In Theory, Advising Matters

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With full appointment books, advisors rarely have time to think about theory, much less practice it. Crookston and O’Banion, marginality and mattering, 7 vectors of development, student subcultures, and observations on advising styles do not seem to have much to do with students when the line outside the office is getting longer. However, advisors who understand theory can challenge themselves and tailor their own styles to meet the needs of their advisees.

Does theory matter? Does understanding student subcultures help advisors? Does advising style make a difference? Does being familiar with theory make for a better advisor? The answers are yes, yes, yes, and yes.

Academic advising without some understanding of theory easily becomes prescriptive. Although theory gives no guarantee that the advisor will know how to respond properly to an advisee, knowledge of theory provides:

- the framework for advisors to guide their practices and to construct appropriate responses to advisees;
- a means of assessing where students are developmentally, enabling advisors to guide advisees in their growth; and
- the context for a broader understanding of advisees as developing adults.

Theory builds the bridge between simply telling a student the classes to take and guiding a student toward decisions that have lifelong effects.

Understanding the historical context for the theories behind current perspectives on developmental advising helps advisors place advising in a larger framework. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, enrollments were falling, students were asking for direction, and higher education administrators began to take notice of the power of good academic advising. In 1970, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1972) recognized that institutions of higher education should integrate advising into the academic experience. Thus began the development of academic advising as it is known today.

Developmental Advising per Crookston and O’Banion

In the early 1970s, two influential scholars expanded the definition of advising. Crookston created a broad definition of advising: “Developmental counseling or advising is concerned not only with a specific personal or vocational decision but also with facilitating the student’s rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavior awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills” (Crookston, 1972, p.12).

Not quite so daunting was the model of O’Banion (1972), who defined advising as a top-down regression:

- exploration of life goals,
- vocational goals,
- program choice,
- course choice, and
- class schedule.

In this model, the advising process begins with the larger questions about life goals and values. As the advisee identifies important goals and values, he or she is free to concentrate on vocational and career goals as a means to achieve life goals. As the advisee clarifies the career goals, her or his focus continues to narrow, moving toward the major, the courses, and finally, the scheduling of classes. A common symbol for O’Banion’s model is the funnel, with life goals at the top and the scheduling the courses at the narrow end. O’Banion’s model sets the stage for further development of advising theory.

Schlossberg’s Theory of Mattering

In 1989, Schlossberg developed a theory with which advisors should be familiar: the theory of
marginality and mattering. By applying Schlossberg’s theory to advisees, the advisor recognizes the discomfort some students experience about their place within the institution; students become marginalized if they do not connect with an individual or a group. When students believe that they matter, confidence replaces feelings of marginality. As simple and straightforward as this theory is, Schlossberg’s research shows that mattering matters. For a successful academic experience, students must feel they matter to someone or some group. When students believe they do not matter, disengagement begins. Schlossberg’s work supports that of other theorists who state that disengagement leads to student departure from the institution. Therefore, for advisors, advisees must matter.

An advisor can easily apply Schlossberg’s theory by practicing good relational skills. The advisor should focus on the advisee, welcome and listen to the advisee, be patient, be comfortable with silence, and be relaxed. As the relationship develops, the advisor lets the advisee know that ideas matter, questions matter, initiatives matter, and the advisor’s relationship with the advisee matters. The advisor needs simply to remember that each student matters.

Chickering’s Seven Vectors

In 1993, Chickering revised his 1969 theory of identity development in college students. Advisors who are knowledgeable about student development frequently apply Chickering’s theories to discussions of growth in college students. His model, co-developed with Reisser, contains seven dimensions of student development, which they called vectors:

1. developing intellectual, physical, and interpersonal competence;
2. managing emotions;
3. developing emotional autonomy, recognizing interdependence;
4. developing healthy interpersonal relationships;
5. establishing identity;
6. developing purpose; and
7. developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, 45–71).

At first glance, Chickering and Reisser’s theory of development appears to be much more complicated than Schlossberg’s theory of mattering. As an advisor becomes acquainted with the vectors, however, he or she can visualize each vector as a continuum along which a student’s development progresses.

