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Coupling Theory and Advising Systems: A New Perspective for Advising Leadership

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Coupling *is a concept used within education, business, and organizational management literature. Its application to organizational management literature allows researchers to understand how organizations function. This article argues that coupling theory can be applied to advising systems' technical (practice) and authoritative (coordination and supervision) aspects. Using coupling theory as a lens to view advising structures and as a language for communicating that assessment can provide profound lessons for more responsive and effective advising practices on college campuses. Additionally, coupling theory may broaden perspectives and deepen advising leaders' communicative vocabulary and allow them to become more skilled and effective administrators in applying these insights to higher education and their institutions.*

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Practitioners should not view advising solely in the context of an organizational structure but in an institution's ecosystem in which multiple institutional agents contribute to the advising process (Tukey, 1996). As Musser (2006) and Bridgen (2017) discuss, advising systems operate within the constructs of institutions, including the processes, practices, management, and functionality of advising services. The authors of this paper argue that a new way of examining or conceptualizing the activities within advising systems, including the technical (practice) and authoritative (coordination and supervision) aspects of these systems, may be necessary to best describe the interconnectedness of advising services at postsecondary institutions. This theoretical paper is a new way of envisioning the institutional advising connections within a college or university. Thus, the authors propose that advising practitioners utilize coupling theory to discuss advising functions, including the technical (practice) and authoritative (coordination and supervision) aspects within advising systems, to build upon the existing literature on institutional advising models and advising systems.

Institutional Advising Models

There is extensive literature regarding the seven institutional advising models and their existence within postsecondary institutions (Barron & Powell, 2014; Carlstrom, 2013; Crockett, 1982; Habley, 1983, 1993, 1997; Habley & McCauley, 1987; King, 1993, 2008; Miller, 2012; Pardee, 2004). According to Carstensen and Silberhorn (1979), a limited amount of postsecondary institutions had policies or comprehensive statements regarding their academic advising delivery models. Several years later, Crockett (1982) and Habley (1983) broadly categorized institutional advising models and described seven institutional models of advising that transcend every type of postsecondary institution.

Decentralized Structures

There are two decentralized structures: the faculty-only model and the satellite model (King, 2008; Pardee, 2004). Faculty are the primary academic advisors for students in the faculty-only model (Habley, 1983). Each student is assigned a faculty advisor in their academic discipline, and students who are considered "undecided" work with the liberal arts faculty to decide their academic major (Habley, 1983). The satellite model involves advising offices either within academic units or within divisions on or off-campus (Habley, 1983). During the student's tenure, the advising responsibilities often move from the academic division subunit's advising office to faculty within that division (Habley & McCauley, 1987).

Shared Structures

In shared structures, academic advising is performed in a centralized administrative unit by primary-role and faculty advisors and faculty's individual academic divisions or departments (Pardee, 2004). There are four shared structures: the supplementary model, the split model, the dual model, and the total intake model. In the supplementary model, faculty serve as students' primary advisors, while a supplementary advising office provides training and support for academic advisors (Habley, 1983). In a split model, academic advising is split between faculty and primary-role staff in an advising office, usually with faculty advising students who have already declared an academic major and primary-role staff advising undeclared students (Habley, 1983; Habley & McCauley, 1987). In this model, the advising office comprises a limited number of primary-roles advising staff and has no jurisdiction for approving academic decisions (King, 2008). In the dual model, faculty advise students regarding their discipline's specific requirements while primary-role advisors advise students regarding their general education requirements (Habley, 1983). Students have two advisors in this model, and the academic advising office not only coordinates all advising services but also advises undeclared students (King, 2008). Finally, in the total intake model, primary-role staff members, faculty, or peers provide initial advising services (King, 2008). An advantage of this model is that students receive intensive support and outreach during the intake process before they transition to an academic subunit or faculty advisor (King, 2008).

