

Toward a Unified Theory of Advising?: Lowenstein Revisited

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Lowenstein proposed a theory of integrative learning within academic advising comprised of six key elements: advising is an academic endeavor; advising enhances learning; the learning in advising is integrative, helping students make meaning of the whole; the student is an active participant in the process; advising is transformative, not transactional; and advising is central to achieving the institution's goals for student learning. What are the implications of a unified theory of advising? What are the potential ramifications (negative and positive) of having such a theory? Who benefits and who is excluded? In this paper, one university professor and five PhD students engage these questions through an examination of these six tenets.

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The debates over academic advising date back to the beginning of U.S. higher education (Cate & Miller, 2015; Himes & Schulenberg, 2016). In that time, definitions of academic advising have changed. Recently, one scholar argued that further discussions about advising's definition were unwarranted (White, 2020). Others suggested that academic advising was only beginning to emerge as a profession; that what the field needed were graduate programs, clearer role boundaries, uniform job descriptions, and consistent placement within institutional organizational structures (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Menke et al., 2020; McGill, 2019a, 2019b, 2021). Others still asked whether advising was a service (Bey, 2019; Engle, 2019; Proctor, 2019; Steele & White,

2019; Tuscan, 2019). Ultimately, some within and outside of higher education have perpetuated a simplistic view of academic advising as merely transmitting information to students for the sake of their timely graduation—a perception that limits what academic advising can do for student learning, growth, and development (McGill, 2021).

Some scholars investigating academic advising practice and scholarship (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008) have stressed the importance of developing a normative theory of the subject (Himes, 2014). Others have promoted the need to situate academic advising at the core of developing a new social contract for higher education (White, 2015), to understand the systems that undergird academic advising (Bridgen, 2017), and to posit that academic advising can be understood through narrative and storytelling (Hagen, 2020). These explorations suggest the overall “growth and development of theoretical debates and questions regarding the field of academic advising” (Burton, 2016, p. 3).

More recent works seek to resolve the field's identity crisis (Bridgen, 2017) and address the issue from philosophical, theoretical (Champlin-Scharff & Hagen, 2013), and historical lenses (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016). To resolve this identity crisis and establish academic advising as a distinct field of inquiry and practice, Lowenstein (2014) argued that a theory of advising—in contrast to borrowed theories used to articulate advising's purpose—was critical. Lowenstein distinguished a theory of advising from theories in advising and concurred with Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) that for too long, academic advising had relied on other disciplines to explain what constitutes advising.

In this paper, we examine Lowenstein's (2014) normative theory which emphasized what

advisors “should” or “ought” to do. Lowenstein’s ethical and behavioral focus allowed advisors to articulate what was unique to academic advising. In this approach, Lowenstein encouraged advisors to engage in earnest debate about their field and address questions advising scholars have raised.

Given Lowenstein’s (2014) charge to examine scholars’ arguments, we evaluate the assumptions inherent in his arguments. In so doing, we contend that advisors must continually reflect upon—and when necessary, reject or revise—theories in or of advising that are not practicable, not grounded in evidence-based practices, nor reflective of the profession’s values (NACADA, 2017a). In this paper, we engage with the six tenets of Lowenstein’s (2014) Theory of Integrative Learning, and consider what is at stake if the field seeks to derive a unified theory of advising.

Research Context, Conceptual Framework, and Methods

This project involves one university professor and five Ph.D. students engaging with Dr. Marc Lowenstein’s work. We employed a form of qualitative inquiry in which the researchers were also participants. This allowed unique access to mental events alongside collaborative critical questioning and support. Craig, an assistant professor, contacted PhD students who had taken his doctoral seminar on academic advising administration in fall 2020. Before entering the professoriate, Craig was a primary-role academic advisor for nearly a decade. He identifies as a white, gay, cisgender man from the American Midwest who is orphaned and temporarily abled. Five students from his fall course agreed to participate as researcher-participants. Laurie is a white, cisgender female advising administrator at a mid-sized public research institution on the East Coast. Helena is a white, cisgender female advising administrator at a mid-sized private institution in the Northeast. Billie is a white, cisgender female advising administrator at a small private institution in the Midwest. Chloe is a white, cisgender female graduate teaching (advising) assistant. And Michelle is a white, queer, cisgender female advising coordinator at a large land-grant university. Importantly, each of us are from U.S. institutions and work within the U.S. higher education system. We acknowledge this is only one model of higher education and that our backgrounds and advising experiences, as well as our interpretation of Lowenstein, are influenced

