The Engagement Model for Effective Academic Advising With Undergraduate College Students and Student Organizations

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This article introduces and discusses the efficacy of an engagement approach to undergraduate college student academic advising. The Engagement Model for Academic Advising involves relationship building between the student-advisee and the professor-mentor to enhance student self-efficacy for completing the degree requirements.

The purpose of this article is to introduce, to discuss, and to illustrate a model of student academic advising that clarifies the individual roles and responsibilities of the student-advisee and the professor-mentor relationship. I believe that the engagement model approach to academic advising allows both students and advisers to develop a heightened personal investment in the success of the individual academic program, the supporting academic unit, and the overall university.

Haworth and Conrad (1997) had this perspective regarding engagement theory and the quality of an academic program, "high-quality programs are those in which students, faculty, and administrators engage in mutually supportive teaching and learning; students invest in teaching as well as learning, and faculty and administrators invest in learning as well as teaching" (p. 27). Too often, current teaching and learning practices are guided by individual and institutional reliance on outdated assumptions of teacher-student interactions (McKeachie, 1998). Learning at the college level generally involves more than the perfunctory regurgitation of the class instructor’s specific lecture material. Learning, in the higher education environment, requires an ongoing process that assesses and compares the thoughts, feelings, and goals of the student and the instructor/adviser (McKeachie, 1998). Learning also involves the development and practical application of those human qualities that will assist the college student in becoming a leader in the community (Rosovsky, 1990).

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CURRENT THINKING

There is some debate on what role student academic advising has in effectively addressing the goals of the students, academic units, and institutions (see Greenwood, 1998; Schein & Laff, 1997; Schneider, 1998; Turkey, 1996). In the current discourse on the purpose of tenure, Greenwood noted that effective tenure policies can attract scholars who are willing to devote time and attention to the increasingly unpopular task of student academic advising. To achieve effective academic advising, Schein and Laff found that an individual student’s self-descriptions of goals and objectives are a better starting point than are lists of curricula. This approach would require an even more concentrated effort on the part of the academic adviser in a time when current technological practices might be limiting the face-to-face student-adviser interactions.

There is little doubt that student academic advising will remain a necessary component of college instructors’ responsibilities. With that in mind, it is important to review and evaluate strategies for advising students and organizations to ensure implementation of processes that offer the greatest possibility for success in achieving the goals of the advisee, adviser, academic unit, and institution.

Schneider (1998) noted that a crisis often brings about an evaluation of existing policies. But change that is developed in reaction to a specific crisis may reflect a narrow focus that does not have a broad application and is vulnerable to the possibility of additional crises. College student advising strategies that are developed, evaluated, and refined by engaging the input of all levels of the institution have the greatest chance for long-term success. As noted by Turkey (1996), it is important to take a “systems” approach to academic advising in order to effectively address the goals of the students, individual academic units, and the overall institution.

The assumption that student advising is an unwanted and unprepared-for responsibility thrust upon the unsuspecting and inexperienced professor is not new (see Lumpkins & Hall, 1987). On the other hand, several studies have supported a careful, planned approach to student advising. In a detailed manual, Matthay (1995) examined specific strategies for working with students from culturally and socially diverse backgrounds. In addition, he uses a specific seven-section approach for preparing the high school guidance counselor for advising students about college selection and admission. The seven sections discussed examining techniques for motivating students; preplanning for academic, extracurricular, and financial success; exploring options for higher education; explaining the application and admission process; exploring the needs of specific populations; reviewing issues of professional growth and development; and outlining a sample plan for student advising. Although targeted to working with younger students, this planned approach to student advising has obvious application for the college instructor/adviser.
Theory-based approaches for student advising are presented by Schultz (1998) and Turkey (1996). Schultz, using an approach based on advising student nurses, stressed the importance of theory-based advising in making the adviser-student interaction more efficient and effective. Nursing theory application emphasizes the social-learning and social-cognitive elements of role-modeling behaviors and imitation to develop rapport and assist the student in clarifying goals. Although nursing theory is emphasized here, the application to the mentor-student relationship within a broad academic setting is obvious.

