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The Context and Potential of Lowenstein's Learning-Centered Theory of Academic Advising

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An examination of the history of academic advising reveals six different proposed purposes competing for primacy. Marc Lowenstein's learning-centered theory of academic advising provides a way to prioritize among those purposes, creating what could become a new normative theory for academic advising. When conceived as a locus for meaning-making about the educational experience, academic advising's value, expected student outcomes, advisor qualifications, and scholarship become clearer. When done well, academic advising could be the locus for addressing issues of fundamental importance to higher education.

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As experts in the curricula, policies, and procedures of our institutions as well as the ways different factors of privilege affect students in all of these areas, academic advisors can be powerful advocates for meaningful systemic change. Advisors can recognize the master narratives students and others apply to higher education and help individuals identify and address those assumptions. This vantage point positions academic advisors as key experts whose insights should guide curricular and policy decisions. For example, if institutions wish to find ways to improve the experiences of minoritized students, those with expertise in academic advising will likely be able to quickly point to curricular and bureaucratic processes that disadvantage students and hamper institutional efforts toward equity.

However, the academic advising vantage point is underutilized. Academic advising is conducted for a variety of reasons that are often beyond the control of advisors. In some contexts, academic advising is viewed as a solution to institutional problems of retention and completion. In other cases, academic advising is primarily focused on recordkeeping and ensuring students have appropriate schedules. In the latter example, advisors' time is typically spent signing forms or pointing students to information. This can mean that student success initiatives are viewed as separate from academic advising, reinforcing the perception of advising as recordkeeping and excluding the other more humane aspects of this work. These problems stem from a lack of clarity among institutional leaders about what academic advising is and should be. This lack of clarity is largely due to the fact that academic advising practitioners themselves have not reached a clear consensus as to why exactly they undertake this difficult work.

Marc Lowenstein's scholarship, however, identifies a path toward much-needed unity and clarity. Lowenstein's contributions relentlessly assert that active, integrative student learning is the central purpose for academic advising. His work has gained some traction with NACADA and has inspired others on a local or personal level. For me personally, Lowenstein's (2000) "Academic Advising and the 'Logic' of the Curriculum" provided vital insight when I was questioning my own purpose as a new advisor. His work has since served as an inspiration for my scholarly writing. Before turning to Lowenstein's work, however, it is useful to explore the many ways the meaning and value of academic advising has been historically defined.

Varied Purposes of Academic Advising

It is a practical impossibility that everyone who advises would identify the same foundational concepts of this work for two primary reasons. First, academic advising developed in higher education as a practice without a widely shared underlying philosophy (see Cate & Miller, 2015; Cook, 2009; Himes & Schulenberg, 2016; Kuhn, 2008; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010). Second, advising practitioners operate out of numerous departments and contexts in higher education, resulting in a lack of common identity and community.

To this second point, the number of individuals who serve as academic advisors at higher education institutions in the United States is unknown. According to the most recent NACADA National Survey of Academic Advising, the majority of individuals who advise serve in positions where academic advising is only one of several job responsibilities (Self, 2013). Primary-role academic advisors, whose responsibilities are firstly concerned with academic advising are a minority. For example, at The Pennsylvania State University, an institution with a historical investment in primary-role academic advising, still only 6% of those who serve as assigned advisors are classified as academic advisors or advising managers.

The history of how academic advising emerged in U.S. higher education has direct relevance to contemporary conversations about its practice, scholarship, and value in the academy. At its earliest mention in 1840 at Kenyon College, academic advising provided students with an institutional ally who could help the student navigate disputes between students and faculty members. According to Hayes (1840):

> A new rule has been established that each student shall choose from among the faculty some one who is to be his adviser [sic] and friend in all matters in which assistance is desired and is to be the medium of communication between the student and faculty. (p. 54)

In contrast, other institutions, such as Johns Hopkins and Harvard, viewed academic advising as more of an educational endeavor meant to help students be thoughtful and intentional about their area of academic focus. As curricular choice became much more available to students in the late 19th century, faculty members were made available to help guide students' academic decision-making. For example, Palmer (1885) describes Harvard's elective system:

> It is the distinctive merit of the elective system that it strips off disguises, places the great facts of the moral life in the foreground, forces the student to become conscious of what he is doing, permits him to become a partaker in his own work, and makes him perceive that gains and losses are immediately connected with a volitional attitude. When such a consciousness is aroused, every step in knowledge becomes a step toward maturity. (p. 398)

