

Professional Development in an Uncertain Profession: Finding a Place for Academic and Career Advisors

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Professional development for academic and career advisors has not attracted much attention in the advising literature and is more often embedded in discussions of the assessment of advising or professional development for student affairs practitioners. The result of this omission from professional discourse has contributed to uncertainty about advising as a profession and minimized the apparent need for professional development. In this article, the author examines the relationship between advising and professional work and details the need for professional development for academic and career advisors in higher education. Barriers to professional development are considered and a model for change is introduced.

Introduction

Advising is typically not considered to be a profession, at least it is not afforded the stature of law or medicine; yet, advisors are referred to as professionals, and students and deans expect advisors to conduct their work with a high degree of professionalism. At a recent luncheon meeting of advisors at The University of Wisconsin at Madison, a colleague posed this question: "Is it possible to be considered a professional if your work is not considered part of a profession?" The group fell silent; some heads nodded knowingly, as if the nodders had answered this question in the past. Other advisors appeared perplexed or startled by the thoughtful silence that enveloped this typically animated group. A lively debate ensued, and by the end of the meeting two critical questions had emerged: "What is professional work?" and "Is advising professional work?"

Viewing Academic and Career Advising as Professional Work

To address the question "What is professional work?" both the traditional definitions of professional work as well as more recent and emerging definitions should be considered. Traditionally, the professions were bastions of expert knowledge and were identified by specific criteria. McDonald (2001, p. 29) cited four criteria of a professional:

specialized knowledge base, complex skills, autonomy of practice, and adherence to a code of ethical behavior. McDonald maintained, "Expertise is the prime source of professional power and influence" (p. 30) and explained that professionals have enjoyed prestige, autonomy, and self-regulation because clients were "presumed to be unable, through lack of that specialized knowledge and expertise, to evaluate the service provided by the professional" (p. 30). Eraut (1994, p. 5) highlighted the professional concept of service and explained that traditional definitions of professionalism are derived from a profession-centered model where "only the professional can determine the real needs of the client." Eraut asserted that acceptance of the presumption of client rights has altered the landscape and invited a new less-patronizing model of service that is client centered rather than profession centered.

Eraut, following Johnson (1984), also described an ideology of professionalism that is not characterized by a set of specific traits or criteria that function as a litmus test for determining the status of a profession. Eraut offered three features of the professionalism ideology: a specialist knowledge base, autonomy, and service (p. 227). While these features do not represent a radical departure from more traditional criteria, Eraut's definition offers an evolving nature of professionalism that is different from previous definitions. Eraut (1994), Houle (1980), and others described a concept called professionalization, the process or strategy by which a profession gains more respect, privilege, and sometimes, prestige. This new perspective accommodates variations across professions and encourages the creation of professionalism models specific to the nature of the work and client needs.

Defining Advising

In much the same way that new perspectives on professions developed in response to client-centered services, the changing needs and expectations of students over the past 40 years have generated new definitions of advising. Prior to the 1960s, advising was defined as the process by which students and faculty discussed course selection and degree requirements for the major. This traditional approach was

prescriptive and not designed to address the individual needs of students. However, this paradigm was challenged by students in the 1960s and 1970s. The heightened level of student activism coupled with expanded curricula and changing enrollment patterns at colleges and universities created a demand for specialized services for many new learners, including returning older adults, minority and international students, and students with disabilities or who have nontraditional learning styles.

Gordon (1992, p. 5) suggested that when multiple areas of specialization emerged advising needed to be more clearly defined. She referred to the introduction of a developmental perspective on advising advanced independently by O'Banion (1972) and Crookston (1972). Developmental advising is anchored in the theoretical frameworks of Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, Arthur Chickering, William Perry, and others and recognizes that advising can be a holistic process of educational planning. Therefore, advisors must consider the multiple, changing needs of learners, including goal setting and vocational planning. O'Banion (1972) described five steps in the developmental process: exploration of life goals, exploration of vocational goals, program or major choice, course choice, and scheduling courses.

