

Advisors as Interaction Designers

Pamela Shockley-Zalabak, University of Colorado Colorado Springs

Pamela Shockley-Zalabak, Chancellor, University of Colorado Colorado Springs, gave the following speech at the 2011 NACADA Annual Conference October 3, 2011, at the Colorado Convention Center in Denver. She provides an overview of changes affecting U.S. higher education, commentary on how those changes affect the role of the academic advisor, and the importance of helping students achieve life goals. She encourages academic advisors to embrace a broad definition of the academic advising profession and to lead change and innovation on campus. She relates personal teaching experiences, including her first instructor job at a federal prison, a chance meeting of a young woman who exemplifies today's college student, and the imperative that academic advisors engage in "disruptive innovation and interaction design" to better serve students.

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I am a long-time faculty advisor, having spent 12 years with an assigned caseload of about 300 students in the Communication Department at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs. I continue to advise on a limited basis, though I now serve as the university's chancellor.

Academic advising reminds me of my two favorite quotations. First, novelist Erica Jong (1977, p. 55) said: "Advice is what we ask for when we already know the answer but wish we didn't." Jong's words remind me of a few senior students who ignored pleas about core graduation requirements. These were second-semester seniors who refused to take public speaking because they were certain the university would change its requirements before they had to take the dreaded course. I know many other faculty advisors can relate to that experience. My second favorite quotation is one I often recall when I believe I have done a particularly good job. It comes from science fiction writer Gordon Dickson (2011) who humorously suggested, "Some people like my advice so much that they frame it up on the wall rather than having to use it."

A Recent Experience

A few weeks ago, I met a young woman who

was working as a waitress at an airport restaurant. Her story reminds me of the importance of advising work and that advice is everywhere.

Blossom was a single mother of four who was enrolled in a local college to study international business. She shared with me she was inspired to return to college by Michelle Obama, and she was enrolled in 12 credit hours and worked full-time while raising a family. I was struck by her comments. She expressed a dislike for accounting and related that her advisors said she was on track. She didn't think she was.

I was quickly reminded people seek advising everywhere, whether from qualified individuals or not. Despite my best intentions and a career in academia, I was not able to help Blossom with accounting or provide answers to many of her other questions. The best I could do was to recommend the questions she should ask and people who might know the answers.

I came away from the experience knowing that the Blossoms of the world are part of the future of higher education, an important part for those of us who seek to make education relevant and to create systems that take into account family dynamics as well as a world that is vastly different from the one many of us entered as young adults.

As an advisor, I loved the interaction with students, just as I enjoyed my interaction with Blossom. I now know that I could have done much more as a faculty advisor.

A Life-Shaping Experience

I want to share a life experience that has shaped my career and my approach to working with students.

At 22 years old, with a bachelor's degree and no preparation, I found myself teaching general education development courses at a federal men's prison. That teaching experience, one that I went kicking and screaming into, transformed my life as I soon found myself surrounded by men who had extraordinary abilities but who had made bad choices. By definition, they were the cadre of students who were not supposed to succeed. They were high school dropouts who had done something for which they were now incarcerated.

Yet, for the 3 years that I was involved, each of my students passed the GED on his first try.

With their success in the classroom tied to work release or early opportunities to stand for parole, they gained a motivation that earlier systems had not provided. What I learned in those prison classrooms shaped my life and my concern for all students. Those prisoners formed my views about what test scores demonstrate and the true qualities of a college graduate.

At my institution, and at many other institutions across the nation, the best single predictor of who will graduate is the student who enters with a GED; they are motivated by what they missed the first time around and are determined to succeed.

The Changing Higher Education Landscape

There are many trends that are influencing students, affecting academic advising and the success of students. These trends require a discussion about building a broad institutional system of student success at which academic advising is at the core. The role of the academic advisor is changing. Today's academic advisors must think about becoming intentional interaction designers to create the experiences which contribute to the future of our students.