Advisees are in the process of developing their intellectual, physical, and interpersonal competencies, learning how to manage their emotions, developing emotional maturity and healthy relationships, which are all prerequisites for successfully establishing identity, purpose, and integrity. The academic advisor’s role is to foster forward movement on the relevant continua.

How does Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) theory play out in an advisor-advisee relationship? Consider Jack, a freshman with an attitude, who does not understand why he needs to consult with his advisor before he can register. His thoughts, “This is a waste of time. I already know what classes I have to take,” come through loudly and clearly in his body language. Moreover, Jack might be right; he might know exactly which classes to take next semester.

Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) theory, built on Chickering’s previous research, gets to the root of why an advisor is more than someone who simply picks classes. An advisor versed in the vectors recognizes that Jack may be struggling at multiple levels; his attitude suggests he may be dealing with issues other than those regarding classes.

By asking a leading question, the advisor can scope where Jack is on the first vector, developing competencies. A good question might be, “How was your last exam?” Jack’s response, “The study questions did not have anything to do with the test questions, so I blew the test,” is a clue to the advisor that Jack needs to develop some intellectual competence. Jack apparently is unable to see a connection between specific questions and generalized answers.

Reinforcing the first vector, developing competencies, the advisor could ask, “Why do you think the study questions did not set you up for a successful exam? Did other students in the class have the same problem?” Jack’s subsequent communication with his professor and classmates helps him grow intellectually and interpersonally.

The advisor might also notice that Jack’s development in the third vector, developing emotional autonomy and recognizing interdependence in relationships, is limited. Jack has probably not developed a relationship with the professor teaching the class. The simple question, “Have you talked with your professor?” might encourage Jack to disengage from parental and peer influence and set out to be the master of his own destiny by accepting responsibility for his performance and establishing a relationship with the professor.

Another appropriate developmentally oriented response from the advisor is “OK, let’s not talk about the classes since you appear to be set in that area.
Let’s talk about other aspects of your experience here.” Some questions might be, “Where at this institution do you find answers when you need them?” “Do you know any other faculty personally?” or “Are you involved in any activities?” The answers to the questions will tell the advisor, who is considering the responses in light of vectors 3 and 4, whether Jack is developing any connections or meaningful relationships on campus.

The advisor might also recognize that Jack needs coaching in the second vector. Jack's haughtiness and demeanor suggest to the advisor that he has not learned how to manage his emotions. This is an opportunity for the advisor to give permission to Jack to discuss his weaknesses, his fears, and to let Jack know that he matters. Something as basic as “Is there anything I can say that will make you smile?” or if the advisor is comfortable, “Jack, I suspect under that attitude there is a really nice young man. Am I right?” should encourage Jack to share some of his thoughts. In any case, the advisor should guide Jack toward learning to manage his emotions, beginning with the advisor-advisee relationship.

Development in the first four vectors is a prerequisite for development in the fifth vector, establishing identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As the advisor asks about values, peer groups, talents, interests, and friends, over time Jack's identity develops from being an emotionally needy highschool hot shot to an independent, committed, college student. Confident in who he is and who he is becoming, Jack has laid the groundwork for development in the fifth, sixth, and seventh vectors. After a few semesters, Jack is secure enough to have a solid sense of identity and to appreciate intellectual and cultural diversity. His relationships are more stable, and he has a moral code by which he lives. He consults with his professors on a regular basis and is involved in student government. Jack has come a long way from the student with an attitude who walked into his advisor's office several semesters earlier.

Questions on the advisor’s mind such as “How committed are you to the courses you are taking?” or “How will these courses help you beyond college?” and “How do you want to live your life?” will encourage Jack to think about his life goals and the values that are important to him. These questions will guide him in his development of the sixth and seventh vectors, purpose and integrity.

By engaging in a more holistic conversation, the advisor is letting Jack know that success in college is not just about completing degree requirements. Understanding and helping a student move through the vectors helps produce a responsibly engaged citizen, one whose relationships and identities go beyond self to the workforce and the community.