by this. Finally, we acknowledge we are all white and our whiteness affords us much privilege and can limit our lens even within our U.S. context.

Our inquiry was built through first establishing a community of practice, or CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A CoP within a doctoral cohort has many benefits, including mutual support, greater solidarity among the members, facilitation of intellectually stimulating learning environments, and creation of opportunities for coauthorship of presentations and publications (Govender & Dhunpath, 2011). Collaboration and collegiality are key features of both communities of practice and successful doctoral cohorts (Govender & Dhunpath, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Wenger, 1999).

Socially constructed community learning is situated within particular historical and social contexts (Farnsworth et al., 2016; Wenger, 1999). Learning is not passive reception of information but rather a function of engaged participation in constructing knowledge within communities. Such learning not only contributes to participants’ knowledge, but also shapes their professional practices and career trajectories (Smith et al., 2017). “CoP in higher education serves to connect students who have a common interest (e.g., academic major or qualifications) and learning purpose, allowing them to form a learning team voluntarily” (Kim et al., 2018, para. 7).

We chose the CoP framework to guide our analysis and discussion of Lowenstein’s (2014) integrative learning theory because five of the student authors, whose research and practice focuses on academic advising, are in the same doctoral cohort. We, the student participants, consciously chose to include the faculty member as a participant in the CoP and not merely as a facilitator. The primary goal of CoPs is to enhance knowledge creation and practice through the collective sharing of insights and expertise among all its members; in this way, each member’s contributions enrich the entire CoP experience.

Not all communities (nor all doctoral cohorts) are CoPs (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). To be a CoP, the group must: 1) share a commitment to and competence within the same domain of practice; 2) forge community through shared inquiry and discussion that fosters learning for all members; and 3) embrace individual and collective practices which are furthered through

the sharing of experience and resources (Wenger, 1999; Wegner-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Additionally, *legitimate peripheral participation* and *reification* are distinguishing features of CoPs (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Legitimate peripheral participation is the participants' process of moving from the margins to the center of the community's inquiry or from a position of minimal engagement to full participation in the construction and application of learning gained through the work of the CoP. Reification is the act of giving form to CoP knowledge by journaling, writing collaboratively, or presenting at conferences (Gauthier, 2016). For these reasons, the CoP framework was ideal to guide our collective inquiry into Lowenstein's (2014) theory.

Building on fall 2020 course discussions, the group sought to investigate Lowenstein's work on a unified theory of academic advising and its implications for the field. Initially, we set out to explore Lowenstein's (2013) vision of the future and his ideas of what a theory of advising would entail (Lowenstein, 2014) but after some discussion, we decided to focus on the latter, and posed the following reflective questions to guide further inquiry:

- What are the implications of having a unified theory of academic advising?
- What are the potential ramifications (both negative and positive) of such a theory?
- Who benefits and who is potentially excluded?

We agreed to respond to these questions independently over three weeks. Afterwards, we met over Zoom and determined a process for examining each other's responses. Merging responses into one shared document, the group asynchronously debated each question and response. We revised our original responses based on reviewer feedback. Due to time limitations, these interactions occurred over a couple of weeks and continued during the revision process. This process spurred a dialogue that created more avenues than could be pursued in one paper. Here, the group presents on the six tenets of Lowenstein's proposed theory; our findings are presented as a dialogue around those six tenets.