Dr. Clayton Christensen (2011) from Harvard is well-known for talking about *disruptive innovation*, his term for all of the changes that both stimulate crisis and innovation. I want academic advisors to think about being disruptive innovators as interaction designers.

The trends that I see ahead are

- globalization. Social and cultural changes are being brought about by a much more connected and disconnected world. Geography is losing its meaning and yet is gaining more meaning as people interact in a global world.
- instant communication. Devices such as Skype have changed our world and helped created a sound-bite mentality. The complexity of what one needs to say is lost, the result of short attention spans.
- diverse populations. The populations that are coming to campus—veterans, first-generation students, transfer students, older adults, reentry students, undecided majors, online students, students of color—all have specialized needs. No one approach works for all, and some have not been updated for decades.
- higher education restructuring. Restructuring is happening globally and locally. In India and China, higher education is moving to a solid public good. In the United States, it is mov-

ing to a private good for individuals at a time when the lowest income students need to be in postsecondary institutions.

- accountability. Higher education leaders are accountable for everything, but their accountability metrics may not match the problem. They are accountable for working on the problems and trying to help shape how they are defined. Only then can they demonstrate the value higher education brings to society, the nation, and local communities.
- financial pressures. American higher-education institutions are under enormous financial pressure. That is not true all over the world. The rough economic times have affected advisors personally and financial pressures on students cause many to doubt whether they can work hard enough to achieve their goal of a college education.
- demands for more options and opportunities to learn everywhere. This is where academic advising comes to the forefront. There is an ad running in Colorado where an institution tells students they can get federal and veteran financial aid for an 11-day course and they will be a professional health care provider. Students who need jobs, and who have not navigated the somewhat complex structure of higher education, see that as desirable advice.

As Rich Feller and Brian O'Bruba (2009) suggest, these trends and many others result in some changes that go the core of how advisors approach working with students. These trends are

- job security. Security, at least as previous generations knew it, is a thing of the past. Jobs change. Advocates of higher education believe the solution is education after high school but do not have the ability to promise that if students work hard and graduate that they will have the job security that they desperately want.
- livable wages. The bar has been raised for achieving livable wages in all occupations and industries, and it will continue to rise. For example, in southern Colorado we have electrical lineman training programs at two community colleges. The average lineman, after 5 years as an apprentice, makes approximately \$100,000 a year. We have exactly one person from the initial 11 selected who could complete the initial training in the first class. Why? Working with high voltage requires a

level of mathematics competency that these students did not have. Students need courses to help them achieve what I know is possible. Many are teaching in old and traditional ways that no longer work.

- problem solving. All work is best understood as “problems to be solved.” What that really means is that we need to help students to learn about problem solving not just completing problems in a particular course.
- knowledge as a determinant of success. What and when one studies is more important to success than where one goes to school, provided there is good content. Many have been elitist in this country, believing that the kind of school one attends is a predictor of success over time. I want people who gain knowledge to be successful. The name on the diploma is not a predictor of the learning that has occurred.
- adaptability. Another given is that change is normal and never ending. It requires gaining the emotional skills to manage continuous transition.

Building a Student Success Organization

All of these trends relate to the academic advisor. It is the imperative of institutions of all types to create an institutional system for student success. Everyone must become interaction designers creating disruptive innovation.

The opportunity for the academic advising profession to help students grow, dream, think, and to be engaged should be at the core of what is done at postsecondary institutions. Everyone needs to get beyond the silos of the past and the present.

Many of my colleagues do not agree with me, but I contend we are designed in departments and units that are not effectively linked. As a result, the institutions do not meet modern efficiency and productivity standards. More importantly, they do not meet effectiveness standards because they do not help students with a whole experience. Simply put, most institutions are not designed correctly.

I do not hold academic advisors responsible for this design, but I hope advisors will be the source of new ideas and new ways of thinking. Everyone in higher education must link teaching and learning missions to institutional systems for student success.

