campus environment, communication, expectations of advising, student attitudes, student perception of advising

Introduction

Based on the premise that behavior is influenced by perceptions of the actions of social group members, social norms theory provides a model for understanding student behavior. A primary goal of the academic advisor is to provide students with accurate information that enables students to make informed decisions that sculpt their behaviors (Crookston, 1972; O'Banion, 1972). An examination of social norms may provide advisors with insight into student behavior as well as tools to communicate information that might affect behavior.

Social norms interventions are used to correct misperceptions of social norms and have been employed on college campuses as preventative measures for health-related issues such as smoking, sexual assault, and drinking. Instead of trying to completely eliminate an undesirable behavior, such as excessive drinking, users of social-norms marketing campaigns report the factual norm (as opposed to the perceived norm) to students in hope that the accurate information will change the student's perception of his or her peers and the individual's own behavior. A student may overestimate peer attitudes or behavior with respect to alcohol, smoking, or other risky behavior or may underestimate the extent to which peers engage in healthy behaviors. Correcting misconceptions is likely to cause decreased problem behavior and increased

healthy behavior (Berkowitz, 2003a).

Marist College, of Poughkeepsie, New York, has implemented a social norms campaign called Just the Facts (<http://www.marist.edu/campus-life/socialnorms.html>), which relies on fact-based marketing slogans to correct misperceptions of student norms. Two of Marist's slogans are "3 out of 4 students say they don't have to drink to have a good time" and "14% of Marist students abstain from using alcohol." These slogans have been featured on the university Web site as well as in on-campus posters.

Theoretical and Historical Overview

The Director of the U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, William DeJong (2003, p.1), supports social norms theory because it is "grounded in a number of important theoretical frameworks in social psychology and health communications that inform public health practice." One of these frameworks is the theory of planned behavior, which is an extension and revision of Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory of reasoned action. The theory of planned behavior is used to measure subjective norms, which are defined as an individual's beliefs about the perceptions of valued people (e.g., family and friends) toward a particular behavior. When an individual's subjective norms are known, one can understand the individual's intentions, and because intentions to perform an act are the bases for performing an act, they can be used to predict behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, when predicting behavior, one formulates her or his expectations, in part, by looking at an individual's subjective norms as well as his or her behaviors. Subjective norms that are the result of inaccurate information are still a determinant of behavior (DeJong, 2003). An individual who has incorrectly collected, stored, or retrieved social information can be predicted to act on the erroneous perception.

Perkins and Berkowitz (1986) first proposed the social norms model as a tool to reduce problem behavior. They suggested that by presenting accurate, healthy norms, people could change the unhealthy behaviors of others. Perkins and Berkowitz's work was informed by the phenomenon of *pluralistic ignorance* set forth by Toch and Klofas (1984). Pluralistic ignorance is characterized by an individual's inaccurate perception that her or

his peers have norms different from her or his own. When one believes a behavior is representative of the minority but it is truly characteristic of the majority, he or she believes a *false uniqueness* (Berkowitz, 2003b). *False consensus* is the term used to describe an inaccurate understanding of the norm (Berkowitz, 2003b). After coming to a false consensus, an individual may increase unhealthy behavior or perpetuate a negative attitude because she or he believes it is the normative behavior or attitude of her or his peers. An individual who engages in an activity perceived as the norm, such as heavy drinking, may justify the unhealthy behavior because of the misconception.

Perkins (1997) found that regardless of whether individuals engage in the undesirable behavior, all individuals under the misconception, or *carriers of the misconception*, contribute to the environment where the behavior is permitted. Perkins found an effective social-norms intervention must be aimed to correct the misperceptions of all community members not just those engaging in the objectionable behavior. Furthermore, many social-norms campaigns address individuals who do not confront the behavior of others (Berkowitz, 2004). For example, those interested in changing a climate that perpetuates sexual assault or homophobia may use a social norms campaign to decrease tolerance for behavior that encourages assault or discrimination. By presenting the fact that most people find homophobic or sexually aggressive behavior to be inappropriate, campaigners can dispel the false uniqueness that may have affected behavior. If a fair-minded individual believes others feel the way he or she does about homophobia or sexual assault, he or she will be more willing to intervene when injustice or violence is encountered.