Crookston advanced the idea that advising is a form of teaching because advising can serve to enhance individual growth and development. He also examined the relationship between the student and advisor and asserted that both assume responsibility for this relationship and the quality of advising (Crookston, 1972; Frost, 2000). This supplanted the traditional, prescriptive arrangement that Frost explained is "built on the authority of the advisor and the limitation of the student" (p. 12). Under the developmental approach to advising, career advising is included in the process; it was an area previously excluded from the advising process because it was considered part of job-placement services.

Perspectives on advising continue to emerge, drawing upon advances in other fields, such as student development theory, adult development theory, learning theory, or moral development theory. The concept of advising as teaching has garnered renewed interest in Crookston's model. Lowenstein (1999) advanced a model of academically centered advising and argued that it is superior to developmental advising because it embraces a collaborative, not prescriptive, style of advising and returns the advisor-advisee discussion to academic content.

This brief review of the changing perspectives on advising provides background for considera-

tion of the second question posed at the meeting: "Is advising professional work?" Gordon (1992, p. 170) suggested that while advising does not meet the criteria for a profession, it "can be viewed as an 'emerging' profession with many of the earmarks of a profession in place." However, this perspective reflects the more traditional and static view of the professions; the concept of professionalization can be described in how work changes over time, how it reflects contemporary pressures, and how it can be used to reexamine earlier values and to respond to the changing needs of clients and society. This dynamic and recursive process fosters an ideology of professionalism specific to a discipline or occupation, and advising is no exception. Furthermore, Eraut's three features of a professionalism ideology, specialist knowledge base, autonomy, and service, are found, in varying degrees, in the work of college and university advisors. Depending upon the particular area of advising, advisors may be responsible for specialized knowledge in an academic discipline and occupational field, or they may be expected to know campus regulations, counseling skills, career and life planning, multicultural issues, technological delivery systems, and other areas that represent student needs. Advisors also possess skills and techniques that, while not necessarily unique to their work, are tailored to improve the delivery of service. These practical abilities include information dissemination, teaching, counseling, mentoring, providing referrals, and decision-making skills (Gordon, 1992).

The autonomy feature of Eraut's professionalism ideology refers to the expectation that members of a profession have a high degree of control over their work, are actively involved in creating policy, and are equipped to evaluate the quality of work within a profession. Advising has secured a greater degree of autonomy as it has grown more specialized. This autonomy is represented in the ways advising is delivered on college and university campuses, particularly in the significant increase in the number of full-time advisors. This increase is due in large part to the ever-increasing demands made upon faculty time for teaching, research, and service. To improve access to advising and relieve faculty of this responsibility, full-time advisors, many of whom have backgrounds in specialized areas such as counseling, student affairs, or higher education administration, are being hired at postsecondary institutions. As the number of advisors grows, so does advisor representation on campus committees responsible for planning and policymaking.

Eraut's service dimension perhaps is the most obvious identifier of advising as professional work.

Much of the theory undergirding advising is drawn from other service professions, such as counseling, or from literature representing the constellation of student services in higher education. The concept of service in a client-centered model also implies an expectation of accountability, and this criterion has been recognized by the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) in their 1994 Statement of Core Values (National Academic Advising Association, 1995) and the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) (Miller, 1997).

Making the Case for Professional Development in Academic and Career Advising

Acknowledging the ideology of professionalism and locating advising within this framework reveals that advising is professional work. Furthermore, the specialist knowledge base that informs advising continues to grow, and advisors, not unlike other professionals, need opportunities to acquire new information and skills and to reflect upon their current practices. Eraut (1995, p. 245) acknowledged that professional development can build knowledge and skills for practice but also suggested that professional development can improve relations with clients and stakeholders and expand “the capacity to contribute to the professional life” of the organization.

This need to update knowledge and skills is articulated in the NACADA Statement of Core Values (1995) in which the declaration “Advisors are responsible to their professional role as advisors and to themselves personally” includes the charge “To keep advising skills honed and interest high, advisors are encouraged to seek opportunities for professional development” (p. 7). This statement includes a list of examples of opportunities for professional development: classes, workshops, conferences, reading materials, research data, consultations with others, and interactions in formal groups with other advisors.