There are various ways to effectively advise student groups and student organizations. As noted by Treuer and Belote (1997), basic learning principles can be applied to the use of information technology for effective student advising, instruction, and community development initiatives. Wildman (1999) reported that participation in an undergraduate transition adjustment class provided students with easy access to social supports and to campus and academic information. When advising student organizations, the important elements for success are simple: access to the faculty adviser and to other student members. Introductory seminar classes or current technology, such as an organization Web site, can increase access to both faculty and students while providing uncomplicated opportunities for sharing information and building relationships.

PRELIMINARY STEPS TO THE ENGAGEMENT APPROACH

It is my anecdotal observation that the “advice” from faculty-adviser to student-advisee is often restricted to probing questions designed to illuminate and clarify the shortcomings and inadequacies of the student. This potentially demoralizing encounter can create a confrontational environment that both the student and the faculty member seek to avoid. This result is unfortunate because the brief exchanges between adviser and advisee may have the greatest impact on the student’s sense of self-efficacy in completing his or her degree requirements.

The engagement approach to academic advising assumes that the primary academic adviser is the frontline mentor in assisting the student-advisees in identifying and clarifying their personal academic goals and objectives. Operating from this approach, there are five primary assumptions: (1) The student was admitted to the college/university having met minimum academic standards, (2) the student has been introduced to the university catalog, (3) the student already has a personal sense of his or her academic strengths and weaknesses, (4) the student has already explored what the particular degree has to offer, and (5) the student has identified personal priorities regarding academic versus nonacademic success.

1. Minimum academic standards—The first assumption in applying an engagement approach to student advising recognizes the student’s
pre-entrance accomplishments, such as the ability to read and comprehend at a college level. It is also assumed that the cognitive capacities of the student allow abstract and hypothetical application. If the student is an international student, or one for whom English is a second language, it is assumed that a minimum English language proficiency has been demonstrated.

2. **Catalog introduction**—On many college and university campuses, there is some mechanism for introductory orientation, or introducing the new enrollee to the basic formal and informal practices of the campus. This second assumption presupposes that the student has been introduced to the general university catalog and, applying the first assumption, has the capacity to read and understand the basic requirements articulated in that student–university contract.

3. **Academic strengths and weaknesses**—It is not assumed that an incoming university student is completely prepared academically and socially to achieve success at this level of higher education. This third assumption, however, does express the idea that the student is beginning to recognize his or her specific competencies and deficiencies. If, for example, a student must choose among several computer skills application courses, it is assumed that he or she can identify his or her basic level of computer competencies.

4. **Explored the degree**—It is assumed that when a student identifies a particular academic area of interest (i.e., biology, family studies, dietetics, math, psychology, sociology), they have a general understanding of that field.

5. **Personal priorities for success**—There are many motivations for continuing education beyond the secondary degree, one of which may be to complete a program of higher learning. The final assumption articulates the notion that the individual student has identified the cost-benefit practical applications associated with completing their personal objectives. It is not assumed that the student’s personal objectives are consistent with those of the adviser.

**THE ENGAGEMENT MODEL FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING**

The underlying assumption for encouraging interactions between advisers and students is that such relationships will culminate in the successful completion of the academic program, leading to commencement and the awarding of a degree. The commencement “passage” thus begins the positive reinforcement process for the new graduate to foster a sense of appreciation for and commitment to the institution. This being so, then it is necessary to view the process as that of a discontinuous rite of passage. It is generally understood that traditional rites of passage include the four primary steps of separation, training, initiation, and induction (Lefrancois, 1999). Applying these steps to student advising, separation requires removal from the general population,
training is the transfer of formal and informal knowledge, initiation can be viewed as ritual transformation, and induction is the awarding of membership.