Dialogue

Lowenstein (2014) argues for a theory of academic advising with a twofold purpose: first, to distinguish advising from related activities like

counseling or teaching; second, to prescribe what academic advising ought to do or be. He believed that a theory of academic advising could be comprehensive, considering the variety that exists in advising while also articulating a shared set of purposes or goals. Lowenstein allowed that such a theory need not and perhaps should not be officially endorsed; instead, it could evolve to gain common acceptance.

Lowenstein's (2014) theory is not descriptive but rather *normative* (i.e., one that suggests what advising *ought* to do as opposed to what it does do). Lowenstein suggested that when evaluating a normative theory, one should ask whether it inspires new approaches or explorations; in short, does it hold up an ideal that people want to pursue? Such a theory should select the right examples of excellence, lead to new perspectives and interpretations, and encourage the exploration of new questions. As such, Lowenstein proposed a theory of advising as integrative learning with six key points: 1) advising is an academic endeavor; 2) advising enhances learning and is a locus of learning; 3) the learning in advising is integrative, helping students make meaning of the whole; 4) the student is an active participant in the process; 5) advising is transformative, not transactional; and 6) advising is central to achieving the institution's goals for student learning. In the following, we pose questions that emerged for us from each of the six tenets of his theory. We use each question as an anchor from which to engage with his six tenets with the tenet to which it refers in parentheses.

Is academic advising *solely* an academic matter? (L1)

Lowenstein (2014) asserted that "academic advising is an academic endeavor" (para. 50). However, is academic advising *solely* an academic matter? Advising may well focus on academic questions, but it also addresses how those questions intersect with or even contradict personal, career, or financial concerns. For example, advisors engage in career planning, but it is distinct from career counseling because it is paired with course selection and educational planning. Financial questions may also be situated in the context of budgeting for college expenses. So, what counts as "academic" advising? And who decides what counts as academic? Our responses are listed below.

Billie: If the topics do not relate to the educational setting, is it not advising? If the topic is not something every advisor (regardless of role or institutional type) would discuss, would it be included? Do advisors have to discuss students' courses for it to be advising? If we agree that advising may include personal, financial, and career concerns, we are making a statement about what advising *could* be. Some may argue we perceive advising holistically or are supporting a developmental perspective of advising. Would we agree?

Laurie: I'm not sure the inclusion of personal, financial, and career concerns necessarily means we are arguing in favor of a developmental view of advising. Perhaps all that needs to be added to Lowenstein's assertion is to say advising is *primarily* an academic endeavor? I believe advising is a site of negotiated learning. In Lowenstein's theory, however, the student seemingly has little agency beyond being able to move freely inside the box which the advisor labels "academic learning." It is the same problem I have with writing learning outcomes for advising. Should there be learning outcomes? Yes. Should the advisor write them all? No. Active learning requires active student participation. Active participation can look radically different from one student to another, just as learning outcomes can also be radically different.

Chloe: Including personal, financial, and career concerns does not mean we endorse a developmental view of advising. Given the level of student diversity within institutional settings, we (advisors) should consider when a prescriptive approach is necessary. Crookston (1972; 2009) described prescriptive advising as an authoritative relationship in which advisors teach and students learn. Crookston pitted prescriptive and developmental advising against one another. It is not appropriate to say advising is primarily an academic endeavor without first considering how institutional structures and systems have shaped advising relationships and practices.

Helena: Have we really defined what advising is? Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008)

questioned whether using metaphors to define advising hindered the ability for advising to stand out as a field in its own right. They state, "we view academic advising as an interdisciplinary field, which brings together different parts of the university in theory and practice" (p. 49). In this practice "advisors create opportunities for students to increase their understanding of academic choices and possibilities" (p. 49). The theory "offers opportunities for advisors to create distinctive scholarship about educational planning and higher education" (p. 49). If we define advising more broadly, is the idea of a theory of advising more palatable to us?

