A Solution-Focused Model: Integrating Counseling Concepts into Higher Education Academic Advising

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Academic advisors in higher education interact and engage with students in various academic disciplines from freshman year through graduation, and have the greatest opportunity to impact students' sense of belonging to their universities. During a time of global hardship in education, it is crucial to equip frontline student-facing personnel with accessible, practical methods to help students maintain hope and find solutions to move educational goals forward. This conceptual paper offers a framework for the integration of school counseling methods with academic advising. Institutional personnel can utilize practical tools taken from solution-focused brief therapy to help students actualize their educational goals during times of hardship.

Academic advisors in institutions of higher education have found themselves in precarious positions since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Van et al., 2020). As students have faced unprecedented academic and personal hardships (George & Rani Thomas, 2020), so too have the institutions themselves (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Academic advisors have found themselves positioned on the frontlines as a first point of contact for students experiencing difficulties (McGill et al., 2020). Students in crisis often have mental health needs as well as academic needs, and tend to first connect with academic advisors for help, although academic advisors are not licensed mental health counselors (Ristianti, et al, 2022). In light of this, professional staff advisors, and academic and student affairs personnel may find themselves in a problematic position when responding to a student in distress (Ristianti et al., 2022).

Enrollment, retention, and graduation metrics have long been a focus for higher education institutions (Steele, 2018). Colleges and universities have sought out academic advisors for student outreach initiatives because the favorable role academic advising has on student development and well-being (see Astin, 1999; Cruce et al., 2006; Kuh et al., 2005). Additionally, and well-known for decades, is the direct, positive impact academic advising has on student success metrics (see Mu & Fosnacht, 2019; Tinto, 1999; Upcraft & Kramer, 1995; Young-Jones et al., 2013). Academic advisors' student caseloads have in turn become more complex in size and substance (Van et al., 2020), creating a greater need for useful, practical, and time-efficient advising methods in times of critical response. Therefore, academic advisors should be equipped with a strategic framework that considers the immediate, holistic needs of students and institutions in times of critical care and need.

There are numerous academic advising approaches that integrate theory into practice, offering guidance for advising students (Jordan, 2016; Kimball & Campbell, 2013). Most notable in advising literature are academic advising approaches and strategies linked to theory and personal advising philosophy (Drake et al., 2013; Dyer, 2007; Freitag, 2011, 2015) that align with NACADA (formerly the National Academic Advising Association) and the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS). These advising approaches are designed to equip institutional personnel in advising roles to support students in times of academic need.

Institutional personnel recognize the importance of student psychosocial, relational, cognitive, and identity-forming aspects of student lives as crucial to their academic success (Drake et al., 2013; Grites et al., 2016). As a result, various approaches that integrate advising and counseling practices have been conceptualized (Bloom et al.,

2008; Earl, 1988; Glennen, 1975, Schreiner & Anderson, 2005; Varney, 2013). Some key approaches drawn from counseling practice include: (a) Intrusive advising approach (Earl, 1988; Glennen, 1975), which is now referred to as the proactive advising approach (Varney, 2013), (b) Appreciative advising (Bloom et al., 2008), and (c) strengths-based advising (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). These advising approaches view the use of counseling techniques as a means to assist students on matters pertaining to identifying talents, developing personal assets, and setting academic and career goals.

Academic advisors are often the first institutional personnel with whom students interact regarding a multitude of issues (Kuhn et al., 2006), some of which transcend academics and broach personal concerns (Drake et al., 2013; Grites et al., 2016). Thus, academic advisors with little to no background or training in counseling technique may find it difficult to advise student wellness issues. Recognizing that professional training, time constraints, and advising caseloads may make hinder the ability to implement the skills and techniques presented by various advising approaches, and also recognizing ways advising personnel can most suitably serve students in any one case (Kuhn et al., 2006), we desired to conceptualize a practical advising approach to bridge this gap.

We propose the integration of a counseling technique called Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), and contend that methods of SFBT utilized in conjunction with a strengths-based advising model will create meaningful collaboration between advisor and advisee. This technique differs from other advising approaches in that it is brief in nature, and appropriate for advisors working with large caseloads of students in times of need. The call for an advising approach that is practical and efficient, yet not cursory in developing relationships, would result in institutional success for advisors and students.

