

NACADA Journal 20(1), 2000, pp. 12–15

Developmental Academic Advising Revisited

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Developmental academic advising has become a widely used descriptive term about which a great deal has been presented and written. Recent scrutiny of this concept, however, has prompted us to examine some of the fundamental principles upon which this concept is based.

The term “developmental academic advising” has pervaded the literature on academic advising, national and regional advising conferences, and many advising programs for almost three decades. Though this concept has had many interpretations, we feel compelled to respond to Hemwall and Trachte’s article in the Spring 1999 issue of the *NACADA Journal*. Their thesis in the article is that “the model of developmental academic advising should be abandoned and replaced with alternative theoretical traditions” (p. 5). The heart of their argument is the suggestion that the student development movement has consumed the process of academic advising and that this movement “has lost sight of the central mission of higher education” (p. 5).

Their conclusion from recent reviews of student development theory suggests that such theory dominates developmental advising to the point where developmental concepts, rather than advising about the curriculum, have become the only focus. They support the conclusion of others that the development of students has become the educational mission of developmental advising and has contributed to the segregation of “social and emotional processes from academic learning” (p. 6).

We agree that the term “developmental advising” is confusing because of the many meanings attributed to it. However, such confusion is no less common than for any other concept subject to individual interpretation. Consider the possible interpretations of the color gray, or the words to a Beatles’ song, or the concept of critical thinking.

Indeed, such confusion has likely contributed to some of what we see as incorrect, inaccurate, or at least incomplete assumptions offered in Hemwall and Trachte’s article. However, advocates of the developmental approach in academic advising would strongly disagree that its practice separates

it from the mission of higher education and intellectual life. Understanding how students develop personally is merely one aspect of the developmental advising approach.

Careful reviews of Crookston’s (1972) seminal article on the concept of developmental academic advising and the Winston, Miller, Ender, and Grites (1984) book by that title—probably the two most influential and most frequently cited sources on this topic—should clarify some of this confusion. One obvious clarification is found in Crookston’s (1972) title itself: “A Developmental View of Academic Advising as Teaching.” Teaching, not counseling, is the essence of his approach. He described the process as “concerned not only with a personal and vocational decision but also with facilitating the student’s rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills” (p.12). These processes, behaviors, and skills are ones that all college students should seek to achieve to their fullest possible levels. Hemwall and Trachte (1999) cite the same description but fail to acknowledge its breadth of application.

Another point of clarification must be made in Crookston’s (1972) use of “prescriptive” versus “developmental” academic advising. We believe that Crookston did not intend for these terms to create a simple dichotomy but rather to describe a continuum. His “contrasting dimensions” (p. 14) demonstrated such contrasts in the roles, relationships, and responsibilities of both advisors and students in the process. Never did he suggest “the naive notion that advisors and advisees are equals” (Hemwall & Trachte, p. 9). He did argue: “The goal is toward openness, acceptance, trust, sharing of data, and collaborative problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation” (p. 16).

In brief, we believe Crookston never intended his concept to be so heavily weighted toward personal development and certainly not to the exclusion of intellectual development. He was writing in an (advising) era when mandatory advisor signatures were prevalent and when full-time advisors were

Thomas Grites & Virginia Gordon

barely existent. We believe that his propositions were attempts to insure that intellectual exchanges became the substance of the academic advising process.

The second publication (Winston, et al., 1984) might well have precipitated some of the ongoing confusion, as these authors attempted to expand Crookston's concept to recognize the interactions among a student's "educational, career, and personal goals" (p.19), that is, the intellectual, career, and social/emotional dimensions of students' lives.

Their approach was clearly based on developmental theories, notably those of Perry, Super, and Chickering, respectively, but it was an attempt to integrate (not separate) the very mission and goals of almost every institution in the country today. Their approach simply purported that academic goals, decisions, and learning cannot be isolated from students' career goals and aspirations nor from their social characteristics and environments.

The academic advisor's role (whether faculty member or full-time advisor) is to facilitate student learning, hopefully in all three contexts identified by Winston, et al. (1984): educational, career, and personal. The academic advisor must be able to recognize the interactions that might inhibit or enhance learning in any of these contexts. Academic advising becomes individualized through this integration of knowledge. For example, while nursing students might have one curriculum in common, they have many different motivations, values, abilities, and other personal characteristics. Some may be more traditional students—living on campus, pledging fraternities and sororities, and so forth—while many older students might have chosen a new or different career path. Advisors using developmental advising takes all of these personal attributes into account in an effort to help students negotiate the curriculum most productively, effectively, and intellectually, as well as to set realistic academic and personal goals.

Hemwall and Trachte "fear" (p. 8) that developmental academic advising has contributed to the strain among faculty and professional advisors because most faculty members do not have the background or even interest in student development theory and practice. Our experience, in conducting workshops for thousands of faculty members across hundreds of campuses representing all types of institutions, is that many faculty members find student development theory extremely interesting and useful, once they are exposed to it in a systematic way and it is applied to academic advising in the broadest context.

Hemwall and Trachte's assumption that developmental academic advising does not support the centrality of the academic curriculum and therefore alienates faculty is inaccurate. These authors state that they are careful to avoid using the word "development" with their faculty and that they rarely show them any advising literature about development. These presumptions indicate a narrow view of the tenets basic to the practice of developmental academic advising and could bias many faculty advisors' interest in the subject. Certainly, if this concept is misinterpreted (to any audience), then the potential for resistance is heightened. Faculty *development* programs on most campuses are designed to help faculty become better classroom teachers, better users of technology, better grant writers, better researchers, better scholars, and even better advisors. Programs that address the latter faculty role must be designed from the broadest perspective, one that integrates academic, career, and personal aspects.