Lowenstein's contention that advising was an academic endeavor led us to ask whether advising was solely an academic endeavor, which then led us to question the very nature of what constitutes "advising" in academia, and even what makes academic advising *academic*. We reflected on our own advising practices and further debated the many different types of advising in which advisors engage and how we integrate the idea of active learning into the process. Out of these exchanges arose a consensus of advising's complexities and the challenges inherent in trying to define what advising is or ought to do.

Does academic advising enhance merely academic learning? (L2)

Lowenstein (2014) asserts that "advising enhances learning and at its core is a locus of learning and not merely a signpost to learning" (para. 51). We associated academic learning with intellectual or cognitive growth that occurs within the formal curriculum, which privileges teaching in the classroom at the expense of learning that occurs elsewhere on campus or in communities. Lowenstein implies the student's only role is that of learner; however, we contend the student may at times be the teacher, too, and the advisor may have much to learn in those moments. Central to advising is the need to honor the agency of students. Is this a normative attribute that could/should be included in a unified theory of advising?

Laurie: If we are promoting a normative theory of academic advising, I believe that honoring students' agency is of paramount

importance. Lowenstein, however, positions the advisor as expert. Instead, I view the advisor as a collaborator, in dialogue with the student.

Helena: I agree with the need to honor student agency and to see advising as a collaborative effort. Is there a disconnect between theory and philosophy? Is that what is concerning us? Normally we talk about theory to practice, but can we put a philosophy into practice? Lowenstein (2014) suggests that a theory of advising, “will try to answer the essential characteristics of advising that distinguish it from other fields, such as classroom teaching or personal counseling” (para. 14). But this seems to relate more to a theory of practice than a philosophy. While Lowenstein stresses the expertise of the advisor, I am not sure that a unified theory/philosophy of advising would necessarily have to eliminate the advisee’s teaching role.

Chloe: While I agree with Lowenstein’s ideal that learning is a continual growth process, we must be cautious that advising is not presumed to only enhance academic learning, which is why we cannot ignore the context or conditions surrounding matters of advising. Students are learners who have agency in the learning process, not merely passive recipients of learning.

After ruminating on whether advising enhances *only* academic learning, most of us suggest that before a normative theory of academic advising can be postulated, advisors must honor student agency and work collaboratively in an approach that considers the advisor and advisee both as experts in the learning process. Ultimately, we wondered whether a unified theory/philosophy of advising would eliminate the advisee’s role as an active participant in learning.

Does integrative learning always help students make meaning in the moment of the advising session? (L3)

Lowenstein (2014) contended, “The learning that happens in advising is integrative, and helps students make meaning out of their education” (para. 53). He suggested here that integrative learning occurring within advising is a present-

tense process. However, learning resulting from advising may occur months or even years after an advising encounter (McGill, 2021), and integrative learning may *require* years of additional experience and reflection. Most students do not make meaning of the whole as they are experiencing it; indeed, most people do not. Reflection and time are necessary parts of the integrative learning process. Lowenstein’s coherent whole also presupposes a single definition of coherence, and implies that once coherence is achieved, it is fixed. Is integrative learning a process or a destination? Or both? Furthermore, how do advisors’ caseloads impact these aspirations?

Billie: Advising is one of the few places in the academy where institutions invite students to engage in continuous integrated reflection (Lowenstein, 2015). Yet, institutions seldom provide the structures to facilitate this process. Students can construct an understanding of the whole instead of perceiving their courses as a list of activities. When done well, this personal meaning-making deepens commitment to and appreciation for learning. Regarding caseloads, a normative theory is intended to be aspirational. We cannot eliminate an argument simply because the field is not there yet. Whatever normative concept arises, advisors will use and refine it. Understanding that our definition is dynamic and continues to evolve, what is the criteria? Is it evidence-based? Culturally responsive? Does our agreed upon criteria point to another central aspect of advising, like scholarship or inclusive excellence?

Laurie: Academic advising is both a relationship and a site of learning integration. Billie’s points about other central aspects of advising, such as scholarship and inclusive excellence—these are also necessary elements to include in a normative concept of academic advising. And yet, as with Lowenstein’s six points, they don’t necessarily help to differentiate advising from other kinds of activities, such as teaching.

