NACADA REVIEW | Academic Advising Praxis & Perspectives

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Perspectives: Key Articles on the Praxis of Advising

The goal of "Perspectives: Key Articles on the Praxis of Advising" is to highlight scholarly inquiry in peer-reviewed journals relevant to the link between the theory and practice of academic advising. Articles discussed in this series may or may not be specifically focused on academic advising, but they are considered to be compelling and important due to a focus on the theoretical frameworks critical to student learning and development, which lead to direct transferability to advising interactions, pedagogies, and relationships.

The article: *Collier, P. J., & Morgan, D. L. (2008).* "Is that paper really due today?": Differences in first-generation and traditional college students' understandings of faculty expectations. *Higher Education, 55,* 425–446.

KEY WORDS: *academic expectations, role theory, first generation students, qualitative*

Role as Resource: An Examination of Collier and Morgan (2008) and its Implications for Academic Advising

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The Research Issue

Academic advisors are uniquely positioned to understand not only the structural elements of success for students but also the contextual ones. They offer experienced advice related to the academic journey, such as strategic study skills, curricular planning, and goal setting. However, they can also provide important insight related to the more nuanced environmental adjustments all students are required to navigate, especially related to academic expectations.

The Research Article

The "role of the college student" was the subject of an article by Collier and Morgan (2008), which addressed comparative reflections between faculty members and undergraduates at one public university in Oregon. Though this article is now 11 years old, it is not only relevant to academic advising but still timely in its conceptual and practical application for working with college students. A recent search on Google Scholar reveals that, as of July 20, 2019, the article has been cited in peer-reviewed scholarly publications 544 times. The journals range from disciplinary-focused (Jack, 2016) and teaching-related publications (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012; Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton, 2018) to higher education publications in general (Dika, 2012), covering a wide range of related topics and constructs.

The authors, both faculty members of the Department of Sociology at Portland State University at the time of this article, employed a "roles as resource" framework to make the claim that "students who arrive at the university with a greater mastery of the college student role possess an important resource for recognizing what their instructors expect of them and for responding appropriately to those expectations" (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 427). They argued that student success requires a connection between a students' understanding of course material and their understanding of the professor's expectations. Their conceptual model (Figure 1) distinguished "between learning the college student role and learning course content as two important influences on student performance" (p. 428).

Collier and Morgan (2008) addressed the important context in a learning environment, where the stakes are inherently high for students.

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Professors operate with autonomy within their courses, and while each faculty member remains generally consistent across courses, students are expected to navigate dozens of different instructional styles, academic rhythms, and even personalities throughout their academic journey. The ability to assess what will be expected of them early in the course often depends on a number of different learned and acquired skills. Each student brings understanding of the "role" they are expected to play, with respect to both course content (knowledge and academic skills) and the ways in which they demonstrate that they are properly informed "college students."

Academic advisors often engage advisees in conversations about expectations, so this study is interesting in its exploration of both perspectives: those of students and those of faculty members. The design of the study is also worthy of closer examination, as it effectively integrates relevant theoretical frameworks, such as cultural capital and "role playing and role making" (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 427), with the practical realities of students' skills, frustrations, and maturity. Academic advisors recognize this journey from their unique viewpoint and can gain valuable insight into these critical perspectives.

The Research Design and Findings

Two sets of focus groups were conducted at Portland State University, including two groups of faculty members and eight groups of undergraduate students. The student groups were further divided into first-generation students (six groups) and two groups of "those from more traditional, highly educated backgrounds" (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 431). The total number of faculty members was 15, and the total number of students was 63. The goal of the parallel set of questions for faculty and students "was to hear about both the faculty members' and the students' expectations of what students should be able to do in the freshman- and sophomore-level classes" (p. 431).

The findings revealed differences in the articulation of issues related to two main themes for faculty members and students: "expectations about workload and priorities" (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 432) and "explicitness of expectations and assignments" (p. 433). However, students also discussed concerns about issues related to "communication and problem solving" (p. 435), especially regarding relationship building with faculty members. Not surprisingly, while most faculty members perceived that their expectations were made clear via the syllabus and in-class explanations, there were differences in the perceptions of students, who were often surprised by the variances in expectations and clarity across their classes. Further, traditional students (the use of this term is addressed below) tended to rely on the syllabus and other written information from the professor, while first-generation students tended to rely on verbal and physical cues from the professor during class sessions.

Reflections on the Article

Concerns With Terminology

The authors use the term "traditional student" to describe students whose parents or parent attended college. The term "continuing-generation student" is now more appropriately used as the comparator to "first-generation student." While not a small minority of the college population, first-generation students are still more likely to leave higher education due to financial concerns, tend to attend less selective institutions, generally come from households with lower incomes, and often require more time to earn their credentials or degrees in comparison with continuing-generation students (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Most colleges and universities in the United States now capture parent/guardian educational background in the admissions process, and some have intentional programming for student sub-populations, such as those who identify as "first-generation students" (Kansas State University, 2019). Other institutions do not, and even within those institutions that do, some first-generation students prefer to remain unidentified to faculty and staff members.