Mary’s case is another example of how understanding Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) theory can help advisors. Mary, a sophomore, admits that “nothing is going right.” Mary was an honors student in high school. Now, she is floundering academically, has not found a niche, and does not know where to go for help. She admits that she is uncomfortable going to a study group. In addition, she has gained weight and lost confidence. She does not engage in her education and is at the brink of departure.

Mary mastered the intellectual competencies in high school, where they appear to have arrested. Mary needs to recognize that now she cannot take on college challenges by herself. With the first and third vectors in mind, Mary’s advisor helps her to recognize that she is interdependent at multiple levels. She may depend on a tutor, a study group, or she may need to talk to her professors. By connecting with any or all of the people available as resources in the college environment, she will begin to develop more mature interpersonal relationships that will support the growth of her intellectual competencies.

The advisor might also learn of Mary’s interests and encourage her to get involved in an activity or club. This will help Mary nurture some leadership skills, and will, in turn, help Mary develop the competence and confidence she needs to continue her progress in the fourth vector, identity development.

As an advisor gains experience with Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vectors, the level of development in the student usually becomes transparent. The advisor is then to find the appropriate levels of challenges and support for the advisee. Success in finding the balance is based on Eltink's Goldilocks theory (personal communication with Jeni Eltink, Director of First Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of Minnesota Duluth, March 3, 2006): “The challenge cannot be too big, it cannot be too small, it should be just right” for the successful growth of the student. With time and experience, advisors recognize the areas of development and the advisee’s place on the continua.
Clark and Trow’s Student Subcultures

Student subcultures exist on every campus, and Clark and Trow’s (1966) definitions of four dominant student subcultures are straightforward. Because prevalent attitudes of those in each subculture are very clearly illustrated, subculture information helps clarify the motivation of students within the college or university. Clark and Trow emphasized that subcultures are not types of students but rather characteristics of groups of students.

Many advisors have met students who are social fraternity or sorority members, football fans, or part of the “rah rah” culture of a campus. They are very social and generally come from middle and upper-middle class backgrounds. These students are not highly motivated for academic success; they do enough to pass the class and graduate. These students, however, help build spirit and loyalty on campuses and are part of the collegiate culture. Clark and Trow (1966) used the football and fraternity weekend as metaphors for the collegiate culture.

Students in the collegiate subculture are not motivated to get good grades because they do not need them. A bright young fraternity member who knows he will be the fourth generation in the family business is not motivated to excel academically. The advisor must understand that academic achievement for students in this group is not a high priority. Upon identifying the collegiate subculture, advisors can apply Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vectors and formulate some questions about competencies, relationships, and emotional maturity.

Students in the vocational culture enroll in institutions to get the degree as efficiently as possible. Many are from working class families, are married with families, and have no time or interest in being involved in the collegiate culture. Their attitude toward college is reflected in comments such as “just tell me what I need to know to get the degree and get a better job.” The symbol for the vocational culture is the placement office (Clark & Trow, 1966). These students are usually more interested in identifying the courses to take and may not be interested in a relationship with an advisor, except as an advocate if necessary. Advisors need to respect the drive of the students in the vocational culture; the function of the advisor may be as simple as signing a document or providing degree requirements.

Libraries, laboratories, and seminars serve as symbols for the academic culture. Students in this culture are intellectual; they value relationships with faculty members; they are generally not concerned with potential income as a motivating factor. These students are serious; they study for the sake of learning. Students in the academic culture need and enjoy advisors who are holistic; their advisors should ask them questions about values, motivation, and intellectual competencies. Many of these students aspire to go to graduate or professional schools (Clark & Trow, 1966). These students probably will have their schedules planned semesters in advance, but they may need some guidance in focusing on values, graduate school choices, and careers.

The fourth campus subculture is counter-cultural. The symbols used by Clark and Trow for the nonconformist culture are distinctive looks, styles of dress, and attitudes. These students are detached from the campus, the administration, and take on different styles on different campuses. Students in the nonconformist culture are struggling with identity issues (Clark & Trow, 1966). They are usually passionate about something such as politics, art, or the environment. The advisor should reflect on theories of Schlossberg and ask questions about the values of the nonconforming student. A thoughtful advisor asks open-ended questions about interests of the nonconforming student and guides the student from that point. Advising the nonconforming student provides a good opportunity to apply O’Banion’s (1972) model of developmental advising in which one begins by discussing life goals.