An institution's leadership climate and attitude can contribute to pluralistic ignorance and the perpetuation of undesirable behaviors. Even though leaders may not participate in negative behavior, their views and discussions about the misconduct can contribute to the environment that permits the objectionable behavior (Berkowitz, 2003a). For example, at a large state university, students perceived that their peers party and get drunk on Thursday nights. While some students habitually drink alcohol on Thursday nights, not every student on campus imbibes on Thursdays. So when a professor at this school commented to his class that "Every dorm turns into a night club on Thursday night," he became a carrier of the misperception. The professor, who does not engage in Thursday activities in the dorms, exaggerated the situation by

using the word *every* and created the perception that Thursday night partying is the anticipated and accepted behavior for on-campus students. By changing the language of the professor's statement to reflect the actual norm, that some students party on Thursday night, this on-campus adult would have helped change the environment that perpetuates the undesirable behavior of excessive partying, drinking, and so forth.

Touted as one of the "fastest growing scientifically validated methodologies for addressing health problems and risk behaviors" by the Editorial Advisory Board of the on-line Social Norms Link (2003), the number of social norms campaigns on college campuses across America has been steadily increasing since Haines's 1996 intervention aimed at correcting misperceptions of student drinking at Northern Illinois University. Similar interventions have been initiated at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, the University of Arizona, Western Washington University, and many others (Berkowitz, 2003a). Northern Illinois University saw a 44% reduction in heavy drinking (six or more alcoholic drinks in 1 day) over 9 years (Haines & Barker, 2003); the Hobart and William Smith Colleges Social Norms Project reportedly achieved a 30% reduction in high risk drinking over 5 years (Perkins & Craig, 2002); the University of Arizona's print media strategy resulted in a 27% reduction of heavy drinking over 3 years (Johannessen, 2003).

The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, edited by Perkins (2003), brings together case studies of social norms interventions at each of the universities listed above as well as Rowan University. Perkins also examined interventions in middle and high schools. In addition, the Montana model, a seven-step process for implementing macro-level social-norms campaigns, is based on a statewide MOST of Us initiative, which addresses several behaviors including smoking, seat belt use, and drinking and driving.

Each year, the number of articles and case studies in scholarly journals about the effectiveness of social norms interventions has increased (Social Norms Link, 2003). In 2003, social norms programs received several awards from the U.S. Department of Education with more than five federal agencies and dozens of state agencies and non-profit organizations funding campaigns seeking to correct misperceptions of social norms (Berkowitz, 2003b). Currently, attempts to change behavior related to smoking and drinking are the most popular uses of social norms interventions on college

campuses (Berkowitz, 2003b). The most common method of correcting misperceptions is through print and electronic media (Social Norms Link, 2003).

While health-related behaviors are the most popular focus of social norms campaigns, theorists and practitioners are exploring ways to use social norms interventions in new ways in the university. Many schools, including Pennsylvania State University at Altoona, are developing social-norms marketing campaigns to change behaviors associated with sexual assault. Altoona's Expect the Unexpected campaign addresses sexual assault with the slogan "Most Penn State Altoona men KNOW: No means No" (<http://www.aa.psu.edu/healthwellness/healthedsocial.htm>).

At the State University of New York at Stony Brook, social norms campaigns have been used by the Office of Campus Residences. The social norms intervention is aimed at decreasing unsafe practices, such as propping doors open in the residence halls, that lead to theft and vandalism.

Funded by the National Science Foundation, E-WOMS (Expanding Women's Opportunities through Mathematical Science) at Northern Illinois University is a social norms intervention directed at changing misperceptions related to academic performance. E-WOMS was designed to increase female enrollment in Calculus I and is used as a forum for determining whether those females taking this course continue into higher level mathematics (Levin & Steele, 2003).

Theory Connections: Student Development, Academic Advising, and Social Norms

Social norms theory has its basis in social psychology and health communication theory. It has been applied to student development theories and utilized by university practitioners primarily in student service areas of the university such as residential life, student activities, and student health services. To determine whether social norms theory can be applied to academic advising and services, the use of student development theories in academic advising should be reviewed.

Most college personnel, including academic advisors, working in student services are concerned with the developmental education of students (Creamer, 2000). The aspects of student development theories that speak most directly to academic advisors are those theories about student behavior patterns and the ways in which students make meaning. While many different models of student development exist, they are all based on theories of

human growth and environmental influences. These theories are applied to learning opportunities at the university both in and out of the classroom. Under developmental theories, the interaction between the student and the educational environment is closely examined. A primary postulation of student development theories is that learning occurs not just in the structured academic classroom but from multiple environmental factors and personal interactions at the university. Therefore, proponents agree that all aspects of the student's life at the university are potential learning opportunities and deserve attention.