Centralized Structures

There is only one centralized structure: the self-contained model (King, 2008; Pardee, 2004). This structure utilizes faculty and staff advisors housed under one specific academic or administrative unit (Pardee, 2004). In a self-contained model, academic advising takes place in a centralized unit such as an advising office supervised by a director or a dean (Habley, 1983, 1997; Habley & McCauley, 1987; King, 2008; Pardee, 2004). Strengths of this model include academic advisors being professionally trained and who consider advising their main priority.

Coupling within Organizational Systems

Institutions are often faced with the challenge of maintaining a continuity of standards and processes while also responding to several factors that may impact the flow and output of the organization (Bledsoe, 2018). The level of impact on the flow and output of an organization can be associated with the concept of coupling. Weick (1976) described the concept of "coupling" in organizations as an attachment between two or more separate departments, but their identity and physical or logistical separateness remain. An example of this within postsecondary education may include several different academic departments within a college or university or, as Weick (1976) mentioned directly, a counselor's and a principal's office in a secondary school setting.

The concept of coupling, whether tight or loose, has often been associated with the coordination of work (Gamoran & Dreeben, 1986), and thus departments or offices that are loosely or tightly coupled share a common aspect of "work." Even though teachers and administrators do not share a common aspect of "work," such as classroom instruction versus administrative policy development, their shared "work" is interconnected with the teaching and learning experience and thus can exhibit aspects of loose or tight coupling with regards to reactionary aspects, coordination, and supervision (Hökkä & Vähäsantanen, 2014; Weick, 1976).

Weick (1976) mentioned that the most common coupling mechanisms might include an organization's technical or authoritative aspects. For the technical aspect, this can include tasks, technology, or territory within the organization, while the authoritative aspect could include the coordination of positions, offices, or responsibilities (Weick, 1976; Yair, 1997). To better understand the concept of coupling, Orton and Weick (1990) described the following concepts listed in Table 1.

Responsiveness is associated with the reactionary time to task-oriented situations (how fast something gets done), and distinctives is associated with the level of autonomy exercised by an individual or department (supervisory control of daily tasks). In loosely coupled systems, the formal technical aspects within an organizational structure are often disconnected, and thus practitioners exercise little supervisory or authoritative control (Gamoran & Dreeben, 1986). In tightly coupled systems, supervision and coordination are controlled, which leads to high levels of

Table 1. Coupling Concepts and Styles

Concept	Coupling
If the system is neither responsive nor distinctive	Non coupled system
If the system is responsive without distinctiveness	Tightly coupled system
If there is distinctiveness without responsiveness	Decoupled system
If there is both distinctiveness and responsiveness	Loosely coupled system

responsiveness but few aspects of an individual or departmental autonomy (Gamoran & Dreeben, 1986). In the following sections, tight and loose coupling concepts are discussed further.

Tightly Coupled Systems

Tightly coupled systems operate by formalizing procedures and rules that direct behavior and patterns that are responsive to events and institutional needs (Bledsoe, 2018; Hautala et al., 2018). Within educational settings, tight coupling aims to eliminate the discretion in decision-making by adhering to administrative orders through specific managerial practices (Hautala et al., 2018). Tightly coupled educational systems are driven by data, analysis, and a shared system of accountability where learning outcomes are measured to examine organizational performance (Millward & Timperley, 2010). Much of the conceptualization behind the formal aspects of an organization is that coordination, routines, policies, and procedures are followed and ideally create well-functioning, tightly coupled systems (Yair, 1997). Teachers within tightly coupled educational settings face much top-down organizational control (Hökkä & Vähäsantanen, 2014).

One negative aspect of the concept of tight coupling is the association with administrative control (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). Aspects of this within a postsecondary setting include administrators controlling minor details of the decision-making process for faculty or other departments in the name of efficiency, such as budget expenditures, relations with peers, or sabbatical semesters (Sauder & Espeland, 2009).

