

The Advising Palaver Hut: Case Study in West African Higher Education

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Although international research regarding advising is burgeoning, most of the research on the role of and advantages related to academic advising has been limited to U.S. colleges and universities. This ethnographic case study conducted at a Liberian university examined the organizational culture of advising from student, faculty, and staff perspectives after the establishment of the Student Academic Advisement and Career Counseling Center. The findings suggest two primary elements that shape the role of advising and college student experience: postwar challenges in Liberian higher education and the shifting perspective on student centeredness. As a result, these elements have redefined the preliminary role of the advising center into a concept referred to as the advising palaver hut.

[doi:10.12930/NACADA-15-042]

KEY WORDS: advising research, metaphors, non-Western, organizational culture, postconflict, student centeredness

Higher education institutions are complex and multifaceted organizations. Therefore, academic advising proves a critical element to student success because it helps socialize students to the “institution’s culture, values, and practices” (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2011, p. 2). Advising services exist in a variety of capacities to meet diverse needs, and some provide students with initial and personal exposure to college faculty and staff. Through these interactions, professionals and faculty members at the institution can leverage the opportunity to address the complexities of new student transitions, academic and career exploration, and student cognitive and social development. Research has shown that academic advising can improve college student academic and social success, college experience satisfaction, grade-point average (GPA), learning, retention, and graduation rates in the United States (Abdussalam, Chen, & Khan, 2007; Bahr, 2008; Drake, 2011; Gardiner, 1994; Hale, Graham, & Johnson, 2009;

Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Kiker, 2008; Kuh, 2008; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Metzner, 1989; Pan, Guo, Alikonis, & Bai, 2008; Rice et al., 2009; Schwebel, Walburn, Jacobsen, Jerrolds, & Klyce, 2008; Smith & Allen, 2006). However, the role of academic advising in non-Western settings has escaped scrutiny.

“As the field of academic advising reaches beyond Western borders and into other cultural traditions, the theories applied to advising must reflect the values, philosophies, and societal norms of each culture” (Burton, 2010, para. 7). Because not all Western perspectives are applicable in non-Western settings, I use a metaphorical interpretation to describe the advising processes contextual to Liberian culture: the advising palaver hut. The use of metaphors to understand organizational culture (OC) creates an opportunity to build upon familiar experiences and push beyond the existing knowledge base to construct new concepts for understanding. Metaphors prove powerful tools to advance understanding of complex processes of organizations. The acceptance of using metaphors in research is expanding, and it allows for revelation of new avenues for analysis and exploration of concepts and for theoretical discovery beyond the scope of some traditional processes of inquiry (Fris & Lazaridou, 2006; Humphries & Grant, 2005; McCulloch, 2009; Morgan, 1998; Pinder & Bourgeois, 1982; Smircich, 1983; Taber, 2007; Wayne, 2008).

Through this ethnographic case study, I sought to identify the role of advising services in a Liberian higher education setting and explore applications of advising approaches in non-Western cultural contexts. The following research questions were posed:

- RQ1.** What does advising look like in a non-Western setting?
- RQ2.** How is advising shaped by the OC?
- RQ3.** How did the presence of the Student Academic Advisement and Career Counseling Center (SA2C3) change the OC?

Therefore, a brief overview of Liberian higher education introduces the context. Then, I explain

the concept of African palaver huts and outline the limited research on academic advising in Africa. Using metaphorical interpretation and Tierney's (1988) conceptual framework of OC, I present the findings and offer some concluding remarks.

Literature Review

Liberian Higher Education

Liberia was established by African American expatriates and remains one of the poorest countries in the world with an annual per capita income of \$US461 (World Bank, 2015). Having undergone a civil war, political instability, and most recently, an Ebola epidemic, Liberians continue to struggle to repair the sociocultural environment, and the government is using education as a major force in this reconstruction (Fields, 2007; Government of Liberia, 2004; International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2012; U.S. Department of State, 2017). Therefore, improvement of the higher educational system to produce quality graduates and a strategic workforce, has emerged as a priority for Liberian redevelopment, specifically in the critical fields of education, agriculture, and engineering (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2012). Like many higher education institutions in developing African countries, the fragile Liberian education system suffers from lack of resources, weak government commitment, poor infrastructure, and a very frail economy (Powell, 2007; Rogers, 2014).

