Academic Advising: A Discipline of Praxis

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Note about this article

This article grew out of several conversations with colleagues in the field of academic advising, most notably Brent Lamons, Ruth Darling and Marsha Miller, as an essay on the relationship between theory and practice, also know as 'praxis'.

Why do advisors do what they do in their advising practice? What challenges do they face in getting from thought to action, from theory to practice? How do they navigate those challenges? What is their process? What is their method? (B. Lamons, personal communication, November 6, 2018) After briefly surveying the landscape of recent literature on the scholarship of advising, this article explores the concept of praxis in general, underscoring the critical importance of a scholarly approach and activity in academic advising praxis. The article mines the topics of the nature of scholarship in general and the ways in which it relates to praxis, offering concrete examples from within the academic advising profession.

"There is a need in academic advising, perhaps now more than ever, to refine, more deeply explore, and better understand why we do what we do and how we should do it" (B. Lamons, personal communication, October 5, 2018). By asking those questions, navigating the dynamic relationship between theory and practice, academic advisors are essentially engaging in praxis.

The term *praxis* has a long pedigree, going back to classical Greek philosophy. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. 1980), Aristotle (384–322 BCE), driven by a quest to understand happiness and morality, explored the relationships between what he saw as the three basic human activities, knowing (*theoria*), making (*poiesis*), and doing or acting (*praxis*) (B. Lamons, personal communication, November 6, 2018). According to Aristotle, praxis represented the process of thoughtfully applying what we know to what we should do and how we should act. Therefore, when Aristotle spoke of praxis, he was referring not to thoughtless routine or habitual doing, nor even to "practice"; he meant intentional, meaningful action. (B. Lamons, personal communication, November 6, 2018). Indeed, practice is a part of praxis, but it is not praxis itself. Within the context of this article, praxis is understood as the process that moves academic advisors from theory to practice, from thought to action (B. Lamons, personal communication, November 6, 2018). That is, the exploration of the rationale behind the *how* of what advisors do.

Any profession will benefit and grow when the relationship between knowing, analyzing, and understanding, on the one hand, and doing, operationalizing, and implementing, on the other, is constantly explored and tested—and academic advising is no exception. This article underscores and explores the critical importance of praxis for the development of the advising profession, connecting it to the idea of the scholarly advisor. In fact, the editors of this journal make the claim that praxis and the scholarly approach go hand in hand.

From Scholarship to the Praxis of Advising

NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising considers the concept of advising to be one of four pillars that together "champion the educational role of academic advising in a diverse world" (NACADA, 2017). The organization summarized that role in the following way:

> Academic advising, based in the teaching and learning mission of higher education, is a series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of student learning outcomes. Academic advising synthesizes and contextualizes students' educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities and lives to extend

learning beyond campus boundaries and timeframes. (NACADA, 2006)

What the curriculum, pedagogy, and learning outcomes look like may vary from one institutional and cultural context to another, but each must be designed, implemented, and assessed in an intentional, coherent way—just a few simple words on a web site, but a giant challenge for the profession. How does one go about realizing this ideal? During the past decade, NACADA has dedicated great effort to establishing the notion of the *scholarship of advising,* emphasizing the need for more research about and evidence-based approaches to advising. In addition to its *NACADA Journal,* a well-established and respected venue for publication, NACADA has further developed its infrastructure to support these objectives in the form of the NACADA Center for Research, which opened in March 2018. Along with the scholarship of advising, NACADA promotes the concept of the *scholarly advisor.* It is no coincidence that two NACADA keynote addresses last year (one by Peter Hagen at the 2018 NACADA annual conference—the text of which appears elsewhere in this issue—and the other by Oscar van den Wijngaard at the July 2018 international conference in Dublin) both emphasized the topics of praxis and the scholarly advisor. The creation of a new online journal that focuses on the application of theory to practice, *NACADA Review: Academic Advising Praxis and Perspectives,* is another manifestation of the intention to strengthen the profession of advising by providing a platform for the development and sharing of a scholarly attitude.