Reviewing the Literature

The primary mode of literature inquiry was a review of two differing areas of existing research. Researchers selected and integrated two conceptual bodies of work: academic advising in higher education and school counseling, as they provide the framework for the conceptual approach combining solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) with the context of academic advising in higher education. We purposefully selected relevant literature focused on the following specific topics related to school counseling: (a) SFBT; (b) SFBT in school counseling; and (c) common issues in school counseling. Additionally, we selected relevant literature focused on the following specific topics related to academic advising: (a) the impact of academic advising on institutional and student wellness; (b) advising as a practice employed by various roles; and (c) common issues employing academic advising approaches.

A thorough review of both bodies of literature allowed us to conceptually connect overlapping areas. Specifically we assessed how SFBT, a method utilized by various mental health professionals and high school counselors, can apply to academic advising in higher education, based on similarities in approach as identified in the literature. The shared tenets between the professions include: (a) theoretical approaches to practice, (b) shared objectives of student academic, career, and personal development, (c) common issues in both professions, and (d) presuppositions of holistic student development as the role of the counselor and the advisor in the school setting. After review, we developed a conceptual framework for the use of SFBT elements in the academic advising setting, and now propose the integration of interventions and principles of SFBT as a method of academic advising practice.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

Solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) was developed in the early 1980s by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg (Corey, 2016). Based on observations of real-life therapy sessions, de Shazer and Berg documented words and behaviors that helped students move toward their goals (Corey, 2016; de Shazer et al., 2021). Unlike other counseling theories, SFBT began as evidence-based rather than a theoretical development (de Shazer et al., 2021). Meticulous work led to a strengths-based counseling approach that is collaborative, cooperative, and empowering (Berg & De Jong, 1996; Corey, 2016) and one of the most popular post-modern approaches to therapy (de Shazer et al., 2021).

Throughout numerous writings, de Shazer stated that SFBT has no theory (Hopwood, 2021; Korman et al., 2020) and he was not inclined to explain human behavior or mental illness (Korman et al., 2020). Additionally, de Shazer had little to no regard for psychopathology (Hopwood, 2021). In fact, when asked how to address specific

diagnoses, de Shazer either declined to respond or dismissed the notion that psychopathology plays a key role in SFBT (Korman, et al., 2020). Instead, according to de Shazer (1991), the guiding research question of SFBT to explore is, "What do students and therapists do together that is useful?" (p. 122).

The foundation of SFBT includes primary intervention techniques, many of which use questions to guide future-oriented and positive thinking (Cepeda & Davenport, 2006; Chen et al., 2018). The primary guiding principle of SFBT is to highlight what is working in students' lives rather than the perceived issues (de Shazer, 1991). It also focuses almost exclusively on finding solutions to a current problem, with little to no regard for what has happened in the past (Cepeda & Davenport, 2006; Chen et al., 2018; Corey, 2016). Therefore, the foundation of SFBT focuses on the absence of problems: (a) therapy is not necessary if there is no problem; (b) if the student is experiencing success, the counselor's role is to encourage what is working; (c) if the student is not experiencing success, a different solution should be offered; (d) small changes lead to more significant changes; (e) the solution is not always related to the problem; (f) language should be positive, hopeful, and future-focused; (g) all problems have times of exception; and (h) the future is created and amendable (Corey, 2016; de Shazer et al., 2021).

SFBT is commonly practiced in school-based mental health services settings (Kelly et al., 2008; Metcalf, 2008). However, that has not always been the case. Use of SFBT in school settings has grown exponentially since the early 2000s (Kim & Franklin, 2009). This growth is partially due to the flexible nature of the approach (Dameron, 2016; Kelly et al., 2008) and the increasing demands placed on school mental health staff. School counselors, social workers, and psychologists utilize SFBT for numerous student issues, including behavioral and emotional problems, academic concerns, and social interaction struggles (Dameron, 2016; Kelly et al., 2008; Kim & Franklin, 2009). Further, due to the high-paced nature of the school setting, solution-focused brief therapy is an ideal approach for counselors because it is time-limited and goal-oriented (Dameron, 2016; Kelly et al., 2008; Metcalf, 2008).

Integration of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy Techniques With Academic Advising

Mental health concerns on college campuses continue to rise (Ketchen Lipson et al., 2015). At the institutional level, many students experiencing mental illness are unaware of counseling services and treatment options (Ketchen Lipson et al., 2015; Schwitzer et al., 2018), and thus, academic advisors can play a key role in connecting students to care (Zhai & Du, 2020). Academic advisors, while experts in areas of academia, are not equipped to provide mental health counseling services (Zhai & Du, 2020). School counselors, on the other hand, are specifically trained to address the unique and complicated mental health needs of students (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). Therefore, while our approach integrates elements of SFBT into academic advising, we do not suggest academic advisors take on the role of counselors.