The Liberian university studied serves as a leading higher education institution in the country and enrolls more than 54% of all higher education students. Undergraduates follow a structured general-education curriculum during the first two years as determined by their college of enrollment. Then they may pursue any of the 28 majors offered through six undergraduate colleges. Following the civil war, 90% of university facilities, computers, and books were damaged or stolen. In addition, the university experienced significant brain drain, losing 78% of teaching, research, and administrative staffs (Fields, 2007; Sirleaf, 2009; World Conference on Higher Education, 1998). The university stands as one of few higher education institutions able to withstand the destruction of the war and increase accessibility despite the decrease in the overall quality of education caused by the declining economy.

In the face of these challenges, the university is currently undertaking the processes of restora-

tion and redevelopment. However, insufficient resources continue to affect students' college progression and the ability of the university to meet national development and workforce needs. Positive educational experiences manifested through advising can lead to long-term benefits as graduates embrace membership as contributing citizens in society. For this reason, administrators recognized the dire need for student services in career and academic advising, and in 2010 they established the SA2C3, the first advising center of its kind in the country.

African Palaver Huts

In many African cultures, palaver huts serve as gathering places that provide a safe space to resolve conflict and build consensus among members of the community. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Republic of Liberia (2009) described palaver huts as

common to rural communities around the country, [and] is a conflict resolution mechanism wherein select members of integrity in the community adjudicate matters of grave concern to the community and seek to resolve disputes amongst or between individuals and or communities (pp. 1-2).

Palaver huts are circular, open-air structures, usually made of mud, clay, or wood, with thatched roofs. The circular structure represents equality of all participants in the enclosure. The concept of African palaver is found in several African countries, each with varying degrees of structure and format of dialogue. However, commonalities of African palaver include the inclusive and collective nature of community discourse to address moral concerns, conduct conflict resolution, create judicial laws, establish cultural norms, educate youth, welcome visitors, host social gatherings, and uplift the common good of the community (Bujo, 2001; Kimosop, 2011; Maina, 2008; Wamba dia Wamba, 1985).

Kratz (1983) defines *palaver* in African cultures as "a context in which discussion is centrally concerned with expression, avoidance or resolution of conflict" (p. 409). The metaphorical interpretation of the advising palaver hut does not suggest that modern developments in advising and counseling should be adapted to antiquated customs, but it is used to recognize and appreciate the value and contributions of traditional concepts

and celebrate their cultural relevancy and applicability in today's society. In this case, what I call the *advising palaver hut* serves as the metaphor for the role of the SA2C3 on campus. To explore beliefs, values, and attitudes of the advising role fully outside Western educational settings, one must understand the OC.

Academic Advising in Africa

A comprehensive literature review revealed little research on academic advising in Africa. Aagard (1991) examined the effects of academic advising on perceived relevance of graduate education in agriculture for meeting national development goals in Tanzania and Malawi. A study in South Africa focused on the benefits of a tutoring and mentoring program that provided students with academic and psychosocial support for enhancing their success (Page, Loots, & du Toit, 2005). As an arguable major component of advising, mentoring has been studied and the findings seem to support the need for academic and career mentoring, especially for tertiary (all types of postsecondary) education (Essack & Juwah, 2007; Maitland, 2008; Page et al., 2005). A study on academic advising in Botswana was used to explore the lack of guidelines and professional training for advisors at the University of Botswana (Motshegwa, 2010). More recently, a study on the effects of advising on student performance offered information on the impact of advising programs at Kenyan universities (Muola, Maithya, & Mwinzi, 2011).

Researchers in southern and eastern Africa examined similar goals for advising; that is, they sought to address retention concerns and national development issues that plague many African countries. In addition to these valuable studies, research to understand the differing roles of advising on the basis of various cultural regions of Africa would extend understanding that informs larger practical efforts. The lack of literature on academic advising in Africa creates great opportunity to see the ways advising translates into non-Western cultural settings where many students may benefit from the advantages of academic advising.

Conceptual Framework: Organizational Culture

Advising is shaped by culture, which determines the structures, resources, policies, demographics, and goals of an institution. Using an OC framework of higher education for analysis

clarifies the relationships among activities, people, and policies created in these social structures and cultural environments. Therefore, describing the OC of the institution deepens the understanding of the role of advising and contextualizes the college student experience of the participants.

