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Learning at the Core: Toward a New Understanding of Academic Advising

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When we first began attending NACADA conferences, early in our careers as deans responsible for academic advising systems, we were startled and somewhat mystified by the term "developmental academic advising." Sometimes it was used to mean that an advisor was a "sensitive communicator" or "good listener" (counseling model); sometimes it was used to mean the use of cognitive strategies (pedagogical model); and at other times, it referred to students becoming responsible adults (personal growth model). However, one thing was clear: The same term was being used for different things.

Common to that, at least in the ideal world, effective advising should be developmental in nature. "Developmental academic advising," then, is part of the jargon of the advising profession. Such commonalities may well end there. In the field of academic advising, based on certain assumptions, similar language is used, but it refers to different things. Perhaps advisor confusion over similar language causes misunderstandings among them.

This paper is the result of our attempt to untangle the various meanings of "developmental academic advising." We argue that the model of developmental academic advising should be abandoned and replaced by alternative theoretical traditions. We draw upon some recent critiques of the student development movement to suggest that the developmental academic advising movement has lost sight of the central mission of higher education. We indicate that other theories about advising are more promising, and we offer the educational concept of praxis as an alternative way of thinking about academic advising.

The Roots of the Developmental Concept

In exploring the meaning of developmental academic advising, we returned to the roots of the developmental concept; most of the history of this term comes from the literature and research in psychology. Jean Piaget's model of childhood development (1926, 1928) was rediscovered in the 1950s and fueled new studies of human development. He argued that humans develop in a systematic way by predictable "stages." Erik Erikson (1950, 1959) studied psychosocial development and Lawrence Kohlberg (1963, 1970) theorized about moral and cognitive development. They identified "stages" of development, which were seen as sequential, hierarchical, distinctive, and in some cases, universal. However, they emphasized the process of development rather than the content of stages; that is, the theories considered what might trigger changes in levels of development.

As part of this flurry of research in development, attention was turned to college students at the tail end of the wild 1960s, when students were challenging the very structure and purpose of higher education. William Perry (1970) examined the cognitive development of college-aged students and initially identified common thinking patterns among them such as dualism (seeing the world as "black and white") and relativism (seeing no specific position as correct, any individual's opinion is acceptable)—ideas often found in the literature on academic advising. Arthur Chickering (1969) pursued ideas about the psychosocial development of the college student. He argued that students' experiences fall into seven identifiable vectors and suggested that students pass through these vectors in a certain order. Research such as that by Chickering focused increasingly on the content of qualitatively distinct stages, with the original focus on the process of change being largely ignored.

The Student Development Model in Student Affairs: A Brief History

Researchers struggled for a new understanding of the college student; one which Chickering and others argued by incorporating vectors and stages of student development, should be useful in redesigning college programs and support services. According to Bloland, Stamatakos, and Rogers (1994), by the mid-1970s, the developmental model appeared to be fully integrated into the student affairs profession as evidenced by the publication of three seminal documents. These documents, which argued that the jobs of student affairs per-

sonnel should be redefined to include the student development model, were issued by the Council of Student Personnel Associations in Higher Education (1975), the American College Personnel Association, The Higher Education Project (1975), and R. D. Brown (1972).

Because of the links that we discovered between the student development model in student affairs and the use of a developmental model in academic advising, we wondered about the nature of the student development model and whether it had been critiqued within the field of student affairs. We found that in recent years a cogent and persuasive critique of student development theory has emerged within the student affairs field itself (Bloland, et al., 1994; Love & Love, 1995).

Bloland et al. (1994) produced a comprehensive critique of student development as a reform movement, a philosophy, and a theory. They argued that proponents of student development as both a theory and a movement have lost sight of the principal mission of higher education: to introduce students to liberal learning, to the world of ideas, to the life of the mind, and to cultivate in them the habit of life-long learning.

> Its deficiencies included a disregard for the mission, goals and roles of higher education itself as well as its relationship to the larger society; an inherent value system that views the development of students as an end in itself and as seemingly accomplishable apart from the curriculum. . . . (p. 91)

They provide extensive evidence to support their contention that student development theory has "detached" the "personal development of the individual" from the central educational mission of higher education institutions (p. 7).