As aligned with the principles of strengths-based academic advising (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005), SFBT is a collaborative, cooperative, and empowering strengths-based counseling approach (Berg & De Jong, 1996; Corey, 2016). In the context of academic advising, SFBT enables the advisor to focus on actionable steps for students' future academic progress based on current successes and positive thinking (Chen et al., 2018; Corey, 2016; de Shazer et al., 2021). Integration of goal setting and celebration of small changes are foundational elements of SFBT (Kim, 2014). Specifically, SFBT interventions value even the slightest change, as small improvement leads to more significant progress (Corey, 2016; de Shazer et al., 2021). Further, aligned with the strengths-based approach, SFBT regards students, not counselors, as the experts in their lives, in control of creating and amending the future (Chen et al., 2018).

As stated by Zarges and colleagues (2018), critical issues in academic advising include student success, persistence to graduation, and retention. Advisors also interact with students from various programs and backgrounds, academic standings, and institutional engagement (Zarges et al., 2018). Approaches that integrate elements of SFBT and highlight a strengths-based focus, goal setting, and future-oriented thinking are valuable to academic advising as they address many of the challenges and shortcomings of the current profession.

Academic and faculty advisors utilize strengths-based advising techniques with students to help them discover academic interests and strengths that can guide them to a meaningful career (Drake et al., 2013). Regardless of professional position, the nature of SFBT techniques and methods encourage

relational connections as well as academic and career-focused holistic student development. They are accessible, practical, and suitable to all advising roles in higher education.

Shared Challenges in School Counseling and Academic Advising

Academic advisors and school counselors face similar challenges. To guide the development of a model applicable to academic advising, we examined methods school counselors use to effectively reach students and families. These methods suggest that SFBT foundations can be integrated into an effective framework for supporting students in academic and future planning. Shared issues in advising and school counseling include managing large student caseloads with limited time, working with reluctant students, helping students to identify future goals, and addressing diverse learners.

Large Caseloads and Limited Time

Faculty and professional staff advisors in higher education face pressures of growing student caseloads (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015). Academic advisors are often limited in time, making it a challenge to fully address students' academic planning and personal needs (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015). Integration of brief, solution-focused approaches into academic advising practices allow advisors to engage with students in a time-efficient manner, focused on academic and personal growth. Thus, SFBT is valuable to school counselors because it offers brief intervention sessions (Kim & Franklin, 2009) and honors the limited time school counselors have with students due to overwhelming caseloads.

Involuntary Counseling and Transactional Advising

Solution-focused brief therapy is an effective theoretical approach for students attending counseling involuntarily (Kim & Franklin, 2009). Solution-focused brief therapy methods could prove effective in required academic advising sessions in which students must attend in order to fulfill institutional or program obligations such as lifts on registration holds, major selection, or periodic program check-ins. Students required to meet with academic advisors may prefer transactional exchanges over creating connections (Smith & Allen, 2006). Students who prefer the brevity of prescriptive advising exchanges or who may attend meetings out of obligation, may benefit from integrated SFBT methods, which enable advisors to employ strategic advising

techniques to help meet students' needs in an engaged and focused manner. Finally, SFBT has been found to effectively address issues such as substance abuse, behavioral problems, and mental health concerns which may apply to the collegiate population (Franklin et al., 2001; Kim, 2014).

Use of Data in Personal and Academic Goal-Setting

Integration of goal-setting and recognition of small changes are foundational elements of SFBT (Kim, 2014). One value of SFBT is the recognition of even minor improvements in students (Kim, 2014). Thus, the use of data which shows even the most discrete change can be an effective strategy in advising to focus on student strengths and exceptions to the problem (Kim & Franklin, 2009).

Academic advisors have access to student data points and can identify and promote small positive changes, focusing on incremental improvements and academic goal-setting. Data points such as grade changes, instructor collaboration, and completed course credits are accessible and measurable references for academic advisors to integrate SFBT techniques, and would add to goal-setting methods described by Schreiner & Anderson (2005) in the strengths-based advising approach. SFBT techniques would align with the appreciative advising approach developed by Bloom and colleagues (2008) in which students are viewed as the experts of their own lives and co-construct, with their advisor, academic and personal life goals. The use of student academic data and collaboration with faculty about the student would enable advisors to integrate SFBT methods into advising practice in ways that holistically empower students.