Tierney (1988) described OC as "the shared assumptions of individuals participating in the organization. . . . These assumptions can be identified through stories, special language, norms, institutional ideology and attitudes that emerge from individual and organizational behavior" (p. 4). From these assumptions, cultural ideology of values, attitudes, and beliefs are developed. The concept of OC includes the investigation of environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership.

The *environment* not only entails the physical location and structure of a campus but also the academic and social climate or prevailing attitude toward the environment (Tierney, 1988). The alignment of the overall environment of an institution with included subunits captures the degree to which the internal OC exists harmoniously. The *mission* of a college refers to the purpose of the organization that drives two components: the *programs* offered and the *audience* served (Tierney, 1988). Change to either component will change the culture of the organization because the mission guides practice. In this study, the degree of cultural alignment among national, institutional, and advising priorities, as well as student, faculty, and staff perceptions and expectations were explored.

Socialization is used to explore institutional fit and the degree to which the institution assists with members' transitions into higher education and their acclimation to campus culture (Tierney, 1988). Academic advising helps students successfully transition into college; therefore, the cultural factors unique to students and institution must be elucidated. Culture also manifests by the way in which members create, receive, and disseminate information (Tierney, 1988). Some forms of information are shared in formal or informal settings, including verbal, written, or nonverbal communication. The transmission of information involves those in charge of communication and the style of communication chosen (Tierney, 1988). Information sharing in advising often involves the dissemination of academic policies and campus resource information. The cohesiveness or fragmentation of an institution

and subunits will exert a profound influence on the culture of information sharing.

Strategies describe the decision-making processes, those involved, and ways decision-based goals are achieved (Tierney, 1988). How were decisions made regarding academic policies and how did those decisions affect advising? Finally, analysis of leadership styles and the values of campus leaders closes the loop on a study of OC (Tierney, 1988). Leaders influence campus stakeholders and hold the positional power to spearhead initiatives. For this reason, the champions involved in the establishment of the SA2C3 needed to be identified. Understanding the influence of culture on organizational behaviors accentuates the perspective that organizational change represents cultural change (Morgan, 1998).

Methods

Design

For this study, I used ethnographic case study methods to shed light on the nuances and complex interactions of the OC and behaviors that formulate part of the advising experience. “Case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events” (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Ethnography is used to discover and gather information about the day-to-day processes in a cultural group. In addition, ethnographers use theoretical models to guide their research (Fetterman, 1998). In this case, Tierney’s (1988) conceptual framework of OC was used to guide the investigation of the university culture and structure. Overall, an ethnography was necessary to “interpret the patterned meaning of organizational life,” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 96).

Using an ethnographic case study strategy was appropriate for this investigation, particularly because advising literature for Liberian higher education does not exist. This embedded single-case study served exploratory purposes through utilization of multiple subunits of analysis. Embedded case study designs involve the analysis of multiple subunits within the larger case (Yin, 2009). Initiating the study with ethnographic case study research methods allowed for an open-minded exploration of the environment and facilitated learning about various aspects of another culture and organization before analyzing the role that academic advising plays.

For the purposes of this research, OC and metaphorical interpretation dictated the manner

by which I analyzed the data, which were collected from a larger study on the social organization analysis of advising, funded by the NACADA Research Grant (Williams Sy, 2013). Postwar literature on the university being scarce, many descriptions of the current state of the institution come from reflections of observations, interviews, and document analysis.

Participants

At the time of the original study, 23,800 students attended the university with an average incoming undergraduate class size of approximately 6,000–8,000 students. A select group of faculty members, staff, and undergraduate students were invited to participate as identified through purposeful sampling within the six undergraduate colleges and among associated staff. As a result of the methodology, I interviewed 20 students, 10 staff members, and 9 faculty members who volunteered for the study (Appendix A).

Procedures

I conducted one-hour interviews with all participants. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and peer reviewed for accuracy of the Liberian colloquial translations. I used a combination approach to interviewing; that is, I used a standardized open-ended interview and an interview guide. “This combined strategy offers the interviewer flexibility in probing and in determining when it is appropriate to explore certain subjects in greater depth, or to pose questions about new areas of inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 347). I considered conversational techniques an important way to handle these interviews. Approaches to ethnographic interviews “must be modified to fit cultural situations as well as the peculiarities of individual informants” (Spradley, 1979, p. 78).