Loosely Coupled Systems

Aspects of loosely coupled systems are characterized by high levels of autonomy between departments. This autonomy can lead to positive and negative outcomes for the organization (Elken & Vukasovic, 2019). A positive aspect of a loosely coupled system is the concept of localized adaption, which allows for negative incidents and events that affect a specific area or department not to ripple through the entire organization (Elken & Vukasovic, 2019). An example of this is an underperforming academic department or non-effective teacher, whose influence will not impact the institution's credibility and performance. A second positive aspect of a loosely coupled system is the aspect of autonomy (Weick, 1976; Elken & Vukasovic, 2019). Coupled aspects of an organization have the flexibility and discretion to execute tasks (Yair, 1997). This can also be characterized as the ability to "experiment" with different responses and procedures, which could ultimately adapt throughout the system or organization and lead to positive outcomes (Goldspink, 2007).

A negative aspect of a loosely coupled system is a lack of centralized authority due to its decentralized nature and a general lack of responsiveness to the system as a whole (Goldspink, 2007; Weick, 1976; Orton & Weick, 1990). Educational organizations that exhibit loosely coupled aspects have difficulty moving forward with fast and responsive institutional change due to the inherent nature of decentralization and autonomy (Shen et al., 2017). A historical example of this from Birnbaum (1988) is a physics department requiring students to learn German despite the academic leadership pressing for more flexibility within the general curriculum. A current example could be a Nursing Program within a community college setting requiring a student's SAT score for their application to the program against the advice of senior college leadership to eliminate access barriers to educational programs. The stalemate between both entities may ultimately lead to frustration within the organization and little progress with redesigning the curriculum or student experience. In general, effective change within loosely coupled systems is difficult, especially for administrators seeking to change the autonomous nature of faculty within departments (Birnbaum, 1988).

Table 2. Tight and Loose Coupling Concepts

Concept	Coupling
Advising units with mostly direct oversight from an advising coordinator or senior administrator.	Tightly coupled system
Decentralized advising units/divisions with faculty autonomy over services delivered.	Loosely coupled system
Shared advising structures with centralized units and autonomous faculty advising services.	A variation of coupling systems

Tight and Loose Coupling within Advising Units and Systems

The concepts of tight and loose coupling within educational organizations have often addressed specific relationships between faculty/teachers and administrators or departments and the institution. The authors of this article argue that coupling, and specifically the spectrum of coupling, can be found within the advising structure of colleges and universities. Specifically, the concept of coupling can be applied to advising units and academic departments or advising administrators and advisors. The aspect of work that is shared and coordinated is considered the "advising process" in which academic advisors, whether faculty or staff, carry out advising services to students. The degree of coupling apparent within these systems can be based on how centralized or decentralized the advising structure is (see Table 2).

As we examine Weick's (1976) scholarship, a responsive but not distinctive system would be considered tightly coupled. For example, the tight coupling can be apparent between advising departments where supervision is exercised over the function and delivery of advising services and the unit's responsiveness. Advisors supervised by an area director or academic administrator often do not have much flexibility or autonomy over their "work." Advising administration will often determine the type/philosophy of advising for the advising unit and manage the hours of operation and availability of advisors. Additionally, aspects of tight coupling apply to a specific advising unit and any department or unit that utilizes primary role advising services. Due to the supervisory nature of the unit or department and following along with the concepts of responsiveness and distinctiveness, primary-role staff within advising/support units such as a TRIO support services department would also exhibit aspects of tight coupling. The responsiveness of each unit is associated with the nature and role of primary-role advisors. Most often, primary-role advisors are part-time or full-time staff members solely dedicated to providing advising services to students. Thus, the unit's responsiveness to provide advising services to students may be more reactive to situations than advising within loosely coupled systems, given the function and role of the department. Finally, the supervisor of this unit may be responsible or associated with the institution's retention efforts. Thus, the supervisor has an incentive to ensure the output of those services is responsive to student needs to improve institutional retention rates.

In stark contrast to a tightly coupled advising unit with an advising coordinator or administrator, a decentralized advising unit such as an academic division that utilizes faculty who serve as academic advisors often has loose supervision from an academic dean or department chair. The level of autonomy exercised in this situation is very high given tenure and the independence that faculty have over their daily schedules and campus presence. Faculty advisors and the division itself exhibit distinctiveness through the autonomy faculty have over their roles. Still, the unit's responsiveness may vary depending on the culture of the division or department. This is not to say that decentralized units or faculty advisors are worse than tightly coupled centralized advising units and primary role advisors. Still, the unique aspects of each provide some perspective to the degree of coupling within the department or unit.