Love and Love (1995) framed a similar assessment. They see the student development movement as one of the forces that has led to a separation of the intellectual, social, and emotional processes that impact student learning. They contend that the efforts of student affairs personnel to achieve legitimacy as professionals have led to the assertion that knowledge of student development theory provides an expertise about the emotional and social development of students comparable to the disciplinary-based expertise claimed by faculty. In the view of Love and Love, this strategy has elevated the idea of student development to a status separate but equal to intellectual learning. Love and Love identify this separation of student development from intellectual life as one of the primary problems in the current system of higher education.

Care must be taken not to misunderstand these critiques. Neither set of authors disagreed with the notion that the development of the whole person is a worthy ideal. In fact, they acknowledged that educating the whole person has long been accepted as part of the mission of higher education. For Bloland et al. (1994) the flaws in the student development movement lie in educators "considering all aspects of the development of students as being of equal value" and their assumption that student development is "*the* educational mission" (p. 101) [*emphasis added*]. For Love and Love (1995), student development practice, despite a professed conceptual adherence to holistic education, contributed to the segregation of the social and emotional processes from academic learning.

Both sets of authors would probably agree with educational philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who is cited by Bloland et al. (1994, p. 97),

> the purpose of education is to stimulate and guide students' self-development . . . but [we] may not divide the seamless coat of learning. What education has to impart is an intimate sense for the power of ideas, for the beauty of ideas, and for the structure of ideas, together with a particular body of knowledge which has a peculiar reference to the life of the being possessing it.

The Student Development Model in the Academic Advising Profession: A Brief History

The relevance of these critiques of the student development movement to the field of academic advising cannot be overstated. In this section, we will show how the idea of developmental academic advising has its roots in student development theory. We will also demonstrate how the literature on developmental advising, like that in development theory, emphasizes the development of individual students and loses sight of the centrality of liberal learning, the main mission of higher education.

Borrowing from the field of student affairs, the growing field of academic advising began to argue for a developmental approach during the 1970s. Most accounts trace the origins of the concept to two articles published in 1972. In "A Developmental View of Academic Advising as Teaching," Burns Crookston (1972) contrasted what he termed "developmental advising" with a traditional approach that he labeled "prescriptive advising." Crookston explained that developmental advising was "concerned not only with a specific personal or voca-

tional decision but with facilitating the student's rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making and evaluation skills" (p. 5). Terry O'Banion (1972) offered a similar litany of goals, stating that academic advising included exploration of life and vocational goals as well as program choice, course selection, and scheduling (p. 10).

By the 1980s, the idea of developmental academic advising had become the dominant paradigm in the literature of the field (Fielstein 1994; Pardee 1994; Strommer 1994). Two Jossey-Bass books, edited by prominent figures in the field of academic advising, embraced the concept of developmental advising (Winston, Ender, & Miller, 1982; Winston, Miller, Ender, Grites, & Associates, 1984). In the 1982 volume, the editors stated that developmental advising is concerned with human growth: "cognitive, affective, career, physical, and moral growth are all important components of developmental advising" (p. 7). In the same volume, Miller and McCaffrey (1982) presented a framework for academic advising and stated, "the central or core theme for such a configuration would be the self, paying particular attention to students' intrapersonal development" (p. 25). We find it significant that the first definition consigns academic or cognitive growth to a position coequal with affective, physical, and moral growth while the framework offered by Miller and McCaffrey (1982) fails to mention academic learning in any specific way.

Developmental Academic Advising: The Current Situation

We found that subsequent definitions in the literature of developmental academic advising commonly de-emphasized or ignored academic learning. For example, in the *NACADA Journal* (1994) issue that revisited the classics, Chickering wrote: ". . . the fundamental purpose of academic advising is to help students become effective agents for their own lifelong learning and personal development" (p. 50). In her widely cited monograph, *Academic Advising for Student Success: A System of Shared Responsibility*, Susan Frost (1991) draws upon Crookston and O'Banion to define academic advising around two principles: "(a) higher education provides opportunities for people to plan for self-fulfilling lives, and (b) teaching includes any experience that contributes to personal growth and can be evaluated" (p. 15).

The prominent literature on developmental academic advising has thematic connections to the student development model advocated by many student affairs professionals. Like those who support the student development model in student affairs, the literature on academic advising regards the holistic development of individual students as the defining mission of the field.

