

Normative Theory, Scholarship and the Need to Disagree: Conversations with Marc Lowenstein

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Conversations and correspondence with Marc Lowenstein delve into the origin of his philosophy of academic advising and his work on advising. Discussions range from helping students articulate the logic of their curriculum through integrative learning, to exploring why the notion of a normative theory is essential for a constructive and relevant discourse on advising, to probing why this discourse should be critical. This article presents Marc Lowenstein's reflections on these and related topics and intends to contribute to a critical discourse on the scholarship and philosophy of advising.

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How do you explain academic advising to someone who cares about student learning, knows about teaching, is familiar with student counseling and support, and works in higher education, yet remains incognizant about advising? This is not as hypothetical a question as it might seem. Academic advising is a concept foreign to higher education in many places, despite long and impressive histories of teaching and learning.

Everyone has a strategy to explain advising. I send inquirers a copy of Marc Lowenstein's powerful piece from 2005, "If Advising is Teaching, What do Advisors Teach?" When considered with Lowenstein's (2014) "Toward a Theory of Advising," these works may be seen as the central axis around which a considerable part of the discourse on the theory and philosophy of academic advising revolves. The articles are like the two movements of a musical advising suite: "Toward a Theory of Advising" (Lowenstein, 2014) succinctly presents and explains the main themes; "If Advising is Teaching, What do Advisors Teach?" (Lowenstein, 2005) elegantly illustrates and contextualizes the subject at hand, like musical variations.

Together these articles have enriched advising literature with three important ideas: the logic of the curriculum, integrative learning, and that advising needs a normative theory. The first two concepts form the basis of Lowenstein's normative theory of advising. Summarizing this theory, the purpose of advising is to enable students to identify or create the logic of their curriculum through integrative learning. There can be little doubt that Lowenstein strongly believes this is the essence of excellent advising. However, he also strongly advocates for a third idea: Advising needs normative theory, as a continuous encouragement to keep thinking and rethinking what the profession should be about.

I had the pleasure and privilege of meeting with Lowenstein several times in the Spring of 2021. Those conversations, complemented by written correspondence, explored his philosophies on academic advising. In the beginning stages of the conversation, Lowenstein spoke of his early experiences with advising and about the friends and colleagues who played such an important role in the development of his perspective on advising. However, the discussion soon shifted to two closely intertwined topics: the scholarship of advising and the need for a lively discourse on the why of academic advising.

All personal communication with Lowenstein quoted below took place via email and Zoom Video Communications between April and May 2021. What follows is not a verbatim presentation of the conversations and correspondence, although it is a very close account of the original transcripts and emails. The emphasis is on Lowenstein's recollections and ideas as he formulated them during the conversations and in the correspondence, interspersed with my introductions and reflections. The order in which topics were originally discussed has been rearranged to create one coherent narrative, while some repetitions and interjections have been removed.

The Spark

Lowenstein: My personal history with academic advising is perhaps less substantial than some people might imagine, but there is a high point that is critical to the scholarship that I have done. I majored in philosophy as an undergraduate and earned a PhD in philosophy at the University of Rochester, New York. For about a dozen years I taught philosophy at several colleges. My teaching in philosophy focused on logic and ethics. Those are the courses that I taught most often, and that's not insignificant. However, I wound up spending most of my career in administration, at the institution that is now called Stockton University in New Jersey.

At Stockton, being a philosophy major I naturally had the job of being the dean of business and health sciences, as you would have expected. I mention that partly because it is a plug for liberal arts. The faculty unanimously asked the provost to appoint me initially on an interim basis and then endorsed my remaining in it, because they saw what I brought to it. What I brought to the position came from my major, I think, and what I bring to advising did as well. As a faculty member I did some advising, as faculty at institutions do. I wouldn't claim that I was very good at it or all that interested in it. I saw my job primarily as helping make sure that students knew where they stood in regard to meeting requirements; nothing much more profound than that.