Clark and Trow (1966) do not clearly define each subculture; they explain the variances among student involvement and identity with their campuses. Nevertheless, from an advising viewpoint, these four subcultures help advisors understand what students might be seeking in the college or university experience; the subcultures are fairly routine and predictable. Understanding the subcultures also helps advisors understand the attitudes of their advisees.

Advising Styles

Once an advisor is familiar with some theory, does it matter how the advisor advises? Daller et al. (1997) observed 10 professional advisors to assess advising styles they used and to determine the differences between prescriptive and developmental advising as practiced. They observed three primary advising styles and appropriately named them the counselor, the scheduler, and the teacher.

The counselor uses techniques to make the students comfortable. The counselor expresses concern
for the student by asking developmental questions (questions related to Chickering and Reisser’s [1993] vectors). Advisors with a counseling style do not generally ask specific schedule-related questions (Daller et al., 1997).

The schedulers are very familiar with policy, procedures, and resources. The scheduler emphasizes appropriate classes and other academic planning issues (Daller et al., 1997).

The teachers coach the students to be responsible for learning about the policies and procedures as well as for their academic plans. Teachers invite discussions that relate to both academic and personal issues, but they clearly leave the decisions to the advisees (Daller et al., 1997).

Daller et al. (1997) observed that while the advisors personalized the advising meetings with advisees, their styles remained consistent. They also observed that each style has a different amount of personalization and placement of responsibility on the advisee. They imply that advisors are to assess their styles, see the limitations of their approach, and over time challenge themselves to expand upon their predominant style, incorporating elements of the other two styles. If, for example, the advisor is a scheduler, she or he might begin by asking a question outside the purview of academic life, “Are you involved in any extracurricular activities?” If the answer is “no,” the advisor can ask more questions of interest. The counselor might ask specific questions about the academic schedule, and the teacher might ask the advisee how he or she makes specific decisions.

Advice for Advisors

New advisors should attempt to learn about different theories, student subcultures, and advising styles and talk about them with colleagues. Most advisors find that once an understanding of basic theory begins to make sense, it is a fascinating field that begs for more exploration.

Pragmatic reasons for knowing theory include initiating reasoned and appropriate conversation; that is, an advisor with some knowledge of theory is less inclined to articulate a gut response or inappropriate comment. For example, instead of saying, “You’re wrong . . . sorry, but this will never work,” an advisor versed in theory might ask, “And why do you think that way?”

Applying developmental theory also places the decision-making responsibility on the advisee. The advisor merely guides the advisee toward making appropriate choices. Advisors familiar with developmental theory coach the advisee; they do not mandate a course of action. Theory-based advising is used to recommend certain behaviors not to prescribe them.

Finally, advisors learn all too quickly that the stages of student development and the borders of student subcultures are fuzzy. Advising is not an exact science, and the theories do not support a pristine approach on guiding students toward making good academic and life decisions. Each advisor and advisee brings her or his own experiences to the table. That is, the art and the science of advising are embodied in an understanding of developmental theories, stages, student cultures, and advising styles and are applied in a workable fashion for the advisor and the advisee.

Characteristics of Effective Advisors

- Genuinely enjoy students
- Relate to advisees of many cultures, ethnicities, educational backgrounds
- Committed to accuracy and clarity
- Open and friendly
- Know their limits and make referrals accordingly
- Excellent listeners
- Organized
- Caring, empathetic
- Reassuring, trustworthy, inspire confidence
- Good memory
- Good sense of humor
- Can deliver hard news in a caring way
- Willing to ask for help
- Good at bringing organization and order to a disorganized process
- Effective communicators
- Creative, innovative
- Calm in a crisis
- Patient, can wait for students to come to their own conclusions
- Detail oriented
- Technologically adept
- Ask probing questions
- Know the right time to present information to students
- A good colleague and collaborator
- Flexible, adaptive
- Good at multitasking
- A quick study
- Nonjudgmental

These comments are a compilation of responses from academic advisors in the Academic Advising Center at The University of Iowa as well as the Content Review Board for the NACADA New Advisor Guidebook.