Who are the students? Who is present? Who is missing? Who is succeeding? Who are being left along the wayside? Policymakers need to determine what specific functions should be linked in

a student success model. How should recruitment, orientation, academic advising, remedial programs, career, and financial advising be related?

Financial aid is a good example. With a first-generation low-income population, students want to get out of school as quickly as they can without taking loans. They will work 30 to 40 hours a week, take 18 credit hours, and avoid loans at all costs. How does that relate to Blossom, my airport contact? How does it relate to barely getting through the day—let alone having time to reflect on developing the kind of competencies that are so clearly important for the future?

What does college do to honors programs, student activities, leadership development, tutoring, and learning centers? Are they a synergistic experience? Can students move seamlessly from experience to experience or are they passed along with no sense of coherence or connectedness? I suggest that a seamless system for institutional student success must be conceptualized to improve the outcomes that I know all seek to achieve.

We also need to develop policy structures on campus where the measurement of outcomes is much more sophisticated than graduation and persistence rates. This is a collective responsibility. NACADA can help those in academic leadership. But those in frontline advising offices have better ideas than I do. Advisors have a better sense of the continuing problems, the continuing questions, and the continuing failures in each institutional system.

The Changing Roles of Academic Advisors

In *Academic Advising in the New Global Century: Supporting Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes Achievement*, Susan Campbell and Charlie Nutt (2008) talk about the shifting paradigm from dissemination of campus information to teaching and learning. This is at the core of the future of academic advising. As teachers, advisors stimulate learning, set high expectations, establish goals with adequate flexibility for individuals, provide support, get input, offer feedback, and facilitate a variety of interactions.

The job of the advisor has changed dramatically with assistance from technology. But academic advisors must move from telling students what courses they need to graduate to helping them dream, grow, and become citizens. It probably never was “check the box” advising but now, more than ever, academic advisors must do more.

Interaction design looks at students as individuals. It looks at the interactions that will help them grow, understand their options, and get them moti-

vated to persist.

That inexperienced high school teacher in a federal prison I told you about was not an outstanding teacher. But my students were linked to something they powerfully understood and wanted. They achieved. They learned. I provided the necessary content but I was in no way an inspirational teacher. Educators must change what they do by design.

While I am saddened by what Hunter and White said about academic advising in “Could Fixing Academic Advising Fix Higher Education?” (2004), I believe they are correct. They said that academic advising is perhaps the only structured campus endeavor that can guarantee students’ sustained interaction with a caring and concerned adult who can help them shape a meaningful future and learning experience for themselves. It is wonderful that academic advisors are those caring and concerned individuals. But from an institutional perspective, it is insufficient that they may be the only ones on campus.

Student Core Competencies

I suggest that interaction design focuses on building design experiences: building work across units and experiences that develop a core of competencies—not courses—for the future.

Every institution should look at competencies it wants students to develop. A few of the core competencies that I would select follow.

Decision Making

Choosing majors, electives, minors, and extra-curricular activities are all examples of decision making. But decision making should lead to the probable future students want in their first 5 years after graduation. How do those decisions relate to family responsibility, work responsibility, cultural responsibility, and broader life, particularly for first-generation students? What is done in advising, in academic designs, to help students work through difficult situations?

As academic advisors, we urge students to complete challenging classes. We try to get them in learning centers and tutoring programs. We ask them to see that seeking help is not a negative. But how do we organize our support so that seeking help is the campus norm versus something that happens for somebody who is not quite making it? How do we also think about resolving conflicts? We are in a generation of conflicts both externally and internally. How do we create competencies for accountability?

Building Working Relationships

Universities, community colleges, and trade schools ought to be where students learn to build working relationships. Faculty and students working together to understand the ever-changing environment is a core competency for the future.

Performing with Integrity

In my classroom, I see less breaches of integrity than I see reported in all of the literature. But I do see people struggling with the integrity of what they are learning, what it means to them, and what they do with it.

Working

As academics, we must understand that many students have to go to work and may not be able to meet with us at times that are convenient for us. At the same time, students often do not understand that educating themselves is part of their work.

