

THE *ACADEMIC* ADVISER



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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I explore the idea that “academic” advisers are “academics” who play a major role in connecting the general education curriculum to the students’ experience as well as connecting the faculty to the students’ holistic experience of the curriculum. The National Academic Advising Association Concept of Academic Advising is used as a framework to consider advisers as academics and to imagine how this idea can be operationalized on college and university campuses within the context of the current challenges facing higher education.

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Hagen and Jordan (2008) assert, “Advisors are *academics*” (p. 30), and Lowenstein (2005) proclaims, “The advisor is arguably the most important person in the student’s educational world” (p. 72). Hemwall and Trachte (1999) argue that advising supports “the centrality of the academic curriculum” (p. 7). A graduate student, Tatiana, and I were discussing the readings I had assigned as part of her practicum in academic advising, and she quoted these authors, ending with the question, What does it mean for an adviser to be an *academic*? She asked this in the context of her practicum goal, which was to assist in the creation of an adviser professional development program to support the newly implemented Academic Advisor Career Path at our university. To think more about her questions, we went on to explore Hagen and Jordan’s (2008) discussion of advisers as academics and Lowenstein’s (2005) learning-centered paradigm for academic advising.

Tatiana was particularly drawn to the notion that “advisors teach the curriculum itself, its intrarelations, its relevance to the life of the mind, and its power as a pathway to lifelong learning” (Hagen & Jordan, 2008, p. 29). We agreed it made sense that in practice and for our purposes, *academic* advisers are in a position to create connections between the general education curriculum and the students’ experience at our university and beyond. I challenged her to continue reading the literature and draft a statement on academic advisers as *academics* and the role they might play in helping students make meaning of the general education curriculum within the context of their student experience. I suggested that she also consider expanding on how to accomplish this at our institution (a research-intensive, land-grant, and flagship university) using the framework of an academic adviser development program.

Academic advisers’ roles and responsibilities have become increasingly complex as mandated completion agendas, performance funding models, and access programs are put in place at both public and private institutions. College and university leaders are realizing how central quality academic advising programs are to student success, and the pressure is on for advisers to show how their work can impact higher retention and graduation rates and students’ future careers and employment. Given these challenges, determining the role of the *academic* adviser and advising outcomes can be difficult—not to mention the complexities present in designing an adviser career path. However, Lowenstein’s (2013) position that “advising is fundamentally an academic activity focused on teaching and learning as well as the integration of each student’s curriculum” (p. 257) serves as a call to structure what academic advisers do within the teaching/learning mission of an institution and the curriculum.

Lowenstein’s (2013) perspective leads us directly to academic advising national standards and best practices as stated in the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) Concept of Academic Advising (2006). The national standards therein provide the context for establishing institutional or unit-based academic advising vision, mission, goals, values, and outcomes as well as specific guidelines for academic leadership and practitioners in implementing and assessing programs based on best practices and student learning outcomes. They also serve as a context for creating an approach to academic advising that is framed within an institution’s mission for teaching and learning, the curriculum, and advisers as academics. The NACADA Concept Statement would provide Tatiana with structure for her exploration of best practices for adviser development. The Concept Statement also provides a framework to develop specific actions that advising leaders and advisers can take to reinforce the *academic* adviser’s role in

cocreating educational plans that integrate the general education curriculum with the students' experience.

The preamble to the NACADA Concept of Academic Advising (2006) states, "Through academic advising, students learn to become members of their higher education community, to think critically about their roles and responsibilities as students, and to prepare to be educated citizens of a democratic society and a global community." In a review of numerous institutional mission statements and purpose statements for general education, similar phrases appear in the narratives that introduce general education curricula. Tatiana and I had reviewed our university's general education curriculum and the statement of purpose: "General education provides the foundation for successful academic study, for lifelong learning, and for carrying out the duties of local, national, and global citizenship. By building basic skills in communication, analysis, and computation as well as by broadening students' historical and cultural perspectives, the general education curriculum helps students acquire an understanding of both self and society, and thus contributes to their personal enrichment while enrolled and after graduation" (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2015). The NACADA Concept Statement and the general education statement of purpose are similar, and we began to draw connections among the academic adviser role, student advising learning outcomes, and the goals of our general education curriculum.

It is evident that in some very important ways, the NACADA Concept Statement and the overarching purpose of general education curricula are reinforcing each other and the primary components are similarly aligned. The three components of the Concept Statement (curriculum—what advising deals with; pedagogy—how advising does what it does; and learning outcomes—the result of academic advising) relate directly to the overall mission and goals of institutions within higher education, the purpose and goals of general education, and the goals of an academic advising program. Through the NACADA Concept Statement, the language of teaching and learning is integrated with the practice of academic advising, and the context for the "academic" in advising is strengthened.

