

A Philosophy of Advising and the Challenges of Implementation

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A philosophy of academic advising remains a critical conversation within academic advising scholarship. A comprehensive philosophy of academic advising holds significant impact on the future of advising practice and scholarship. Dr. Lowenstein's contributions to the integrative-learning paradigm have substantially furthered the discussion, but more work remains. Advising practice remains inconsistently aligned with any single philosophy. This divergence between philosophy and practice must be resolved by changes in the structures and systems in which academic advising resides.

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"If philosophies of advising disagree regarding what is at the core of advising, they will also disagree regarding the activities that define an excellent advisor" (Lowenstein, 2005, p. 65).

Throughout the 21st century, scholars have advocated for clarifying the role and purpose of academic advising (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Bridgen, 2017; McGill, 2018; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). This critical step is important to determine appropriate advising methods and create a distinct body of scholarship (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). Throughout this same period, Lowenstein has provided the most notable and comprehensive philosophy of advising. Lowenstein's contributions to clarifying the role and purpose of academic advising as "learning-centered" was a significant development in the scholarship of advising. Yet inconsistencies in how academic advising is understood in practice within and across institutions remain. This inconsistency must be resolved by identifying a clear and common philosophy of academic advising and making intentional changes to the institutional structures that direct advising.

Lowenstein (1999, 2005, 2014) has advocated for a shared understanding of the role and

purpose of academic advising, one unique to the role of advisors in higher education. While others have also called for a distinct purpose of academic advising (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999; Himes, 2014; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008), Lowenstein has provided a series of writings outlining a strong and sustained argument for understanding the purpose and role as one focused on teaching and learning. This sequence of articles began with "An Alternative to the Developmental Theory of Advising" (1999) and continued through several pieces including, "If Advising is Teaching, What Do Advisors Teach?" (2005), "Envisioning the Future" (2013), and "Toward a Theory of Advising" (2014). Dr. Lowenstein's collective work advocating for a focused philosophy, or normative theory, of academic advising is critically important to the practice, scholarship, and future of the field.

Despite Lowenstein's comprehensive and widely cited philosophy, challenges to implementing any shared view of the role and purpose of advising continue. These challenges often include structural and systemic characteristics of the institution or its constituents. For example, challenges to implementing a comprehensive philosophy include high student demand, diverse disciplinary background that does not necessarily align with advising practice, student perception of advising as scheduling, lack of understanding of advising philosophy by administrators, advisors lack of training, variable advising structures, and disparate and isolated advising offices (Gordon, 1994). Bridgen (2017) found similar challenges in the implementation of a learning-centered paradigm, observing that "the context of the university determines the true identity of advising" (p. 19). Thus, if advisors hope to align a common philosophy to the practice of academic advising, the system in which we practice must be changed.

A Philosophy Focused on Learning

Lowenstein uses "philosophy" to refer to his vision of a learning-centered paradigm in early

works (1999, 2005) yet intentionally shifts to “normative theory” in his later works to describe the overarching purpose (Lowenstein, 2014). Given the influence of social science fields in academic advising practice and scholarship, the language of “theory” is primarily used in advising literature to describe, predict, or explain how the world works (Lowenstein, 2014). Instead of the social science definition of a theory in academic advising, Lowenstein (2014) proposes a theory of advising: “A theory consists of very general ideas in any discipline that serve as foundations or in some cases explanations for more particular facts and ideas and which guide inquiry in that discipline.” A theory of advising, or a normative theory, provides the ultimate purpose of academic advising; the ideal of what advising should be or “what advising would be at its best...” (Lowenstein, 1999, 2014). As these ideas have evolved and developed, Lowenstein (2014) concedes that a theory of advising is synonymous with a philosophy of advising. This small change in terminology better aligns the diverse educational and disciplinary knowledge of practicing academic advisors and avoids the debate around having a “unified theory” (Jordan, 2003) or not—a debate made more contentious because of conflated definitions. A normative theory is the same as a philosophy; both indicate a statement about the overarching purpose.

In 1999, Lowenstein introduced the academically centered theory of advising. This proposed philosophy of advising included: working with students to understand the interrelationships of courses, help students determine how different disciplines complement one another, challenge intellectual presuppositions about life, and assists students as they embrace lifelong learning (Lowenstein, 1999). These characteristics distinguished the academically centered theory from developmental advising which focuses on facilitating student personal growth and development, and provided a purpose of academic advising that was distinct within higher education (Lowenstein, 1999). The goals of developmental advising for personal growth and development should not be limited to students in higher education (Lowenstein, 1999). These goals could easily overlap with responsibilities of other offices, such as counseling. Moreover, Lowenstein’s (1999) framing of academic advising as focused on learning places academic advising practice within the educational function of the institution.

