

Developmental Advising: The Elusive Ideal

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[doi:10.12930/NACADA-19-201]

Although developmental advising grew out of the works of many theorists prior to 1972 (Erikson, 1968; Heath, 1964; Neugarten, 1971; Perry, 1970; Super, Starishevsky, Matlin, & Jordaán, 1963), Burns Crookston was responsible for integrating these concepts into our conscious thinking about academic advising. Although his landmark article* grew out of his concern for students of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the needs of those students parallel the needs of students today. A developmental approach to advising—focusing on the individual student’s concerns, needs, and aspirations—is accepted as an ideal by many writers and practitioners in this field.

Student-centeredness has been a hallmark of higher learning for many years with varying degrees of emphasis. The development of a student’s character was a concern of America’s earliest colleges during the colonial period. During those formative years academic advising played an important role in facilitating students’ development because faculty or administrative mentors were directly involved in students’ well-being (Gordon, 1992). Although many advisors have practiced their personal versions of developmental advising since then, Crookston, in his classic article, reminded us of the importance of emphasizing the student’s role and responsibility in the advising relationship.

The development of the whole student—intellectually, personally, and socially—had been a stated goal of higher education long before Crookston so aptly pointed out its relationship to advising. Advising continues to be one of the best vehicles for accomplishing this goal (Crockett, 1985; Gordon, 1988; Ender, Winston & Miller, 1982). Much has been written about developmental advising and its benefits; definitions and suggestions for practice abound (Abel, 1988; Beasley-Fielstein, 1986; Chickering & Reiser, 1993; Ender, Winston, & Miller, 1982; Frost, 1990; Gordon, 1988; McIntire et al., 1992; Winston, Miller,

Ender, Grites, & Associates, 1984). Some evidence shows, however, that little progress has been made in implementing developmental advising consistently across campuses (Habley & Crockett, 1988). If a developmental approach is so desirable, why has progress been so slow? Many complex reasons exist, but 10 possible explanations are listed below. These explanations are coupled with some suggestions for ways to overcome barriers to implementing advising in a developmental mode.

Ten Reasons Why Developmental Advising Isn’t Implemented and Some Suggested Antidotes

The reasons (or are these really excuses?) for the lack of developmental advising are complicated by multiple factors at each institution. The size of the campus, the predominant type of student and changes in the student profile, the philosophy of and emphasis on advising, the level of administrative support for advising, the type of delivery system, and who performs advising functions all influence advising practices. Thus these 10 reasons will apply differentially to various institutions. These reasons are representative, however, of those expressed at national meetings and in the literature for why developmental academic advising has had a difficult time establishing a toehold on many campuses.

1. *Advisors do not have the time to become involved in the type of advising that requires frequent contact with one student; advising loads are too high for personal contact.*

On some campuses both faculty and professional advisors are assigned so many advisees that establishing a personal, ongoing relationship with an individual student is almost impossible. The tenets of developmental advising, however, can be integrated into a 20-minute interview or into a year’s sequence of advising contacts. Advisors who are totally focused for even a short span of time can

Reprinted with permission from Gordon, V. N. (1994). Developmental advising: The elusive ideal. *NACADA Journal*, 14(2), 71–75.

* Virginia Gordon is referring to Crookston, B. B. (2009). A developmental view of academic advising as teaching. *NACADA Journal*, 29(1), 78–82. doi: 10.12930/0271-9517-29.1.78 (original work published 1972, *Journal of College Student Personnel*).

make students feel that someone in authority cares about them.

Developmental precepts and approaches can be used effectively in group advising and in regular courses as well. Course content (e.g., in freshman seminars or career courses), as well as teaching techniques, can reflect a developmental perspective (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978; Touchton, Wertheimer, Cornfeld, & Harrison, 1978). When advisee loads are unrealistic, however, the root of the problem must be addressed. Advising in overcrowded conditions is not advising at all; it is a clerical function. This experience can be frustrating for both students and advisors. Administrators can often be convinced to take strong measures when student dissatisfaction and attrition data indicate the need and value for more personal student contact and lighter advising loads. (See items 4, 5, and 10 below).