Ultimately, transforming academic advising into a discipline of research and a profession of scholarly practitioners is aimed simply at improving practice toward the ultimate goal of optimally promoting student success. This aspiration leads to an important question: Do academic advisors need scholarship to improve practice? Nearly a decade ago, using sociological theory about the development of professions, Shaffer, Zalewski, and Leveille (2010) evaluated the state of the advising profession in an article titled "The Professionalization of Academic Advising: Where Are We in 2010?" They showed that the creation of a knowledge base that exceeds a mere catalog of tricks of the trade, learned on the job, is an essential stage in the transition from occupation to profession, as critical for the advising profession as for any other.

Three Pivotal Publications

The call for research and theory building has been given many voices in publications, but a few collaborative efforts stand out as milestones along the road to the professionalization of advising. A 2005 *NACADA Journal* issue was dedicated entirely to scholarship and "theory building in academic advising" (Hagen, 2005, p. 3). It offered a range of examples of what guest editor Hagen introduced as two types of theories:

- "analogic" theories, "characterized by an analogic, metaphoric, or translative relationship between the phenomenon under study and some other phenomenon for which theory statements already exist and have gained some acceptance," and
- "normative" theories, which "describe an ideal, desirable state toward which practice should tend" (Hagen, 2005, p. 6).

Among the journal issue's many eye-opening articles, Lowenstein's normative contribution perhaps stood out the most and is often cited today, as it raised the kind of critical question necessary to move professionalization forward: If advising is teaching, what do advisors teach (Lowenstein, 2005)?

The 2010 NACADA book *Scholarly Inquiry in Academic Advising,* edited by Hagen, Kuhn, and Padak, was an important next step in the creation of a canon on advising scholarship. Authors offered further perspectives on the idea of scholarship as well as reflections on critical methodologies and concepts. In addition, the book created space for "voices from the field," offering examples of concrete initiatives in research and systematic analysis of advising practices. The emphasis in both publications, the *NACADA Journal* issue of Fall 2005 and the 2010 book, was mostly on creation and development of a knowledge base through engagement in research and theory building.

A next important step in professionalization was the publication of *Academic Advising Approaches* in 2013. Edited by Drake, Jordan, and Miller (2013), this volume widened the scholarly perspective further, particularly in a section titled "A New Lens: Applying Theories From Other Disciplines to the Practice of Academic Advising" (pp. 179–242). In this book, the emphasis was on applying theory, not building it. As contributors Musser and Yoder observed, "theory informs advising by building

the foundations that support creative development of new techniques and philosophies related to academic advising. It describes approaches that have inspired new ways of thinking about the practice of advising" (2013, p. 180).

Though its development was not strictly linear, one could argue that within a short decade, the vision of the relevance of scholarship for advising evolved from a perceived need to theorize and abstract away from practice to provide shared frames of reference, to a desire to enrich daily practice by imbuing it with theory. As it evolved this vision, the scholarly advising community laid the foundation for becoming truly "scholarly" in the manner advocated by Ernest Boyer (1990).

The Nature of Scholarship

In 1990, as part of his investigative work on the divide between teaching and research in American research universities, Boyer presented a new perspective on scholarship—or rather, to use his word for it, "reconsidered" the notion of scholarship (Boyer, 1990). His ideas about scholarship continue to inform educational practice as well as reflections on the nature of higher education. According to Boyer, scholarship is not a unitary phenomenon. It consists of several interconnected and complementary aspects, of which, he claimed, usually only some are acknowledged and get all the attention, whereas others are often ignored or not seen as integral to scholarly activity. Boyer recognized four types, or aspects, of scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and teaching.

- *Discovery* is the activity of creating new knowledge, of satisfying human curiosity and the desire to know and understand things, to boldly go where no one has gone before.
- *Integration* is the way in which scholars provide a larger, academic context for their discoveries. They present findings or assumptions to colleagues, hoping for recognition and feedback, for constructive criticism and inspiration, or they are inspired by what others present to them, driven either by agreement and a desire to explore the topic further and provide more support for a certain explanation or hypothesis, or by disagreement and a desire to "falsify," to expand shared knowledge and understanding by exposing inconsistencies or gaps in the proposed approach. Integration is done mostly through publications in

scientific journals and papers presented at academic conferences.