Advocates of the developmental approach believe that the university environment should challenge as well as support the students as they progress through their individual developmental processes. To this end, they encourage collaboration among students, faculty members, staff, and administrators. Ultimately, all members of the university community, including academic advisors, are called to respond to the needs of students and see nearly all student interactions as learning opportunities. As leaders in the field of academic advising work to develop a unified theory of academic advising, including student learning outcomes for academic advising, the collaborations among members of the academy will be salient in theory and practice.

Chickering's psychosocial model, based on Erikson's identity versus identity confusion theory of development, is one of the most well-known and oftentimes applied theories of student development. Chickering organized student development into seven sectors of identity resolution. He found that students who have relationships with faculty members, such as academic advisors, are more likely to thrive in a liberal arts environment (Chickering, 1969). Chickering's theory has influenced several developmental advising models, most notably those of Crookston (1972) and O'Banion (1972).

Crookston (1972) introduced the term *developmental advising* and contrasted it with his definition of *prescriptive advising*. Under a prescriptive approach, advisors prescribe the actions to the student and then leave it up to the student to carry out the prescription. The major fault of prescriptive advising is that it does not encourage or help students develop a sense of responsibility for their academic careers or decisions, nor does it encourage growth or development toward self-reliance.

In Crookston's (1972) developmental model of advising, advisors facilitate the student's environmental and interpersonal interactions, promote behavior awareness, and engage students to make

independent, informed decisions. The advisor also provides knowledge of how others have performed in programs and other pursuits on campus. O'Banion's (1972) theory places responsibility on the advisor to provide the student with accurate information so that the advisee can make the best decisions. O'Banion envisioned advising as a process in which the dynamic relationship between the advisor and advisee is seen as a partnership. Together, advisor and advisee strive to enhance the student's self-awareness.

Perry's (1970) cognitive theory of student development, based on Piaget's cognitive development theory, maps the evolution of student thinking with regard to knowledge, values, and truth as well as the meaning of life and responsibilities. Perry described change as a result of cognitive conflict and identified steps that take students from a simplistic, categorical view of the world to a complex realization and understanding of knowledge as contingent and values as relative. Students climactically formulate and affirm their own commitments and responsibilities. Perry's theory helps academic advisors understand the ways in which students view their education and gives insight into when a student does or does not take responsibility for an action, decision, or behavior.

Student development theory provides a starting point from which academic advisors can begin to understand the development, decisions, and behaviors of their students. Clearly, student development theories have been an asset to academic advising and have informed several academic-advising models. Is social norms theory compatible with academic advising models? Developmental advising models are student centered, and when effectively utilized, result in the student gaining a clearer understanding of her or himself and the higher education experience. Reporting the norm of the educational community would help a student clearly understand him or herself in relation to his or her environment and peers. For that reason, it appears, both O'Banion's (1972) and Crookston's (1972) developmental advising models would work quite well with a social norms campaign designed to inform students of accurate norms. In both advising models, the advisors are charged with providing accurate information from which the students will determine their own decisions, behaviors, and actions. The motivation behind a social-norms marketing campaign is consistent with these developmental processes and goals. Perry's cognitive theory of student development is also compatible with social norms theory in that the ultimate goal of

the student's development is to have a complex understanding of the nature of knowledge. Successful application of Perry's theory would necessarily lead the student into an awareness that what one perceives to be representative of the majority is not always correct.

Sample Applications

Theoretical bridges seem to exist: Social norms theory has been applicable to areas of the university actualizing student development theory; successful academic advising has been informed by student development theory; academic advising models seem compatible with social norms theory. So, can the innovation of social norms theory and excitement over the successful interventions be applied to academic advising and services? To answer these questions, misperceptions about academic advising must be corrected. Because the goal of social norms interventions is to correct misperceptions of preexisting social norms, institution stakeholders should identify the areas of misperception to be clarified. If the majority of the target market believes the social norms campaign, the targeted behavior will be effected.

Academic advising encompasses different functions from campus to campus. Some institutions place admissions, freshman orientation, registration, and retention under the umbrella of academic advising, while others simply define academic advising as any advisement related to student learning (Jordan, 2003). Because of these discrepancies and because each institution is unique, members of advising programs must determine the climate and social norms, actual and perceived, of their institution. Table 1 outlines sample misperceptions and affirmative statements of actual norms suitable for an academic-advising social-norms marketing campaign.