I also documented my observations of admission processes, student registrations, and advising sessions over a four-month period. The conceptual framework guided the activities and events observed throughout the study, which was designed to gain a better understanding of the daily campus functions and institutional culture (as per Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). As a participant observer, I collected data through holistic field notes.

I used a document summary to summarize and organize material culture (as per Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Handbooks, curriculum guides, advising and registration forms, newspapers, as well as academic meeting notes and strategic

plans were the types of documents collected. However, missing portions of critical information as a result of poor record maintenance and the destruction of archives during the war made document analysis challenging. To maintain the integrity of the study, the following techniques were used to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity: triangulation (interviews, observations, and material culture); peer debriefing with key informants; member checks following interviews for accuracy; and reflexive journaling to record themes, decisions, questions, biases, and actions.

Data Analysis

Thematic and content analysis were guided by questions from Tierney's (2008) framework on OC in higher education (Appendix B). I initiated content analysis with a review of the interview transcripts and then applied primary codes. A second review of the data included a cross-interview analysis of interview transcripts with primary codes (as per Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009) and content analysis of observation field notes as well as material culture to develop secondary codes that emerged from recurring patterns.

Ethnograph v6, a qualitative data analysis software program, was used to organize data and develop frequency outputs of recurrent themes (Qualis Research, 2008). This output was used to initiate the synthesis and interpretation of the data. The program also allowed for analysis of themes grouped by colleges, gender, academic class, and participant type (student, staff, or faculty).

Findings

Tierney's (1988) conceptual framework of OC provided a detailed description of the case and answered RQ1.

Environment

Physical environment. The university is characterized by multiple campus locations, portions of prewar and postwar infrastructure, overextended facility capacities, and climatic conditions of sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, the lack of air conditioning and overcrowding makes the conditions uncomfortable and difficult for work and learning.

SA2C3 is located on the main campus in a one-room office partitioned into three areas: the director's office, the counselors' office with five desks, and the student workers' table. The space does not accommodate the staff of 14 people. As a result, counselors work in the office in rotating shifts. Some stay in the office while others walk around the campus to assist students. The office windows and doors remain open at all times, limiting privacy, and allowing the sounds of campus to reverberate throughout the room. Limited and shared office space also affects the 375 faculty members, which negatively affects confidentiality for faculty advising.

Academic climate. The devastating results of civil war currently shape the weakened academic climate of the campus educational system. The lack of resources, poor preparation at lower levels of the education system, and outdated curricula contribute to these deficiencies, which manifest as restricted opportunities and offerings advisors can provide to students. However, the time frame in which this study was conducted captured significant levels of growth, change, and restoration as reflections of efforts to improve educational quality.

Social climate. The university is represented by the diversity among student demographics, peer camaraderie, and vacillating relationships between students and institutional actors. The student body ranges broadly in age, and over 80% coming from the low socioeconomic background of both rural and urban parts of the country. Students rely on one another for guidance and support. These informal advising networks form a critical component in the navigation of the university system. However, tensions have emerged from years of deteriorated relationships between students and the faculty. The institution is a microcosm of the larger society and displays the concern, destitution, corruption, rehabilitation, development, and resilience found in all sectors of Liberian society.

Mission

The mission, "to prepare well qualified men and women for teaching, research, public and private service, and to contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals¹ for

¹ The "Millennium Development Goals" were created in 2000 at the United Nations Millennium Summit to address concerns surrounding international development. The first baseline report developed by the Government of Liberia and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) was created in 2004 and identified quantified targets such as eliminating poverty and hunger, increasing primary education, gaining gender equality, reducing child mortality, ameliorating maternal health, controlling disease, ensuring environment sustainability, and initiating global partnership (UNDP, n.d.).

sustainable human development” (University of Liberia, 2007, p. 4), closely aligns with national development goals. However, the operationalization of the mission fell short of institutional plans for the future. Although all academic departments align their work with the mission, the lack of formal career advising, outdated curricula, and the need to examine relevance among academic programs act as missing links that might otherwise connect these overarching goals to practice.