Developmental Academic Advising: Implications

Relationships between professional academic advisors and faculty advisors have been strained through the years (Habley, 1994). Bloland et al. (1994) described a "long-term alienation" of student affairs professionals from the faculty (p. 101). We contend that the conceptual underpinnings of the developmental academic advising model most likely contribute to the strained relationships between faculty and professional advisors and help to explain why faculty advisors are reluctant to participate in workshops and conferences about academic advising.

The concept of developmental advising moves the focus of academic advising away from academic learning toward a broad concept of student development. This shift of purpose produces a tendency to question the advising qualifications of faculty members. If academic advising has as its central purpose the development of the whole student, advocates of developmental advising have good reason to be concerned about the performances of faculty advisors (Crockett, 1982; Gordon, 1994). Faculty members not infrequently express discomfort about discussing students' lives outside the classroom. Similarly, the concept of development makes faculty members defensive because they understand that it calls into question their expertise as advisors (Ender 1994). In addition, they treat the developmental advising concept, and the advocates of it, with intellectual skepticism. Faculty members who we have encountered, worry, as we do, that developmental academic advising does not support the centrality of the academic curriculum.

In his 1994 (p. 25) article, Habley, who has sought to bridge the professional-faculty advisor gap, retold the feelings of one faculty member who encountered the reaction of professional advisors: "I've sat quietly, not identifying myself, as professional advisors talked about faculty advisors with condescension, irritation, annoyance, bitterness, dismissive amusement, and—on at least one occasion—rage." We find the sense of alienation regrettable and ironic. The daily work of faculty and professional academic advisors offers a natural opportunity for alliance, not alienation. Both groups of professionals focus upon student learning through

the academic curriculum. To build effective relations with faculty members, academic advisors will need to keep in mind this naturally shared interest.

We fear, then that the concept or model of developmental academic advising contributes to the strained relationships between faculty and professional advisors. The failure to be skeptical about the developmental model may contribute to faculty reluctance to attend workshops and conferences on academic advising. We worry that this situation will perpetuate the tendency of national organizations, as Habley (1994) warned, to be associations of professional advisors rather than associations for advising.

A New Direction for Academic Advising

Initially, we were mystified by the term "development," but after researching its history find it particularly unuseful. "Development" is certainly not the specific focus of those who oversee faculty advising systems in small colleges. We discuss among our colleagues how to avoid using the word "development" when working with our faculty, and we rarely show them advising literature, which is sprinkled with jargon from student development theory.

Some of this uneasiness about using words such as "developmental" or "development" may be due to the possibility that academic advising systems in small colleges and universities have not been shaped by the student development model in the same way as at larger institutions. Faculty members in most small colleges still take responsibility for the advising system and draw from many different frameworks to illuminate the learning process through advising. We believe that phenomenology, learning theory, narrative theory, Socratic dialogues, Perry's anomalous information ideas, and the concept of paradigms and paradigm shifts are useful notions for different people in different contexts for different reasons.

People do not learn or change in one way, and it may well be that no one framework can inform good advising. We have learned much from other suggestions about new approaches to understanding academic advising; they seem to be leading academic advising in valuable directions. We suggest another advising approach that we think has particular merit: the concept of praxis, as it has been used in educational theory.

The idea of praxis in education has been most closely associated with the work of Pablo Freire (1970), who defined it as "reflection and action upon the world to transform it" (p. 36). In other words, to act effectively, a person must be able to understand and analyze the beliefs, norms, assumptions, and practices that give meaning to his or her world. This process can be called "critical self-reflection." At one level, the concept of praxis allows advising to be consistent with actual mission statements of colleges, which usually include some reference to helping students become "citizens of the world."

If academic advising can be considered a form of praxis, it can be reconnected with liberal learning, the core of which includes the proposition that students should acquire a capacity for critical reflection upon the world in which they live. Academic advising is thus incorporated with what is, in our view, the main mission of higher education.

Shifting to an advising approach based on praxis has practical implications. Consider how advisors might discuss with advisees the task of completing general education or core requirements. Students as well as advisors can easily fall into the trap of considering requirements a list to be checked off, marking one's road toward the completion of a degree. Students in this case (and of course in many situations that advisors confront) think of their education as a series of disconnected courses. They do not perceive their education as integrated; they are not forced to make meaning of their educational choices—other than externalizing the cause of the choices. In other words, they are "forced" to take certain courses because of institutional rules, but they do not perceive the broader educational goals on which those requirements are based.