However, shortly after I came to Stockton, I had the assignment of a lifetime. For ten years I ran what was called the "liberal studies program," which was a self-designed major where students get to literally design their own course of study, subject to certain restrictions. It is a great opportunity for a student who is a self-starter. From my point of view the most important thing was that students really needed to understand, comprehend, and construct what I much later called the "logic of the curriculum." This meant an understanding of how all the courses fit together: why each course belonged where it was, how the courses individually and collectively met the student's educational goals, why this course was

taken before this course, why these courses might be good to take simultaneously and things like that. To be admitted into this major students needed to write up a proposal that had to be approved by the dean and the faculty committee. The burden of the proposal was to explain the logic of their curriculum. It was great and the students, the ones who loved it (not necessarily the ones with the highest grade point averages), really got excited about it. Nobody had ever asked them to look at their education that way before. It was a wonderful experience for both the students and me. It was the most fun I ever had, pretty much.

Much later I had the thought that every student should be able to have this experience that these students found so valuable and so exciting—every student, even if they are following a prescribed course of study. If they are going to be, say, physical therapy majors and practically every course they have to take is already dictated and they have to take them in a particular order and at a specific moment within the curriculum, that does not mean they could not have this experience, too. I did not immediately see how, though. It was actually my last advising experience, because after that I moved into administration and stopped having regular contact with students, but this one advising experience stuck in my head and I have always remembered it as what I want advising to be.

In Search of *Why*

It was not until about a decade later that Lowenstein began to explore the topic of advising systematically from a philosophical perspective. Stockton proved to be fertile ground for cultivating ideas about the purpose of advising. Many of these ideas emerged from conversations between Lowenstein and two colleagues, Tom Grites and Peter Hagen, who both shared Lowenstein's sense that the important yet elusive *why* questions in advising were easily and often overshadowed by the seemingly more concrete and practical questions about *how*.

Lowenstein: My first introduction to thinking critically about advising was when my colleague, Tom Grites, invited me to work on

the ethics of advising with him. Tom was a great advisor. He said he kept running into strange situations where it seemed impossible to decide which advice or which course of action would be appropriate. He assumed I would be able to bring some technical, philosophical concepts to bear on what he was experiencing, and stimulated my thinking about the ethics of advising. This persuaded me that in general advising is something worth thinking about at a higher level than just the tricks of the trade. We ended up presenting at conferences together and writing an article on the ethics of advising which was published in the *NACADA Journal* (Lowenstein & Grites, 1993). That was my introduction to NACADA.

As part of my responsibilities in an assistant provost position, I was charged with hiring a director of advising, where Peter Hagen was selected. That was sort of love at first sight, intellectually. I had never met anybody in advising who had a humanities background—a student of literature, Greek, and Latin, which was unheard of in those days. He had been at Penn State where he worked under Eric White, for whom I have tremendous respect. We engaged in incessant conversation about the philosophy of advising and what a theory of advising might look like. This all happened in the late 1990s and I have come to believe that almost everything we said back then was wrong. The first half of the 2014 article on theory of advising was written to prove what was wrong with the stuff that I had been working out with Peter in the '90s. But like Tom, Peter was a huge influence, even though everything we said was wrong.

As Lowenstein began to both attend and present at NACADA conferences, he noticed that the professional development discourse was indeed skewed heavily toward the *how* of advising. Many of the presentations he saw were case studies, often revolving around a specific practice at a certain institution, placed within the framework of a developmental or educational theory. Such presentations offered useful examples that could enhance daily practice but did not necessarily encourage a more profound reflection on the overall meaning and purpose of that

practice. There even seemed to exist a certain aversion to speaking about advising in terms of theory or philosophy.

Toward a Normative Theory of Advising

Lowenstein: In 1996, Peter had just arrived at Stockton and Tom was at this too, we attended a NACADA conference session about the question of whether we should have a theory of advising. The presenters were some of the old-time heavy hitters at NACADA. I think Virginia Gordon was there too. I don't remember as much about the presentation as I should, but the really interesting thing that stuck with me happened in the Q&A after the presentation. A member of the audience got up and said: "I don't see why we need a theory. We're doing just fine without one!" I did not say this out loud, but what I thought was: Wait a minute, if you think you're doing all right, it must be because you have criteria for what you're supposed to be accomplishing, and those criteria have to be based on theory. So you *do* have a theory, you just never articulated it.