The work of the advising center also aligns with the university mission and vision “to facilitate student learning and development along with nurturing their ambitions for career success, high-quality advising, and mentoring” (SA2C3, 2010, p. 1). The center was developed as a response to the growing need for support services that would provide students with the necessary information needed to make appropriate academic choices and give them a sense of direction and purpose in pursuing careers that align with national development requirements and work force needs.

Socialization

Orientation. Upon admission, students are required to attend an orientation program and select a program of study. The absence of a college catalog and formal advising means students cannot take part in structured interactions with faculty members and staff to enhance their understanding of the curricular offerings, culture, and academic requirements. Limited guidance among a largely first-generation population leaves many students self-directed in their academic pursuits or relying on inaccurate advice of peers or family members unfamiliar with the idiosyncrasies of higher education. Poor presentations of academic readiness among students also elevate the need for advising. As a result, students experience academic difficulty when placed in incompatible programs or find changing majors challenging because of the rigidity of the structured curriculum.

In the absence of structured advising in the current system, students rely on several factors to select a major; they are categorized as external (peers, family, and the availability of resources) and internal (personal interests, career aspirations, and academic strengths) influences. This lack of intentional advising partially accounts for the imbalance in enrollment among the various colleges. Over one half of the undergraduate population is enrolled in the College of Business

and Public Administration. Students’ preferences for business majors may result from peer pressure as well as the increased assurance the Business College offers to provide adequate resources toward degree completion in a timely fashion.

The advising system. Advising is decentralized and informal. Currently, advising duties fall primarily to each college. Faculty advising is prescriptive and unstructured, which contributes to inconsistencies across colleges. Departments rely on the experience and institutional knowledge of the faculty, many of whom were graduates of the university, to help guide students through the curriculum. However, the differences between the faculty’s prewar college experiences and students’ postwar experiences lead to misaligned expectations, campus cultural clashes, and new elements of advising and counseling that require training and preparation. The high student-to-faculty ratio also diminishes the quality of advising.

Each department claims a curriculum guide that outlines academic requirements and course sequences used to advise students. Faculty use the documentation as a reference for advising on the course-selection process. When advising, they review course requirements with students, but some focus their discussions around career advising and personal student transitions to help students acclimate to academics, such as study strategies, time management, and avoidance of unethical behavior. Because of the informal structure of it, the amount and quality of advising varies from individual to individual.

Tensions still exist between faculty members and students from remnants of postwar behaviors, such as classroom corruption and hierarchical cultural conflicts. These strained relationships sometimes affect the advising dynamic as students often avoid faculty interactions in preference for peer advice. Although advising is not required, students must obtain course approval from instructors and designated staff during the registration process. Therefore, the current advising system consists of unstructured faculty advising and informal advising networks among peers and family.

The SA2C3 was officially launched on September 18, 2010, to assist students in their “personal development, academic choices, and overall preparation for careers beyond campus” (Student Academic Advisement and Career Counseling Center, 2010, p. 1). Still in the infancy stage with regard to implementing a new advising structure, the SA2C3 employs

people to provide advising, as well as career and personal counseling, informally; most of their daily appointments come from referrals or walk-in students, not through formal appointments when students enter the university.

The war not only corroded the physical structure of society but also exerted a long-term influence on the individuals who experienced war-related trauma. In a country undergoing the journey of reconciliation, Liberia needs to integrate displaced youth and adults back into society. To these ends, the university serves as part of the rehabilitation process for many students, some of whom identify as ex-combatants. To address concerns of both victims and ex-combatants, the university president voiced goals for mental health concerns as part of the establishment of the SA2C3. Seven of the 11 full-time SA2C3 staff members attended seminary, where they received training in psychotheology or pastoral counseling. These counselors draw on their experiences as former students of the university and use counseling and conflict transformation therapy when working with students struggling in a postwar context.

Information

At the university, information is created hierarchically: initiated by senior administration and filtered, in order, through faculty members, staff, and students. The administration is taking progressive steps toward restoring the quality of education; therefore, information creation consists of policies undergoing review, revisions of departmental curricula, new streamlined processes, and improved procedures and services. In an environment with inadequate technology, efforts to improve the system present unique challenges to information dissemination that include the coordination of activities on multiple campuses, adequate dispersal of information to the many students enrolled, and communication of changes to the student body and the faculty. These challenges force administration to seek alternative methods of bridging communication gaps through media, open forums, and informal networks.