Helena: I understand what you are saying about integrative learning being long-term and not just what occurs in the space of one

or more advising meetings. But I am not sure if, when Lowenstein writes “advising,” he is referring to those point-in-time occurrences. That’s the way advising is often portrayed. It is the advising relationship that might take advising out of the present sphere.

From quality advising, students may construct meaning and engage in interdisciplinary reflection during college and beyond, but this is not a prerequisite for advising. While Lowenstein’s normative theory included distinctive features of advising, such as a coherent understanding of the logic of the curriculum, advisors should not overlook central aspects found elsewhere in the academy given the ethical implications and potential for harm if advisors do not exhibit such behaviors. Integrative learning speaks to both a process and outcome but could potentially be derailed in situations where surrounding conditions either allow for or prevent this type of learning from happening.

If a student is a passive participant, is it still academic advising? (L4)

Lowenstein’s (2014) fourth tenet is, “The student must be an active rather than a passive participant in this process” (para. 55); however, students may or may not be active participants in academic advising. If not an active participant, but the student has shown up for an advising appointment, are they not being advised? If the student is an active participant but we misadvise them, does that mean they have not experienced academic advising?

Laurie: Active participation is required of both parties. There is shared responsibility in the relationship. Lowenstein seems to assume the student’s participation in advising will be active. However, experience tells us that’s not always the case. Perhaps more focus on the student as an equal partner in the advising relationship might ensure that Lowenstein’s ideal student behaves in ideal ways. “Ideal” should be a negotiated concept, though—not one that is predetermined by the advisor. Lowenstein privileges the advisor’s view of what “constructing an education” means and looks like. I am not entirely comfortable with that stance.

Michelle: The concept of an ideal student and advisor relationship is one that I have the most concerns with. It assumes that all students (and advisors, for that matter) are approaching both their advising relationship and their academic endeavors in the same way, which is not always true. Lumping everyone into the same grouping is detrimental.

Helena: If a student is not an active participant, has learning occurred? Lowenstein writes (2014), “the student has a task of constructing an education with the advisor serving as facilitator” (para. 57). This gets away from the advisor as expert; it is the student who is constructing the learning.

Billie: Integrated reflection requires active participation from students. While students may not always be involved, advisors would aspire for students to be engaged. Normative theory is aspirational, but defining engagement is complex. Any attempt to define the ideal student risks imposing dominant cultural behaviors which could marginalize nondominant groups. Some students may not be comfortable challenging or asking questions of people in authoritative positions. We also need to examine the ways colleges design the environments. Are we positioning students to be active in the ways we structure advising? We want to avoid perceptions that students are deficient.

Chloe: We must not assume that a student comes with the capital to construct their education actively with the advisor fulfilling the role as facilitator. Assumptions left critically unexplored or questioned constitutes privilege.

Laurie: Lowenstein’s assertion that a theory of advising should prescribe what *ought* to happen is troubling. Implicit in the “ought” is a privileged, invisible decision-maker who determines the goals and aspirations for academic advising. Who is that decision-maker? Student voices in articulating what academic advising ought to be are notably absent. We are so accustomed to this view—that the institution (or its representatives)

knows best—that we rarely question it. Yet as advisors, we know too well that in advising, there is seldom one right answer.

The group engaged in rigorous discussions about both students' and advisors' roles and considered ways power and privilege are implicit in normative theory. Advising as an equal partnership is ideal and should be predicated on inclusive practices. However, power and privilege influence participation as a socially and historically situated construct; so, we also must acknowledge the power tied to being an expert in advising. Advisors need to be continually questioning whether our practices are indeed inclusive—which may involve the very type of debate Lowenstein encouraged.

Is academic advising always transformative? Can transactional advising sessions be effective and even meaningful? (L5)

Fifth, Lowenstein (2014) argued, "Advising is transformative, not transactional" (para. 57). We debated this point. Some advising moments may require a transactional approach and may be helpful to build the trust that can allow for transformation. Thus, transformation may not always be the ideal need, as Lowenstein stated. Also, who gets to decide what counts as transformation? Should transformation be the ultimate goal?

