The Developing Role of Student Advising: An Interview with Charlie Nutt

By Arlene Harborth

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Charlie Nutt has been an active member of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) since 1991 and currently is the NACADA Executive Director. NACADA promotes and supports quality academic advising in institutions of higher education to enhance the educational development of students. This organization evolved in 1977 from the first National Conference on Academic Advising and currently has over 10,000 members from all 50 states. At the October 2011 conference, 15 international countries were also represented. Charlie's current responsibilities as executive director of NACADA include responsibility for coordinating the work of the executive office staff as well as working with various NACADA units on professional development and external relations of the association.

Arlene Harborth (A.H.): The history of academic advising in the United States goes back to the beginnings of the colonial colleges as faculty sought to not only develop the intellectual enlightenment of the young men attending college through the classical curriculum but also their moral and ethical development (Gillispie, 2003). This institutional guidance, known as "in loco parentis" (in place of the parent) truly provided a strong foundation towards independent responsible citizenry for these students. To what extent has the growing diversity of today's students in higher education changed and possibly expanded the role of the academic advisor?

Charlie Nutt (C.N.): One of the major changes in student demographics is based on increased numbers of adult students in community colleges. The concept of "in loco parentis" in relation to adult learning doesn't fit any more. Since the student demographic has become more diverse, advisors currently do much more than serve as parents. Advisors are now providing direction focused on moral, social, economic, and educational development of students. Today's model of expanding advising toward a more holistic approach supports student development and student learning, and it far exceeds just sharing registration details. This new expanded approach better prepares today's students in not only excelling academically but also in giving them the potential to improve their basic life skills.

A.H.: The expanding role of advising has grown into a more independent, unique, and focused developmental niche in higher education. As the current executive director of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), please convey the importance your organization plays in the professionalization of college advising.

C.N.: Prior to NACADA coming about, professional advisors really had no association to connect to and very little network opportunities. Advisors were looked upon as just being clerical, so this is the first area that was advanced. Secondly, the organization has advanced the body of knowledge through its work with publications and research initiatives and through development of material for academic advising that goes beyond just how to register students. I also believe the role NACADA has played specifically with graduate programs for the development of academic advising at Kansas State University is a giant step forward for the professionalization of the field. I think the major pieces are providing networking opportunities for advisors, expanding the body of knowledge and body of literature, and connecting with Kansas State to develop the online graduate programs.

A.H.: Do developmental educators and academic advisors have similar theoretical foundations and objectives? The National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) defines developmental education as "a field of practice and research within higher education with a theoretical foundation in developmental psychology and learning theory. It promotes the cognitive and affective growth of all postsecondary learners, at all levels of the learning continuum" (NADE, n.d.). Academic advising has also been defined by NACADA as "a systematic process based on

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a close student-advisor relationship intended to aid students in achieving educational, career, and personal goals through the use of the full range of institutional and community resources" (Hendey, 1999). NACADA's definition adds that academic advising is a developmental process assisting students in the clarification of their life/career goals and in the development of education plans for realization of these goals. Clearly, both fields honor and respect the "developmental" journey that students encounter, but what other commonalities connect the two fields?

C.N.: As a developmental educator for 20 years prior to coming to NACADA, I see a strong connection between the commonality of the two being extremely grounded in developmental learning theory, student learning theory, various psychological theories, and higher education theories. The other piece that makes them very common and connected is that developmental educators are focusing primarily on students as they enter college and are providing them the skills, abilities, behaviors, and attitudes which will make them successful in their careers and in college as they move through their program of study. Academic advisors recognize as students come in that there are things we must teach for them to be successful academically and throughout their career. Much of this is foundational types of material and knowledge they must have before they can move on. So, I think the connections between the two are very important. In developmental education, students who recognize their ability to grow academically will be successful students. Obviously, we are providing those students with the skills and abilities to be successful in their future academic programs. Academic advisors are also providing those first-year students with the skills and abilities they need to make decisions to move forward and to act on those decisions, plus teaching reflection and encouraging students to use what they learned in college and apply it to the rest of their lives.