Media. Electronic technology on campus is unreliable and most students are not computer literate. Therefore, e-mail communication cannot be utilized to disseminate important information. The institution relies on campus organs, such as radio announcements, newspapers, bulletin postings, and distributed memos. Outdoor bulletin

boards and notices are located throughout campus. However, rain and wind occasionally destroy printed materials, hampering this fragile information-distribution system.

Open forums. Town hall meetings also serve as an avenue of communication. These meetings provide an opportunity for dialogue and a safe, appropriate environment for students to express concerns and make contributions to decisions that affect the institution. Opening the lines of communication to students and providing direct access to senior administrators have improved the dissemination of accurate information and created an environment in which students feel that their input is considered.

Informal networks. Information dissemination also relies on the assistance of informal networks among student leaders and advising staff members. Their unique position as agents of the institution and advocates of students allows advisors to build bridges of communication between the faculty members and administrators and students. Oftentimes, the SA2C3 Director attends student gatherings across campus. For example, two palaver huts exist on campus, the political and religious palaver huts. In these huts, students gather for lively discussions and resolve concerns related to these topics. SA2C3 staff often visit these huts to learn about student concerns and advocate on their behalf with administration.

Strategy

By tradition, Liberian culture encourages the respect of authority. Hence, the strategy or decision making at the university has been top down such that students have no involvement in decisions. However, the new president's student-centered philosophy on institutional governance and student involvement is slowly changing the culture across campus as it relates to decision making. Students are now involved on campus committees as the institution creates initiatives to improve the quality of their experience. The advisors in SA2C3 play an intermediary role between students and administration regarding university affairs.

Leadership

All participants in this study praised the positive changes under the leadership of the university president. From his experiences in U.S. higher education, he brought a student-centered approach to the institution, an ideology the campus is slowly adopting. Students appreciate

the president's transparency and accessibility. According to the president, "Advising is a normal part of development for students and without that one cannot excel. [Advising identifies] where the interest of the student is, and how to guide the students in the right direction." A senior sociology major and a freshman biology major both agreed that they wish the university would provide more advising services to support students in their academic success and create a friendly environment that addresses individual needs.

Discussion

Overall, advising is ultimately shaped by the organizations and students advised, and organizations are shaped by the context of the nation. Therefore, the cultural context of society determines the priorities of social institutions and shapes the structures and processes found within organizations. This study identified two primary elements that continue to mold advising and the college education experience in Liberia: postwar effects and the shifting culture of student engagement. These elements have redefined the preliminary role of the SA2C3.

Postwar Effects

University life in a postwar setting is riddled with challenges of remediation and rehabilitation, which frame a different picture of higher educational experiences than that taken in nations at peace, particularly in a developing country. The quality of education was compromised by the effects of war and increased corruption, and after the war, the lack of textbooks and supplies, electricity, and qualified instructors coupled with traumatized students and remnants of unethical behavior has hindered progress. Students are forced to focus on daily challenges in addition to the obstacles of college progression. The realities of postwar effects led all participants to describe the quality of the college experience as "chaotic," "challenging," "torturous," and yet, pointing to the inauguration of the current president they acknowledge that it is improving. In such a complex and fragile environment, advising takes on a function different than it does in the United States and other parts of the West. The advisor is called to heal the wounded in this postwar environment, but many of them, both on faculty and staff, are wounded themselves. The SA2C3 Director explained the need to counsel

staff, referred to as *wounded healers* expected to lift up students:

Well, I want for us first of all to realize that in advising students you have to be open minded. You can't be judgmental. Whatever your religion or your belief, your persuasion, your philosophy, that's secondary. When you come to counseling [students] or to advise [students], you have to meet them where they are. Even if you are wounded, then you can be a wounded healer . . . but what we want to realize is that when they come to us we want them to know that, "We're here for you."

