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LEARNING-CENTERED ADVISING

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I say moreover that you make a great, a very great mistake, if you think that psychology, being the science of the mind's laws, is something from which you can deduce definite programs and schemes and methods of instruction for immediate schoolroom use. Psychology is a science, and teaching is an art; and sciences never generate arts directly out of themselves. An intermediary inventive mind must make the application, by using its originality.

—William James, 1899

When Wilbert McKeachie's *Teaching Tips* was published in 1950, it was the only book of its kind on the market (Nilson, 2010). The 13th edition, released in 2010, joined an ever-growing number of books, journals, and web sites focused on improving college teaching and learning. In the intervening years, researchers in neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and higher education have shared well-researched, comprehensive descriptions of strategies and principles for enhancing student learning. Although most of these findings have been focused on improving learning in a classroom setting, they offer exciting possibilities for infusing learning-centered principles coherently and intentionally into academic advising. Currently, practitioners can find much information about techniques and tools to improve advising, often presented as isolated ideas or tips, such that they cannot see how or why the tools promote student learning.

Other contributors to this book discuss the many approaches advisors can use in their advising practice. In this chapter, I explore principles that undergird learning-centered advising, regardless of the approaches advisors use, and suggest a coherent and integrated approach to learning-centered advising.

7 Principles for Good Practice

Perhaps the best known description of teaching practices that promote learning was published by Chickering and Gamson (1987), who consolidated and published ideas generated at a meeting attended by other scholars of higher education. The response to their concise article was enthusiastic: Within 10 years, more than 150,000 copies

of these seven principles were ordered from the Johnson Foundation (Chickering & Gamson, 2000).

Chickering and Gamson (1987) wrote that good practice in undergraduate education

- encourages contact between students and faculty members,
- develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,
- advances active learning,
- allows for prompt feedback,
- supports an emphasis of time on task,
- communicates high expectations, and
- induces a respect for diverse talents and ways of learning (p. 3).

They focused on translating research into accessible, understandable, practical, and widely applicable material. Although they directed their work toward the faculty, they hoped to reach other audiences as well, including administrators, those in state and national agencies, and policy makers (Chickering & Gamson, 2000). They succeeded admirably. At the end of their article, they challenged stakeholders to create an environment favorable to these good practices. They included, among other descriptors of a positive climate for learning, this tantalizing sentence: "Advising is [would be] considered important" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 5). They did not elaborate, however, on how advising might create an environment for learning or why advising should be considered important.

14 General, Research-Based Principles for Improving Higher Learning

In 1993, Angelo expanded Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven-point list by delineating a "teacher's dozen" research-based, practical, and easily understood principles:

1. Active learning is more effective than passive learning.
2. Learning requires focused attention and awareness of the importance of what is to be learned.
3. Learning is more effective and efficient when learners have explicit, reasonable, positive goals, and when their goals fit well with the teacher's goals.
4. To be remembered, new information must be meaningfully connected to prior knowledge, and it must first be remembered in order to be learned.
5. Unlearning what is already known is often more difficult than learning new information.
6. Information that is organized in personally meaningful ways is more likely to be remembered, learned, and used.

7. Learners need feedback on their learning, early and often, to learn well; to become independent learners, they need to become self-assessing and self-correcting.
8. The ways learners are assessed and evaluated powerfully affect the ways they study and learn.
9. Mastering a skill or body of knowledge takes great amounts of time and effort.
10. Learning to transfer, to apply previous knowledge and skills to new contexts, requires a great deal of directed practice.
11. High expectations encourage high achievement.
12. To be most effective, teachers need to balance levels of intellectual challenge and instructional support.
13. Motivation to learn is alterable; it can be positively or negatively affected by the task, the environment, the teacher, and the learner.
14. Interaction between teachers and learners is one of the most powerful factors in promoting learning; interaction among learners is another. (pp. 5–7)

As is clear from his title, Angelo directs his principles to the teaching faculty, and he hopes that the impact of these principles will be actualized in the classroom.