In other cases, academic advising was identified as a locus for helping students mediate the institution, providing guidance on academic choices when available and more. For example, in 1906, The Ohio State University's system of advisors was created:

> 'to assist the undergraduate in choosing studies that will result in a well-rounded course and will achieve most economically the purpose which the student has in view in his course' … Advisors were also to 'promote personal relations between students and instructors' and 'aid the student in all matters connected with his university life.' (The Ohio State University, 1906, pp. 22-23, as quoted in Gordon, 2004, p. 18)

Academic advisors were simultaneously ombudsmen who did not have power over the student's grades or institutional standing and faculty mentors whose goal was to guide intellectual growth. They were not only recordkeepers who specialized in degree requirements but also concierges who could help with practically any issue the student encountered.

A multi-institution study of academic advising conducted in 1925 found that the academic recordkeeping function of academic advising predominated its practice (Hopkins, 1926). Subsequent studies have reported similar findings (Raskin, 1979; Robertson, 1958). Each of these studies suggested that advisors' work in navigating bureaucracy and recordkeeping dominated their focus and presented a barrier to engagement in more meaningful interactions. Moreover, these studies found that the skills and inclination necessary to meaningfully engage with students were not evenly distributed among those who were expected to advise.

As higher education institutions became concerned about student retention, creating appropriate social engagement opportunities for students, and cultivating an alumni base, advising initiatives emerged that are more closely aligned with modern student affairs. The Student Personnel Point of View guided this work (American Council on Education [ACE], 1937; ACE, 1949). This perspective was influenced by the

new field of developmental psychology, the educational perspectives advocated by Dewey, and the professional associations of individuals who worked in emerging student affairs roles (ACE, 1949; Roberts, 2012). The Student Personnel Point of View has been summarized as advocating the educational philosophy:

> that all students should be viewed holistically, that all students should be encouraged to develop to the full limits of their potential, and that learning should be recognized as the result of a variety of rich experiences that take place both in and outside the classroom. (Roberts, 2007, p. 7)

Many will recognize these principles as very similar to those of developmental advising.

While institutions were creating new positions for areas of student affairs, academic advising writ large remained a responsibility of faculty members. Some institutions (especially larger institutions) created specialist roles to deliver the ombudsman and recordkeeping functions of academic advising, including deans of men and women (Rudolph, 1990; Scheckel, 2019). Between the 1950s and 1970s, some institutions created specialist roles for academic advising. These roles were variously titled but seemed to deal primarily with keeping track of degree requirements, navigating bureaucracy, and generally functioning as an ombudsman. Time demands on faculty members, the complexity of degree requirements, and the psychosocial needs of students all seemed to play a role in the creation of these specialist academic advising structures, especially at larger institutions (Gordon, 2004; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008).

In the early 1970s, several publications provided key language that helped to solidify academic advising as a special role in higher education, providing the foundational language adopted by academic advising's national association. Crookston's (1972) publication, "A Developmental View of Academic Advising as Teaching" and O'Banion's (1972) "An Academic Advising Model" are often cited as influencing key principles in academic advising's history. Both authors advocated for qualities of academic advising that are aligned with the Student Personnel Point of View. These publications came at a time when educators were grappling with the depersonalization of mass education.

Crookston was very explicit about the importance of engaging the student through a developmental process by aligning advising with teaching:

> Developmental counseling or advising is concerned not only with a specific personal or vocational decision but also with facilitating the student's rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavior awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills. Not only are these advising functions but . . . they are essentially teaching functions as well. (Crookston, 1972/2009, p.78)

The assertion that academic advising fosters student psychosocial development became a guiding philosophy that influenced the field's scholarship and practice, providing a model for the founders of NACADA, the first national association for academic advising (Grites & Gordon, 2009). This model emphasized relationship-building with students while also broadly aligning advising with teaching. Advising practitioners were able to rally around a common practice of advising wherever they were and however their positions were described. Developmental advising provided language that defined "good" advising, especially when contrasted against its alternative, the so-called prescriptive advising practice. While the adoption of this perspective provided a common ideal, it also aligned the role of academic advising with student affairs areas that valued the Student Personnel Point of View, resulting in academic advising being under the purview of student affairs rather than academic affairs at some institutions. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that this history may contribute to the longstanding strained relationship between primary-role advisors and faculty advisors (see Ender, 1994; Habley, 1994; Hemwall & Trachte 1999/2009).