Application of the Engagement Model for Academic Advising requires that the academic adviser understands his or her role in the process of passage. The student–adviser relationship is best viewed as a mentoring relationship that results in the initiation and the induction (commencement) of the advisee into the group of individuals having completed a degree. As illustrated in Figure 1, both the advisee and the adviser bring preexisting experiences into the relationship. Although the underlying assumptions about the student have already been identified, the experiences of the adviser that uniquely qualify him or her for the “training” include (a) completion of a degree consistent with the target of the student-advisee; (b) familiarity with the catalog requirements of the college or university and the supervising academic board; (c) familiarity with any changes, additions, or deletions to the college or university requirements; (d) awareness of the successes and failures of past students within that curriculum; (e) training or experience in successful interviewing techniques; and (f) understanding of and personal commitment to the process of mentoring a student-advisee through the process to completion.

Beyond the five general assumptions about the student-advisee and the six experiences of the professor-adviser, there are four primary steps involved in engaging the student-advisee in a mutually supportive learning environment. These are to (a) identify the assumptions that can be clearly articulated by the student; (b) assist the student to clarify those assumptions that are unclear; (c) clarify the personal, professional, and educational goals of the student; and (d) guide the student as he or she navigates through the specific curriculum. The most direct way to identify the student’s assumptions is through specific questions regarding the degree program. For example, a student entering into an undergraduate program might be asked, “Have you reviewed the program course schedule in the catalog?” or “Based on the catalog, what would you like to take this semester?” Some specific probing can easily identify whether the students are familiar with the specific program for which they are registering. Vague assumptions and goals can be clarified with the student through the judicious use of open-ended questions in an initial or early session with the adviser. Before an adviser can work effectively with a student, he or she must clarify that the particular degree area meets the personal and professional goals of the student. If some interest that is outside of the department’s professional application is identified, it is the academic adviser’s responsibility to counsel the student about investigating other academic areas. If the academic adviser discovers that the student has identified personal priorities that would minimize the likelihood of academic success, it may even be best for the adviser to encourage the student to withdraw from school for a period of time in order to maximize the likelihood of future academic success.

After completing the first three steps of the engagement process, the final step involves ongoing guidance through the student’s specific curriculum.
FIGURE 1

Engagement Model for Academic Advising

This is the "maintenance" phase of the model during which the academic adviser monitors the progress of the student-advisee. Interaction or intervention at this level is motivated entirely from the teacher-trainer function, maneuvering specifically toward the student's completion of the degree. At this point in the relationship, the student is very likely beginning upper di-
vision courses and the academic adviser may have more substantial contact with the student. It is during this phase that the more comprehensive “mutual teaching and learning,” of Haworth and Conrad’s (1997) engagement theory, take place. Both the adviser and the advisee identify and clarify the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum, the advisee’s learning style and competencies, and the adviser’s strengths and weaknesses as a mentor and guide. If both student-advisee and teacher-adviser approach the relationship as a guided learning experience, then each will emerge with new and enhanced competencies that can be easily adapted and applied to future interactions.

CONCLUSION

In the Haworth and Conrad (1997) presentation of an engagement theory of academic program quality, they noted that “students who learn from committed scholar-teachers become more inspired professionals who are more committed to their profession and to their ongoing professional growth and development” (p. 31). This proposed Engagement Model for Academic Advising assumes that the college or university student is not entering into academic relationships as a consumer. Instead, the incoming student is paying tuition to learn under a more experienced tutor/mentor/teacher. Conversely, the professor-adviser is not working as an independent researcher or as service delivery personnel. Instead, this model for academic advising assumes that the adviser is being paid to teach, conduct appropriate research, and provide service in the form of specific insight and expertise for the university and professional community. Successful application of the Engagement Model for Academic Advising pairs the student-advisee with an appropriate professor-adviser with the objective of providing mutually rewarding learning and training in a particular academic area of shared interest. Consistent with the findings of Schein and Laff (1997), this model of academic advising focuses on the goals and objectives of the incoming students, paired with faculty-mentors who likely share the same interests. If success is defined as the creation of mutually rewarding relationships resulting in the initiation—induction process of commencement, then the Engagement Model of Academic Advising seems to illustrate one possible approach to achieving that end.

REFERENCES


Money doesn’t make you happy, but it quiets the nerves.
—Sean O’Casey, Playwright