From Theory to Practice: The Application of Theories of Development to Academic Advising Philosophy and Practice

Sherri Williams
Graduate Student
Kansas State University Advising Certificate Program

Although there are no established theories of academic advising (Creamer, 2000), there are numerous theories from education and the social sciences which have provided a foundation for the changes which have occurred in the field since it became a "defined and examined activity" (Frost, 2000, p. 10) in the 1960s and 1970s. As stated by Creamer (2000), "academic advising is an educational activity that depends on valid explanations of complex student behaviors and institutional conditions to assist college students in making and executing educational and life plans. These explanations are commonly found in sound theories…[Therefore,] advisors may be required to understand many theories…in order to grasp sufficient knowledge to be useful in advising students" (p. 18). Moreover, as a result of the increased interest and scholarly research associated with the field, as well as drastic changes within society, institutions of higher learning, and the student population, various approaches have been defined and proposed as effective models of academic advising. This paper is intended to examine several of the theories and approaches to advising that can provide a solid foundation for advisors wishing to develop their own personal academic advising philosophy.

Theories that Influence the Practice of Academic Advising

Amongst the multiple theories that provide a foundation for effective academic advising practice are those of student development, cognitive development, career development, learning, decision-making, multiculturalism, retention, personality, moral development, and adult development (Creamer, 2000). In addition, academic advisors should have an awareness of sociological, organizational, psychosocial, and person-environment interaction theories (Creamer, 2000; King, 2005). Due to increased diversity in the student population, and the fact that many of the established "theories are especially wanting in regard to their appropriateness for explaining development in minorities, gay and lesbian persons, and women" (Creamer, p. 31), academic advisors also need to understand theories of identity development associated with race, class, gender, sexuality, and special populations (King, 2005; McKewen, 2003). Such a broad range of theories may prove to be overwhelming to academic advisors, and as Hendey (1999) states, "the fact that there are many different developmental theories only makes a precise common understanding of developmental advising more difficult…It all gets rather complicated and confusing" (¶ 1). However, while Hendey cautions advisors "not to get bogged down in specific theories of development, [he does] think it is necessary to have some knowledge of several of the specific theories" (¶ 3). There are three theory clusters important to the practice of academic advising: psychosocial theories, cognitive development theories, and typological theories (Creamer, 2000).

The psychosocial theories of development, which can be applied to the development of identity in students, were proposed by such well-known figures as Erikson, Chickering and Reisser, Levinson, Marcia, and Josselson. These theories "describe how development is shaped by the resolution of developmental tasks that occur in chronological sequence throughout the life cycle" (Creamer and Creamer, 1994, p. 18). All of these theorists established a particular number of stages which individuals pass through in the course of their lifetimes. "People are seen as making systematic progression in a certain order through a series of phases. Step by step they move closer to some form of adult status. This movement can be seen as involving changes in intellectual and physical powers (for example around changes in intelligence, expertise and ability to reason); and the impact of life events and experiences" (Smith, 1999, ¶ 7).

Erikson established eight age-related stages of development, each characterized by particular issues, or developmental tasks, which must be addressed before moving on to the next stage (Evans, 2003). The stages most relevant to traditional students in higher education are those related to identity versus identity confusion and intimacy versus isolation (Creamer, 2000)

Well-known within the realm of student services in higher education are Chickering and Reisser's seven vectors of identity development which include the following: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Creamer, 2000; Evans, 2003). Although these vectors are not necessarily as sequential as those proposed by Erikson, the "vectors do build on each other and lead to greater complexity, stability, and integration…[E]ducational environments exert a powerful influence that helps students move through the seven vectors of development" (Evans, p. 182).

Levinson's developmental theory outlines four eras within the life cycle, each lasting approximately 25 years (Smith, 1999). For traditional-aged college students, Levinson's second era of early adulthood, which occurs between the ages of

17 to 45, is most applicable. This era consists of four stages: early adult transition, entering the adult world, age thirty transition, and settling down. Each era has its own distinct characteristics, and each transition, "which may take between three and six years to complete…requires a basic change in the character of one's life" (Smith, ¶ 11). Moreover, a process of individuation occurs throughout one's life whereby there is a "changing relationship between self and the external world…[M]uch of developmental progress is couched in terms of the changing nature of the relationship between self and others, such as mentor relationships, love and family relationships, and occupational relationships" (Smith, ¶ 12).

Josselson applied Marcia's four identity states - diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement - to identity development in women. Creamer (2000) noted that, "Josselson's work shows the complexity of identity development and how it may vary by gender" (p. 22).