Beginning in the 1990s, some authors bluntly challenged the developmental philosophy on the grounds that it did not provide guidance on what exactly is being taught through academic advising, contending that it was unclear how academic advising differed from other areas of higher education (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999/2009; Laff, 1994; Lowenstein, 1999). Notably, Hemwall and Trachte (1999/2009) and Lowenstein (1999) both presented alternatives that highlighted student

learning. Hemwall and Trachte (1999/2009) suggested that the focus of academic advising should be on facilitating student learning about the meaning and value of higher education. They argued that academic advising could be considered a "form of praxis" where "students should acquire a capacity for critical reflection upon the world in which they live" (Hemwall and Trachte, 1999/2009, p. 116). Specific examples of this praxis include helping students make sense of degree requirements in relation to institutions' student learning goals for graduates (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999/2009). Lowenstein's contributions are even more precise. Lowenstein (1999) proposed an "academically centered model" for advising and further refined this notion by specifying that academic advising specifically engages students in "creating the logic of [their] curriculum" (Lowenstein, 2000).

Elements of this student-learning focus made their way into NACADA's (2006) *NACADA Concept of Academic Advising*. This concept statement aligns academic advising with student learning, allowing advisors to lay claim to a distinct segment of higher education and describe the role of academic advising as a teaching endeavor. NACADA reinforced the advising as teaching concept represented by the developmental paradigm by adopting language such as *curriculum*, *pedagogy*, and *learning outcomes* to align advising more explicitly with educational principles. However, the closest the statement comes to expressing the central purpose of academic advising is:

> Academic advising synthesizes and contextualizes students' educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and timeframes. (NACADA, 2006)

Underlying these conversations about the nature of academic advising is a current of consumerism, vocationalism, and institutional economics that spans the history of higher education in the United States. In recent higher education history, institutional measures of retention and completion are often referred to under the broad term *student success*. Academic advising—including academic success coaching as a specialized subset of academic advising responsibilities—has claimed a causal relationship with retention and completion (Allen & Lester, 2012; Capstick et al., 2019; Crockett, 1978; Habley, 1981; Tippetts et al., 2020; Young-Jones et al., 2013). A full exploration of the ramifications of this claim (both positive and negative) are beyond the scope of this paper. Significant here is the fact that academic advising has laid claim to another role: to keep students enrolled until they graduate. To summarize, academic advising exists to accomplish an array of goals, including:

- Mediation between the student and institutional authority
- Making meaning of education
- Keeping track of degree progress
- Facilitating personal and vocational decisions
- Facilitating development in psycho-social dimensions
- Keeping students enrolled at the institution until they graduate

I have previously argued that this array of seemingly coequal priorities for academic advising is problematic (Schulenberg and Lindhorst, 2008, 2010). It creates a situation where academic advising easily becomes a catch-all area where any new initiative meant to affect student success can be carried out. The lack of a unified definition of advising stymies scholarship in the field and inhibits the recognition of good practices and desirable student outcomes. While well-intentioned, the advising as teaching mantra does not provide guidance through these multiple purposes. What, exactly, is being taught? What are students supposed to learn? A straightforward agreement on what constitutes the teaching or learning that is achievable through academic advising will help the field articulate its value, identify good practices, determine appropriate qualifications for its practitioners, and produce robust scholarship.

A Learning-Centered Theory of Advising

Lowenstein's works provide a way forward by focusing attention on the essential purpose of academic advising separate from incidental activities that might also happen within academic advising contexts (Lowenstein, 2014). Lowenstein's line of thought begins with a critique of the "developmental hegemony" (1999) and culminates in the articulation of a normative theory of academic advising that differentiates academic advising as a distinct field of practice and thought

(2014). In his words, "A normative theory of advising will be a statement of the ultimate purpose of advising, of what advising *ideally should be*, not necessarily what advising actually is" (Lowenstein, 2014, para. 17). In many ways, the purposes of advising outlined above may serve as de facto normative theories of advising in that they are commonly agreed upon purposes of advising. In particular, the developmental paradigm may come closest to representing a common normative theory in that it created what Lowenstein characterizes as a hegemonic guiding principle (Lowenstein, 2011, 2014).