A.H.: Recent research has focused on interventions for improving developmental students' chances for academic success, including supports such as "intensive" weekly advising (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). This research recommends intensive advising be provided by both full-time advising staff and faculty. However, it is suggested that the target advisor load for full-time advisors be 300/1 and the target advisor load for full-time faculty be 20/1 (Habley, 2004). Is this ratio, in your opinion, the correct ratio for advising developmental students?

C.N.: One of the things that you have to recognize is those numbers are self-reported numbers for institutions who completed the 2006 ACT NACADA survey. They are not by any means the recommended numbers but are the median range of the advisor load for that period of time. To get an accurate ratio, you need to look institution to institution at the various roles the academic advisor and faculty advisors maintain. On many campuses, in addition to an academic advising load, advisors may also be actively involved in recruitment activities, orientation activities, and possibly teaching in a first-year program. Other campuses may not require any of those responsibilities, so that changes the load issue. The same is true for faculty. Many faculty, in addition to teaching loads, have community loads, structural loads, service loads, and research loads. Because of variabilities, each institution has to look carefully at the responsibilities assigned to advisors and to faculty to determine what the specific advising responsibilities are and then look at ratios for populations being served. Because of that, it is very difficult to recommend a perfect load number. What may work well at your institution may be totally absurd at another institution.

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A.H.: Recent research also supports early intervention to reduce or eliminate the need for developmental education (Borch et al. , 2010). One such intervention recommends that "college advisors" be placed in high schools to educate students about institutional standards and requirements in order to better prepare students for a more successful academic transition to college. Given that current public school funding is so limited, how might advisors implement this recommendation?

C.N.: Many campuses are doing this in a variety of ways. They are providing some collaborative hiring where a local high school and local university will work together to fund a position so that an advisor may work part-time at the high school and part-time at the institution. Others will work out some strong collaboration with feeder institutions so that advisors go to campuses on a regular basis to talk to students about what advising is and what is required to be successful at college. They are not in a recruitment role but rather focus on what is needed to be successful at college. Lastly, universities and colleges can deliver professional development focused on teaching high school guidance counselors and faculty ways students can be successful as they transition from high school to a college. I think that partnership with public schools is something institutions must take as an initiative, especially for community colleges.

A.H.: Have you observed whether this partnership occurs more frequently with community colleges than with four-year institutions?

C.N.: Partnerships appear to happen more with community colleges because they can more accurately identify the feeder schools and then partner with the appropriate institution. I do think that there are some growing programs within major universities where admissions and recruitment areas are collaborating to develop material either online, YouTube, or handouts that recruiters use on campus. This type of information would cover advising and what students need to be thinking about to be successful. So, now you have a partnership between advising, recruitment, and admissions all working beyond just accepting students to teach and coach them about how to be a successful college student.

A.H.: In *Academic Advising in the New Global Century: Supporting Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes Achievement* (Campbell & Nutt, 2008), you highlighted the need for academic advisors to be actively involved in "engagement and immersion" (p. 1) with developmental students to facilitate their success. Please elaborate on your recommendations for how advisors can meet this challenge.

C.N.: The first piece has to be that the institution is focused and driven to provide comprehensive delivery of professional development in the field to promote literature, skills, and behaviors that advisors need to understand and use. We continue to have an abundance of professional development for advisors and faculty that is still very institutionally based, meaning that most training occurs once a year to introduce the newest Banner or People Soft screens and the latest financial aid policies. Many times professional development may be blindly teaching people the latest course registration process. Then, the second piece is connected back to the student learning outcomes for what we expect students to value, know, and do.

It's also important to establish what academic advisors need to know and value in providing clear development toward learning outcomes and assessments. When focusing on outcomes for developmental students, we need to think through the shared model of faculty and academic advisors working with developmental students to increase student learning. Building the collaborative partnerships and thinking specifically about roles for the professional advisor may involve a different set of learning outcomes and different sets of teaching than the role of the faculty advisor. But, until learning outcomes are defined for students, faculty advisors, and professional advisors, it is hard to enhance the immersion that the literature supports for students in developmental education.

A.H.: Your research also points out that in the United States, due to the Post 9/11 GI Bill, there has been an increase in enrollment of veterans and active military (Nutt, n. d.). You go on to say that this increased enrollment comes at the same time many support programs for this population have been decreased. How would you propose to structure academic advising to more effectively meet the needs of the growing veteran student population?