Boyer (1990) found that traditional perspectives on scholarship emphasize these two aspects, a viewpoint that in his view contributed immensely to the lamented divide between research and teaching. To close that gap, he made a strong case for equal acknowledgment and appreciation of the other two aspects of scholarship:

- *Application* is scholars' response to the question: Why and how is my research relevant to others, outside the field of academia? In certain disciplines, such as medicine and engineering, this question may be easier to answer than in others, such as philosophy and classical languages. The answer does not always need to look like a pill or injection, or a nifty gadget or impressive piece of infrastructure. It may be elusive yet well founded. The fact that certain disciplines constantly raise critical questions about societal issues and their impact on the individual and humanity makes them as relevant as those that provide cars and cures. The reverse perspective on application is its inclusion of ways in which the outside world inspires scholars to look for answers and create new knowledge.
- *Teaching* refers to the way scholars pass on what they discover to others, including those who are not residents of academia themselves. Advisors teach students, but as scholars, advisors also have a responsibility to share what they know with those who, for whatever reason, are not part of academic communities but who, through their own role in society, allow scholars to enjoy their privileged position.

Boyer is no stranger to the advising community. In their editorial titled "On the Scholarship of Academic Advising," *NACADA Journal* coeditors Kuhn and Padak contended that "academic advising shares [Boyer's] definition of scholarship with the professoriate" (2005, p. 5). They argued that if teaching can be seen as a form of inquiry and, as such, as an aspect of scholarship, the same goes for advising (Kuhn & Padak, 2005, p. 5). In her foreword to the monograph *Scholarly Inquiry in Academic Advising,* McGillin referred to Boyer's (1990) types of scholarship, suggesting that each of these perspectives creates

opportunities and possibilities for advising practitioners of diverse backgrounds and training to engage in research (McGillin, 2010). They do, indeed, but looking at Boyer's four types of scholarship only as diverse options for advisors to engage in inquiry (e.g., solely from a perspective of application) would be missing an important point. As Boyer (1990) suggested, the four types are not distinct and should best be considered as aspects of scholarship that are integrated and strengthen each other. When scholars discover, for instance, they seek feedback and ways to apply what they have found to the benefit of others; through teaching, they often see even more clearly what it is they do not yet properly understand themselves. Theory and practice are closely connected; they are intertwined. Following Boyer, theoretical exploration can be a worthy pursuit in and of itself, but it is through the integration, application, and the transfer and sharing of knowledge that scholarship reaches its full potential. Satisfying curiosity simply "to know" and understanding to be able to "do better" are closely connected.

Taking the scholarly stance thus leads to seeking to answer the question that follows Lowenstein's (2005) critical question about the *what:* If advising is teaching (i.e., supporting individual development, engaging in appreciative inquiry, or helping students write the story of their education), *how* do advisors do that? This *how* indeed goes beyond a set of tricks of the trade, passed on from master to apprentice, but follows from a constant back-and-forth between abstraction, generalization, knowledge creation, and theory building, on the one hand, and application, experimentation, assessment, and improvement, on the other. It is this constant interaction between theory and practice, between thought and action, that is called *praxis*—the key concept that defines the inspiration and aims of the journal you are reading now, *NACADA Review: Academic Advising Praxis and Perspectives*.

The Scholarly Advisor

That praxis is about systematic reflection on practice does not mean this reflection can only take the form of traditional academic research, theoretical analysis, and knowledge generation. For reflection to be productive, applicable, and transferable however, it must be methodical—or at least eventually find a clearly structured form of expression. As Boyer (1990) pointed out about

scholarship, praxis is a process of discovery, integration, application, and teaching—an ongoing shared exploration by a community of professional practitioners of the *how* of academic advising.

So what does praxis, this scholarly approach, look like? More essential to scholarship than writing and presenting are systematic reflection and generalization born of the desire to identify the various components that together constitute a thing, a situation, or a phenomenon and to understand the processes or dynamics between those constituents. Gaining such an understanding in a specific situation often helps people understand and predict similar, but new, situations, and vice versa: A general understanding of certain phenomena can allow for a better understanding of specific cases.