Considering the Barriers to Professional Development in Advising

To be sure, creating opportunities for professional development can prove even more difficult than explicating a rationale for the existence of the opportunities. Barriers to professional development may be internal or external and will change over time. For this article, internal barriers are defined as those hindrances to professional development found within a particular department or administrative unit on campus. External barriers exist beyond the department or unit, typically at the

campus or community level. This categorization is necessarily imprecise, but it may illustrate more clearly the source and nature of some of the barriers to professional development.

Internal Barriers

At least four internal barriers are recognizable to advisors at almost any college or university: time, justification, venue, and cost. The first barrier, time, is certainly not unique to advising, but the critical issue with regard to advising relates to caseload. Advisors exercise a great deal of autonomy over the content and delivery of their advising sessions but often feel they have unmanageable caseloads that prohibit them from participating in professional development activities. Reductions in staffing levels coupled with increased student enrollments exacerbate an already difficult situation.

Some advisors find that justifying time spent on professional development activities is difficult when they know their absence from the office will mean students' needs go unmet. They may also face a challenge from department chairs or deans who do not consider advising to be professional work and do not support the use of “work time” for these activities.

The decentralized arrangement of advising on many campuses can be isolating, and it leaves many advisors to identify a venue for professional development. Venue in this context refers less to the physical space required for professional development and more to the locality or area of affiliation. For example, an advisor in a small department is likely to be the only advisor and will need to seek opportunities for professional development with advising colleagues across the school, college, or campus. Advisors in highly specialized areas, such as pre-professional programs, sometimes share greater affinity with pre-professional program advisors at other campuses than they do with advisors in other programs on their home campus. In this situation, national associations may offer the most relevant and meaningful opportunities.

The financial cost of professional development activities is another common barrier. Costs may include, but are not limited to, journal subscriptions, conference or workshop registration fees, travel, and lodging. Participation in regional or national conferences can be very rewarding, especially for advisors working in specialized disciplines or majors, but the price tag can be staggering if travel is required. Other costs associated with participation in professional development include release time and support for nonadvising activities, including

clerical work or administration of registration for departmental courses. Nontravel-related expense is an important consideration, particularly when caseload volume is high and the department or unit cannot afford to hire another advisor. Instead of leaving the advisors no means by which to pursue development, departments may hire administrative or student employees to assist with nonadvising tasks and provide advisors with a much-needed measure of relief.

External Barriers

Similar barriers exist beyond the department level, and they reflect the size and culture of the institution. For example, advisors on smaller campuses may find the organization of events or activities, especially those requiring significant committee work or the input of representatives from a common area (such as health professions advising), to be burdensome. In contrast, the decentralized advising model in place at larger institutions can create an environment in which the relatively simple task of identifying advisors can be challenging, and assuming the task of organizing the advisors would be even more intimidating. For example, at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, advising is offered by faculty members and staff who hold a wide variety of titles and to date no mechanism exists for tracking new hires and creating a campus-wide directory of advisors.

Another unknown that can confound the efforts of professional development is the number of advisors relative to the number of faculty who advise. While both groups share a common goal of providing service to students, their interests and expectations for professional development may be widely divergent.

Costs associated with providing professional development are another barrier. Even programs or activities designed to draw upon campus resources require administration and coordination. Some institutions have addressed this need by offering grants to individuals or groups willing to participate in or undertake planning for professional development activities.

Overcoming Barriers: A Model for Change and a True Story

While this list of barriers to professional development for advisors is far from exhaustive, it may seem daunting or worse, insurmountable. It has become cliché to say that creating change within an organization is never easy even when resources are available. So how should advisors and admin-

istrators think about creating the changes necessary to provide or expand upon the opportunities for professional development at their college or university? Parker Palmer (1992) offers an alternative pathway to organizational change in education; he calls it "a movement approach." The movement approach is rooted in his intense belief that "bureaucracies...define the limits of social reality within which change must happen," but people who "abandon the logic of organizations" can acquire power and "rewrite the logic of organizations" (pp. 10, 12). Palmer suggests the existence of four stages in movements that he has studied (p. 12):

- Isolated individuals decide to stop leading "divided lives."
- These people discover each other and form groups for mutual support.
- Empowered by community, they learn to translate "private problems" into public issues.
- Alternative rewards emerge to sustain the movement's vision, which may force the conventional reward system to change.