This incident fueled the conversations back at Stockton. And Lowenstein, Grites, and Hagen connected with kindred spirits elsewhere within the advising community.

Lowenstein: Over the next couple of years we talked about it and we met like-minded people at conferences: Martha Hemwall and Kent Trachte and a little bit later Janet Schulenberg. I know exactly when and where it happened: It was at a NACADA conference in Denver, Colorado in 1999. As we kept on talking about these things and had met a few other people that seemed to be interested in them, we realized that we should get a group together that studied the theory and philosophy of advising.

At that time, NACADA had a concept it no longer does, called an Interest Group, and it was possible to graduate from being an Interest Group to being a Commission. When we started there were four or five of us. Then there were ten, and now there is a mailing list of over 130 people I think, of which maybe 30 or 40 show up for business meetings at the annual conference. Peter was

the first head of it, and he deserves a lot of credit for that¹.

For Lowenstein, the late 1990s to 2014 were the years in which he welded his various ideas on advising into theory and became a leading voice in the conversation that grew into a discourse of its own. Advocacy for a normative theory revolving around the concepts of “integrative learning” and the “logic of the curriculum” (Lowenstein, 2014) were and continue to be the essence of his work.

A normative theory sets a standard for advising. As Lowenstein (2014) described in “Toward a Theory of Advising,” while providing a basis and setting a standard itself, normative theory should comply with the same basic criteria that apply to any theory. It should be embedded in a broader theoretical framework—in this case a “philosophy of higher education” (Lowenstein, 2014, para. 19). It should identify common elements in diverse contexts, distinguish essential from incidental characteristics, and provide a proper description of the phenomenon it pertains to—in this case, it should identify what advisors do and what it is that makes that advising (Lowenstein, 2014).

What is important here is that each of these criteria create possibilities to disagree and to form counterarguments, similar to the principle of falsifiability in non-normative, descriptive theory. A normative theory of advising proposes a paradigm that sets a standard for practice and defines a specific domain for research. As with every theory, it is also an invitation to explore that paradigm, to find further support for it, or to challenge it. Both support and criticism are necessary to make advising practice, as well as scholarship, intentional, grounded, and based on a well-articulated, continuously-tested and challenged set of principles.

The Scholarship of Values

Since its early days, NACADA has recognized the importance of research as a source and condition for the development of the field of academic advising. In 1981, the first issue of the *NACADA Journal* was published under the

editorial leadership of Virginia Gordon and Tom Grites. Since then, the notion of scholarship has gained increasing traction within the association, culminating in the formation of the NACADA Center for Research at Kansas State University in 2017 and the launch of a second double-blind, peer-reviewed journal, the *NACADA Review: Academic Advising Praxis and Perspectives* one year later.

Yet, it could be argued that discourse on theory and philosophy continues to be an acquired taste, a domain reserved for connoisseurs and aficionados. If we agree that scholarship is a cornerstone of individual professional development and a flourishing profession, are we not missing something if we focus too much on evidence and data, neglecting systematic exploration of underlying values and principles?

Lowenstein: That is exactly the right question. I am so pleased that you asked the question that way because that is why it is problematic: It is because we are missing out on something and we don’t even know it. Scholarship starts with a question—it *has* to start with a question. There needs to be something you are wondering about or that you are curious about or that you would like to know about, find out about, or think about. Questions are not all the same. Some questions are empirical questions: Is the cat on the mat? Do students understand something better as seniors than they did as first year students? Do students think more clearly about ethical issues as seniors than they did as first year students? And does it matter whether they are philosophy majors or not?

These are empirical questions and you would need to do an empirical study to find the answers. However, there are also questions that are not empirical. Philosophy studies those questions, as does literature, and some of the questions that history studies are not empirical questions. If I am interested in the question of whether advisors have a primary obligation to their institution or their students, that is a value question. You don’t study it by getting two groups of advisors and having one of them do this and one of them do that and see what the results are.

¹ For a more extensive account of the history of the NACADA Theory, Philosophy and History Commission and the evolution of the discourse on advising theory, see S. L. Burton (2016).