Advocates for the concept and the practice of developmental advising have never stated, suggested, or even implied that faculty advisors are inadequate because they have little or no knowledge of student development theory. In fact, many people, including faculty and staff, can be excellent developmental academic advisors (in practice) without such formal knowledge, especially when an effective development/training program is in place.

Where we do agree with Hemwall and Trachte is that academic advising needs to be based on many theoretical frameworks. Attempts in the past to create one "theory of academic advising" have not been successful. Indeed, the knowledge of many theories, such as learning, personality, moral, career, cognitive, narrative, and minority development, can and do enrich the practice of academic advising.

Creamer (2000) pointed out that the purpose of academic advising is student learning and personal development, and that the context of academic advising is the formation and implementation of educational and life plans. In other words, the focus of academic advising is the whole person, which is what developmental academic advising espouses. Hemwall and Trachte seem to acknowledge this broader focus but not the relationship of developmental academic advising to it. Many factors certainly impinge on or facilitate a student's ability to learn in the overall college environment. To limit exposure of faculty to advising literature that is "sprinkled with jargon from student development theory" (p. 8) seems shortsighted. To argue that such information (alone) causes faculty advisors to

be “reluctant to participate in workshops and conferences about academic advising” (p. 7) seems questionable.

As advocates for the developmental academic advising concept, we have never espoused the idea that academic advising should be singularly focused, but we do support the idea that developmental academic advising is a valid approach that allows integration of many aspects. We also agree that the central mission of advising is to help students understand and appreciate the value of liberal learning, to acquire the capacity for critical thinking, and to make wise curricular choices based on their goals. This mission is exactly what all academic advising, including that from a developmental perspective, is about.

It is ironic that Hemwall and Trachte’s (1999) arguments for substituting “praxis” for developmental advising describes exactly what the advocates for developmental academic advising have been suggesting for years. Helping students understand the purpose and meaning of course requirements, talking to students about their educational values and goals and how these relate to the curriculum have always been integral to developmental advising. The purpose of general education requirements, how these relate to liberal learning, and how they enrich one’s intellectual life now and in the future have always been on the developmental advising agenda. Effective developmental advisors have always asked probing questions and encouraged students “to engage in critical self-reflection” (p. 9). Everything cited by the authors as examples of a praxis approach to advising mirrors the developmental approach, with one exception.

Hemwall and Trachte (1999) argue that the praxis approach “will prompt changes in goals and values . . . rather than personal development” (p. 9) and that this change is real learning. However, many students affirm their original goals and values throughout the higher education experience and do not change them. To imply that they have not also learned something about themselves in the process defies common sense. “Making meaning of the world to transform it” (p. 9) might also be based upon an honest and realistic appraisal of their own *personal* world as well.

Corollary to the notion of change is that some students experience a kind of negative learning; that is, they learn that they are not as capable in certain areas as they once thought (relative to other students), or they no longer enjoy the academic fields of study they had once so passionately wanted to pursue. Sometimes the academic advisor must

“prompt changes” (p. 9) in an uncomfortable direction, and it is unclear whether the praxis advisor’s inclination or ability would support doing this.

Hemwall and Trachte state that the difference between the concept of praxis and developmental advising is “student learning.” We contend that they do not give an appropriate description of how developmental advising can also concentrate on student learning while also taking into account the many personal characteristics (interests, values, abilities) that make students unique in how they approach the learning process. Developmental academic advising does not need to be “reconnected with liberal learning” (p. 8); we argue that it was never disconnected.

We do welcome praxis as one more concept or framework for advising. Hemwall and Trachte’s contribution in defining this approach is extremely useful, and advisors can incorporate these ideas and suggestions into their advising. However, developmental advising is another approach that can be used in offering the student a complete learning experience. To “argue that the model of developmental academic advising should be *abandoned and replaced* by alternative theoretical traditions” (p. 5) [emphasis added] may be akin to abandoning the curriculum itself.

We appreciate Hemwall and Trachte’s suggestion to reexamine the concept of developmental advising as it may be practiced and hope that they also will reexamine the characteristics of the developmental advising concept. We think that they will find that it is rare for any advisor to use only a single concept in practice. Teaching and modeling decision making, encouraging intellectual curiosity and critical thinking, and generating enthusiasm for life-long learning is, and always has been, part of the developmental advising approach. Academic advising can and should integrate many theories, frameworks, and concepts into its practice. Our ultimate goal, like that of Hemwall and Trachte, is to create academic advisors—faculty or staff—who focus on educational planning in the context of students’ strengths and interests, taking into account their readiness to make solid academic decisions based on their short- and long-term goals.

Furthermore, all academic advisors must continue to demonstrate their availability to students who seek their advice; their knowledge of the institution with its curriculum, resources, and opportunities; their compassion for student learning through the advising process; and their eagerness to improve upon their own (advising) knowledge and skills. When this happens, we will be blessed

Thomas Grites & Virginia Gordon

with caring and effective advisors, regardless of their academic training and experiences or their conceptual frameworks, whose students will truly be engaged in learning at the core of their higher education experience.

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