He admits these steps represent an ideal type of movement and cautions that "movements offer no guarantees of success" (p. 17). With that caveat in full view, I offer this model because it describes recent experience with the formation of an association for academic and career advisors at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

On January 11, 1999, a group of seven advisors and administrators responsible for advising met to explore the possibility of creating a group that could address four critical areas: advocacy, professional development, communication, and networking. The group came together because members had tired of passing conversations about professional dilemmas, hollow criticisms of outdated policies, and never-pursued plans. In much the same way that Palmer describes individuals who "decide to stop leading 'divided lives,'" the advisors and administrators came to the initial meeting with individual agendas and a collective feeling that each could accomplish much more by working together. The group met again later that month, balancing enthusiasm for the project with healthy doses of questioning. They examined the many barriers to advancing professional development and recognized that the presence of other campus organizations currently offering development and networking opportunities might mean that a new

organization would produce redundant efforts. Despite some concerns, group members were certain that they were pursuing worthy goals and decided to hold a public town meeting.

The announcement of the February 26, 1999, town meeting was distributed via a campus-wide listserv with a minimum of fanfare, and the members arrived at the meeting uncertain whether anyone else would attend. The members observed that they had invited colleagues who were busy, dedicated, and often unwilling to put their professional and personal needs before those of the students they serve. They need not have worried. The attendance at the first town meeting was, to the group members, surprisingly high and the conversation stimulating. Advisors from throughout campus attended, representing a wide variety of academic units. This became the first in a series of town meetings culminating in a vote on February 24, 2000, to organize the Madison Academic and Career Advising Association (MACAA). The first election of officers was held May 12, 2000, and monthly meetings were held throughout the 2000–2001 academic year, providing a venue for reflection and forum for discussion of issues common to advising practice. Guests were invited to share information about new policies or student trends, and these sessions were well received. The group concluded its inaugural year on May 10, 2001, with the adoption of a mission statement (Figure 1) and formation of committees.

The future of the association is uncertain; however, the next year will mark a turning point as the group moves beyond Palmer's third stage (problem recognition) and looks toward the fourth (new reward structure). The ability of the MACAA to sustain its efforts may be embedded in the committees' work. Each committee has proposed a project or event that represents an extension of discussions from monthly meetings, and all have the potential to offer the kind of reward that Palmer suggests will encourage a movement to persevere and its for-

mulators to not lose sight of its mission.

To Be or Not to Be a Professional—Does Anybody Care?

Wade and Yoder (1995) asked if anyone cares about the professional status of advising in their chapter *The Professional Status of Teachers and Academic Advisers: It Matters*, and it marks a return to the discussion described at the beginning of this article. Are advisors professionals? If yes, does it matter? Wade and Yoder believe teachers and advisors merit professional status and argued that status as professionals matters because policy, practice, and rewards are at stake. However, they contended that “to be regarded as a professional is the collective responsibility of those who advise” (p. 101). This is an important consideration and one that dovetails nicely with Palmer's model of a movement approach to change. Both remind advisors that perception is in the eye of the beholder and advisors hold the power to claim the identity of professionals.

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Figure 1 Mission statement adopted by MACAA

<p style="text-align: center;">Mission Statement</p> <p style="text-align: center;">University of Wisconsin-Madison Academic and Career Advising Association (MACAA)</p> <p>The UW-Madison Academic and Career Advising Association fosters excellence in career and academic advising for the benefit of students by promoting professional development, building collaborative relationships, advocating for advising and recognizing excellence.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Adopted May 10, 2001</p>
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Author's Note

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