Lowenstein further expanded the academic-centered or learning-centered theory in 2005, further aligning academic advising with a teaching and learning approach. The unique role of the academic advisor is to help guide the student in creating a curriculum and making meaning from those choices:

“The advisor has the unique opportunity to introduce the student to the idea that an education is not just the sum of its parts, to provide examples by recommending some choices with a structural rational, to encourage early efforts at thoughtful curriculum building and to support generally the student through the curriculum-building process.” (Lowenstein, 2005, p. 71)

Explicit in Lowenstein’s (2005) theory is a shift towards a more academic focus on academic advising practice.

While these initial ideas on the academic-centered theory were gaining support, Lowenstein (2011, 2013) took his ideas a step further by showing examples. Readers learned about an idealized advising practice at the University of Utopia (Lowenstein, 2011). This idealized vision of academic advising provides a possible view of what practice subscribing to the learning-centered philosophy could look like. For example, students earn credit for academic advising (Lowenstein, 2013). Earning credit for advising activities signifies that advising is an important learning activity, emphasizes the knowledge advisors bring to the relationship, and shares an expectation that students achieve the stated learning objectives (Lowenstein, 2013). The University of Utopia and Lowenstein’s vision for the future show clear connections between a philosophy of advising and the impact of an advising structure and day-to-day interactions with students (Lowenstein, 2011, 2013).

Lowenstein’s “Toward a Theory of Advising” (2014) also makes important strides in providing a clear purpose of academic advising. In addition to laying out the importance of a theory of (or philosophy of) advising, Lowenstein (2014) further develops his theory of advising as integrative learning. Important components of Lowenstein’s theory of advising include recognizing the contributions that advising brings to student learning, that learning is integrative, and advising is transformational (as opposed to transactional). To emphasize the unique role of

academic advising, Lowenstein (2014) argues that students' goals must align with their role as students; otherwise, everyone would need the services of an academic advisor.

A comprehensive philosophy of academic advising directly impacts practice by providing a framework for determining effective advising systems and models, expectations for academic advisors, priorities for working with students, and hiring and training for advisors. For example, many advisors work in one-on-one meetings with students, but perhaps additional ways of interaction can help meet the goals of advising. Are there settings, such as in workshops or a formal class, where small groups can meet advising outcomes? For example, Lowenstein (2014) advocates for advisors to have classroom teaching responsibilities. An advising portfolio that includes individual appointments with students and classroom teaching changes how an advisor (and an advising office) would structure their time and the priorities by which they are evaluated. In addition, what expectations surround continued professional development? How are academic advisors expected to engage with research and scholarship? Moreover, how does scholarship fit with other professional responsibilities? These are important considerations for balancing all demands on an advisor's time while meeting the overall purpose of academic advising.

A philosophy of advising will also influence how advisors work with students. The integrative learning view, to help students understand the "world of ideas" and deepen their thinking about the content of their courses (Lowenstein, 1999), can be adapted to fit any meeting with an individual student, regardless of the institution, department, or program. As Lowenstein (2000) argues, helping students understand the "logic of the curriculum" can occur whether the program is completely student-driven or prescribed. These views directly relate to learning objectives for an academic advising appointment. An academic advisor who sees advising as integrative learning will employ strategies to meet this objective.

In addition to strategies for working with students, a philosophy of advising also informs assessment. Assessment should include assessing individual student learning (if that is an expectation of advising) and assessment of advising across the institution. One example of student assessment informed by the integrative learning philosophy is a student portfolio that depicts the students' reflective learning throughout their

college experience (Lowenstein, 2013). This portfolio includes assignments from traditional courses and written reflections on the student's learning (Lowenstein, 2013). Program assessment of academic advising should connect the practice of advising back to the institution's educational mission.

Inconsistency Between Philosophy and Practice

Despite the growing literature based on a learning-centered view of advising, advising practice remains inconsistent and misaligned to any common philosophy. This continued discrepancy results from a lack of a shared view of the role and purpose—a shared philosophy of academic advising—but also systemic barriers (Bridgen, 2017; Gordon, 1994). Even if all advising practitioners and institutional leaders agreed with Lowenstein's view of academic advising, challenges remain in implementation. Constraints on academic advising come from academic advisors as well as students and institutional administration (Bridgen, 2017; Gordon, 1994).

