

Letter to the Editor: Is Advising a Political Activity?

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In “Critical Advising: A Freirian-Inspired Approach,” Andrew Puroway (2016) argues that advising is not a politically neutral activity. Although I agree that the “politics” of academic advising is an important (and hitherto unexplored) topic, I find the political vision embodied in Puroway’s conception of critical advising unrealistic and the strategies for its realization inadequate.

In sympathy with the advising-as-teaching-and-learning position of Hemwall and Trachte (1999), Puroway argues that advisors should foster critical reflection in students with the goal of promoting social justice and the common good (p. 4). The benefit of reorienting advising around the goal of world transformation through critical reflection, Puroway claims, is that it would align advising with the mission statements of colleges, with the *raison d’être* of a liberal arts education, and encourage students to think about the purpose of higher education and their own educational goals (p. 4). Borrowing Hemwall and Trachte’s language, Puroway calls this sort of advising *praxis* or *critical* advising that is neither prescriptive nor developmental because it consists of “critical dialogue [that] presumes a change in goals and values” and engages the student as a learner and potential citizen of the world who can make meaning of the world in order to transform it (p. 4).

To articulate the theory of critical advising, Puroway also draws on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Freire, according to Puroway, puts forth the idea of education as a critical dialogue between teacher and student where the goal is for students to understand that they are capable of acting in concert with others and that the world is amenable to liberating change (p. 5). Students are not passive objects to be filled with information (Freire’s concept of *banking education*) but act as partners in dialogue and co-creators of knowledge (p. 5). To engage in this Freire-inspired approach to advising with its emphasis on dialogue and liberation, Puroway says, advisors must “seek to situate questions for dialogue in the lived experiences of students, problematize curricula and relationships of power in higher education, and place educational goal setting in the context of social justice or projects for the common good” (p. 6).

Puroway’s vision is new and exciting, but when he details the practice of critical advising his

argument cleaves rather too conventionally to the goals of integrative learning (Lowenstein, 2005, 2013, 2014, 2015). To the student who asks about graduation requirements, for example, he suggests that in addition to giving specific information (which is what the student wants and needs), “the advisor can also raise the question of ‘Why do you think (or anticipate) the course is required (will be important) for graduation?’” This question certainly helps students “develop an understanding of the curriculum” (p. 7), but it falls short of Puroway’s conception of the social-justice oriented personal and political goals of Freirian-inspired advising. It also betrays the foundations of critical advising, which, according to Puroway, is not to study the requirements of the university but to align advising with the missions of colleges and the purposes of a liberal arts education. It is now well established that to advance the purpose of a liberal arts education a professional advisor could, for example, help students understand that their major need not be vocational preparation but is rather a point of coherence for their entire education; that they are not just completing requirements for their major but learning to master a field of study; that their general education requirements and prerequisite classes are not annoyances standing between them and their major but distinctive opportunities to explore our complex world; that what is valuable about a liberal arts education is studying what you are sincerely interested in and enjoy, and by doing so you will develop marketable skills including the capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems (see, e.g., Laff, 2006; White & Schulenberg, 2012).

To be sure, the political vision embodied in Puroway’s conception of critical advising involves much more than asking students to reflect on or to problematize curricula. Puroway suggests that advisors should inquire into the student’s life “both inside and outside of the classroom” and should ask students questions that will prompt them “to articulate ways their current academic courses motivate changes (or not) of their worldview as well as the ways they inform future action” (p. 7). He gives as examples the following questions:

- Have your classes caused a change in how you see the world or guide the actions that

you take in the world? (e.g., vegetarianism, activism, belief in god or atheism)

- How do you define freedom? Do you think that higher education is making you more free? In what ways is it making you less free?
- What does the *common good* mean to you?
- What does *citizenship* mean to you? (p. 7)

These are all excellent questions for students to think about in a classroom setting, but I believe they are out of place in a one-on-one advising setting. They are out of place not because they are political but because they demand far too much from the advisor–student relationship. Faculty and professional advisors are different and have different relationships with students. Professional advisors (among whom I count myself) should be realistic about who they are and what they can achieve in an advising appointment. While a professional advisor qua advisor may be a “teacher” in a general sense, and his or her office may be a place of “learning,” the advisor–student relationship does not compare to the rigorous daily learning experiences that take place between faculty and students in the classroom. I do not think it is a defense of the status quo, a failure of imagination, or a blinkered vision of what academic advising can be to say that advising is not the place to aim to foster dialogue about freedom, the common good, and citizenship.

A fruitful way of approaching advising as a political activity, I suggest, is not to redefine the advisor–student relationship as a serious conversation about political matters, but to reflect on relationships of power in higher education. Advisors should ask themselves: How does higher education regard professional academic advising? Are advisors seen as agents of retention and recruitment? Of customer service? Of degree completion? Of student affairs? Or are they regarded as employees trained to help students define their academic ambitions and make deeper connections across the numerous curricular and cocurricular opportunities available to them? And who benefits from the role academic advisors play

in higher education? Is advising structured to benefit students’ academic learning or personal development or both? Do the faculty reap palpable benefits from the unbundling of undergraduate advising from their duties? To what extent does advising benefit an institution’s rankings and bottom-line? To appreciate the political stakes in advising one must examine what institutional goals advising advances and who stands to benefit most from its growth.

References

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