NACADA Journal 1(1), 1981, pp. 1–6

Toward A Pragmatic Philosophy of Academic Advising

John H. Borgard, Virginia Commonwealth University

Thousands of faculty members, professional advisors, and administrators in American higher education participate in the activity of academic advising. Grites has defined academic advising as a "decision making process during which students realize their maximum educational potential through communication and information exchange with an advisor."[1] Advisors work within this function each day, continually altering the delivery system with new procedures such as increased career advising, refinement of a record keeping system, or enlarged adult advising services. Conversely, the academic advising activity is shaped and changed by external forces such as budget, reduced or renewed interest by chief academic officers, and personnel changes, to name a few. Both kinds of change often occur without pattern, without thought to what we ought to accomplish through academic advising, or without adequate desire or tools to examine the worth and validity of the academic advising efforts.

Numerous writers such as Crookston, Hardee, O'Banion, and Grites have contributed valuable statements about academic advising.[2] Yet we need something more if academic advising is to become a truly educative function rather than an adjunct to teaching, research, and service.

Basic Premises

The temptation when dealing with an applied function such as academic advising is to construct an eclectic philosophy. The historical development of academic advising delivery systems in the United States lends itself to such an organization.[3] Yet, an eclectic schema is too facile; it allows the use of high-flown words to justify ongoing activity. I propose that academic advising predicate itself on a Deweyan pragmatic or instrumental base with the hope that such a singular approach will bring effective pattern to a most essential yet presently fragmented part of American higher education.

Pragmatic philosophy as applied to academic advising is not an intellectual exercise or a school of thought to be studied for its own good, but a process of arriving at fundamental dispositions of college students within their college environment and toward the work world beyond. A pragmatic philosophy does not ground itself in the attempt to comprehend a certain totality or specific inclusive system of life. It does not aim to achieve an organized wisdom that projects a definite conduct of life nor is the pragmatic philosophy defined merely from the standpoint of subject matter.[4] It is difficult to deal with concepts such as ultimateness or totality because, for the pragmatist, the nature of experience is on-going and changing. For Dewey, totality is not a quantitative summation but rather a consistency of response to events and a continuity of action with constant readaptation for continuing growth.

To explain the concept of philosophy further, Dewey differentiates knowledge and thinking. Grounded knowledge is science, representing facts we have ordered and determined rationally, whereas thinking is prospective reference:

> Philosophy is thinking what the known demands of us—what responsive attitude it exacts. It is an idea of what is possible; not record of accomplished fact. Hence it is hypothetical, like all thinking. It presents an assignment of something to be done—something to be tried.[5]

The reality in which colleges and universities exist is process and change. The lives of the institutions through their students and faculties are full of movement and change. Students change as they interact with faculty, other students, with the cur-

[1] Thomas J. Grites, *Academic Advising: Getting Us Through the Eighties*, AAHE-ERIC/Higher Education Research Report (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1979), p. 1.
[2] Burns B. Crookston, "A Developmental View of Academic Advising as Teaching," *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 13 (1972), 12–17.
[3] Grites, pp. 5–19.
[4] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; rpt. New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 324.
[5] Dewey, p. 326.

ricula, and the myriad experiences of their collegiate environment.[6] The knowledge generated by educational institutions changes as we perceive research issues or we challenge assumptions and render new solutions. University structures operate in process and change as administrators, faculty, and students recognize problem areas, gather data about problems, and devise new arrangements for resolution. For example, the chemistry faculty reorganizes the major curriculum to integrate the latest discoveries in technique and theory; or institutions implement evaluations of administrators to increase accountability; or students become more active in institutional governance by winning a seat on the board of visitors.

Learning Begins in Experience

A philosophy of advising must found itself on the principle that learning begins in experience. Higher education traditionally has subscribed to the tenet that subject content remains central to collegiate experience. This content appears in books, and faculty interpret and explicate it.