Career Development

Specific to advising and career development, Looby (2014) identifies ways in which concepts and techniques of SFBT can be applied to career development through alignment with National Career Development Association (NCDA) competencies (Table 1). Skills such as attending, listening, and encouraging can help to establish student trust and rapport while uncovering presenting issues. Utilization of career counseling skills, such as questioning, use of silence, and hope, can lead to decision-making, pinpointing of strengths, and identification of future goals. Using a brief, solution-focused approach within higher education academic advising may lead to

Table 1. Aligning Career Development Competencies with SFBT Principles

NCDA Competencies	Solution-focused Principles
Attending	**Opening – How can I help?** Neutral and non-judgmental stance of the counselor, positioned as interested in being informed and learning more about the student.
Listening	**Listening to what the student wants.** Show respect by starting where the student is, valuing their unique experiences. Develop an understanding of the student's view of self and identity, based on student narratives.
Reflecting	**Check for understanding.** Build trust by demonstrating awareness and appreciation of what the student is experiencing, learning, and valuing.
Encouraging	**Feedback** – compliment and help to connect meaning. Affirm what is working, successes, insights and connections for moving forward.
Questioning	**Curious approach by asking questions.** Show genuine interest in understanding the student's perspective. Provide gentle guidance to help clarify, organize, and move forward. This may involve interrupting the student to get back on track with non-intrusive inquiries.
Silence	**Counselor remains "neutral," the student is the expert.** Use pauses as appropriate, allowing the student to organize thoughts, and set a pace that is comfortable.
Identifying Strengths & Barriers	**Exceptions, when were things different?** Use a systems approach to assist the student in determining what changes are needed and considering the perspectives of others in all affected aspects of the student's life.
The Importance of Hope	**Miracle Question** – describe what the student wants in detail. Help the student to recognize the process of identifying an ultimate career goal. This creates hope for the future.

more meaningful connections with students and provide them with tools to recognize obstacles, identify strengths, and forge a path to the future.

Suggestions for Strengths-Based Focus in Academic Advising

In 2005, Schreiner and Anderson hypothesized that advising focused on the strengths of students would result in greater student self-confidence, motivation, and engagement. Soria and colleagues conducted a study in 2017 which explored the benefits of a strengths-based approach and found overwhelmingly positive results. Specifically, students who engaged in strengths-based conversations reported greater levels of academic self-efficacy and had higher rates of retention and graduation than students who did not engage in strengths-based conversations (Soria et al., 2017). Soria and colleagues' study (2017) supports the notion that positive psychological interventions promote positive emotions, behaviors, and thoughts (Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013).

According to Froerer and colleagues (2018), SFBT integrates elements of positive psychology and utilizes hope and positivity to move toward improvement. However, many students struggle to identify their strengths and may need guidance in developing a positive mindset (Linley & Burns, 2009). Therefore, we suggest academic advisors utilize the techniques of SFBT (Table 2) which foster positivity and recognition of strengths within the student.

Goal Setting in Academic Advising using SFBT Techniques

In 2018, Larson and colleagues conducted a study to explore academic advisors' understanding of their roles for the purpose of creating a comprehensive professional definition of tasks. The data conclusively identified goal-setting and goal-oriented thinking as key roles of the profession (Larson et al., 2018). Additionally, academic advising and goal-setting plays an important role in student success (Lynch & Lungrin, 2018), As Lotkowski and colleagues (2004) state, even though a student may achieve mastery of a subject area, reaching academic goals and academic self-confidence still depends heavily on quality advising.

As a core focus, SFBT seeks for students to understand that problems are often fleeting (Chen

Table 2. Strength-Based Focused Suggestions for Academic Advising

Technique	Example	Purpose
Identifying Strengths vs Skills	"What do you enjoy doing outside of the classroom and why?"	Begins dialogue about things the student enjoys; promotes positive and hopeful thinking.
	"What makes you good at the hobbies and activities you enjoy?"	Helps students understand the difference between skills and strengths. For example, "being good at soccer" is a skill, while "dedication" and "discipline" are strengths.
Strengths Finder	"Tell me about a time you felt strong as a student."	Promotes student reflection to identify a time of success.
	"During that time that you felt academically strong, what strengths did you see?"	Identifies key elements which lead to the student's success.
	"Let's discuss how to integrate those strengths into other areas of your life."	Guides student to better understanding of ways to integrate personal strengths into other situations.

et al., 2018). Thus, finding realistic and workable solutions to alleviate the issues is the focus of the approach (de Shazer, 1999; Korman, et al., 2020). We suggest that SFBT techniques be integrated into the work of academic advisors (Table 3).