Praxis as an intentional process can commence on either side of this equation. It can start with practice, first disassembling a concrete case, issue, or challenge into separate components, and then seeking out relevant theoretical frameworks that help explain what is "going on" and point to an appropriate advising intervention. Then again, inspiration may come from a theory or general principle that offers new interpretations and the possibility of applying them to the advising practice. This section explores both approaches. It should be noted, however, that oftentimes it will be difficult, in retrospect, to determine how or where the thought process of praxis started—although it can be a fruitful part of professional development to retrace those steps as well to learn and grow in the way we engage in praxis.

Beginning With Practice: Describing Its Connection to Theory

Systematic reflection often begins with a systematic review. Reflection on the *why* and *how* of the advising practice requires a clear picture of *what* it is advisors are doing. What is actually going on when advisors meet with students one on one and talk about their goals and ambitions or when they introduce groups of first-year students to procedures and rules that shape important parts of their study experience? Why are certain interventions highly successful with some students and utterly ineffective with others? What determines the accuracy of attributing certain issues to the background characteristics of students, the features of a specific program, or the implicit "campus culture"?

Answering questions such as these requires identifying the constituent parts of the issues advisors face if they intend to access and understand the dynamics that lead to certain outcomes—desired or not. This systematic review of the phenomena from daily practice can be done in a variety of ways. I briefly highlight two here, rather to illustrate the point than to establish a standard approach.

Modeling the world around us. One concrete manifestation of the scholarly approach is the *model*. A model is not the same as a theory. A model constitutes a way of representing or simplifying reality to facilitate a more distant view, a more comprehensive perspective. One early example within the literature on advising is Habley and McCauley's (1987) identification and visual representation of seven distinct organizational models of advising. Through short written explanations along with simple diagrams representing the various connections between students, advising units, faculty, and so on, this overview helped advisors and advising administrators better understand the dynamics of their own advising practice and compare themselves with others. In addition, this overview of advising models helped create a vocabulary that would strengthen the professional discourse, making it easier to position oneself within the field and discuss different practices: "We use a split advising model, except for our philosophy department, which uses a faculty-only model."

Institutional structures can be modeled, and so can processes. A well-known example of the latter is Gordon's 3-I process model, which reduces the complex and rich interactions career advisors have with students to three basic functions: integration, inquiry, and information (Gordon, 2006). As with organizational structures, processes become more accessible and open for review and analysis through modeling. A simplified portrayal of a process could, for instance, reveal that it is multidirectional and can be entered at various places, as is the case with Gordon's (2006) 3-I model, in contrast to a process that is more linear, such as self-regulated learning as modeled by Miller and Brickman (2004). In the latter model, each key element, such as *task value, motivation,* and *personally valued future goals,* occupies a specific position and is connected to the others in linear ways. Both of these models, however, help advisors identify various options for potential interventions. Gordon (2006) presented key stages and argued for

their relevance but left space for advisors to decide which stage offers the best starting point for advising an individual student, whereas Miller and Brickman (2004) described a more linear process, within which they nevertheless allowed the advisor to identify various moments when advising interventions can be relevant and effective.

Whereas the advising models described by Habley and McCauley (1987) were mostly simplifications of actual practices, Gordon's (2006) 3-I model and the model by Miller and Brickman (2004) were instead derived from or designed to simplify theory. Models of both types make it possible to add, change, or remove parts of the practice or theory under scrutiny. Thus, by moving around and experimenting with elements or variables from practice or theory, advisors can hypothesize about the roles and impact of these elements without actually having to intervene in the reality they aim to understand better. Particularly those models that take the shape of concrete, visual representations of reality are immensely helpful in understanding the context and structure of advising practice. They literally show how advisors "connect the dots" in their work.

The daily advising practice can, for instance, be represented by identifying in a model the various stakeholders, experiences, procedures, and so on that affect the lives or study experience of students. A simple list of those elements, however, does not qualify as a model—yet. Only when scholars explore ways to connect them does the dynamic between the various components reveal itself—and even then only after close inspection and reflection. Every line or arrow drawn between two elements raises the question of what that connector represents: In what way do these elements interact with each other? Although even situations with only a limited set of elements can be immensely complex, most interactions can be reduced to a few basic types:

- Causation (because of this, that will happen)
- Correlation (whenever this happens, that is more likely to happen too)
- Moderation (this will make the effect of something else stronger or weaker)
- Mediation (something is affected by something else and, in turn, has an effect on yet another thing)

These terms also can be phrased as questions:

- Why does this happen?
- Why does this always happen when that happens as well?
- Is it possible that this makes the effect of that stronger?
- Is this outcome a direct result of that intervention, or is there something "in between"?