The customary view of higher education teaching assumes that the college curriculum is intrinsically desirable, often with scant regard for capacities and purposes of students studying within it. The higher education experience must be something more. The pragmatic academic advising philosophy sees the four-year undergraduate educational experience as more than a "collection" of academic content items that will somehow transform the student into a knowledgeable, mature, functioning adult. The true learning situation "has longitudinal dimensions. It is historical and social. It is orderly and dynamic."[7] The learning gained in college through content course work constitutes only one set of the many growth experiences in which the student participate. Students live *in* the world in a truly interactive fashion and are affected by the college environment in many ways:

> The environment . . . is whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, and capacities to create the experience which is had. Even when a person builds a castle in the air, he is interacting with objects which he constructs in fancy.[8]

Integration and Continuity of Experience

A pragmatic philosophy sees that an educational experience is an interplay of both external and internal forces.[9] The traditional view of education most emphasizes external control of experience with meager weight assigned to internal forces that also decide the value of the experience. Within this context, the academic advisor becomes the arranger of the interaction of the external forces of experience (the faculty's teaching of the subjects of the curriculum) with the internal forces (the ideas, needs, interests, and capacities of the student). The academic advisor becomes concerned with the quality of the total experience that the student derives from the college situation. The interaction must not occur willy-nilly; there must be guidance to cultivate maturity so that the student eventually will be able to interact on his own. Dewey states:

> It is part of the educator's responsibility to see equally two things: First, that the problem grows out of the conditions of the experience being had in the present, and that it is within the range of the capacity of the student; and, secondly, that it is such that it arouses in the learner an active quest for information and for production of new ideas.[10]

The meaning of Dewey's words go beyond the arranging of interactions. The academic advisor must bring continuity to the student's experiences as the student encounters his environments. What a person learns becomes the means by which he deals effectively with the next situations. The pragmatic advisor extends himself further than the mere signing of a student course schedule for advance registration. The thoughtful arrangement of subjects which expose the student to the most comprehensive and serviceable set of experiences should be the goal of the advisor-advisee interaction as the student progresses toward graduation.

---

[6] Arthur W. Chickering, *Education and Identity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 974), p. 322; James L. Bess, "Integrating Faculty and Student Life Styles," *Review of Educational Research*, 43 (1973), 377–403.

[7] Alfred L. Hall-Quest, editorial forward in *Experience and Education*, John Dewey (1938, rpt. New York: Collier Books, 1963), P. 11.

[8] John Dewey. *Experience and Education* (1938, rpt. New York: Collier Books, 1963), P. 44.

[9] Dewey, *Experience and Education,* p. 42.

[10] Dewey, *Experience and Education,* p. 79.

Specific courses such as internships, cooperative programs, and field work courses offer vehicles in which education (and advising) connect the needed subject content with experience outside the college classroom.

Interaction and continuity can be achieved through additional means. Students (and faculty, to a large extent) continue to view college courses in isolation, only as one-way communication, and frequently just as passive absorption of *content*. Yet, many *skills* valued highly in the work world are taught within the content courses without students or faculty realizing what has been gained. Research and analytical skills, interviewing techniques, verbal and written proficiency, facility in the manipulation of symbols, and interpersonal skills students learn in many courses, along with the all too highly emphasized content. The student can discover, and perfect these skills for his greater growth both in and out of college. Practically speaking, he can enter these traits on a resume so that a future employer will see the full range of abilities and knowledge that the student possesses. The pragmatic academic advisor becomes the bridge between the student in his present environment and his environments to be. If learning begins in experience, then academic advising is essential to making the learner an active force in his own development.

Revision Through Systematic Inquiry

At the heart of a pragmatic philosophy of academic advising should be an openness to constant revision through systematic inquiry. We cannot organize a successful advising program about a set of universal principles written in stone. Since the university or college participates in constant process and change, so, too, must the advising program. Though the pragmatic advising administrator must adapt to the structural and historical environment in which the program exists, he continually must assess student needs which may demand change in services.

The academic advising administrator must attune himself to institutional services such as registration and scheduling, admissions, and student life in addition to the academic components, since their operations affect the quality of the student's educational experience. The academic advising administrator must be proactive in his association with these units so that their services will facilitate the student's interaction with the college environment. This administrator must utilize the studies that explain the development, behavior, and retention of college students in higher education. As Chickering points out, one of the worst shortcomings of American higher education is not the uncritical acceptance of the latest "truths" about students, but rather the neglect of beneficial information about the ways college students interact with their environment.[11]

The key to thoughtful revision of programming resides in regular evaluation or else quality will be judged only by hearsay and impression. Systematic evaluation of academic advisors and advising programs, however, is seldom done to gather facts for change.[12] Evaluation of academic advising (particularly faculty advising) can be difficult if an already existing student evaluation of teaching is viewed with disdain. Furthermore, evaluation of advising can become ineffective because of confusion about reasons for evaluation or in summative versus formative uses of results. In addition to the more direct evaluation techniques, less personal indicators of need for change such as an increase in number of graduation problems or larger numbers of requests for advisor reassignments also should be used.