This critical distinction between empirical research and evidence-based, descriptive theory on the one hand versus prescriptive, normative theory on the other hand is a common thread that runs through Lowenstein's oeuvre. It reminds those in the field of academic advising of the logical necessity to establish ultimate objectives before deciding on ways to achieve them and to measure success. What makes the values that inspire those objectives—and with these values, the idea of a normative theory of advising—so elusive is that while values may be inspired by the world around us, they cannot be deduced from it in any empirical way.

Values cannot be evidence-based. On the contrary, they determine how we weigh the evidence. This is always the case, even in the most empirical disciplines. Even if standards appear to be beyond values, or valueless, at some point, someone had to determine that, and others had to agree for it to become accepted as a standard. Nothing out there dictates the definition of a milligram, a second, or a meter. That there is no empirical analysis or data-driven recipe to prove or support values does not imply that values are merely a matter of opinion. Constructing a theory in any field or discipline means developing a coherent, logical argument, in which the assumptions are acceptable, and the inferences make sense. Normative theory is no exception. For Lowenstein, the need for a normative theory of advising is beyond doubt and it has implications for the notion of scholarship in the context of advising.

It is no secret that the balance between social science and humanities-oriented scholarship on advising concerns Lowenstein. The strong emphasis on empirical studies that characterizes much of the social science research related to advising implicitly devaluates other forms of scholarship. In fact, such research cannot exist without rigorous, systematic exploration of the underlying principles, assumptions, and values that define the frame of reference for practice, research, and the praxis of advising—the way theory, research and practice inform each other (Van den Wijngaard, 2019).

Lowenstein: The word “research,” it seems to me, is used in two different ways, and we can avoid some confusion by distinguishing them. In talking about areas of faculty work, we separate research from teaching and service. In that context the word refers

generically to whatever counts in a particular professor's field; even artistic work or fiction writing. In a narrower or more technical sense however, I think of research as referring to empirical work in the natural and social sciences and not to the more normative/conceptual areas of the humanities. Think how odd it would sound to say “I'm doing research on the existence of God.” In the advising community or specifically within NACADA, I prefer we use the word “scholarship” whenever we do not mean to privilege social science work.

Talking about student success allows me to give an example of what I have been saying. The question as to what factors or interventions serve to improve student persistence, graduation rates, or time to degree is an empirical one to be addressed by social science methods. I suspect that the best studies of this will be quantitative (though I am not well qualified to pronounce on this). On the other hand, the question of what student success *means* is a conceptual one, or maybe even an ethical one, and cannot be answered by empirical study. Personally, I happen not to like the idea of defining student success as persistence or time-to-graduation etc. I prefer to define it in terms of individual students' own goals.

I have suggested, gently, in some of my writings that if the advising community will address the conceptual, normative questions about the nature and purpose of advising, and form a coherent and cogent consensus on these, it will have an additional weapon to use in fighting for its rightful place in the higher education world.

A Fundamental Dilemma

When it comes to advising's rightful place in the higher education world, however, there appears to be an ethical dilemma that seems to rarely enter the formal discourse on advising; perhaps this is because of the prevalence of evidence-based research. This dilemma hides below the surface of the debate on the methodology and epistemology of the scholarship of academic advising. One's implicit position with regard to this dilemma may express itself through the preferences we claim for either a more

quantitative, evidence-based social science approach, or one that is rather qualitative and reflective in nature, as is common within the humanities. The dilemma follows from the realization that the values we embrace for advising are linked inextricably to our ideas about education: How we see the purpose and the value of education determines how we see the role and value of advising within education. Clearly, value is almost identical here with values rather than worth. As Lowenstein (2014) observed, a normative theory should be “tied to a philosophy of higher education” (para. 48).

If we probe even deeper, our values for education and advising rest upon fundamental, individual, or collective ideas of what it means to be human. This is the bedrock where our ethical dilemma resides, as the formal values and intended outcomes of advising may not align with personal values for education or about what it means to be human. The challenge arises when what advisors aim for and what they want to nurture and encourage is at odds with institution goals or with the ruling paradigm of higher education.