Many academic advisors have come to advising from diverse educational backgrounds and bring their discipline's way of knowing to their work with students. These diverse educational experiences may impact how advisors approach advising, with advisors bringing diverse training and skills to the advising role (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015). Therefore, advising-based literature provides an important mechanism to create a common language and shared understanding of academic advising among practicing advisors. Published research and scholarship are important because it provides a shared language to discuss the fundamental ideas of a comprehensive philosophy of advising. As Lowenstein (2014) points out, there is not much literature addressing the importance of a philosophy of advising. While Lowenstein's "Toward a Theory of Advising" (2014) provides common language from which to discuss the premise of a theory of advising as well as the theory itself, inconsistency in practice remains. "...all personnel associated with an advising system must be educated about the theory and philosophy of advising so that they can understand the critical purposes of advising" (Bridgen, 2017, p. 18). This knowledge and understanding of an advising philosophy is especially true when advising services are distributed across institutions with independence and

little institutional oversight (Kapinos, 2021). Engagement with and contributions to the scholarship of advising are variable. First, practitioners' experience and knowledge in advising literature will likely depend on their educational background, prior work experience, and expertise in academic advising or higher education. Second, contributing to scholarly work is not a common expectation of practicing advisors (Troxel, 2018). Therefore, without a consistent knowledge base or expectations to engage with the literature, advisors may not contribute to the conversation and "will unlikely act in accordance with these goals" (Bridgen 2017, p. 18). Engagement in both reading and writing are critical to the development of a shared philosophy.

Many advisors report that working with students is the primary role of an academic advisor (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015). Yet, students do not necessarily understand the role academic advisors could play in their education and are unprepared to engage with advising as advisors intend (Bridgen, 2017). Gordon (1994) observed this as well, "students perceive that advising involves only scheduling and registration. . ." (p. 72).

A shared philosophy of advising also depends on support from the broader campus community; this includes institutional administrators, academic advisors—regardless of faculty or staff designation—and students. According to Gordon (1994), administrators do not always understand or support a common philosophy based on recent advising literature. Bridgen (2017) observed that "faculty members, students, staff, and administrators indicated that they perceive a misunderstanding among those in the campus community about the purposes and functions of academic advising" (p. 13). In one study, campus administrators reported that advising was related to other functional services, such as career services or learning support, instead of helping students set academic goals or develop important broader skills such as intellectual development or decision-making skills (Bridgen, 2017). Moreover, decisions at high levels of the university about structure, funding, and staffing directly impact practice and can vary across institutions. Therefore, a shared philosophy must be understood by all who engage with advising and those who make decisions for advising. Differences in structure, titles, and expectations within and across institutions diversify the purpose of academic advising practice.

The Conversation Must Continue

Academic advising has yet to agree to a common or comprehensive statement about the overall purpose of advising, but that responsibility lies with practitioner-scholars. "Regardless of the preferred vision, the future of the field will be dictated by advisors. Therefore, individually, and collectively advisors must identify a theory that describes the profession, a vision of where it should go, and a path for getting there" (Lowenstein, 2013, p. 257). Once identified, implementing this shared philosophy will require changing the systems in which advisors practice. Discussion and dialogue must occur within the literature of academic advising to further these conversations.

Lowenstein's continued work provides a common framework and language from which to have these conversations. Scholarship must focus on refining a comprehensive philosophy or theory of advising. Is Lowenstein's learning-centered paradigm a good fit as a philosophy of advising? If so, how do advising practitioners and scholars implement such a view given the structural constraints? If not, what is Lowenstein's learning-centered paradigm missing?

As the context of higher education continues to change, a clear philosophy of academic advising, or not, will lead advising practitioners down a particular path. This path will determine future considerations of structure, practice, and research. Intentionality in identifying and articulating a comprehensive advising philosophy will be important for all constituents: students, advisors, and institutions. Both institution-wide decisions and day-to-day decisions can make a big impact on advising practice. Part of any decision-making should include connecting the decision back to the purpose of academic advising.

For example, continuing the discussion on a philosophy of academic advising is especially important as academic advisors and institutions address the challenges associated with a global pandemic. The unexpected and unprecedented changes in higher education due to the pandemic have quickly shifted resources within institutions. Students' needs have changed and in ways that are not yet fully understood. As a result, advising offices are adjusting how advising is conducted. Since the philosophy of advising impacts structure, practice, assessment, and scholarship, changing any of these components requires considering the impact on the overall purpose. Does offering Zoom advising appointments

continue to meet the goals of academic advising? Does Zoom increase the effectiveness of advising because more students can take advantage of their advisor's expertise? Does Zoom limit learning during the advising appointment if this is a goal of advising? Are the ways in which advising goals are achieved differently between in-person and remote meetings? As advising administrators, academic advisors, and institutional leaders make quick decisions to manage the impacts of the pandemic, we risk confounding the purpose of academic advising with other roles on campus.

If the articulated purpose of academic advising does not match practice, it is important to identify those discrepancies. Advisors should reflect on current practices and connect to personal and institutional views of the purpose of advising. This reflection is critically needed before a discussion of best practices can be undertaken. Great ideas often come through conversation. To further this discussion, academic advisors must continue to read scholarship, challenge others, and contribute to the scholarship on academic advising.

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