Interest, Careers, and Interpretation of Experience

A pragmatic view of advising sees the college student as an active thinking organism. Many college students, however, need stimulation toward activity, particularly in relating their interests and experiences. This concept we should not confuse with the progressive elementary education theory of education as child-centered, using traditional subject matter only as it pertain to the students' interests. The college academic advisor must assist students to clarify their interests and relate the institutional subject matter and services to the perfection of those interests. Many students do not explore effectively these feelings or more basically, even think about what life and work will exist for them after college. The following of interests must be informed, though, through use of vocational testing, and discussions with department chairpersons, career counselors, and alumni so that the students will use their interests to form effective experiences.

Through exploration of student interest, the pragmatic advisor, as arranger and interpreter of

[11] Chickering, p. 339.
[12] Grites, p. 52.

experience for growth, avoids the traditional prescriptive advisor-advisee relationship so well described by Crookston.[13] Using student interest as the catylyst for discussion, the pragmatic advisor and the student eschew the authority relationship and become participants in the accumulation of experience. Rather than the advisor fulfilling his responsibility by giving the advice and the student assuming the duty of following this counsel, the interaction between the two itself becomes an experience upon which both can build.

Especially as academic advising includes career advising, the advisor must encourage the student to interact with useful environments and then assist in the interpretation of the advisee's experiences. One main frustration, though, of many advisors, particularly in the arts and sciences, is the sparse knowledge that students care to have of the future world of work or the courses that relate to possible avenues of employment. The advisor, notably the faculty advisor, must realize the minimal contact which he may have had with the world outside academe and take steps to become familiar with at least the careers stemming from the major and related areas. Unless the academic advisor is willing to carry on some interaction with experiences outside the presentation of and research about subject content, then it is most difficult to encourage interactive behavior in the students.

Academic advisors should become leaders in developing or promoting internships, field work courses, and other experiential programs so that students will choose formal credit-awarding methods of building experiences growing from the curriculum. The academic advisor must espouse the spirit of Dewey's idea that men have do to something to things if they wish to find something —"They must alter conditions."[14] Advisors must foster in students the concept of problem-solving rather than just the inculcation of content. Subjects of the college curriculum are important as they lead to the quest for more information to be used in critical thinking and the reconstruction of experience.

The Advisor and the Educational Experience

The pragmatic academic advisor plays a key role in stimulating the independent thinking necessary for the student to successfully engage the environments in which he will live—"to give the learner experience in effective experiencing."[15] The academic advisor will lead the student to explore interests in relation to available college content to form an active educational experience, intellectual at the highest level, that helps the student to conceptualize and imagine, and that equips the student with the tools for continued growth.

Interaction with the subject matter environment represents only one kind of experience a student can have in college, albeit a most important encounter. Within that interaction alone, there are fruitful or less rewarding experiences which demand interpretation by an academic advisor. To curriculum interaction, with whom does the student discuss crucial directional questions such as graduate school versus direct entry to the job market, the meaning of being in the right place at the right time, choice of electives to open the widest experiential plane, it's not what you know but who you know, and the value of extracurricular participation versus more time devoted to content study, or dropping out of school? It is the academic advisor.

No doubt, the type of pragmatic interchange between student and advisor outlined here requires time. We may find it difficult to mesh this requirement we have with the traditional demands of teaching, research, and service. Yet, if we view undergraduate education as one set of important experiences leading to continued personal growth, the shaping of that set of experiences to its fullest measure becomes an integral and legitimate educational function.

[13] Crookston, pp. 12–13.
[14] Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 275.
[15] J. Donald Butler, *Four Philosophies and Their Practice in Education and Religion*, revised ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1951), p. 457.