One of Lowenstein's significant contributions is his precision in language. Lowenstein's critique is with developmental advising interpreted as a normative theory, not necessarily with developmental advising as an approach to advising or with developmental theory as it informs advising. The literature of academic advising uses the term *developmental* inconsistently—sometimes using different definitions interchangeably within single publications. There seem to be three main categories of meaning behind the term *developmental* (Schulenberg, 2013):

- Developmental advising: Advising influenced by the Student Personnel Point of View, which posits that advising is an activity meant to promote holistic student development
- Developmental theory: A variety of psycho-social theories that explain and predict how humans develop their personalities, identities, and habits of decision-making, meaning-making, etc. Lowenstein termed these "instrumental theories" (2014)
- Developmental approaches*:* Techniques that advisors might use to promote a particular kind of psycho-social development

The conflation of these terms under the developmental umbrella has led the intellectual conversation away from why advising matters to a disproportionate emphasis on how advising is accomplished. Moreover, it has shaped and constrained the field's practices, delivery models, and body of scholarship.

Lowenstein critiques this status quo and seeks to elucidate a normative theory of advising that, among a few salient criteria, ultimately clarifies how academic advising is distinctively *academic*. Lowenstein articulates a normative theory of advising as "the integration and enhancement of students' academic learning" (Lowenstein, 2014). The integrative learning theory is summarized by Lowenstein using six main points:

- Advising is an academic endeavor specific to higher education
- Advising enhances learning by being a locus of learning
- The learning that happens in advising is integrative and helps students make meaning out of their education as a whole
- The student must be an active rather than a passive participant in this process
- Advising is transformative, not transactional
- Advising is central to achieving the learning goals of any college or university

When describing the integrative meaning-making function of advising, which I believe is the crux of this theory, Lowenstein refers to previous publications that emphasize the co-construction of the "logic of the curriculum" (Lowenstein, 2000, 2005/2009, 2014). Per Lowenstein (2014):

> In brief, what students accomplish in advising is to construct, intentionally and reflectively, an overall understanding of how the pieces of their education fit together, so that the whole emerges as more than the sum of its parts and their educational decisions are informed by a sense of how they fit into that whole.

While it is perhaps implied, this theory would benefit from explicit recognition that much of the learning in college takes place outside of the formal curriculum and that learning affects students' academic experiences. The formal curriculum exists in a context that is equally (and often more) important to the learner. For academic advising to function as a meaning-making endeavor, it needs to help students make sense of this formal curriculum in the context of the student's experiences, values, and goals.

Students are motivated to come to college for a variety of reasons, only one of which is to learn something from their academic courses. College is advertised as a place to gain credentials that provide entry to specific vocations as well as increased socioeconomic potential (Allmendinger, 1975; Levine, 1986; Patel, 2021).

Socioeconomic potential is gained not only from one's major and degree credentials but also the social connections created by association with the specific institution, social organizations, and friend groups (Eide et al., 2016; Hu & Wolniak, 2010; Zafar, 2013). For many students, attending college and selecting an area of study are processes characterized by negotiation between the self and cultural and familial expectations (Hamilton, 2014; Phinney et al., 2006; Traxler, 2009; Wang, 2014). The intersection of these aspects of higher education is the unique domain of academic advising.

Students openly negotiate the relationships between these factors as they make decisions about college attendance, choice of major, and choice of social engagements. Lowenstein is correct that the critical locus for this meaning-making is academic advising. Moreover, this focus harkens back to the origination of academic advising at the advent of real curricular choice, in which an advisor was supposed to engage students in making intentional, meaningful educational decisions about how they constructed their higher education.

When explicitly regarded as a locus for learning, academic advising can influence students to create a different understanding of their higher educational experiences. For example, the sense a student makes of a general education requirement will take into account not only what the institution intends with this requirement but also the student's own experiences with and values associated with the area of thought. Additionally, students will become able to identify how a given requirement can relate to their own goals for the collegiate experience. Similarly, the student should learn to make sense of their choice of cocurricular engagements in the context of their choice of major. Students could be engaged in explicitly grappling with the narratives of power and prestige, social justice, and meritocracy that are part of higher education and how those narratives influence their decisions. Ideally, the student can learn to integrate their thinking across multiple dimensions even if doing so requires holding multiple meanings simultaneously.

Where This Theory Leads

Even today, the conversation about what academic advising is meant to accomplish within the university, the expertise needed to fill that role, and the range of theories that should guide advising practice continues. Yet, Lowenstein's contribution of a robust theory of advising that centers on integrative learning provides guideposts that may allow us to answer these important questions. Returning to the six main purposes of academic advising presented earlier, Lowenstein's theory helps to identify what is central to academic advising and what is incidental (i.e., not unimportant but not the primary purpose of this work). Of these six purposes, only one is necessary for every student: to make meaning of education. The other functions of academic advising may happen along the way but are not the end goals of this work. For example, as students make meaning of their educations, they are also likely to be facilitated in personal and vocational decisions and are also likely to develop in psycho-social dimensions. These are byproducts of a higher purpose. Students who need mediation with institutional authority will likely fulfill that need through academic advising, as will they likely find help in tracking degree progress. However, again, these are functions that occur as a result of that meaning-making endeavor.