To initiate a social-norms marketing campaign to combat misperceptions, the responsible research team implements traditional social-research methods, including surveys and focus groups, to assess actual and perceived behaviors. If, after data collection, the researchers determine that an undesirable behavior is an actual norm, they should select another form of intervention. If the data confirm the misperceptions of social norms, they should proceed with the campaign by carefully selecting information and the venue(s) for dissemination.

The data collected should determine the messages of the marketing campaign and are paramount to accurately tracking changes that may be a result of the campaign. Affirmative statements and statistics about the actual norms of the academic advis-

Table 1 Sample misperceptions and affirmative statements of actual academic-advising norms

Misperception	Actual Norm
Most students do not attend freshman orientation.	80% of incoming students attend freshman orientation.
Most students only meet with their advisor when they have a problem.	70% of students meet with their advisor at least twice per semester.
Everyone waits until the last minute to register.	60% of students choose classes during the first week of preregistration.
Most math and science majors are male.	6 out of 10 women declare science or math majors.
Academic advising does not determine academic success.	85% of graduates attribute part of their success to academic advising.
I cannot take an art class because I am not artist.	7 out of 10 social science majors have taken at least one art class.
The core curriculum classes are a waste of time.	75% of upperclassmen find that the core classes have prepared them for advanced-level classes.
The writing center is only for students with below average writing skills.	100 students visit the writing center each week.
The study skills center is only for students with learning disabilities.	4 out of 6 students visited the study skills center this semester.

ing program should be developed. These statements and statistics unequivocally portray the pre-existing social norms. The numbers must be accurate and believable to the intended audience. For example, a student will surely not believe “100% of students frequent the math skills center” but when presented with the fact that “7 out of 10 students visit the math skills center,” she or he will change the misperception that “no one goes to the math skills center.”

Fabiano (1999) organized six stages to developing a social-norms marketing campaign:

1. assessment (collection of data),
2. selection of the normative message,
3. test of the message with the target group,
4. selection of the normative delivery strategy,
5. dosage of the message, and
6. evaluation of the effectiveness of the message.

While the premise of a social-norms marketing campaign may be intuitively simple, a successful intervention requires careful planning and implementation. Mistakes can occur in any of Fabiano’s stages.

Berkowitz (2003b) examined mistakes related to data collection and presentation. Because of their ingrained misperceptions, participants will initially

question the veracity of survey data, but they will reexamine their assumptions if the data are easy to understand, openly expressed, and reliable. Conversely, unreliable and confusing data may perpetuate misperceptions, undermining the campaign. Similarly, media that are difficult to interpret or that are aesthetically unappealing will be ineffectual. Furthermore, if key stakeholders share negative comments, disbelief, criticism, or their own misperceptions with the targeted audience, the campaign will be undermined.

The targeted audience must feel a connection with and care about the people represented in the campaign. For instance, if a student sees him or herself as an outsider or as a member of a subgroup, a campaign that only represents the general student body may not affect his or her perceptions and behavior. To address misperceptions in subgroups, such as athletes or members of fraternities or sororities, the campaigns should be directed to the targeted audiences.

The actual norms can be advertised to students through posters, brochures, radio spots, and Web sites. The actual norm should be communicated to correct the biggest and most problematic misperceptions with which the department is struggling. The most significant misperceptions vary from school to school and department to department.

For example, schools with a large commuter student population may have poor attendance at freshman orientation days, while competitive schools with students living primarily on campus do not have a problem with students attending orientation but may have significant difficulty getting students to go for tutoring or to seek out learning-disability support services.

In the latter case, an institutionalized stigma may be attached to services designed to help students with academics. As a result, a student may wrongly perceive that no students need tutoring or learning-disability support services. High ability students are particularly susceptible to suffer under the acute pressure caused by misperceptions of their peers' abilities, behaviors, and decisions. Competition is evident both in and out of the classroom for these students (McDonald, 2003) who may make rash decisions based on their misperceptions. Other high-ability students may make choices based upon what they believe others think is right for them (Gordon, 1992). When confronted with the facts on the academic lives of other students, high ability students may be liberated from the self-imposed pressure generated from constantly comparing themselves to their peers by misconceptions.