2. *Advisors do not have the background or expertise to handle the type of personal relationship that developmental advising requires.*

Many academic advisors, especially faculty advisors, do not come from disciplines where human development theory teaching or communications skills are taught. The knowledge and skills involved in developmental advising can be learned, however. The key is to convince advisors that being responsive to students needs is an advisor's—as well as the institution's—best interest.

Not all faculty members enjoy advising, and some are not particularly good at it. Assigning students to reluctant advisors who will provide only minimal assistance is not productive. Advisors who are motivated and willing to learn and practice the basic tenets of developmental advising, however, should be rewarded for their efforts. Lighter teaching loads, merit salary increments, release time, and cash awards have all been used to reward good advising.

3. *Students perceive that advising involves only scheduling and registration, equating advising with high school “guidance.”*

Not only do some advisors need to be motivated to understand and practice developmental advising, but also students need to become aware of its value. Stokes (1992) found that the reasons students gave for not participating in advising were (a) that they were too busy, (b) that they

assumed it would not be helpful, or (c) that they found faculty advisors unresponsive or unavailable when students did try to make contact. Such discouraging results strengthen the need for required student appointments and for faculty to take their responsibility for advising seriously. Once good advising is experienced and the outcomes are positive for both advisors and students, future productive contacts are more likely to take place.

4. *Many administrators neither understand nor support developmental advising and do not make funds available to implement developmentally oriented programs.*

Administrators who are supportive of good advising systems are the key to the success of any program. Fielstein and Lammers (1992) found that advising is linked to administrative practices. Some administrators need to be educated as to the value of advising, however. Surveys of student satisfaction with advising, retention data, advisor questionnaires, and other evaluative methods can demonstrate the need for developmental advising. Because many administrators are unfamiliar with the literature on advising and retention, providing a thorough review can raise awareness levels. Local research and evaluation studies can have a powerful effect if specific deficits in the system are highlighted. Administrators need to set behavioral standards for academic advisors (Beasley-Fielstein, 1986).

5. *Advisors lack training to help them acquire developmental advising expertise, nor is there a great outcry for such training.*

One of the most important aspects of any advising program is faculty development or training. As I stated in number 2 above, developmental advising skills can be learned, and many advisors appear to be interested in improving their techniques. Kramer and Gardner (1984) suggest that faculty development be grounded in linking advising and teaching so that “faculty view advising as an extension of the teaching role rather than as an addition to it” (p. 414).

Suggestions for training content have been put forth by many writers (Bostaph & Moore, 1980; Ender & Winston, 1982; Gordon, 1984, 1992; Grites, 1984; Kishler, 1985). Student development theory must be included in any training program, for an understanding of developmental concepts is

at the heart of the advising process. Thomas and Chickering (1984) find that “advisors without knowledge of developmental theory tend to view students stereotypically” (p. 91) and do not see beyond a student’s superficial characteristics (e.g., sex, age, ethnic origin, major, test scores, and body build).

Fielstein and Lammers (1992) list requisites for developmental advising—which should be incorporated into ongoing training—such as helping students (a) to improve study skills, (b) to plan courses of study, (c) to improve interpersonal skills, (d) to understand their own values, and (e) to explore career options. In an earlier study Beasley-Fielstein (1986) found that dissatisfied students cited unpredictability, indifference, intimidating demeanor, and inaccessibility as contributing to discontent with the advising relationship.

Crookston’s description of developmental advising has been an enduring model for helping new advisors understand the developmental approach. Becoming a developmental advisor doesn’t happen after one training session; it requires a cumulating of knowledge, skills, and experiences with many types of students.

6. *Institutions do not require contacts with one advisor over time, so advisors cannot force students to have advising sessions.*

One of the biggest barriers to establishing a developmental advising relationship is the lack of contact between advisors and students over an extended period of time. As I stated earlier, some students have a narrow perspective of what advising can offer. One frequently used method of forcing contact is requiring an advisor’s signature on registration material several times a year, but this often results in only superficial contact.