Using a strategy based on praxis, academic advisors should engage their advisees in dialogue about the purpose and meaning of course requirements. They should talk with advisees about the educational goals, and related values, of the curriculum. Advisors need to help students understand why "citizens of the world" should understand different ways of thinking about the world—the math student should feel the beauty of the painting, the English major should experience the discovery in the lab, the physics student should be able to think about the historical context of ideas.

As another practical example, the concept of praxis might be useful to advisors in helping students sort out their educational goals. Praxis would suggest that advisors prompt advisees to engage in critical self-reflection or to see the connection between ideas and consequent action. An advisor might be tempted to say to her or his pre-med student, "Oh, so you want to be a physician. Okay, let's see what course choices you might have." However, an advisor who is guided by the concept of praxis might ask probing questions instead. "Tell me why

you want to be a physician?" might open an important conversation that might be missed by the advisor who assumes that the career decision was already determined. Such questions prompt the advisee to engage in critical self-reflection.

These examples suggest some similarity between the praxis and the student development models; both place emphasis on individual students. Indeed, in some of its fully articulated forms, the student development model involves critical reflection and self-transformation. However, the concept of praxis presumes that a critical dialogue between the academic advisor and the advisee will prompt changes in goals and values. This emphasis on change, that is, learning, rather than personal development, makes clear that self-transformation (making meaning of the world to transform it) not self-actualization (primarily identifying individual self-development) is the most important goal of praxis.

Praxis also captures the dynamic of the advising relationship better than other models. We think that the very notion of "advising" implies a fundamental asymmetry between the advisor and advisee; that is, the advisor has a particular agenda which involves providing direction. The concept of praxis acknowledges this relationship. Consequently, such an approach can be seen as promoting an hierarchical advising relationship, like in the prescriptive model whose flaws Crookston so thoroughly exposed. Such an interpretation would be mistaken. As we have said, an integral element of praxis includes critical dialogue between the parties of the system: in this case, the advisor and advisee. As Love and Love (1995) explain, the reflective nature of this critical dialogue creates a relationship in which the "professional becomes a teacher-student and the student becomes student-teacher" (p. 46). As good teachers would, academic advisors, guided by the concept of praxis, must listen critically to students and use the provided information to promote students' learning. The students, at the same time, are allowing the advisors to become aware of how they are thinking and learning. The paired terms of teacher/student and student/teacher suggest reciprocal communication. Praxis preserves the important contribution of developmental academic advising which led professionals beyond prescriptive models of advising. However, it does not lead back to what we see as problematic ideas, such as the naive notion that advisors and advisees are equals.

Conclusion

Our professional and academic experiences allow us to make sense of some aspects of the student development model—for instance, we recognize that students have certain personal experiences that might inhibit learning (we understand what happens when someone breaks up with his or her significant other, parents begin divorce proceedings, depression looms real, or mononucleosis hits during finals). Nevertheless, the developmental approach to academic advising is confusing. It suggests that faculty members are not adequate as academic advisors. But our experiences in small institutions, with long-term and relatively successful faculty-based advising systems, suggest otherwise. The idea of "student development" maintains a focus on individual development, but because faculty are at the center of advising in our institutions, we understand advising to be about teaching and learning.

In other words, the model of developmental academic advising appears only partially useful. For this reason, we have explored other perspectives that could more accurately reflect and guide academic advising practice. In understanding advising, we came to see individual student experiences in their right place—secondary to the main educational mission and only to the extent the experiences allow or inhibit successful learning. Though academic advisors may draw on multiple methods and understandings in advising students, sometimes simultaneously, we found the concept of praxis to be a more useful metaphor because it interconnects learning, liberal learning, and academic advising. Praxis, consequently, reconnects academic advising to the main mission of our institutions: student learning.

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Dr. Hemwall and Dr. Trachte are engaged in an ongoing research project focused on the decline of the developmental advising paradigm and the emergence of an alterative paradigm based on the concept of student learning. They are also editing a monograph on academic advising in small colleges.