When examining systems, and not solely departments or units, tight and loose coupling aspects can be apparent within institutional advising models. For example, centralized systems such as a total-intake model may exhibit a high degree of tight coupling institutionally if primary-role advisors provide a majority of the advising services within a centralized unit. Decentralized systems such as faculty-only models may have high levels of loose coupling

Table 3. Coordination of Advising Services (Authoritative Aspect)

Concept	Advising Output	Coupling	Authority/Coordination
Centralized Systems	Mostly Professional Staff	Tightly coupled system	Advising Coordinator and Academic Deans
Decentralized Systems	Mostly Faculty	Loosely coupled system	Academic Deans / Coordinator*
Shared Systems	Shared Professional and Faculty	A variation of coupling*	Academic Deans / Advising Coordinator

* The extent to which the system is coupled will depend upon the district's organizational responsiveness and coordination of authority over advising services.

between academic divisions or departments (see Table 3). The responsiveness of each academic division or department to advising functions may vary greatly, given each academic division's social norms and culture.

Coupling Theory in Practice

Coupling theory provides a critical frame for advising administrators – a frame that can be leveraged to evaluate and enhance the effectiveness of institutional operations. The aforementioned advising models (centralized, decentralized, shared) provide a prescriptive diagnosis of advising practice, but they do little beyond that. The models provide little deeper analysis than that identification, important in its own right, but only a naming. Coupling theory goes beyond the structural descriptions that the advising models provide to a more practical application of what is happening in advising units and how the structure affects the constituencies served by the advising unit.

In his original work, Weick described two "mechanisms" or elements at the heart of the coupling concept: the technical aspects of the organization and the authoritative aspects. The technical element includes three aspects: task, technology, and territory. The authoritative aspect includes position, offices, and responsibilities. Administrators can review the organization and ascertain how the system works by explicating the concept of coupling around these two central elements using the lens of coupling theory. Administrators can utilize these categories to their advantage by employing the elements as a heuristic or a problem solving and practical method for analyzing their offices' work and authoritative control.

First, administrators may reflect on the technical element and quickly ascertain how other units influence or impair their units in advisor tasks. Analyzing the daily work duties of advisors within the office will reveal how significant the demands of other units may have on the advising function. For example, advisors within academic departments may spend significant amounts of time on functions that are critical to the department and yet are not a part of their academic advising duties. The analysis will delineate functions that are perhaps detracting from advising duties and tasks; the same will be true with an analysis of the support technology and territory in which advisors complete tasks during a typical workday. The advising administrator can ascertain what holds the organization together, how the advisor is influenced, or how demands are divided.

The overriding significance of coupling analysis is that it provides, both in the technical and authoritative aspects of work, a method for ensuring that advising administrators see clearly how academic advising is performed across their units of responsibility. Coupling theory provides a much deeper and more practical approach to academic advising administration in at least three ways: as a lens, a language, and a lesson.

Lens

First, coupling theory sharpens the administrative perspective by providing a lens through which unit advising practices may be assessed. The size of an institution can provide a greenhouse for diverse advising models and structures. An example could include a group of advisors who work centrally from the Dean's Office, advising several departments and programs. Other small private schools may retain entirely decentralized units, with primary-role advisors or faculty who report to a department chair or program director and have no real connection with the central advising unit other than in name. The experienced administrator may

have the wisdom to identify units as one model or another. Still, this identification may come up short in providing either an assessment of the implications of the structure or an approach to moving that unit closer to the institution's priorities if they differ from the specific unit.