Lowenstein: For my “ideal” advisor this would create tremendous dilemmas. Increasingly, the paradigm of higher education is instrumental and transactional. This is true in the United States, although it is not true everywhere. I stay in touch with my alma mater, which was a liberal arts college in a very traditional mold. It still has a core curriculum, which I still like a lot. But by and large, if you look at most of the states in the United States, you find that they are being run by people whose views are pretty transactional and who get their budgets from state legislators who want to know which majors do not send students to high paying jobs. And understandably, students and their families are making an investment in their higher education and like to see a return on that investment.

In fact, I am struggling with trying to write about this. I am not exactly sure where it is going to go. The paper I wrote some years ago called “Academic advising at the University of Utopia” (Lowenstein, 2011), was an homage to Robert Hutchins who was president of the University of Chicago in the 1930s and ’40s. He was a very influential thinker at that time and a huge exponent of the liberal arts and he wrote about this in his

University of Utopia, published in 1953. I really believe that what is good for most students is to have the kind of integrative experiences that I have always advocated. It does not mean that they cannot go on to be accountants, physical therapists, or other professions. I am not opposed to people making money. I would however, like them to get an *education* along the way, and I *do* have a philosophy of education. It is about thinking about deep, difficult subjects and ideas concerning art and literature and humanities and science. Ultimately, what I think students should strive to accomplish for themselves is to understand the world and coming up with a worldview. That is not where we have been going in recent years. But if the university is telling an advisor to get their students out there and employable while the advisor wants to slow down and talk to each individual student about what floats their boat intellectually and help them see how ideas connect to their lives and so forth, this is going to create dilemmas for the advisor. And I am not sure there is a way out of it.

My solution is to come down on the side of the integrative learning and the liberal arts approach to knowledge and the non-transactional view of education, which I can afford to advocate since I am retired and my income is no longer dependent on pleasing anybody. I realize though, that for an advisor who is not retired and does need to please some people in order to keep receiving a paycheck, it is not so simple. The way I talk about dilemmas in what I have written about them is that you try to find a way to have the best of both worlds. That is often a creative act.

Anytime there is a dilemma, there are principles involved. There is a principle saying you should do this and this other principle that says you should do that. Trying to find a compromise between those principles may be a matter of tweaking those principles a little bit, or partially disobeying one of them. I think that the best discussion that I have done of that is in the chapter that I wrote for the second edition of the *Academic Advising handbook* (Gordon et al., 2011). In that chapter, “Ethical Foundations of Academic Advising,” I talk about how I can best

pay some homage to one principle and still also to another. Neither is going to be perfectly obeyed, but there may be some creative way in which I can think about paying at least some attention to what each of them wants to achieve. With that I have not answered the question about the specific and fundamental dilemma that we're talking about, I'm just talking in general. If I manage to work this out more fully than I have articulated so far, it will be the place where my earlier work on ethics really does meet up with my work on theory.

The Need for Disagreement

There may be an analogy in how we think about the struggle with this fundamental ethical dilemma in conjunction with Lowenstein's (2014) normative theory of advising. According to that theory, advising is about facilitating and supporting students as they construct or reconstruct the logic of the curriculum—identifying what it means to them. Following that transformative, integrative approach in advising, students become empowered, without suggesting at any moment in time that this will open up any possibility and resolve every dilemma for them. Empowerment, however, will radically change their perspective.

Even if compromise is the only possible decision, that compromise now becomes an expression of agency, rather than complacency. First, it is based on a clear articulation and awareness of the two sides of the dilemma. Second, it is the outcome of a creative and independent judgment. If this were an objective when advising students, it would make sense for advisors to claim similar space for their agency, too, by using their creativity and judgment to navigate the dilemmas they face. As with students, this would not always allow them to change the situation they are in or resolve the issue. It would, however, help them articulate their personal values more clearly and provide them with the choice to decide why, when, and how they want to accept or challenge existing situations and expectations.

This critical agency cannot develop in isolation and will benefit from a lively and sometimes fierce debate on values and purpose. Even if advising scholarship is limited to being instrumental and providing new insight in how to do things, it would benefit from the same constructive disagreement that is an essential feature of

any discipline. This is even more necessary when it comes to the discourse and scholarship about the *why* of academic advising.