To support a campus culture that considers academic advisers as "academics" and recognizes how advisers facilitate student engagement with general education, it is necessary for advising leadership and advisers to be affiliated with the institutional structure that designs the curriculum (faculty governance, curriculum committees, college deans, department chairs, professors). I was fortunate to begin my advising career in a large college of liberal arts advising center for undecided and preprofessional students, primarily staffed by faculty from across all college disciplines. In this environment, I grew to appreciate the many

different approaches the professors brought to the advising and mentoring of students who were undecided—the scientists, the humanists, the social scientists, and the musicians and artists. Our primary focus for advising was the general education curriculum, using electives for the exploration of various majors across the university. The faculty advisers were always ready to engage in debates concerning the purpose of a particular requirement, the logic of an academic policy, and approaches to use with undecided students. As a young professional, I realized that there was an “academic culture” that provided the foundation for multiple philosophies and theories, values, communication, behaviors, structures, and actions. This culture provided the context for my work as an *academic* adviser, and I began to question how academic advisers who were not faculty should navigate academia, the professoriat, faculty governance, curriculum, and academic policy.

Terrell Strayhorne (2014), in his keynote address at the 2014 NACADA Annual Conference, challenged academic advisers to be “cultural navigators.” Strayhorne noted the many cultures that exist on college and university campuses and asserted that it is the *academic* advisers’ role to help students successfully navigate these cultures as well as their responsibility to understand the cultures so that appropriate connections can be made for and with the students. He mentioned the academic/curricular culture as central because the students’ primary goal in college is to earn a degree. The metaphor of academic adviser as cultural navigator is helpful to consider when exploring how advisers must connect to the academic cultures of their institutions. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines *navigator* as “a person who finds out how to get to a place” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/navigator>). What is the “place,” or places, for an academic adviser in the academic/curricular cultures of an institution, and how do advisers find those places?

In my case, it was an associate dean who determined the “place” I needed to be as an “academic” adviser. The associate dean asked why I was not a member of the college curriculum committees. It made sense to him that the director of advising should be present when curricula were being discussed, as advisers worked extensively with the general education core in the academic exploration and planning process. In his opinion, the faculty members of the committee did not have the direct experience of helping students make meaning of the curriculum and integrating the general education courses with degree plans and experiences that enriched their learning. For the next curricular cycle, I found my place as a member of four different college curriculum committees. This was the first step in learning what it meant to be an “academic” and an adviser. I soon learned how the college curriculum was created and approved as a part of the university-wide curricular process,

grounded in the faculty governance of the institution. As college proposals were sent through the channels, I was asked to attend various faculty governance meetings to answer questions and be a part of the discussion. I saw my role as not only navigating the curriculum with students but also navigating the curriculum with the faculty who created and taught the courses as well as designed the degrees.

An *academic* adviser approaches the curriculum in a holistic manner, exploring how the various pieces can fit together in ways that support both the goals of the curriculum and the goals of the students. Lowenstein (2013) best captures this idea in his quote, “Advisors help students to make a coherent whole out of their entire education in a manner analogous to that in which a classroom instructor helps students make sense of the material in a single course” (p. 245). I found that in my evolving role as an “academic,” I brought a holistic perspective to the curricular discussions and served as an advocate for how students experienced the general education.

My role in the academic discussions of the college and university grew as curriculum development intersected with academic policy and academic policy connected to implementation and implementation directly involved the students. Faculty leaders in undergraduate education submitted a proposal to the Undergraduate Council of the Faculty Senate asking for a standing “Advising Committee” that would review all policies and curricular changes making an impact on undergraduate education. The proposal was approved, and academic advising had found its “place” within the faculty governance structure and curricular approval process.

I was fortunate to work with deans and associate deans who saw the connection between advising and the curriculum. I realize that this is not the case for all advisers and advising leaders; but I argue that advisers must be college and campus leaders and take the initiative to begin the discussions and submit proposals to define the adviser role as being uniquely “academic” as they navigate the curriculum with both students and faculty, connecting the curriculum with the undergraduate student experience and representing a holistic approach to student learning and success.

The NACADA (2006) Concept Statement refers to the diversity of our campuses, curricula, and students, and for that reason my suggestions on how one might proceed to find a “place” represent, in general, departure points for exploration/navigation. If membership is restricted to faculty or academic administrators due to bylaws of governance structures, advisers can simply ask to sit in on meetings to hear the discussions and to learn the reasoning/rationale behind the decisions made concerning curricula and policy. Finding this place and taking a seat at the table allows *academic* advisers to join the academic

discussions. Academic advisers should engage with faculty and the curricular/policy discussions in college and departmental curriculum committees, general education assessment committees, college deans' leadership teams, academic policy committees, academic program review teams, and teaching/learning councils.