The key to establishing a developmental advising relationship is a regular schedule of contacts, so that trust can be developed and an educational goal can be formulated. Establishing a series of contacts is largely the responsibility of advisors because students with little to no experience do not know their roles and responsibilities. As well, we should not expect students to have positive expectations of an advising relationship; these expectations can arise only from the types of positive experiences that students probably have not yet encountered.

Good advising programs begin when expectations are made clear to faculty and staff as they are

hired. Advisors must be informed of evaluative criteria at the outset. Good advising must be nurtured through regular in-service programs for advisors. A reward system must be established. An administration that is dedicated to excellent advising will make sure that all of these conditions exist.

One of the best ways to ensure regular advising contacts is through freshman seminars or other types of advising courses (Fidler & Hunter, 1989). Although such a course is usually taken during a student’s initial term of enrollment, expectations and experiences gleaned from the course set the tone for future advising, especially if the teacher is the student’s advisor.

Accessibility is another key to regular advising contact. Expectations should be made clear to advisors concerning regular office hours. According to Frost (1990), “if the developmental nature of academic advising is to be increased, an extended advising program with planned incidences of advisor contact may offer the same kind of support needed to achieve developmental advising goals” (p. 13).

7. *Autonomous units handle advising, making a common advising philosophy and approach difficult to implement.*

Particularly at large institutions, advising may be handled by autonomous units that establish their own advising policies and procedures. Uneven advising often results. Establishing a college- or university-wide advising mission statement provides a foundation for a common goal. A policy-forming board or advising committee with representatives from all academic units (as well as from student affairs) can coordinate. Administrative support is obviously needed. A common evaluation system can indicate whether all units provide the same quality of advising and where adjustments need to be made.

8. *Most campuses barely integrate student services (e.g., admissions, career services, and counseling) with academic services.*

Student services are an invaluable resource to advisors who need to refer students to professionals with special expertise. Student affairs professionals need to be part of in-service developmental advising workshops and to present information needed for referrals. Student service offices also need to adopt a common philosophy of student

development so their efforts may be coordinated and their goals in harmony.

9. *Most advisors have little training in dealing with the needs of diverse or high-risk student populations.*

Culturally diverse students and students with special needs (e.g., academically deficient students, adult students, or learning-disabled students) are often advised by full-time specialists. If ever a case could be made for developmental advising, serving these students is it. I (Gordon, 1992) have suggested that advisors need to be especially sensitive to the developmental needs of these students. We must acknowledge important differences between groups and between individuals. Workshops that teach important aspects of different cultures and special populations can provide the knowledge and skills needed.

10. *We have neither time nor support for evaluating advising or even for determining student desire for developmental advising if it were available.*

Recent research (Beasley-Fielstein, 1986; Fielstein & Lammers, 1992; Frost, 1990, 1993) provides insights into the advisor-advisee relationship when developmental approaches are practiced. If developmental advisors are interested in their advisees' involvement in the total college experience, these advisors will nurture a relationship organized around both academic and personal concerns and will view the relationship as a way to encourage students to "plan actively for their educational future" (Frost, 1993, p. 19). Astin (1993) concludes that "student-faculty contact within any given institutional environment can have important positive implications for student development" (p. 384). Developmental advising is an obvious way to accomplish this.

Conclusion

These are only a few of the barriers that could be cited. Every campus has strengths, limitations, and potential for establishing developmental advising. Until administrators are convinced that developmental advising—or advising itself—is at the heart of the institutional enterprise, little progress will be made. And until advisors and students persuade administrators that developmental advising is essential, inaction and lack of support will remain. All must acknowledge that students' performance in class cannot be separated

from other life experiences. All must approach students from a developmental perspective.

Over 20 years ago Crookston described "an intellectual learning community within which individuals and social systems interact in and out of the classroom and utilize developmental tasks within and outside the university for personal growth." Striving toward such an environment is a worthy task.

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