Thus, the simplified representation of daily advising practice through a model allows or even forces advisors to ask questions that are essentially theoretical or scholarly. Attempts at answering these questions make it possible to move from considering a particular case that gave pause to identifying general patterns that help explain and predict similar but new situations.

Unraveling stories. Even if models are not made up of numbers, they tend to take the shape of systematic representations that are more quantitative than qualitative. An alternative way of looking at a problem from a critical distance originates from the humanities: Instead of a model, advisors can try to create or identify one or more *stories* that help them understand both the students they work with and themselves. A narrative and interpretive approach, known as *hermeneutics,* can help advisors understand, in a systematic way, what and where they can do better. Looking for plots and identifying contexts, styles, and themes, they can reconstruct and interpret the stories behind the questions students ask—and at the same time make more apparent their own, often implicit, stories about the ways in which they think about their activities and their view of themselves as advisors (Hagen, 2018).

As argued by Peter Hagen elsewhere in this issue (Hagen, 2019), ideally, advisors seek to understand their practice through various approaches, navigating back and forth between methodologies that stem from, respectively, the social sciences and the humanities. The simplicity of models or the plots and themes behind stories help advisors better appreciate the complexity of the issues they aim to understand. More important, such tools provide advisors with the material and vocabulary to explain to others the choices they have made in addressing such issues. That transferability is what makes individual advisors' findings beneficial to the profession, beyond helping them in our own, local practices. A shared vocabulary and viewpoint create the possibility to see commonalities in advisors' activities, even if they are operating in seemingly different contexts, and thus widen the horizon of their professional development far beyond the settings (institutional as well as cultural) that define their daily work.

Starting With Theory: From the Bigger Picture to Daily Practice

Complementary to this "from the ground up" approach, which starts with modeling one's own daily practice, is a "from theory down" approach, in which models and other systematic frameworks based on existing theory shed a new light on practice. In academic advising, the theories involved can be diverse in origin. Both the social sciences and the humanities offer powerful methodologies and theories that help to describe and explain the daily practice of advising. The work of advisors touches upon so many aspects of the student experience that the list of relevant academic domains is practically endless. Prominent on that list, however, are disciplines such as teaching and learning, developmental psychology, and sociology. Oftentimes, theories developed within or between these disciplines may shed new and interesting light on the work advisors do, without once mentioning the word *advising*.

One example among many is the *Educational Psychology Review* article by Miller and Brickman (2004) titled "A Model of Future-Oriented Motivation and Self-Regulation." The article brought together two strands of theory related to learning: the social cognitive perspective on self-regulation as formulated by Albert Bandura and theories of future-oriented self-regulation developed by scholars such as Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius. In essence, Miller and Brickman showed how learning strategies and motivation improve when students have a stronger sense of task value (seeing the relevance of what they do), which in turn is enhanced by the ability to relate short-term goals within the immediate context of learning to long-term ambitions and personal values. The word *advising* and its forms do not appear one single time in this article, yet the relevance to the advising profession of studies such as these and the models derived from them is obvious. Not only do the studies provide empirical and theoretical support for many of the existing assumptions that drive advising, but they offer new perspectives on the relevance and impact of advising.

Key elements of academic advising find a place within this model on learning, particularly conversations with students that help them articulate their long-term goals and personal values (career objectives, a desire to help others, a strong intrinsic curiosity about a certain topic) and develop short-term objectives based on them (courses, internships, study abroad, extracurricular activities). Relating such objectives to the context of curriculum is exactly what Marc Lowenstein (2005) talked about in his article on the *what* of advising, mentioned earlier. Miller and Brickman's model (2004) showed how those seemingly peripheral conversations actually contribute to the very ability and desire of students to regulate their own learning. This insight, in turn, opens up new possibilities for assessing the impact of advising. Integrating advising into theories of learning and teaching allows advisors to identify outcomes within the learning process as potential indicators of effective academic advising. In doing so, not only do such theories advance academic advising as a discipline, but they also consolidate the position of advising within the institutional framework: Advising is not just a helpful add-on that gives students a sense of direction; it actually enhances their learning and can be assessed based on this outcome.

