

The Foundation Lowenstein Laid

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This personal growth narrative follows the author's naïve, idealistic entry into the academic advising profession, through disillusionment with the realities found in the higher education arena and fears of her ability to navigate them, to a place of competence and contentment with the contributions made as the end of her career comes into sight. Guided by the road map provided by Marc Lowenstein's body of work, the author learned to approach academic advising as a process in which advisors, through dialogue, coconstruct with their advisees an education that provides meaning and value to the student.

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My journey as a primary-role academic advisor began in the mid-1990s at a very small community college extension campus located on a military installation. While completing a master's degree in higher education administration and working there in a part-time clerical, part-time instructor role, I was intrigued by seeing some of what the two academic advisors did. I had been a nontraditional adult undergraduate student at similar extension campuses, but none had offered academic advising services, leaving me to navigate my way to associate's and bachelor's degrees on my own, aided only by paper catalogs and registration clerks. I did not even know there was such a thing as a college-level academic advisor until I started working at this campus. However, once I learned of such a position, I immediately felt it was something I would like to do. Thus, when one of those positions opened just as I was completing my graduate work, I applied and was thrilled when I was selected for it.

I dove into my new role with gusto and a sense that this would not be just a job for me, but rather a vocation. The students I worked with were all military-related, and with two decades as a

military spouse under my belt, I felt a strong affinity with them. Many were young, enlisted soldiers who were seeking to attain the education credits they needed to be eligible to move up in the ranks. Others were approaching their 20-year military retirement mark and were preparing for jobs in the civilian world. A few were veterans who had already separated from service but could still take advantage of the military base offerings. And some were family members of those soldiers. Some were in what they hoped would be just the beginnings of their higher education journey, but most were focused on completing an associate degree. Almost all were highly motivated, and it was deeply gratifying to assist them in navigating their educational journeys.

All the offered degree tracks were clearly mapped out (including the one that was intended for transfer to a four-year institution), and thus the advising was primarily prescriptive in the sense that there were few elective options. Most students were financing their studies with military tuition assistance, GI Bill funds, or Pell Grants, and it was critical that they achieve required progress markers to maintain that funding. I enjoyed aiding them in ensuring those markers were met, and my graduate work in education administration had prepared me well to do so. At the time, I did not know to apply the term *prescriptive* to what I was doing. I simply thought that what I was doing was academic advising. I had never heard of NACADA and did not know anything about advising as a profession.

I enjoyed being part of a higher education environment. I wanted to learn more, so I began a second master's program, this time in educational psychology. As I became immersed in student development theory, I realized there was not much opportunity to apply those fascinating constructs in my current position, so I began to look for other opportunities. In 2000, I accepted an advising position working with undeclared/ exploring students and interdisciplinary social science majors at a nearby university. My new advisees were mostly traditional-aged college

students, and I believed they would be eager for assistance in the various areas of growth as they worked their way through the seven vectors of student development, grew towards self-authorship, expanded their ability for meaning making, navigated moral development, and so on. I eagerly began my new position with the excited assumption that I would be expected to provide what I had learned was termed *developmental advising*. Although I had never actually seen this type of academic advising in action and had not been trained in any type of skill set to do the work, I naively assumed that having a good foundation in the underlying theoretical concepts would be enough to get me off to a good start, and I trusted that I would be working with more experienced colleagues who would be willing and able to give me pointers on how to fill in any gaps in my practical application experience. My enthusiasm was unbounded as I began my new role.

Imagine my shock and dismay when I learned that my caseload topped 500 students, that it was expected that I would only see most of them for a 20-minute meeting once per semester, and that I was not allowed to ask them to do any preappointment preparation! Clearly, this was not going to be a situation that stimulated either developmental advising of students or growth as an advisor. My idealistic vision was shattered, and I was devastated. I had accepted the position without first asking the right questions about what the expectations were, and there was no going back. It became my challenge to figure out how I could do the best for my advisees within the constraints I found myself. Still, the knowledge that I could—and, I felt, should—be doing more for those students weighed heavily on me, and there were many days when the challenge felt insurmountable.