I know many in academia do not want to frame higher education as preparing people for jobs. But if higher education does not do that, at least in part, what *is* it doing? Higher education provides students life competencies that allow them to move forward to their futures. I hope that advisors are helping students develop critical thinking about their futures. But higher education is operating at a time in global history where people are into criticism thinking, not critical thinking. It is easy to say that “everything is wrong and it’s not my fault.” How do educators shift the thinking so students recognize they have control over their futures?

More than Courses

Higher education needs to help students develop written and oral communication skills, professionalism, ethics, and abilities to work with other people and to master a content area. But when the experiences on campus and in advising units that help students do that, advisors are doing much more than offering courses.

All educators must ask what competencies they want a student to experience and develop as a result of being on campus. Then, all must ask how to get there.

Interaction Design

Interaction design focuses specifically on the processes and practices that exist in academic advising and other units on campus. What do advisors do in orientations (that is, beyond distributing needed information)? Most colleges have orientations into their institutions, but do they have ori-

entations out of them? What does the institution do when students are ready to leave? What family and community orientations are conducted? How are one-on-one sessions designed? Is technology used to support those efforts? What are advisors doing with group sessions?

What course placement and testing programs are offered? Are online sessions effective? How do advisors create personal connections through Skype or other technologies? What about degree audits? What about getting students to think more broadly with visual learning using an iPad or various other applications? What about apps for student success that are institution specific? What about game design—how does the program tap into emerging technologies? What about faculty advising? What about alums? Alums are powerful in terms of helping people succeed, particularly recent alums who have similar characteristics to those students who are struggling.

The Role of Academic Advising

What about co-advising with other institutions? Imagine, 2- and 4-year schools working together helping students to become their own designers, helping them to become the critical thinkers that will sustain them over a lifetime.

I hold academic advising in high regard. The level of personal interaction that advisors experience does not occur in all courses. Advisors are central to retention and to student development. Advisors are vital to helping students transition into the university and out of the university. Advising is also needed for parents, families, and communities. Institutions—yours and mine—need advising about changes we need to make.

How can advisors do all of this without burning out, becoming overloaded, or unrealistically using the limited resources available? What does it take to be this interaction designer, to engage in disruptive innovation? Advisors are in a perfect position to lead disruptive innovation. Advisors were drawn to the profession because they care about students and their success, possibly more than some of us who approach our days from an academic disciplinary perspective. The most important ingredient is the passion for change. The second is an awareness of design and systematic thinking. What are the ways one can conceptualize the designs of working together? How can the interaction be designed? Who are the people who need to be at the planning table and how are efforts executed differently to create a student success model that is more robust than the silos of individual departments?

Of course, advisors have to have superb interpersonal competences such as listening skills, questioning skills, and the ability to embrace technology. There must be presentation skills and a commitment to continuous learning. In reality, these are the competencies that students are expected to have when they graduate.

I encourage you to have passion for the role that you play at your institution. You are changing lives. Our world is changing. Today's excellence is tomorrow's mediocre performance. Together, we have both the responsibility and the opportunity to reach higher and to prepare for the future.

As Charles Varlet De La Grange said in 1872, and I think it applies today, "When we ask for advice we are usually looking for an accomplice." We need to become our students' accomplices in creating their futures.

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Author's Note

Pamela Shockley-Zalabak is Chancellor and professor of Communication at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS). The author of 8 books and more than 100 articles and productions, Dr. Shockley-Zalabak shares her research interests on building organizational trust. Her latest book, *Building the High Trust Organization* was published in 2010. In addition to her chancellor duties, she continues to teach. Previously, Dr.

Shockley was Vice Chancellor for Student Success and the founding chair of the UCCS Communication Department. Her honors include the University of Colorado Thomas Jefferson Award, President's Award for Outstanding Service, and

the Chancellor's Award for Distinguished Faculty. She earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Oklahoma State University and a PhD from the University of Colorado, Boulder, in organizational communication.