C.N.: This is a major challenge. One thing we have to do is go back to what it is that advisors need to know about this population and delve into how to provide advisors the appropriate skills and behaviors to work with them. Many times, educators simply talk about the returning GI student, whether he or she is 30 or 50 years old, in the same way we do other students with adult learning issues. A veteran student may have the same issues as any adult learner but also has issues created by his or her military background including, post-traumatic stress disorder. They can also arrive with issues of not being a first-time student as they may have attended many different institutions often online, while enlisted. Advisors really need to take the time to think through all of these details about what makes this student body different, look for the gaps, and finally determine how to effectively close those gaps to provide a complete support package for this population.

A.H.: In this same article you share that academic advising in the United Kingdom (U. K.) is known as "personal tutoring." Is this just a matter of semantics, or is the role of the advisor very different in the U.K.?

C.N.: It has been very different in the U.K. until recently; what I mean by "personal tutoring" is that primarily tutors and/or academic advisors provide personal academic tutoring plus advising. It is very much a faculty driven model. In the U.K., the tertiary system of education does not follow the liberal arts model of the United States. Students determine their career plans early and enter into a specific degree program their first year. This type of learning and curriculum is very different so the personal tutor is not tasked with assisting in choosing a major for these students; instead they deal more with assisting students to be academically successful in coursework and how to learn on their own.

However, the U. K. system has changed during the last 7 to 8 years. One major focus was the push for "widening participation" to have 50% of the population between the ages of 18 and 35 enrolled in some form of higher education. That was a significant change for their system. Suddenly, there was an increased volume of students seeking postsecondary education without the knowledge of what they wanted to do in life. Immediately, institutions were faced with exploratory students, students with disabilities, and many other diverse populations enrolling in higher education. This program began to move the traditional "personal tutoring" role toward a more professional tutor or professional advisor role for the U.K.. Currently, you will see the U.K. very focused and doing a lot of work on how to enhance student success with the influx of a new student population in higher education. Processes in the U.K. are very research driven and most advisors have a faculty background providing a much stronger base for research. This model will be extremely interesting to follow in the next couple of years as they deal with massive budget cuts and a growing number of students who will now have to pay a greater part of their tuition than in the past.

A.H.: Have you worked with other countries on their advising models?

C.N.: We have done a great deal of work with Japan as they are going through some postsecondary changes similar to the U.K. They are calling this change an Academic Reform Movement which basically means students will choose an institution based on the type of programs they offer. Students select where they want to attend and then stay there to finish. They also, because of culture, have a very limited adult student population. Students go to college directly from high school or never go to college. This has caused a decrease in enrollment in higher education in Japan. Currently, they are focusing on looking at methods to increase the number of students who go to college and how to help these students be more successful. They are thinking about adding what we in the states call "liberal arts" or "general studies" programs to provide options to encourage more students to enroll.

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An International Christian University in Tokyo has established an advising center for all first-year students to work with advisors before they are connected with a faculty member in their major program of study. Many institutions in Japan are looking at this model because of the nationwide academic reform process and the need to understand the different types of developmental supports needed for these students. Australia—where postsecondary education has emulated the U. K. system— is now looking at modeling the U. S. systems of providing various majors as well as our model for academic advising. Both Netherlands and Germany have done a lot of work in helping students transferring from one institution to another by simplifying the transfer process. These international countries are also looking at how to take the U. S. developmental advising model and make it the standard model used with all students.

Academic advising has become a very important focus in higher education across the world, and it is important to fully understand these global perspectives as they evolve. NACADA is now including one international article in each issue of publication about advising practices in different countries. During the past 4 years, NACADA has provided consultants to U.K., Netherlands, Tokyo and other parts of Japan, Australia, and Hong Kong. NACADA is the only association providing a global focus and support for advising.

A.H.: In conclusion, would you venture an estimate as to what percentage of postsecondary institutions require developmental academic advising?

C.N.: My gut feeling is a very high percentage of institutions would say they offer developmental intrusive advising for at-risk freshman. The true answer is in how they define developmental advising. With today's diverse student population, no campus can claim to never see a developmental student. The needs of this population are currently very great and will probably continue to grow.

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