

A Tribute to Dr. Marc Lowenstein

Marian Gabra, University of California Los Angeles

This is a tribute to Dr. Marc Lowenstein, an influential scholar of academic advising theory, whose contributions have not only profoundly informed my work, but also the field.

[doi:10.12930/NACR-21-02]

KEY WORDS: tribute, advising philosophies

I am incredibly honored to pay tribute to Dr. Marc Lowenstein, an influential scholar of academic advising theory whose contributions have not only profoundly informed my work, but also the field. His work highlighted the transformative ability of advising to foster student learning and inspired advisors to go beyond developmental advising to guide students to draw connections between what they learn both inside and outside of the classroom. Through utilizing this framework, advisors have become more instrumental in supporting students as they curate an enriching undergraduate experience.

His seminal work, “If Advising is Teaching, What do Advisors Teach?” (2005), unpacks how quality academic advising fosters student learning and growth. Reading Lowenstein’s work validated my own instinct that academic advisors are educators because we facilitate learning. Academic advising is an integral component of student learning and development. Dr. Lowenstein’s framework made cultivating a student-advisor partnership—one that inspires students to draw connections between all aspects of their undergraduate experience—a primary goal of advising. These correlations help students to understand the value of their undergraduate education as it relates to their intellectual, professional, and personal aspirations. Through Lowenstein’s learning-centered philosophy, we now advise the whole student, acknowledging that all aspects of their individuality inform their scholarly identity. As advisors, we go beyond simply informing students of their degree requirements to engage more fully with students and explore the rationale and value of their degree.

Lowenstein’s work also emphasizes that advising requires ethics, depth, and dexterity, in addition to the intentional goal of fostering student learning. Academic advisors support students in their intellectual, professional, and personal goals, while simultaneously upholding the integrity of the institution and the degree. For example, while policy may be black and white, student experiences are grey. Thus, it is critical that advisors are comfortable with ambiguity to make nuanced policy decisions about student lives that validate their realities. Moreover, it is important that advisors act as a model for students and teach them how to perceive their education and the world with all its complexity. To engage students in complex dialogue, advisors must be dedicated to cultivating their own professional growth. Continuous learning on the part of advisors facilitates learning, cultivates empowerment, and enables in-depth understanding of advising best practices. Quality advising inspires both students and advisors to be change-agents, leaders, and valuable contributors to our diverse and ever-changing world.

Lowenstein’s more recent article, “Toward a Theory of Advising” (2014), builds upon his previous work and calls for a “unified” and “comprehensive” theory of advising that highlights the value of “advising as integrative learning” (para. 49). His argument also pays tribute to the contributions of Hemwall and Trachte’s learning-centered philosophy (2005; 2009) and outlines six main characteristics that define an aspirational philosophy and practice of advising:

- Advising is an academic endeavor.
- Advising enhances learning and at its core is a locus of learning and not merely a signpost to 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 (Lowenstein, 2014).

His aim here is not only to define advising as a distinct field of thought but also to demonstrate the complexity of advising as an enhancing and transformative process. The framework of “advising as integrative learning” is valuable because it articulates how advising directly impacts student learning, and how advising is aligned with the mission of higher education—both critically important points to highlight if we are to advance both the profession and the field of advising. I would add that advisors, too, are transformed by advising through this framework, because teaching and learning are reciprocal when we move beyond transactional advising. Only then we are able to learn from the experiences students share with us, as much as they learn from our interactions with them.

I continue to revisit Lowenstein’s work because primary-role advisors and administrators must work intentionally and collectively to advance the field of advising. We must simultaneously elevate our role in the eyes of stakeholders as well as faculty members at our institutions. Lowenstein’s work presents us with a paradigm that positions advisors as equals to faculty members with regard to facilitating student learning because we help students to define “the logic of the curriculum” of their entire undergraduate education (2005, p. 65). This assertion elevates the perception of advising and advisors as equal contributors to the academic endeavor within higher education as faculty members. I am exhilarated and inspired by his philosophy of advising. It challenges me to think more critically about how I may contribute to the advancement of the field of advising in addition to fostering the intellectual, personal, and professional development of students and academic advisors.

Lowenstein’s work has informed my philosophy of advising and my approach to creating an advising curriculum for both students and staff at my institution as the Director of Advising Professional Development and University Studies. The philosophy he outlined has provided me with an invaluable framework to develop a University Studies seminar program for undergraduate students and a Professional Develop-

ment program for academic advisors that are learning-centered.