Billie: We should examine this assumption; some have portrayed prescriptive advising negatively. In some cultures, people may prefer more direct techniques. The outcome could be equally beneficial because advising is predicated on an exchange of information. A degree of informational competency is warranted regardless. Competency could be a central component to normative theory if the field believed such a philosophy was warranted.

Laurie: As an advisor, I would love for all advising encounters—or at least relationships—to be transformational, but that view does not center the student. Instead, it centers the advisor: *I am important and necessary to the student*. But some students do not want or need to be transformed. This assumption is, for me, problematic.

Helena: This reminds me of the example of the advisor of the future (Lowenstein, 2013). With the addition of artificial intelligence (AI), transactional advising became somewhat more intuitive, even if still transactional. Not all students want or need to be transformed, but is there a happy medium between transactional and transformational? How do we communicate our advising philosophy to students? If, after we do so, they say "thanks, but can I just have my PIN, please," we know they don't want to be transformed, but at some point do we have to give them the option of being transformed? Some advisors email students the courses they should take and the students are happy with that interaction. Others say, "No, I want to be advised." Should advising offer more than a transactional experience to students? Is this the philosophy we want?

Billie: If we do not let students' desires dictate their education elsewhere in the academy, why would we do it with advising? How many students want to be taught math, English, Spanish, etc.? I worry we are undermining the merits of our field by making learning optional instead of essential. Normative statements are intended to be aspirational.

Helena: Yes, we need to communicate the essentialness of our work: Can a theory of advising do that?

Laurie: True, learning is not optional. But what counts as "learning"? And who decides? Is the learning advisor-directed, or student-directed?

Chloe: Who is centered in advising relationships? That entire concept, which forms the reasoning for a need to have a theory of advising, reflects roles of dominance. When distinction or separation gets prioritized in advising, the focus drifts away from students.

Overall, we concurred with Lowenstein that, at its best, academic advising can be transformative. However, we remain troubled by a view of advising that centers the advisor instead of the student. Perhaps some would argue this should be so—that the advisor's role is to facilitate the

learning process. However, this approach assumes that advisors know what is best for the student, that transformation constitutes all students' most pressing need. For any theory to be unified, the student voices cannot be excluded.

Is academic advising valued as a site of learning? (L6)

Lowenstein's (2014) final tenet is "Advising is central to achieving the learning goals of any college or university" (para. 58). We agree that advising should be valued as a site of learning and be central to the institution's goals for student learning. However, advising is seldom valued as a site for learning, let alone *integrative* learning. We wonder, though, if advising is not valued as a site for learning because higher education and the general public does not have an understanding of it? Does this affirm Lowenstein's need for common understanding? If we concede that people do not understand advising, what solution would we propose?

Laurie: A common understanding would have value—but is it possible to achieve? To borrow Lowenstein's (2014) example, most people have a general idea of what nursing is—yet there remains considerable debate within the field about how it should be practiced. Do we need a unified theory, or do we simply need to be clearer about what academic advisors do—or maybe, what won't get done if advisors aren't there to do it?

Helena: A normative theory of advising, that is defining advising by what we *ought* to do as opposed to what we *actually* do, remains unclear to me. I'm thinking of an advising philosophy—general outcomes of what we want students to leave the advising experience (from start to finish and beyond) with. If we don't have that, can we achieve a unified understanding? To use the nursing example: Would most agree what the outcomes of nursing should be?

Billie: The general public might agree with the positive objectives of professions like nursing, law, medicine, etc. So, how might students be harmed if advising did not exist? Literature exists related to the ways advisors and administrators perceive advising (Larson

et al., 2018; Menke et al., 2020). Future researchers should further examine the ways students, families, and the public understand and appreciate advising.