Many students hold the misperception that all students are self-directed and confident about their major choice and career path (Gordon, 1995). A student may believe that at her or his competitive school, all students came to the university knowing exactly their courses of study and their postgraduate plans, such as law or medical school. However, if most students are undeclared and choose a major in consultation with a faculty advisor, the student's misperception could be debunked by a social-norms marketing campaign that utilizes the poster slogan, "Confused about what major to declare? 80% of students choose their major in consultation with an advisor."

Media campaigns are not the only way to convey accurate social norms to students. Advisors can directly communicate survey data on an intimate level. Because diminishing confusion that comes with a new environment is a primary goal of advising (Gordon & Habley, 2000), advisors are in a natural position to communicate social norms to students. This one-on-one form of delivery may even be more effective on individual students than a media campaign for both new students and for those who respect the opinion of and have placed faith and trust in their advisor.

The advisor, who is often the first university representatives to interact with a student, often helps

shape a student's first impressions and expectations of the university (Gordon & Habley, 2000). Therefore, advisors have the opportunity to present the accurate norms of university life from the first interaction.

When advisors present themselves as knowledgeable student advocates from the beginning, students will be more willing to trust and connect with them (Smith, 2002). Sufficiently prepared with data from social norms research, advisors can present themselves as a knowledgeable student resource to advisees. Advisor training workshops and materials could provide facts, figures, and affirmative statements of actual norms to advisors so that they may convey this information to students during initial and subsequent advising sessions.

For a successful intervention, advisors, staff, and administrators must see themselves as influential members of the community who impact the cultural climate of the university. They must believe in the goals of a social norms campaign or they risk becoming carriers of the misperception. They can benefit from social norms training that focuses on language intricacies. For example, adverbs like *never*, *always*, or *every* can exaggerate the truth. Not unlike the professor's offhanded remark about Thursday night partying that caused false consensus, an employee in the registrar's office who complains, "All students submit drop forms late," will affect students' perceptions of social norms related to timeliness and student responsibility. An administrator or staff member who tells a student, "Advisor X is never available to see students," gives the student an inaccurate perception about an advisor who would prefer that students schedule appointments in advance. Advisors, staff, and administrators should be encouraged to use precise language that conveys the actual, and not an exaggerated, norm.

Limitations

If administrators, staff, and school leaders do not buy into an intervention, the carefully crafted social-norms intervention can be sabotaged through everyday conversations. A social-norms marketing intervention alone cannot be expected to correct all misperceptions of normative behavior but should be used as part of a larger institutional plan to generate a systematic change in the environment. The institution's collection of localized norms must be consistent and ongoing.

Social psychologists have noted two major limitations of social norms theory that can impact the effects of an intervention campaign of academic

advising and student services. First, predicting how people interpret social situations is difficult because people, often inexplicably, do not conform in all situations to the group majority norm, and second, human behavior is not completely dictated by social norms (Rachlinski, 2000). In particular reference to social norms interventions in student affairs, Wechsler, Nelson, Lee, Seibring, Lewis, and Keeling (2003), perhaps the most vocal opponents of the use of social norms interventions to reduce college drinking, find fault with the application of social norms interventions on diverse university campuses with many subgroups because students in subgroups tend to act based on their perceptions of their subgroup not their perceptions of the majority norm. Wechsler et al. also noted that a number of the cited articles that support of the use of social-norms marketing campaigns to reduce binge drinking are dissertations, working papers, and unpublished presentations. Furthermore, they argued, the success of many university programs is reported by college administrators who may have limited training in evaluation, and subsequently, whose studies may lack empirical rigor.

Conclusion

Social norms marketing has made a significant impact on universities with regard to health-related issues such as smoking, sexual assault, and drinking. The compatibility of social norms, student development, and academic advising theories suggests that social-norms marketing campaigns have the potential to correct misperceptions of academic advising and change undesirable behaviors. Such campaigns would depend upon accurate collection of data as well as careful implementation of marketing strategies and must reflect the intricacies and nuances of individual university cultures and academic norms. Academic advisors, administrators, and staff must see themselves as influential members of the university community, be well informed of the actual and perceived norms, and believe in the goals of a social-norms marketing campaign for the intervention to be successful. Empirical studies on the application of social-norms marketing techniques to academic advising misperceptions are necessary to move from theory to practice.

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Additional Sources on Social Norms

- The National Social Norms Resource Center
www.socialnorm.org
- Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Prevention
www.edc.org/hec/socialnorms/
- Bacchus and Gamma Peer Education Network
www.bacchusgamma.org
- Social Norms Link
www.socialnormslink.com

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