A Caution About Assumptions

Assuming that first-generation status puts a student immediately "at risk" is a deficit perspective, often based on generalized data and stereotypes. National statistics (in this case, in the United States) are aggregated using available evidence and longitudinal models that are framed in traditional metrics. Enrollment and completion patterns are important for trend analyses over time, but these do not take into account individual students' motivations, nor their levels of engagement when college staff and faculty members take an active, compassionate, and learning community based approach to local interventions. It is

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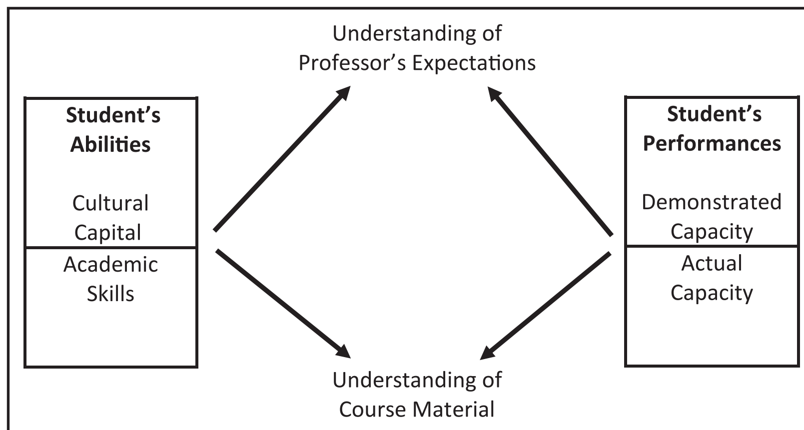
Figure 1. Conceptual model



Note. Taken from Collier and Morgan (2008, p. 429).

important to note that preparedness for the higher education environment is not relevant just to students in institutions in the United States. Most, if not all, colleges and universities around the world are increasingly addressing the importance of active engagement with students to build a stronger academic community.

Faculty Sensitivity to Privilege

Regarding faculty members and instructors, issues of privilege within the "accepted" norms and climate within a classroom setting also raise concerns in relation to the expectations of the student role. Addressing pedagogical practices specifically related to race, for example, Charbeneau (2013) suggested that "in practice, attending to diversity does not mean giving up aspects of one's culture or behavioral norms, but it does mean understanding and acknowledging that other cultures and values are legitimate" (p. 664). Expectations related to course requirements and academic standards, while seemingly consistent for all students, can take on an undertone of inequity when viewed through the lens of differing understanding of the student role.

Implications for Academic Advising

So, what implications do these rather broad findings, though grounded in evidence, have for academic advisors across an institution? Students enter higher education with varying degrees of certainty and confidence, often based on their assumptions about what will be expected of them. They rely on their personal resources (family and friends), but also on knowledgeable and caring faculty and staff for emotional and academic support.

First-Generation Status as an Asset

Academic advisors who view their roles as those of educators and mentors are strategically important to each student with whom they interact. Beyond academic planning and goal setting, they have the opportunity to share critical insight with advisees on the expectations that faculty members tend to have across disciplines and programs. Most importantly, they must take care to elevate the strengths and unique abilities of first-generation students, who are often highly motivated and emotionally supported by their families. Rather than a barrier to success, these can be important assets (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Paying specific attention to the notion of "roles" (e.g., discussing with students how they see themselves within the college context) can help raise awareness in students and contribute to their sense of belonging and empowerment within the higher education community.

Intentional Discussions

It is critical, then, to more accurately understand the culture and climate of expectations within each institutional context. One way to uncover this is to intentionally discuss the topic. Regardless of the advising structure (primary-role advisors, faculty advisors, or both), advisors could host conversations with faculty members

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at the department or college level related to expectations beyond the specific content in a course. While some disciplines have these types of discussions regularly, many do not. Faculty members enjoy sharing their expertise and experiences about student learning, and gain valuable insight from colleagues as well.

While all new college students have to learn to navigate uncharted educational waters, Collier and Morgan (2008) warned that "any advantage traditional students have in understanding this distinction will provide for further 'differentiation' of these two sets of expectations" (p. 430). The response from faculty and staff members can either exacerbate those differences or help decrease them.

Further, the authors' finding that verbal and physical cues are important to first-generation students raises the question, "How are these expectations expressed in an online environment beyond the static syllabus?" Instructors who teach asynchronously could use recorded videos and conversational explanations of assignments and assessments, providing valuable context and insight toward focused strategies for success.

Discussions that are initiated and facilitated by academic advisors can inform and inspire faculty colleagues to develop a deeper understanding of the effect of the backgrounds of the students. These conversations in turn can allow academic advisors to share more reliable and useful guidance with students. While students may still be inclined to ask, "Who are the hardest (or easiest) professors here?" advisors can shift the conversation to more appropriate contexts related to each student's previous experiences, goals, motivations, strategies, and strengths.

Together, academic advisors and faculty members can demystify the environment of higher education and empower each student to construct a role as a partner in learning. Neither academic advising nor academic advisors are mentioned in the article by Collier and Morgan (2008), but the implications for relationship building with a knowledgeable and caring institutional representative are obvious.

Academic advisors across the world remain at the front line of assistance for students, who are expected to navigate complex educational environments with all the tools they have available to them. With their exploration of the importance and influence of "role as resource," Collier and Morgan's article is still interesting and relevant today. This article would be especially effective as a common reading with advising colleagues to discuss practical ways in which advisors might deepen their pedagogical approaches to conversations with students and further their commitment to their work as "scholarly advisors."

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Author's Note

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