Chloe: Is achieving a common understanding of advising possible? Regarding the nursing example, consider the support systems and resources available for nurses to deliver services. These elements influence how the field is perceived, valued, and practiced. Nursing outcomes might seem universal; however, nurses' experiences will differ by institution. When considering how experiences differ, consider the organizational system that surrounds nurses and how nursing is structured to function in that particular environment.

The group agreed that a common understanding of advising outcomes is necessary and beneficial, but difficult to achieve and likely clouded by the privilege of whomever would be defining the outcomes. As the field continues to define advising objectives, practitioner-scholars need to include multiple stakeholders. This is where higher education administrative perception becomes essential. Administrators are highly influential advocates for advising and hold power to change the discourse regarding advising's value (Menke et al., 2020).

Discussion

Lowenstein (2014) asked advisors to consider a unified advising theory with the purpose of "articulat[ing] advising as a distinct field of thought and practice" (para. 3). This would be a normative theory, which describes the ideal: what *ought* to occur in academic advising as opposed to "descriptions of actual practice" (Lowenstein, 2014, para. 49).

In discussing distinctions between comprehensive and unified theories, Lowenstein (2014) remarked that a "theory might be comprehensive without being generally accepted and vice-versa" (para. 35). This statement raises some questions: How effective is a comprehensive theory if not generally acceptable? If it is generally accepted but not comprehensive, will only those who accept it benefit from it? While comprehensive may be a better term, these questions raise the overall question: Should the advising profession

at this point accept a comprehensive or unified theory?

First, we must consider for whom any unified theory is written. A true “unified” theory of advising would recognize the equal role of advisors and advisees, seeing them both as active participants in integrative learning. According to Lowenstein (2014), “the student has a task of constructing an education with the advisor serving as facilitator” (para. 57). A unified theory should, then, be constructed in a way that allows advisees ownership of their own learning. Students learn, and make meaning of their learning, in many ways depending on their background, experiences, cultures, etc. Lowenstein (2014) suggested that advisors could work toward “an ideal for advising to which we could all strive in ways appropriate to our individual settings” (para. 24); however, it becomes more challenging to unite all these potentially disparate ideals. The profession should recognize that everyone involved in these relationships enters them with different goals and expectations.

Attempts at creating a unified theory need to consider: who is being left out of the equation, or who is not well-served by the proposed theory? Lowenstein (2014) expressed “discomfort with an officially sanctioned common theory” as opposed to a “freely reached common theory...[which] gain[s] wider and wider acceptance” (para. 34). So, how can we “freely reach” a theory that is inclusive to as many as possible while excluding as few as possible? While an admirable goal, we question whether any theory can benefit/include all and exclude none. As advising professionals, we must critically assess whether any theory—and in turn, practices guided by those theories—are reflective and appreciative of the diverse groups of students we serve. Should a unified theory be for U.S. advisors, or for all advisors, and if so, would a theory based in a U.S. context be truly inclusive?

Further, regarding any normative view of advising, the field should foster dialogue and learning in *both* directions. Advising’s relational aspects must factor into the theory in some way. We need to be honest about our assumptions. Not all theory applies to everyone. Any advisor who engages with students without a presupposed understanding of what *should* happen in those encounters is an advisor ready to learn with and from those students—an important outcome in academic advising that is missing from Lowenstein’s framework.

Despite these objections, we believe Lowenstein (2014) successfully meets his own criteria for what a normative theory must accomplish. However, in his six points, we are not convinced Lowenstein successfully distinguished academic advising from related activities like teaching or counseling. Most of his points about teaching may be true; all but the first—being an academic endeavor—may be true in a counseling setting (and vice versa). Moreover, we are not fully convinced Lowenstein has accomplished more than proposing a *framework* for academic advising and a set of goals. He gives the example of Roy’s (2017) theory in nursing, but this is also a framework. Roy’s Adaptation Model (RAM) similarly succeeds in articulating a vision of what nursing ought to look like; but like Lowenstein’s vision for advising, Roy’s vision does not clearly distinguish how nursing is fundamentally different from other healthcare fields like speech therapy or psychotherapy.