Future-Oriented Thinking in Academic Advising

Proactive, appreciative, and strengths-based academic advising approaches are future-oriented in that advising interactions focus on student career and life goals, and how present academic choices can affect the future (Drake et al., 2013). These advising approaches presuppose relationships as integral to student success and well-being (Drake et al., 2013), advising as a collaborative process between the student and advisor, and advising as a process involving holistic support of the student and academic and personal guidance. Naturally, the foundations of these approaches are compatible with the key components of SFBT in practice because of their shared assumptions about methods of engagement with students. Thus, combining the techniques of SFBT with these academic advising approaches may be advantageous for students.

A key component of SFBT-driven conversation involves the visualization of an improved future

Table 3. Goal-Setting in Academic Advising

Technique	Example	Purpose
Exceptions Question	"Was there a time this year in school when this academic problem did not exist?"	Highlights that the problem is not all-consuming and the student can find solutions.
Scaling Question	"On a scale of 0-10, how troubling is this academic issue for you?"	Frames the scope of the problem in an approachable and concrete manner.
	"What do we need to do to move that number from 8 to 2?"	Empowers the student to make positive changes through goal-setting.
Embracing Small Change	"Even the smallest change moves us towards a goal. What is one small change you can make to improve the situation?"	Prompts student to view change as attainable rather than an overwhelming goal.
	"What resources do you already have that can help you move towards your goal?"	Reminds students they have the ability to remedy their issues and achieve their goals.

Table 4. Future-Oriented Approaches in Academic Advising

Technique	Example	Purpose
Miracle Question	"If you were to wake up tomorrow and your academic issues were gone, what would be different in your life?"	Allows student to imagine a reality where no issues exist, and move towards that goal.
Solution Mind Mapping	"In the center of this paper, draw a circle with your ideal future in it. Now, draw branches to that future that will help make that future a reality."	Creative and non-verbal approach to future planning which allows student to conceptualize an ideal future and the process to achieve it.

(Cepeda & Davenport, 2006; Joubert & Guse; 2021). Further, as Joubert and Guse (2022) state, one of the most important assumptions of SFBT stipulates that a focus on the future enhances the propensity for change. Language that communicates a positive future, hope, and the expectation of success will promote improvement and change (Cepeda & Davenport, 2006; Sarti, 2003). Therefore, we suggest the techniques outlined in Table 4 be integrated into academic advising.

Potential Limitations

The proposed advising approach is not without limitations. For example, the suggestions presented assume students are willing to openly engage in dialogue during advising sessions. Additionally, because SFBT is future-oriented, this method does not allow time in advising appointments for past reflections or guidance to help students learn from prior decisions. Therefore, it is the student's responsibility to make these connections. Moreover, the quick and goal-oriented nature of SFBT techniques may not allow advisors the necessary time to empathize with students in distress, though in these cases students should be referred to mental health professionals.

Conclusion

Academic advisors have an immediate and meaningful impact on first-year students and provide continuing influence as students work toward degree completion (Astin, 1999; Kuh et al., 2005; Upkraft & Kramer, 1995; Young-Jones et al., 2013). Academic advising also has been shown to have a positive impact on students' sense of belonging to their institution, which directly affects persistence to graduation (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019). We conclude that integration of the strengths-based counseling technique, Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, should be used as an advising method, as it allows for meaningful collaboration between advisor and advisee, but differs from other advising approaches as it emphasizes brevity. The need for an advising approach that is brief in nature and time efficient, yet not cursory in developing relationships, would meet the goal of practicality for academic advising and result in student and institutional success. Integration of SFBT methods into academic advising approaches which capitalize on students' strengths (Bloom et al., 2008; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005) would enable advisors to work with students in a time-efficient manner, a benefit to faculty and staff advisors with high student caseloads and limited time.

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Authors' Notes

The conceptualization of the practical advising approach we present was developed by two researchers with separate backgrounds in school counseling and academic advising, and a faculty member who teaches and advises undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students. We sought to combine our shared experiences and knowledge to create a practical academic advising framework. The first author provided research and knowledge relevant to counseling techniques, while the second author brought research and academic advising expertise. With experience in both counseling and advising, the third author's contribution bridged the two content areas.

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