Lowenstein paints a picture of what higher education could look like if an integrative learning-centered theory of advising guided its practice and scholarship. This thought experiment—initially presented in "Academic Advising at the University of Utopia" (2011) and refined in "Envisioning the Future" (2013)—imagines how higher education might change if academic advising were differently conceived and delivered. Lowenstein's focus is on students and advisors themselves:

> Learning in the advising setting gives coherence and meaning to students' educations … Students understand that there is, after all, a rationale to the requirements they must meet; moreover they can expand on this rationale and take ownership of it by tying it to their own educational goals—and those goals, in turn, become more sophisticated over time as they are informed by new learning. (Lowenstein, 2013, p. 246-247)

I believe the potential for an integrative learning-centered theory of advising is even more profound, especially when we are explicit that meaning-making includes the student's individual context. It presents the possibility to create new

theory, to change structures and practices that devalue or disincentivize learning, and to change the way society values higher education. Integrative meaning-making represents a distinctive area of theory-building for academic advising, including theories that explain and predict what happens as a result of academic advising. We could move beyond borrowing instrumental theories from other disciplinary areas and create our own. The intersections and gaps between the learning intended by higher education institutions and the learning that actually happens are rich and relatively unexplored. Advising conducted using an integrative learning lens will begin to develop its own set of theories. For example, Traxler's (2009) work contributes a new theory of student academic decision-making that is cyclical and contextual to students' multiple communities. NACADA can help in this endeavor by soliciting publications that are explicit and precise in defining developmental and prescriptive concepts and by expecting analysis of academic advising from increasingly sophisticated perspectives.

When conceived in this way, academic advising can address questions of great significance, both for the individual student and for our understanding of higher education as a whole. How might academic advising help students to engage more authentically with their academic learning? How can academic advising help students negotiate meaning from their out-of-class experiences? In what ways may academic advising help students connect their social experiences and expectations to what they are learning through the formal curriculum? How does the social pressure to be part of the "right" circle affect students' choice of major and vice versa? Who is included and excluded from high prestige majors by, for example, gateway courses? How does this relate to higher education's promise of social and economic betterment? How might academic advising help institutions recognize these patterns and create equitable change?

Lowenstein's guiding focus also presents the possibility to change the ways academic advising is valued and incentivized. Because they have a deep understanding of how students make sense of higher education, academic advisors could be significant voices in the university's academic leadership. Faculty member-led academic advising could be supported through the creation of institutional structures that do not penalize that devotion of time and, more significantly, through the creation of space to engage students in meaning-making. Time sinks and trip hazards could be moved out of the way. Curriculum committees informed by expertise from academic advising perspectives might develop new degree requirements that are easy for students to understand and follow (and where the logic is more transparent). Appropriate technologies may be harnessed to take on the bookkeeping functions of advising, creating space for advisors to focus on the work that is specifically human. Students could be incentivized to engage in the thinking prompted by academic advising through a graded experience coequal with any other degree requirement (Lowenstein, 2013).

If done well, the outcomes for students are potentially profound as Lowenstein imagines in his utopian future (2013). Extending from Lowenstein's outcomes, there are additional possibilities. Students may become less inclined to think of their college degrees only as a credentials for a "good job" and less inclined to believe there is a necessary linear relationship between their major and career. More graduates could reflect on their intellectual development with a fondness similar to that which they hold for their social experiences in college. Students who are not involved in residential, traditional educational pathways will have a way to make just as much meaning for themselves.

Finally, advising driven by integrative meaning-making may better address some of the fundamental challenges of our contemporary U.S. democracy. Higher education's role in social prestige and economic gain runs contrary to some of the most democratic ideals of U.S. culture (Sandel, 2020). If we can systematically engage students in high quality, learning-centered meaning-making through academic advising, we create the opportunity to make change. College graduates will have genuinely practiced self-reflection and integrative thinking. As citizens and leaders, these college graduates will have a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between major and career. Even more importantly, because they have practiced self-reflection and meaning-making, they may be better able to project this thinking as compassion for others.

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