Indeed, we wondered, does *any* field have a singular theory that clearly distinguishes it from other fields or disciplines? In most fields, multiple theories guide both inquiry and practice; indeed, much learning is derived from the interplay between multiple theories, and from the research and practice that both inform and are informed by those theories. For instance, many student-development theories define student-affairs practice, but even the latter covers a whole slew of functional areas. Advising is one functional area in higher education that has borrowed from other theories to guide its practice.

A comprehensive theory of advising might be possible, but perhaps not at this moment. Currently, advising may be too diffuse a profession for any such theory. NACADA: The Global *Community* for Academic Advising, recently changed its name from the National Academic Advising *Association*, which suggests a more collective approach to defining what we *might* do, than prescribing what we *ought* to do. Fifteen years ago, NACADA developed a “Concept of Academic Advising” (NACADA, 2006), rewrote its Core Values (NACADA, 2017a), and defined competencies for advisors (NACADA, 2017b, i.e. “Pillars of Academic Advising”). We wonder what a theory of advising would explicate that these pillars do not? If theory can do more than what these pillars promote, then perhaps they are a foundation upon which some comprehensive theory of advising theory can be constructed. But to create such a living and working document

would require as many people from our “global community” as possible: faculty, primary-role advisors, students, parents, former advisors, advising administrators, etc., to define our work and the work we aspire to do in advising.

Our dialogue led us to three conclusions:

- Advising is a science. If it is to be a profession, advising must be founded on research, not just espoused beliefs. Researchers will best demonstrate and debate the merits of advising theory. The NACADA community and practitioner-scholars continuously need to refine and reflect upon our perspectives. The definition of academic advising cannot remain static.
- Advising is an art. Not every question can be answered through science. Our students’ diverse identities and situations are multi-dimensional. Advisors need to honor this complexity in whatever perspectives they espouse or publish.
- Advising is an ethical practice. To avoid harm, the field needs to frame foundational behaviors, practices, and competencies all advisors must exhibit from day one. To advance this ethos, NACADA should further examine and refine its pillar documents (NACADA, n.d.).

Limitations

There were three identified limitations in this study. First, each of us identifies as white Americans; thus, our perspective of advising is limited to the U.S. educational systems. Namely, our view of privileging the student is characteristic of an individualistic culture; but what about collectivist cultures? Scholars should explore these differences in seeking a unified theory of advising. Second, there was a power dynamic inherent in the group’s construction. Craig, the first author and assistant professor, had (at least) two positions of privilege: as instructor and as a male. Although we aimed for an egalitarian group, our responses could have been shaped by the inherent power dynamic of the group’s construction.

Finally, the timeframe for data collection and analysis remained a limitation. Having additional time to discuss and deliberate Lowenstein’s works would have enhanced our engagement with the topic. Given this condensed timeframe, we

decided on a direction very quickly. This decision was pragmatic and essential to a timely completion of our manuscript, but it also constrained dialogue more than we would have preferred. This limitation was made even clearer to us when it came to editing/revising our work, where we were challenged with deciding just how much to change and whether that would alter the organic nature of the original conversation; indeed, we continued to engage in friendly debate throughout the process.

Conclusion

Any unified theory of advising would need to be dynamic; indeed, this should be an on-going goal of any profession (McGill, 2019b). So far, scholars have spurred the profession in the right direction. For instance, Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) speak of a “scholarly identity” becoming a “priority within academic advising” (p. 51) and posit that theory is part of this identity. But it is also possible to consider that scholarly identity can be part of any comprehensive (or unified) future theory of academic advising. We deeply respect Lowenstein for his continuing contributions to the academic advising profession, and aimed to establish a foundation in which an exchange of ideas could be communicated in an authentic, safe space. We worked to embrace vulnerability through the decision to evolve from minimal engagement to full participation in the construction and application of learning. Ultimately, we seek to increase dialogue about academic advising and, like Lowenstein, urge others to explore the purpose and value of our work.

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