Angelo's and Chickering and Gamson's principles continue to be influential. In 1998, the American Association for Higher Education, the American College Personnel Association, and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators published a list of 10 learning principles (*Powerful Partnerships*) that emphasize collaborations between academic and student affairs personnel and organizations; the similarities to the earlier principles are striking.

Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principles were cited by The Ohio Learning Network, a consortium of colleges and universities that used technology to enhance distance learning, because they provide the foundation of high-quality distance-delivery methods (Watwood, Nugent, & Deihl, 2009). Virginia Commonwealth University's Center for Teaching Excellence made the case that these 1987 principles are essential in an online environment and provided vignettes to suggest ways they can be adapted to online teaching and can support meaningful learning in online classes (Watwood et al., 2009).

Connecting Learning Principles to Advising

Although the learning principles delineated here come from research about classroom teaching, they promote student learning, a goal shared by academic advising. Some teachers and advisors may assume that student learning is automatic, the result of good teaching or good academic advising. However, students learn for and by themselves; it is a process, a change, a response to experiences. Advising and teaching

techniques and tools matter, not as ends in themselves, but as means of fostering and supporting student learning. When teaching and advising are learning centered, the focus rests on students (not teachers or advisors): What are students learning? How are they learning? Can they apply their learning? Will their learning support and encourage further learning? While some principles from the 7- and updated 14-point lists are better suited for the classroom, some give promise for strengthening learning in the advising setting.

Clear, Reasonable, and Positive Goals

Learning is more effective when students have clear, reasonable, and positive goals. Few new-to-college students understand the process or content of academic advising. Many assume that an advisor helps primarily with scheduling and registering for classes and, with the advent of online registration and degree evaluations, meetings with an academic advisor may no longer be mandatory. As Jayne Drake pointed out in her chapter, outstanding teachers, like outstanding advisors, must set clear objectives about what students should be able to do, understand, and value as a result of teaching or advising.

Research indicates that students fail to learn and retain new material when they do not understand the structure or the context of it (Svinicki, 2004). Without seeing the overall framework and goals for academic advising or apprehending the reasoning behind the general education and degree requirements, students may think they are learning small, discrete items, rather than realize that they are experiencing a sequenced and logical progression toward specific goals and learning outcomes.

For example, students may believe that general education requirements are arbitrarily created, disconnected, and listed to form obstacles to negotiate before taking classes in their majors. They may think that they should accumulate course credits rather than build real-world skills and capabilities. Despite their helpfulness, degree audits and evaluations can foster these misconceptions. Because advisors have continuing contact with students, they may be more able to help students see the *logic of the curriculum* (Lowenstein, 1999) than faculty members who may teach students in one class. Advisors can help students see the connections among their classes, in their majors and minors, as well as in general education requisites, and can encourage them to consider and articulate the transferable skills they are developing through their experiences in and out of the classroom. This learning principle reminds advisors that when students understand the structure—the big picture—they can learn more effectively and efficiently. The Task Group on General Education made a point in 1988 that remains true today: "Perhaps the most urgent reform on most campuses in improving general education involves academic advising. To have programs and courses become coherent and significant to students requires adequate advising" (p. 43).

Communicating goals or learning objectives for academic advising is equally important (Martin, 2007), which some advisors accomplish by creating an advising

syllabus (Trabant, 2006) while others employ less formal means. No matter the vehicle, for students to understand the structure and purposes of advising, they need to know the expectations for their learning through advising. Learning goals for students change as they progress through their programs, and the objectives should be reasonable in number and function; for example, a first- or second-year student might need to learn how and why to meet with faculty members, to understand how to undertake and read a degree evaluation, to set accurate expectations for the amount of time and effort needed to be successful in classes, or to grasp the purposes of the curriculum. For more advanced students, learning objectives might involve articulating ways their education has helped them develop the skills they will need after college, evaluating the courses and out-of-class experiences that will prepare them for the work they hope to undertake, or investigating internships or off-campus study experiences.