The Praxis of Praxis

If this scholarly stance, this habit of praxis, is to become and remain a defining feature of the profession, the way in which advisors engage in it *in itself* also should be the object of critical reflection. For a profession to stay up to date and relevant, it should concern itself not only with providing systematic, theoretical foundations for practice but also with the ongoing review and development of that process of praxis itself. What is necessary to engage in praxis? How is the nature of praxis determined by the differences between disciplines and contexts? Most important, what defines "good praxis"? Just as with practice and theory, the interaction between praxis and the study of praxis comes with a *how* and a *why*. Developing and challenging assumptions about the methods and rationale that support the praxis of advising will be critical for the continuous evolution of the profession—and thus this article, like Ouroboros, bites its own tail.

Academic Advising: A Discipline of Praxis

Whether models be based on practice or derived from theory, working with models allows advisors to take a scholarly stance—both analytical and creative—and to communicate to others clearly what it is they do and why. The same applies to the humanities-based perspective of using narratives and stories to reveal what drives students and advisors alike. On the basis of models and hermeneutics, advisors can develop objectives not only for practice but also for further research. They can create possibilities to schematically and systematically see and think about what advisors do, unveiling the dynamics and components of advising. Modeling and hermeneutics therefore present concrete examples of scholarship as Boyer (1990) saw it, whereby new knowledge is being created, integrated into existing knowledge, applied, and transferred to fellow practitioners across institutional and cultural contexts.

The example of the application of the Miller and Brickman (2004) model to advising may help in thinking about the nature of academic advising as an object of scholarship. What is the scholarship of advising about? On a theoretical level, it may be hard to define academic advising as an academic discipline on its own—unless, perhaps, one were to approach the role of theory from a *normative* perspective, meaning, as Lowenstein (2014) suggested, that defining the field of advising should be the very purpose of theory. Such a theory of advising would delineate or identify academic advising by stipulating, for example, its ultimate purpose. A discussion of the pros and cons of a normative approach to advising theory falls beyond the scope of this article, although it is important to consider why and how we seek to establish the nature of the profession. However, even a normative theory that ultimately defines advising in terms of its purpose or mission would not determine the nature of advising as an academic discipline, a field of inquiry. As others have observed (Drake, 2013; Hagen & Jordan, 2008; Lowenstein, 2014), it is obvious that, even while practitioners continue to discuss the precise and ultimate purpose of advising, in the practice of academic advising, many *analogical* theoretical perspectives meet, from those of communication and information sciences to those of psychology and educational theory, sociology and cultural studies. Academic advising is more than multidisciplinary; it is truly *interdisciplinary,* constituting an

intersection of disciplines, for when advisors talk with students about articulating their personal goals and values, they do not operate only within the context of learning and teaching. Taking into account student identities, developmental stages, and future professional aspirations, advisors constantly combine many disciplines. They borrow from these disciplines and contribute to them—even though the latter in particular could be made much more explicit.

Academic advising is easily associated with practice—professional advisors, faculty advisors, personal tutors, and the many other titles and roles that exist around the world all conjure up images of conversations, presentations, work-shops, and other concrete interventions that help students successfully define their goals and find their way toward graduation. As does every human activity, advising offers an exciting object for research, systematic description, analysis, and explanation.

It is where practice and research meet that praxis—the systematic exploration and assessment of the daily practice of advising—happens. The more diverse the approaches taken toward such explorations and the more numerous the perspectives chosen, the richer the outcome. In other words, if advisors review their work using a range of methodologies from various academic disciplines, and actively seek ways in which their findings can enhance practice, then the profession and, ultimately, the students being advised will benefit—from the level of minute details to that of overarching missions and objectives.

Engaging in praxis means adopting a scholarly stance in the spirit of Boyer's (1990) work to bring together discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Academic advising may not be a distinct theoretical domain within academia, but through its diversity in practice and the constant interplay between theory and practice, it is a true *discipline of praxis*. By providing a podium for ideas and a platform for exchange, *NACADA Review: Academic Advising Praxis and Perspectives* intends to contribute to the emergence of a global community of scholarly practitioners and the further growth of academic advising as a discipline of praxis.

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