The University Studies program puts into practice the academic advising syllabus (Kramer, 2003) that I crafted in collaboration with members of the advising community, and which was inspired by Lowenstein’s advising-as-teaching philosophy. The University Studies curriculum teaches students the value of a liberal arts education; how to make meaning of their undergraduate experience; how to draw connections across disciplines and between what they learn inside and outside of the classroom; how to identify the transferable skills they acquire from a research university; how to implement effective learning strategies; how to assess their learning; the importance of self-authorship; and how to self-reflect upon their learning and development from an intellectual, personal, and professional perspective. During the academic year, I lead an instructional team of graduate students to teach these seminars. In the summer, I hire, train, and mentor academic advisors to teach these courses (as advisors are only allowed to teach during the summer at my institution). The training and teaching experience that academic advisors obtain directly translates to their roles as academic advisors. It also enables them to more intentionally practice Lowenstein’s advising-as-teaching philosophy and to collaborate with students in the learning process. Moreover, with this experience, advisors are able to understand the role of faculty members and thereby foster more thoughtful partnerships with the faculty members in their departments to facilitate active student learning. We hope to demonstrate to faculty members through a longitudinal study how the University Studies curriculum fosters student learning and how advising-as-teaching contributes to the values of a liberal arts education by cultivating well-rounded students who can express the logic behind and value of their undergraduate education.

The advising professional development program that I lead is also informed by Lowenstein’s integrative and learning-centered philosophy. In developing the vision for this program, I intentionally moved beyond models of advisor training and competency building to cultivate an intellectual learning community that explores the relationship between theory and practice. If advisors are to go beyond developmental advising to engage in advising-as-teaching, then they must also practice and celebrate lifelong learning.

Through this program, I aspire to foster a culture of advising research so that advisors not only become skilled in the pedagogy of advising as practitioners but also experts in the field as researchers and scholars of advising. Given the many responsibilities that advisors manage, realizing this aspiration will take time, a strategic and thoughtful approach, buy-in from advisors, and meaningful collaboration with different campus entities. I have worked collaboratively with academic advisors, faculty members, librarians, the undergraduate research center, and the graduate writing center to develop workshops, reading groups, writing groups, an advising research workshop series, an advising research guide, and initiatives that foster the intellectual, personal, and professional growth of advisors. Dr. Lowenstein was generous enough to contribute to the advising research guide, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

I am indebted to Dr. Lowenstein for igniting a flame in me, for helping me to imagine how I could practice advising more meaningfully, and for leading me to engage in the advising profession with great intention as a lifelong learner. I do not know if it is possible to fully express my gratitude for his groundbreaking work, for his contributions to the advancement to the field, and for his mentorship, as he generously mentors me in my scholarly endeavors. I cherish the conversation we had in Phoenix at the NACADA annual conference in 2018 when I shared with him my research ideas, and he shared with me his enthusiasm for the project. I began working on my research for the article as soon as I returned from the conference; his words of encouragement continue to reverberate in my mind as I work on my first draft. I thank him profusely for leading the way.

References

- Hemwall, M. K., & Trachte, K. C. (2005). Academic advising as learning: 10 organizing principles. *NACADA Journal* 25(2), 74–83.
- Hemwall, M. K., & Trachte, K. C. (2009). Learning at the core: Toward a new understanding of academic advising. *NACADA Journal* 29(1), 113–118. (Reprinted from *NACADA Journal* 19[1], 5–11).
- Kramer, G. (2003). Advising as teaching. In G. Kramer (Ed.), *Faculty advising examined*. (pp. 1–22). Anker.
- Lowenstein, M. (2005). If advising is teaching, what do advisors teach? *NACADA Journal* 25(2), 65–73.
- Lowenstein, M. (2014). Toward a theory of advising. *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal*.

Author's Note

Marian H. Gabra, PhD is the Director of Advising Professional Development and University Studies at UCLA. In her role, she works collaboratively across campus to cultivate spaces of learning and growth for students, staff, and faculty members. As the Director of University Studies, she leads an instructional team in curriculum design and innovative pedagogy and teaches courses under the program, which aim to help students transition into, engage with, and navigate UCLA. As the Director of Advising Professional Development, she has created and implemented the Advising Communities of Excellence (ACE) Professional Development Program, which offers interactive workshops and initiatives that bring together campus professionals to explore the relationship between advising theory and practice. ACE has collaborated with campus partners, librarians, the research center, and faculty members to develop a culture of advising research at UCLA. Dr. Gabra and the ACE Committee have been awarded the 2018 NACADA Region 9 Advising Innovation award. She has been a featured keynote speaker at various programs and conferences. Dr. Gabra also advises students in College Academic Counseling. She earned her BA in English from Occidental College in 2002 and her doctorate in Comparative Literature from UCLA in 2010. Dr. Gabra may be reached at mgabra@college.ucla.edu.