Such clear and reasonable learning goals help students realize that academic advising involves more than scheduling and registration. When advisors remind students of these learning goals throughout their college careers, rather than assume that students will remember them from an advising syllabus or early meeting, students may understand that academic advising offers a carefully sequenced series of learning opportunities.

To promote learning effectively, advisors should state goals as positive and appealing objectives. Rather than list responsibilities of advisees, advisors might include the benefits of advising for students or a list of circumstances in which a student might want to consult an advisor (for issues not related to registration). This broad scope of advising, which shows issues other than just scheduling and registering, shows advising as an attractive and inviting learning-centered activity for both advisors and students.

Learning Requires Active Involvement

The passive human brain, with listening as the sole learning modality, cannot focus for long (Svinicki, 2004). For active learning, students must get involved; that is, they need to think about the content of their learning not just passively receive information. Advocates for active learning focus on the process rather than on the outcome. Advisors can involve students actively, as well as send a message that advising involves more than registering for classes, by asking first-time students to respond in writing to questions such as "What are your goals for your first year in college?" "What were your favorite classes in high school?" "What are your greatest strengths?" By raising these questions when students are preparing to select classes for their first college semester and keeping responses in an advising folder or electronic portfolio, advisors can revisit the questions as students progress by adding specifics to root questions such as "How are you managing your time?" "Have you met with your professors?" "What has been your most demanding challenge this term and how have you dealt with it?"

Advisors could ask the following questions of experienced students: "How are you the same as when you began in college? How have you changed?" "What do you intend to do and to be when you complete your program? What resources can you use right now to help you reach this vision?" Advisors might ask students on academic probation "What resources do you plan to use this term?" or "What do you intend to do differently this term? How will these changes help you?" By writing their responses, students actively engage in learning-centered advising, provide rich material that advisors can use in future meetings, and offer information on areas for growth that advisors can help students monitor.

Referring students to other offices and people on and off campus, asking them to develop a term-by-term plan for finishing their program, expecting them to complete a task before they come to an advising appointment encourage their active learning. In addition to fostering active involvement, these activities potentially help students understand the learning goals of advising and to value the learning process.

Motivated Students Learn More Effectively

Motivation is not fixed; it can be changed. In the context of academic advising, *motivating* means stimulating students' desire to learn. When advisors explain the goals of advising and the benefits they can accrue by being active participants, students may become intrinsically motivated to take advantage of the opportunities for learning that advising offers and may appreciate the relevance and applicability of learning to their lives in and after college. Students may also be extrinsically motivated to be involved in advising if they recognize that advisors can help them complete their programs in a timely fashion or provide letters of recommendation that will help them get a job. Students are intrinsically motivated when they value advisors and advising for their importance and relevance; they are extrinsically motivated when they see advisors and advising as a means to an end.

Research on the connections among extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation, and student learning leads to no clear conclusions about the relative effectiveness of extrinsic or intrinsic motivation in fostering learning (Nilson, 2010). However, several scholars have asked students about the activities and situations that motivate them to learn in the classroom. The critical influences respondents cited included the professor's enthusiasm for the material and the teaching of it, the relevance and applicability of the material, clear organization, an appropriate level of difficulty, active learning approaches, and professor's rapport with students (Sass, 1989). In her chapter on advising as teaching, Drake explores these influences in greater detail. Sass's results offer good news for academic advisors, who without power over students' levels of motivation to learn, can control their own attitudes, behaviors, and the methods they use to present and organize information.

At every meeting, advisors can enhance students' skills of reflection, self-assessment, goal setting, and decision making, which they will need throughout their time in college and in the real world. By reminding students of the skills they are developing, advisors may help them understand the relevance and applicability of advising and

increase their motivation to take full advantage of it. When advisors introduce inexperienced college students to opportunities that may await them in a few years (e.g., internships, off-campus study, or independent research), students may remain focused when they face difficulties or boredom.