Lowenstein: One thing that could happen is that somebody would take a critical look at one of my ethics papers or at my 2014 theory paper and say, "This is nonsense, and here's why! Here are some of the assumptions that Lowenstein is making and they are just unfounded. If you are to assume contrary to that you would get this completely different result." You could have a normative theory of advising that sees the crux of advising somewhere else entirely, not as integrated learning but as X or Y or Z, and the argument could be much better.

I think that the questions that I am seeking to answer, both in the ethical train and in the theoretical train, are legitimate questions worthy of attention. What are the key values that should animate thinking about ethical problems in advising? That is a legitimate question that people ought to be writing about and there is hardly any literature at all on that. This is astonishing in a way because advisors encounter ethical problems every day. Why isn't anybody writing about that? Where are the arguments and debates?

A Global Conversation about Values and Purpose

For many years, an integral part of the mission and vision of NACADA has been to reach out to advisors across the globe and to be a global community for academic advising. While the membership may still be predominantly North American, more voices from other countries are entering discussions and scholarship about advising. Does that make it harder to maintain the idea of a normative theory?

Lowenstein: It makes it harder to maintain a *descriptive*, non-normative theory because the biggest challenge for a descriptive theory is that there are so many varieties of advising experiences. And the more varieties you add to the pile, the more difficult it becomes to say something coherent that successfully generalizes about them, so in terms of a descriptive theory it becomes harder. In terms of the normative theory, I don't think

it becomes the least bit harder. The very fact that perhaps some advisors or tutors from, say, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom or countries still further from North America, may have at least implicitly different notions of what they're trying to accomplish with advising, might lead to their coming up with a different normative theory. That could happen, but what I really hope would happen is that there would be a dialogue between these different perspectives—which would be helpful in developing a normative theory that would have still wider appeal than a normative theory that, even though it's not empirical, is at least drawn up with North American universities in mind.

Here's a far-fetched analogy: one reason why I supported bringing history into the theory and philosophy group is that I think that potentially the study of the history of advising invites you to think about how the purpose of advising was seen at different stages. Did those folks at Johns Hopkins in the 19th century understand the purpose of advising differently than people at state universities in the 20th century? At some level that is an empirical question, but it also gets you thinking about value questions and normative questions. So, this is the far-fetched analogy: that this is valuable in the same way as knowing how advising is thought about over a geographical divide.

It does not seem too far-fetched. It is often in the comparison with others that we gain a better understanding of ourselves whether these others reside in different times, or different places. To acknowledge someone else's perspective—to engage in honest and open discussions about the origins and implications of other perspectives—enables critical and constructive reflection of the self. Lowenstein's work, his arguments for a normative theory of advising and the theory he proposes, is an open invitation to all members of the growing global advising community to engage in a conversation about the nature and purpose of advising. In fact, it challenges advisors to disagree and to provide different perspectives and well-crafted arguments for what advising is about and its role within higher education.

The arguments for conceptualizing advising as an effort to help students “intentionally and

reflectively integrate their academic learning into an education that is a coherent whole” (Lowenstein, 2014, para. 1) are compelling. But even agreement with this particular normative theory still leaves rooms for questions and challenges. One area particularly begging for further discussion and debate is the tension between values for advising and values for higher education.

The greatest value of Lowenstein's fundamental questions—what is advising about and why is that so—lies in the attempts at answering those questions, rather than in the answers themselves. However, the answers are relevant because an academic advisor's rationale for advising directs the choices, topics, and methods applied in both the practice and scholarship of advising. Lowenstein's own answers to these questions stand out as crucial landmarks in the history and evolution of the field of academic advising. Academic advisors should honor these answers by using them as input for more and new discussion and debate.

Lowenstein: Like anyone offering a vision, I do hope people will like it and act on it. But I also would be delighted to see alternative normative theories emerge, disagreeing with my own, which could lead to lively debate that could result in even better answers to the theoretical questions and more compelling visions. In fact, that's one of the elements in my Utopia!

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