Several unexpected outcomes resulted from my interest in general education and the overall undergraduate curriculum. New relationships developed with faculty across the college, and an increased awareness of the various disciplinary cultures at my institution resulted in my ability to better communicate with faculty groups and students in those majors. The opportunity to shape perceptions of academic advising in ways that connected faculty and professional adviser roles was extremely beneficial as I became a more adept navigator of university cultures. I was learning the institutional academic culture, the language of teaching and learning, and the role of an academic.

Hagen and Jordan (2008) assert, "If advising is teaching and the partaking of advising is learning, then it clearly behooves staff academic advisors to become more like faculty and it clearly behooves faculty advisors to conduct advising in ways that are parallel to classroom teaching" (p. 29). The path I took to become "more like faculty" was to earn a doctoral degree with a focus on leadership studies in higher education and a collateral area in educational anthropology. I became a student of higher education and researcher/practitioner and explored higher education through a cultural lens. My role as cultural navigator became quite clear as I added new dimensions to my understanding of what it means to be an adviser who is "academic."

Back to my conversation with Tatiana—I had assigned what I referred to as foundational reading in the academic advising literature to provide a framework for thinking about adviser professional development. Her question, "What is an academic?" brought new insights to developing an adviser career path curriculum that would provide the foundational knowledge and skills needed to become a cultural navigator and to join the "academics" at our institution. Our discussion returned to the NACADA Concept of Academic Advising (2006) and how we might use the Concept Statement as our guide to an academic adviser development program that prepared advisers to be academics within the context of a curriculum, pedagogy, and a set of learning outcomes. As we unpacked the Concept Statement from the perspective of using it to frame adviser development, it became clear that the principles outlined would provide the needed structure for preparing an *academic* adviser to navigate the curriculum, to practice being an "academic," and to serve as the individual best positioned on campus to cocreate comprehensive educational plans for students.

The lens through which we viewed the Concept Statement changed from “student” to “adviser.” The preamble of the Context Statement places academic advising and academic advisers as central to the missions of our institutions and to the teaching/learning of the students. The curriculum for advising addresses the breadth of curricular content as well as specific components, providing departure points for an adviser development curriculum. The pedagogy focuses on the teaching and learning process and the delivery of academic advising, framing adviser development as parallel to that of those who teach students and who create active learning opportunities to engage students in their learning. The student learning outcomes return to the centrality of institutional mission, goals, curriculum, and cocurriculum to academic advising. Learning outcomes “articulate what students will demonstrate, know, value, and do as a result of participating in academic advising” (NACADA, 2006). They become the focus for adviser development content and the structure for our program assessment.

Earlier in this essay, I referred to the current landscape in higher education and the acknowledgment by university and college leaders of the central role academic advisers play in student success. The focus on advising as critical to retaining and graduating students has influenced the body of knowledge advisers must have to be effective, and, in fact, the definition of an effective adviser is changing to include being not only a cocreator of academic plans but also an expert in and advocate for student success, retention, and degree completion. The use of technology and data to guide timely communications and interventions, the knowledge of risk indicators for special student groups, and an in-depth understanding of identity development and approaches to learning have emerged as critical knowledge needed to respond to diverse student needs as well as to the regional, state, and federal agendas that are now a part of our daily lives.

Given these challengers, the importance of the call for advisers to be “academics” is urgent, for at most institutions, it is the academic adviser who is in a position to inform our academic colleagues of the challenges facing students, the student experience outside of the classroom, and how these have an impact on student learning and success. In summary, the NACADA (2006) Concept Statement provides the context and departure point for institutions to consider a different paradigm for academic advising programs and for academic advisers’ role that embraces the “academic” in the adviser and the curriculum of the institution and responds to the changing needs of students and to the challenges facing higher education.

During weekly meetings with graduate students, I typically begin conversations with the question, “What did you learn since we last met?” It

became clear that the question for this particular discussion with Tatiana was, “What did *we* learn?” Connecting academic adviser role to general education, exploring the meaning of being an “academic,” considering the metaphor of navigator and finding a place, and unpacking the NACADA (2006) Concept Statement to focus on adviser professional development were bullet points on a shared list of what we had learned. We both agreed that the insights we explored together had shaped not only new ways of thinking about our task at hand but how we would think about future initiatives and our perceptions of academic advising and adviser role on our campus. Tatiana was excited about the opportunity to help create an academic adviser development program that was grounded in “academics” and provided a knowledge base that would support the complex role and expectations of academic advisers. I was thankful to have engaged with a student in exploring ideas and new ways of thinking about both new and long-standing questions dealing with the very purpose of academic advising, general education, and *academic* adviser role. The overarching insight was that our experience served as an example of an academic adviser and student exploring a curriculum, making connections to ideas and experiences, and arriving at new understandings and insights. Our shared experience represented the best of what can take place when one is privileged to serve as an “academic” adviser.

NOTE

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