Fortunately, I found advising colleagues who shared my deep desire to do more than serve as a class scheduler for our advisees. They introduced me to NACADA (then the National Academic Advising Association), and one of them shared Marc Lowenstein's (1999) recently published article, *An Alternative to the Developmental Theory of Advising*. I can very clearly recall sitting at my desk reading the article, with tears of relief streaming down my face as I felt a heavy weight sliding off my shoulders and the realization dawning that here was a framework in which I could situate myself that would guide me in

maximizing whatever time I would be allowed to share with my advisees.

In this article, Lowenstein (1999) explained the difference between advising *style* and advising *content*, and his descriptions of the alternatives of both areas gave me exactly what I needed to clarify my own thinking. I read the article over and over again and kept a printed version right on my desk to refer back to whenever my confidence began to waiver. I knew that I was most comfortable with what Lowenstein termed a *collaborative style*, and I was grateful to him for articulating it. That had, in fact, always been my way of interacting, even when my advisees' options were few. While this was new terminology for me, it did not change anything in my practice; it simply reinforced my preferred way of being.

What was new for me was Lowenstein's (1999) comparison of the *developmentally centered paradigm* and the *academically centered paradigm*. My enthusiastic study of the broad range of student development theory had left me expecting that I would be able to assist students in a much larger way than I eventually understood would have been feasible even with a much smaller caseload. Lowenstein's explanation of the *academically centered paradigm* made sense for my situation. The four constructs in his description of what he envisioned as "the exemplary advisor" served as a guide on how I could work with my advisees and where I could seek to improve my advising skills. My situation would remain far from my ideal, but here was a road map for making the best of it.

It was not long after this that I found Lowenstein's (2000) next article, *Academic Advising and the "Logic" of the Curriculum*, which expanded upon the academically centered paradigm and provided some specific ways to organize the goals I could work toward with my advisees. This was especially helpful with the interdisciplinary social science majors I worked with who were, to a significant degree, designing their own programs. Drawing on Lowenstein's description, I could explain to them that the logic of their curriculum should consist of an overall goal, sub-goals that were part of that overall goal or steps towards it, groups of courses chosen to address each subgoal, and relationships among the courses. These two articles served as a solid foundation for my work with these students for the next four years.

By 2005, I was ready for a new adventure when I learned that NACADA was advertising for the newly created position of coordinator of educational programming. I joined the NACADA Executive Office in March of that year. I soon learned from my colleague Marsha Miller, who served as the managing editor for the *NACADA Journal*, that Lowenstein was working on a new article that took his previous work further. That Fall 2005 edition of the *NACADA Journal* contained what would become Lowenstein's perhaps most well-known article, *If Advising is Teaching, What Do Advisors Teach?* Lowenstein's articulation of academic advising as a teaching and learning process is so widely appreciated across the profession today that there is no need for me to explain why it undergirded all my work for seven years as NACADA's coordinator of educational programming and continues to do so today in my position as an assistant director of programs and projects.

In 2011, I was elated to discover that Lowenstein had published his vision of what an outstanding academic advising program, based in a learning-centered philosophy, could look like in the "University of Utopia" (UU). In this vision, readers are treated to a glimpse of a situation in which we can "think of the advising transaction as a locus of student learning that is coequal with the classroom but may add much more value" (Core Ideas, para. 2). In this UU, "facilitation of higher-level reflection and meaning construction" in relation to the linkages among the pieces of a student's education become "the province of a student's academic advisor" (Core Ideas, para. 9). Lowenstein painted the picture that brought into focus my unarticulated expectations of what academic advising would be when I naively stepped into it a decade earlier. Again, tears slipped down my cheeks as I read the description of what ideal advising could be—but now knew often was not—when fully expressed.