Shifting Culture Toward Student Centeredness

The tumultuous college student experience not only reflects postwar realities but also the deteriorated relationships between students and authorities within the institution, especially the faculty. However, the campus has undergone a major cultural shift toward student centeredness, defined as "a university's effort to convey to students that they are important . . . the extent to which students feel welcomed and valued" (Elliott & Healy, 2001, p. 7). *The university exists because of the students* was the recurring message given from participants. Student centeredness improves student trust with administration, staff, and faculty, and opportunities to increase student success are multiplied (Elliott & Healy, 2001; Spanier, 2010).

In response to the introduction of a student-centered culture, the participants reported that the college experience is improving for both faculty and students. However, this cultural change threatens existing hierarchical structures among faculty and staff and traditional norms of authority. Conflict emerges among faculty and staff members and students as they redefine the "dichotomy of teacher-centeredness and student-centeredness" (Huang & Leung, 2005, p. 40). With the SA2C3 arguably serving as the mediating entity to resolve conflicts and support the institution during this time of cultural change, it seems to serve as the advising palaver hut.

Advising Palaver Hut

As with traditional African palavers, the advising palaver hut of the SA2C3 serves multiple roles in the campus community. It offers space to resolve conflict and thus promotes

solidarity and cultural values, and it welcomes, engages, and heals the community through dialogue, education, and informal social gatherings. The palaver hut primarily exists to settle disputes and maintain peace among the community. In the case of the advising palaver hut, the SA2C3 mediates academic and personal disputes between institutional agents and students, particularly between faculty members and students. However, this role was not intended in the original purpose and responsibilities of SA2C3. Part of the center's student advocacy efforts involves discussing and mediating disputes on students' behalf, but it was also charged with clarifying other services provided to the campus community and creating awareness about resources.

The emergence of the SA2C3 as the advising palaver hut has proven critical in ameliorating the dissonance that has materialized during the cultural and philosophical transition of the institution. The role of intermediary has contributed to improved student-institution relations, strengthened cohesion among various community members, and promoted the administration's new cultural value of student centeredness. According to the SA2C3 Director:

Well, we're beginning to move into a positive direction because to effectively advise people they must have some degree of trust. You have to build confidence and . . . we've been trying to build that kind of trust level and to really have the bridge so that students can know that this office is for them. We're currently working with the deans, and the chairpersons, as well as faculty members so that no one feels that this office is intruding or dictating to them what they need to do, but rather that we are all working as partners seeking the greater good of the institution.

Perceptions regarding the role of SA2C3 were positive overall among the participants, but the nature of the feedback varied by students' needs for academic, personal, or career counseling services. All of the student participants, except two, stated that they would feel comfortable using the SA2C3 personal counseling services provided they could be assured of confidentiality. A junior primary-education major shared her experience on the basis of interactions with her peers in the community:

I saw [young people's] hunger and thirst for counseling and for acquiring new knowledge. So, I think and I'm definitely sure that if [SA2C3] is well publicized to the student populace, and they can come here, and they can find a place of confidence where whatsoever is being shared here can remain because this is the problem we have. They will soon . . . find a mother because most of these young people had a breakdown in their upbringing and development of character because of the war. Some of them were like 8 years old, 10 years old and they grow up on their own and they never had a mother or father or someone to say, "What you are doing is wrong, but do it this way." But rather it has been like criticizing, criticizing, criticizing, and no correction. . . . So, definitely [the SA2C3] is going to work.

In addition, advising policies are being developed on the basis of observed student needs, and the SA2C3 staff members are proposing institutional policy and procedural changes taking account of the concerns brought forth in disputes. The establishment of the SA2C3 has positively influenced the culture of the university and the way the student body, faculty, and staff perceive the environment and the college experience.

Implications

Research

Findings from this study have expanded the knowledge of academic advising in a non-Western, postwar culture, and they highlight the significance of applying OC and metaphor to understand complex structures and processes involved in higher education advising. However, the OC framework alone does not address the interactive effects of subcultures nor does it capture other aspects of OC, such as member behaviors and resources. In the future, researchers might examine advising from organizational service levels, and they could investigate specific approaches and models of advising in the non-Western context. Finally, advising research in other international settings will enable deeper understanding of issues in other cultures and countries, validate the methods of advising identified by NACADA and within this study, or perhaps uncover new approaches.