The lens of coupling theory enables administrators to assess the practice of those models and their implications for faculty, staff, and students. In addition, the theory will provide a means of assessing the outcomes executive administrators provide for academic advising across the campus. Through the lens of coupling theory, an administrator may lobby executive leadership to align the college's diverse advising units. Administrators can see more clearly how advising is delivered and how those systems influence the entire organization and its constituents.

The loose coupling system described here provides a particularly adept example of working with units that do not report directly to the central administrator. Advisors within several academic departments may report directly to the department chair; consequently, they may have no reporting line to the main college advising office or receive their employee evaluations from the chair. In practice, this approach cuts those advisors off from the priorities that the college or main central advising office may set; the autonomy of these advisors can potentially work against college priorities. The college advising administrator's authority or influence is severely hampered by the loose coupling of these departments with the main college advising office. Loose coupling, then, has significant implications for the advisors in those units who have no structural requirement to follow the college's priorities. Their department chair often gives them many other responsibilities and duties, dividing their focus. And indeed, the orientation of loose coupling may impact the student experience of advising within these departments. Even though the college will be judged, through institution-wide advising assessments, and by the student experience of advising in these units, the administrator may not have the authority to implement change there.

Language

Beyond assessing the advising structures across advising units more effectively, coupling theory also provides a language through which to communicate that assessment to others. Adopting coupling theory can provide a vocabulary that enables the administrator to take a step back from personal subjectivity; it presents a filter through which to communicate with department heads, faculty, and staff in a way that's clear, concise, and free of a personally biased vocabulary. For example, even when an advising administrator recognizes potential negative outcomes from a decentralized and shared structure of academic advising–such as a lack of consistency with advising practices due to training requirements or an unwillingness to use a retention based software system for note-taking and alert posting–simply describing the structure as "decentralized" or "shared" or placing the blame of the "structure" affords no stance for imagining anything different nor for approaching the dean or others within the college to discuss possibilities for change. Without words, the administrator is bereft of the ability to name the problem and then work toward a solution.

Millward and Temperley's (2010) description of the essence of a tightly coupled system, as one driven by data, analysis, and a shared system of accountability, may provide just the verbiage needed for an advising administrator to advocate for closer coupling of the unit with the main administrative advising office or, at best, a discussion of advising practices throughout the college. Furthermore, explaining that learning outcomes of the institution are the drivers of evaluation may also provide stronger support for more direct supervisory status if a highly decentralized unit is underperforming and not meeting the needs of students. Coupling theory enables a vital vocabulary to discuss "work" (Gameron & Dreeben, 1986). And at the end of the day, academic advising is work.

Lesson

Finally, the theory and its application in institutional contexts may contribute to a lesson in growth and change. For example, would units under college supervision and care be more effective if they were more tightly coupled? Or, are there advising offices that need the autonomy of the loosely coupled unit to flourish in their existing contexts? A more robust theoretical frame allows leaders to ask more detailed questions and to see a more nuanced picture of what is possible across all units. More tightly coupled units within the college office would impact the departments in which they reside.

In some cases, particularly in pre-medical units, they may need that autonomy to ensure that their students receive an advising experience

that best suits them and prepares them for the rigors of medical school applications and interviews. It may well be that a loosely coupled system in those units is the better model. An example of growth and change is provided in the following section highlighting the situational example of "Western State University."

Theory to Practice: A Divided University

Applying this three-pronged coupling assessment can play out in several scenarios. At Western State University, sophomore to junior year retention continued to decline over several years. The institution's executive administration was aware of the problem but struggled to ascertain the reasons for the third-year downturn in retention. More third-year students transferring to other institutions and other data revealed a 7-8% decline in retention rates over the last two years. Academic deans, associate deans, and other administrators across the institution began determining the reasoning behind this drop-off. In the College of Liberal Arts, the associate dean who oversees academic services began to analyze the data through the lens of coupling theory. This associate dean quickly realized that their institution, and more specifically their advising structure, was a "loosely coupled" system. For example, the individual colleges were allowed to hire academic advisors as they saw fit. There was no institution-level oversight for academic advising as it was split between the colleges within the institutional structure. Additionally, the institution had no campus-wide coordination from a central advising office that served students outside a first-year model. Consequently, the College of Liberal Arts was like the four other colleges at the University: responsible for their academic services, including advising. This reality indicated a heavily decentralized model; however, aspects of coupling theory can help us dive deeper into what was going on at Western State University.