High Expectations Encourage High Achievement

Like all teaching, learning-centered advising offers developmental opportunities to students, and advisors who employ this strategy must tailor expectations to individuals and their needs. A one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. Advisors should expect much from their students as well as support and encourage them to meet high levels of achievement. However, advisor discussions with first-year students and their expectations of them should differ from the material and outcomes discussed with juniors and seniors. Expectations for a military veteran returning to complete a 2-year program while working full-time and parents of young children will not mirror those for full-time, traditional-aged students at a residential liberal-arts college. If advisors believe in the power of learning-centered advising, they should expect students to take as much advantage of it as is reasonable.

Advisors can also encourage students to set high expectations for their own learning. Students should embellish initial goals for grades earned or credits completed with plans for taking advantage of cocurricular experiences, finding avenues for leadership, exploring research opportunities, and stretching themselves by taking demanding classes. When setting high expectations, discussing them with advisors, and monitoring their progress to achieving their objectives, students make the most of their time in college. Advisors can be important resources in such endeavors.

Studied in a classroom setting, high expectations exerted a significant positive impact on first-year students' attitudes toward learning. Furthermore, researchers learned that high expectations, combined with other learning principles and practices, factored into successful outcomes for underprepared college students (Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2006).

Students Need Feedback

To learn well, students need feedback. To become independent learners, they must learn to give themselves feedback. If they keep a file or electronic archive of students' written responses to reflection and self-assessment questions, advisors will discover rich opportunities to provide feedback and encourage students to reflect on their experiences. When advisors ask students at the end of a term to look at the goals they had set, advisors provide an opportunity for self-reflection and self-assessment. Furthermore, when advisors ask students to assess how their recent successes will affect the goals they set for the upcoming term, students can reflect on the past as well as plan for the future. Learning-centered advising demands reflection and self-assessment, skills that demand work and can induce pain, especially if hoped-for futures prove impossible or unrealistic. Baxter Magolda and King (2008) provided

a sequenced series of questions that promote students' self-assessment and self-authorship: For example, "What new perspectives have you encountered?" and "How have these experiences affected the ways you see things?" can guide students to explore their experiences, the reasons they are meaningful to them, and how they interpreted them. These practices create the building blocks of self-assessment and self-authorship.

According to Pizzolato (2006), Baxter Magolda's learning partnerships model (LPM) can help advisors promote students' self-authorship. When advisors encourage students to identify and assess academic options ("What are your thoughts about the choices for class enrollment next semester?" or "What majors are you considering?"), they help students develop confidence and belief that their ideas matter and that they are capable of effectively weighing decisions rather than relying on the opinions of others. Challenging students to explain the processes they used to make academic decisions, suggesting a variety of options to them, and brainstorming possible responses to difficult academic situations give students practice in self-assessment. (See chapter 8 by Janet Schulenberg.)

Interactions Promote Learning

Interactions between students and advisors can promote learning; interactions among students are equally important. Reporting on the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement, Kuh (2008) reiterated the impact of academic advising: Students at 4-year colleges who met with advisors at least twice during the academic year tended to participate in the five benchmark activities important to student success and engagement. In addition, he found that contact with an advisor is related to self-reported gains in personal and social development and in more frequent use of deep approaches to learning. Advisors can have a powerful effect on students and their learning.

Peers also play an important role in fostering learning. Panels of experienced students who talk with newer students about major selection, study abroad, internships, job search, extracurricular activities, or service learning can enrich the learning environment and can give the seasoned students an opportunity to enhance their self-assessment skills in a public context. Group advising sessions also permit students to hear questions and comments of others, perhaps prompting them to consider new areas or concerns. A group advising session in a living unit may encourage further informal conversations about advising issues long after the session has ended. Listening to other students, sharing their own ideas, and responding to others' thoughts and opinions sharpen thinking and deepen understanding.

A Caveat

Despite the importance of employing enhanced learning principles, advisors must remember that they are not teaching skills, approaches, or values; they are teaching

students. The characteristics of each student—academic preparation, hopes and dreams, experiences, cognitive development, background, and eagerness to learn, among other descriptors—should affect advisors' decisions about how, what, when, and why they teach as well as the ways and content that students learn. When working with such wonderfully diverse student cohorts, advisors face challenges when meeting students' learning needs and helping them make the most of their time in college. Fortunately, advisors are bright, committed, and hard-working professionals prepared to answer this call.