In 2013, in my role as NACADA's webinar producer, I was granted the tremendous privilege of working with Marc Lowenstein, Peter Hagen, Janet Schulenberg, Sarah Champlin-Scharff, and Hilleary Himes in a virtual presentation titled *Emerging Issues in Academic Advising Theory*. In the presentation, these brilliant scholars discussed the need for academic advising, as a field, to become self-authored by advising professionals. Lowenstein's copresenters shared a bit about the history of advising in higher education and discussed the contributions of theoretical con-

structs from many other disciplines into advising, including education, social science, and humanities. They discussed advising as a process in which advisors, through dialogue, coconstruct with their advisees an education that provides meaning and value to the student. Lowenstein then completed the presentation by sharing his thoughts regarding the need for a normative statement of what academic advising ideally could and should be. He explained that, in his work, he had been seeking to develop a comprehensive statement of advising that would apply in any setting, with any student. He contended that such a statement would provide unity of purpose for all of us in the field, and equally importantly, it would articulate for stakeholders at our institutions why advising is necessary. He stated four criteria for this overarching statement (or philosophy) of advising: It should be tied to a philosophy of higher education; it should identify common elements in all the disparate activities, settings, and populations that go under the heading of advising; it should distinguish essential from incidental characteristics of advising; and it should distinguish advising from other activities. He concluded by asserting that this statement of advising should identify what advisors do, both for those inside and for those outside the advising community, and show why advising is critical to achieving the goals institutions have for their students. It should imply a standard for what students and other stakeholders can expect from advisors, so that those expectations are appropriate and so advising professionals can be judged according to our own goals and standards, not on goals and standards set by others who have different agendas. And finally, it should inspire advisors to reach for a vision of excellence, an ideal to live up to. Having the opportunity to have a small role in the development of bringing this presentation to the NACADA membership was one of the high points of my professional career, and I savored every moment of listening to these gifted scholars share their ideas as they built the presentation. Best of all, by the time the webinar aired, these incredible humans, who I admired so much, had become my friends.

At the October 2015 NACADA Annual Conference, I had a chance to chat with Lowenstein following the Research Committee's "Common Reading" offering. I was elated to hear that our webinar had spurred him on to getting that statement/philosophy he had

discussed written and published as the normative Theory of Advising as Integrative Learning. In his article, *Toward a Theory of Advising*, Lowenstein (2014) offered “a plausible and comprehensive statement of the essential nature of advising that sets academic advising apart as a distinctive area of practice and thought” (Conclusion, para. 2). While this new theory may be summed up briefly in the following six points, reading the full article is critical to grasping what a masterful articulation this is of what academic advising can and should be.

- Advising is an academic endeavor. Its purposes are specific to institutions of higher learning.
- Advising enhances learning and at its core is a locus of learning and not merely a signpost to learning.
- The learning that happens is integrative and helps students make meaning out of their education as a whole.
- The student must be an active rather than passive participant in the process. The student has the task of constructing an education with the advisor serving as a facilitator.
- Advising is transformative, not transactional.
- Advising is central to achieving the goals of any college or university (“The Theory of Advising” section).

As I read the article, I was overjoyed to find that, to my mind, Lowenstein had succeeded in what he had said during the webinar that he desired to do: create a statement that could provide a unified foundation for the field of academic advising. And two years later, my belief was reinforced by NACADA’s Professional Development Committee when, in 2017, they decided to open the association’s new *Academic Advising Core Competencies Guide* with the above six points from Lowenstein’s Theory of Advising as Integrative Learning, which “constitute the essence of academic advising” (Farr & Cunningham, 2017, p. 3).

My practice as a primary-role academic advisor and my work as a member of the NACADA Executive Office Content Development Team have been informed and inspired by the contributions of countless theorists and practitioners, but it is the foundation laid by Marc Lowenstein that has been the grounding for

it all. Thank you, Marc, for inspiring me, again and again, to reach for a vision of excellence and for articulating an ideal for me to seek to live up to. I am forever grateful.

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Author’s Note

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