In this loosely coupled system, the university is responsible for territory and offices; in other words, the university controls the infrastructure and facilities. However, each college oversees staff hiring and staff responsibilities. In effect, this loosely coupled system has created four different advising structures with different advising priorities across its institutional structure. For example, while senior executive administration at the institution is focused on the sophomore to junior retention rates, the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences leadership is focused on filling critical classes for tenured faculty. The College of Health Sciences leadership is largely focused on ensuring that the college's research agenda is moving forward and securing valuable grants for funding research. Still, leadership within the College of Undergraduate and Professional Studies (which is even more decentralized with satellite offices at several community colleges) feel their advisors do not need to engage in this institutional effort to focus on retention given that a large majority of their students transfer to their academic programs often at a junior status.

By viewing this system through a coupling lens, the associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts is now prepared to provide an assessment using a language senior executive administration will recognize as professional and insightful, and which can effectively describe why the institution's priorities of retention are not necessarily being implemented at each college level and why there is such variation in institutional efforts to address this issue. The associate dean can now describe in more detail the technical and authoritative aspects of the advising system and move beyond a simple description of "decentralized." The department-specific priorities, level of institutional coordination, lack of central authority, emphasis on addressing institutional retention efforts, and the differences between executive and department/college vision can all be described in more detail using the language of coupling theory.

Furthermore, the associate dean is now equipped to address the situation through the appropriate adjustment of tasks, positions, and responsibilities within their college and model and advise other colleges on moving forward while addressing executive leadership priorities. The associate dean may speak to the College of Liberal Arts department chairs and explain the discrepancy in priorities between executive administration and college-level departments. Or they might share the lesson with their frontline advising supervisors across the college to address the day-to-day practice of academic advising and where adjustments in that practice must be made to address institutional priorities. They can suggest adjustments to asks and responsibilities, perhaps to shift energy and investment from college and department-level priorities to retention phone calls to students or even one-on-one appointments discussing reasons for departure. In sum, coupling theory provides a theoretical

framework that, when put into practice, provides rich insights into how academic advising systems function within an institutional structure and how individuals can advocate for better control of coordination from executive leadership to address inconsistencies within advising practices. Coupling theory examines the system, the coordination of services, the level of institutional authority over those services, and how all these aspects affect the output of advising practice which, in turn, impacts retention, the very issue at the forefront for senior executive leadership.

Future Research and Conclusion

Using coupling theory as a lens through which to view advising systems/structures and as a language for communicating that assessment may provide profound lessons for more responsive and effective advising on campuses. Model and structure theories are useful and will remain, but using them in conjunction with organizational models like coupling theory can be a powerful pairing for advising administrators. By broadening their perspectives and deepening their communicative vocabulary, advising leaders and directors are given opportunities to become more skilled and effective administrators in applying these insights to higher education. Future research on coupling theory within advising systems could focus on identifying coupling aspects within divisions or advising units by examining the responsiveness and distinctiveness of the technical and authoritative aspects of those advising departments or units. For example, this could include qualitative research by interviewing both advising center staff and advising leadership to establish whether or not tight coupling is apparent within the sub-unit of advising or if the loose coupling is apparent within a decentralized unit. Additional qualitative research could examine advising coordinators' perspectives and experiences coordinating advising services within decentralized or shared systems. Such a study could help establish if loose or tight coupling exists with the coordination of work or the authoritative aspects of those systems.

In conclusion, coupling theory may broaden perspectives and deepen the communicative vocabulary of advising leaders and directors. It can allow them to become more skilled and effective administrators in applying these insights to higher education and their institutions. Finally, using coupling theory as a lens through which to view advising structures and a language for communicating that assessment may provide profound lessons for more responsive and effective advising practices on college campuses if further examined through future research.

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