Implications

While each learning principle individually helps create a culture that fosters student learning, research suggests that when applied in total, the magnitude of their impact on student learning is multiplied (Cruce et al., 2006). The combined principles challenge advisors to treat learning in an intentional and integrated way rather than focus on a particular technique, tool, or axiom.

> There is no universal best teaching [or advising] practice. If, instead, the point of departure is a core set of learning principles, then the selection of teaching [or advising] strategies . . . can be purposeful. The many possibilities then become a rich set of opportunities from which a teacher [or an advisor] constructs an instructional program, rather than a chaos of competing alternatives. (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999, p. 19)

Such principles generate implications beyond enhancing students' learning; they serve as guidelines for enhancing advisors' learning as well. In the midst of ever-increasing responsibilities and limited time, do advisors reflect on their own learning? Do they set high expectations for themselves as advisors? Do they find ways to increase their motivation? Do they discuss advising with peers and learn from others? Have they set clear, reasonable, and positive goals for themselves?

The words of William James with which this chapter begins remind advisors of the need to adapt the principles to their particular situations and students. Advising is a complex human activity; learning principles that work at one college or with one student may not be as successful for another. Inventive and original minds must apply learning principles. As they discover diverse ways to implement these principles, advisors will focus on learning as the primary goal of academic advising. When advisors ignore the knowledge about new ways humans learn, they risk using advising sessions in inefficient, ineffective, and perhaps even counterproductive ways. Advisors' time and energy are too valuable to spend carelessly; the learning students can gain from advising is too vital to their success for advisors to fail in offering various active-learning opportunities.

Learning principles also offer rich areas for contemplation and discussion among advisors as they work intentionally and coherently to infuse learning into the advising arena. Angelo (1993) called his principles "pump-primers" (p. 4) and listed three

goals (adapted here for academic advising). To meet the first goal, advisors think, talk, and read about the connections between known research on learning and advising practice. Whether the learning principles add up to 7, 14, or some other number, their importance lies in way they are applied to practice. Using Angelo's suggestions, advisors could compile a list of learning principles that guide their own advising practices and compare their lists with those of other advisors. What a discussion-rich and stimulating topic for a brown bag lunch, department meeting, or advising workshop!

Adapting Angelo's (1993) second goal, advisors could use the list of their own principles for learning as criteria for assessing their current advising practices. When advisors consider the principles most important to them, they can better evaluate the success of the advising practices that embody them. If they use an advising syllabus, for example, is it focused on learning-centered principles or rules? Adapting Angelo's third goal, advisors could identify the implications of learning principles and develop practical applications for encouraging active advisee learning.

While this chapter has included some ways to apply learning principles, individuals must generate and validate them if they are to move from research to practice, from espoused theories to theories in practice. Advisors need to ask, "What would I do differently if I focused on learning?" and "How can I ensure that every advising experience is learning centered?"

Angelo (1993, p. 4) made the claim that applying his principles will promote higher learning:

> I define higher learning as an active, interactive process that results in meaningful, long-lasting changes in knowledge, understanding, behavior, dispositions, appreciation, belief, and the like. The key terms in this definition are *meaningful, long-lasting*, and *changes*. Higher learning is *meaningful*, if the learner understands and appreciates what is learned; that means that something learned by rote but not understood would not qualify. By *long-lasting*, I mean learning that will endure in accessible memory at least beyond the end of the term. And *changes* here means not simply the addition of knowledge but also the transformation of ways of understanding and organizing the knowledge learned. This is a demanding definition of higher learning . . . but having an explicit definition does help me make difficult decisions about what and how to teach.

Higher learning is surely a lofty goal for academic advising. It is a goal, however, that practitioners can achieve when they fulfill the promise and potential of advising.

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