Practice

The findings suggest that new culturally specific approaches to advising will better meet the needs of the students and the institution. The African palaver has proven a successful strategy for litigating, mediating, reconciling, and counseling in Liberia (Al-Bakri Nyei, 2011; Lekskes, van Hooren, & de Beus, 2007; Milne, 1991; Pillay & Goodfriend, 2009; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Republic of Liberia, 2009). In particular, counseling services can reduce negative stigmas associated with psychological services. For advising, use of the palaver provides students with informal ways to communicate with institutional agents, but in formats familiar and accustomed to everyone at the university.

As neutral entities, advisors naturally fall in positions to support delicate developments between parties and cultural change. Because advising is a teaching and learning process according to the NACADA Concept of Academic Advising (NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising [NACADA], 2006), the SA2C3 advisors use the palaver hut as the mechanism to educate and support students. As part of a collectivistic culture, this approach to communication seems most appropriate. Individuals gather at the advising palaver hut to settle disputes, welcome guests, hold social gatherings, educate youth, and strengthen community bonds on and outside campus. As outlined in NACADA's Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising (NACADA, 2005), advisors have become the mediators of the institution.

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Appendix A. Student participants

College	First Generation	Major	Gender	Academic Class	Advising	Age	Status
Business and Public Administration							
Business	No	Accounting	F	Senior	Yes	35	Unknown
Business	No	Accounting	F	Freshman	No	28	Full-time
Business	No	Public Admin.	M	Freshman	Yes	26	Full-time
Business	No	Economics	M	Junior	Yes	23	Full-time
Business	Yes	Management	M	Senior	Yes	31	Full-time
Agriculture and Forestry							
Agriculture	Yes	General Ag.	M	Freshman	Yes	39	Full-time
Agriculture	No	General Ag.	M	Senior	No	30	Unknown
Agriculture	No	General Ag.	M	Senior	Yes	32	Full-time
Science and Technology							
Science	No	Biology	F	Freshman	Yes	18	Full-time
Science	Yes	Biology	F	Senior	No	32	Full-time
Science	No	Civil Engineer	M	Senior	Yes	Unknown	Full-time
Science	Yes	Chemistry	M	Junior	Yes	26	Full-time
Education							
Education	Yes	Secondary	M	Freshman	Yes	42	Full-time
Education	Yes	Secondary	M	Senior	Yes	40	Full-time
Education	No	Primary	F	Junior	Yes	Unknown	Full-time
Education	No	Secondary	F	Freshman	Yes	35	Full-time
Social Sciences and Humanities							
Liberia	No	Sociology	F	Senior	Yes	28	Full-time
Liberia	No	Sociology	F	Freshman	No	24	Part-time
Liberia	Yes	History	M	Freshman	Yes	39	Part-time
Liberia	Yes	English	M	Senior	No	35	Full-time

Staff Participants

Student Academic Advisement and Career Counseling Center

- 4 staff counselors (including 1 peer counselor)

- Director

Office of Student Affairs

- Vice President of Student Affairs/Dean of Students

- Peer advisor

Registrar's Office/Admissions

- University Registrar/Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management

President's Office

- President of the University of Liberia

Office of Academic Affairs

- Vice President of Academic Affairs

Faculty Participants

College Deans and Professors

- Dean of the College of Business and Public Administration

- Dean of Liberia College

- Dean of Teachers College

- Professor in Primary Education

- Dean of the College of Agriculture and Forestry

- Visiting professor/researcher

Appendix A. Student participants (cont.)

- Dean of the College of Science and Technology
- Dean of the College of General Studies
 - Professor in Management

Appendix B. Tierney's framework of organizational culture

Environment:

- How does the organization define its environment?
- What is the attitude toward the environment? (Hostility? Friendship?)

Mission:

- How is it defined?
- How is it articulated?
- Is it used as a basis for decisions?
- How much agreement is there?

Socialization:

- How do new members become socialized?
- How is it articulated?
- What do we need to know to survive/excel in this organization?

Information:

- What constitutes information?
- Who has it?
- How is it disseminated?

Strategy:

- How are decisions arrived at?
- Which strategy is used?
- Who makes decisions?
- What is the penalty for bad decisions?

Leadership:

- What does the organization expect from its leaders?
- Who are the leaders?
- Are there formal and informal leaders?

Note. From Tierney (2008), p. 30.