These psychosocial identity development theories are readily applicable within academic advising. As an advisor, it's important to have an understanding of these various theories and stages in order to ascertain the level of development of particular students and to assist them in developing within and beyond their particular stage. Understanding how students in a particular stage or level of development establish meaning in their lives can provide insights to advisors which allow them "to explain conditions in students' lives that are often confusing and that sometimes block effective planning and learning" (Creamer, 2000, p. 21). Moreover, Creamer and Creamer (1994), affirm that understanding the life themes that students are coping with at various stages of development, "such as searching for identity and purpose…may help advisors to focus their interventions with students on what should be taught during each encounter with students rather than merely on what students present as questions" (p. 18). Evans (2003) highlights the importance of understanding psychosocial development in students in order "to be more proactive in anticipating student issues and more responsive to, and understanding of, concerns that arise [when working] with students" (p. 185).

Cognitive development theories are also very relevant to the field of academic advising. Based on the work of Piaget, these theories "examine how people think, reason, and make meaning out of their experiences" (Evans, 2003, p. 186). Cognitive development is also viewed as sequential and "development occurs when [an individual's] cognitive structure is changed, thus enabling new ways of incorporating experience" (Creamer, 2000, p. 23). Because cognitive structures vary from one individual to another, individuals may have very different views of a single event (Creamer and Creamer, 1994).

One of the most recognized cognitive development theorists, Perry, proposed cognitive and ethical development as "occurring through a series of positions, beginning with basic duality and moving through multiplicity, relativism, and commitment" (Creamer, 2000, p. 23). In duality, students believe that there is only one correct answer to all questions, which can only be provided by an authority figure. In multiplicity, "uncertainty is now viewed as temporary in areas of which authorities have yet to find the answers…and students begin to rely less on authorities" (Evans, as cited in King, 2003, p. 238). In Perry's third stage, relativism, students begin to understand that knowledge is contextual and relative and are able "to make judgments based on evidence and the merits of an argument" (Evans, as cited in King, p. 238). In the final stage, commitment to relativism, "students test out and evaluate various commitments leading to the development of a personalized set of values, lifestyle, and identity" (Evans, as cited in King, p. 238).

Believing Perry's theory to be inappropriate to describe the stages of women's intellectual development, other cognitive development theorists, such as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, established a set of perspectives outlining the stages of epistemological change in women including "silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge" (Creamer, 2000, p. 23).

Numerous other cognitive development theories exist which pertain to student development. According to Creamer and Creamer (1994), knowledge of these theories can provide academic advisors with a better understanding of "students' comments and queries expressing widely differing views of seemingly similar situations. These theories also help us to understand students' expressions of confusion over complex events or dilemmas. Simplistic views of the world may lead students to simplistic solutions, such as career choices that do not fit known personal attributes" (p. 18).

Typology theories are not theories of development but rather indicate differences between personality types and how individuals relate to or adapt to their educational and work environments. These theories categorize the differences between individuals and their learning styles, but do not ascribe value judgments to them (Evans, 2003). An example of typology theory is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which is effective in explaining behavioral variations amongst individuals. According to Creamer (2000), an awareness of typology theory may assist students and advisors in understanding individual students' reactions to the varying teaching styles they encounter throughout their educational experience.

Finally, career development theories are also pertinent to academic advising and are connected with the appropriate choice of career when taking into consideration numerous variables including an individual's age, experience, values, personality, social and family goals, etc. (Creamer, 2000). Among these theories is Holland 's vocational personality type,

which emphasizes the notion of "*congruence*, that is, the theoretical implications for satisfaction and growth of the individual given the closeness of fit between the individual's personality type and the occupational type" (Creamer, p. 25).

Although these theories can provide an important foundation for understanding student advisees, Smith (1999) cautions advisors to be aware of the gender, cultural and social biases which may be represented by many of the aforementioned cognitive and psychosocial stage theories. Since the majority of these theories were formed in research undertaken in a Western context and with male subjects, they may not be applicable to female students, minority students, non-traditional aged students, gay or lesbian students, or students of different ethnic, cultural, or religious backgrounds (Creamer, 2000). Furthermore, Smith (1999) cites Rutter and Rutter's criticism that such models concentrate "on the universals of development rather than individual difference…While there may be some universals of growth when we come to examine the individual life things are rarely that straightforward" (¶ 15 and 16).

Academic Advising Approaches

The aforementioned theories, and Chickering's psychosocial theory of student identity development in particular, have played an important role in the evolution of academic advising approaches and the connection between advising and teaching (Creamer, 2000). The most well-known of the approaches, prescriptive advising and developmental advising, were terms coined by Crookston in the early 1970s.

Prescriptive advising represents a traditional relationship based on authority between the academic advisor and the student (Crookston, 1994; NACADA, 2006). According to Crookston, the relationship between the two can be compared with the doctor/patient relationship in which the student or "patient" has an "ailment" or problem, and the advisor or "doctor" "makes a diagnosis, prescribes something, or gives advice" (Crookston, p. 6) on how to solve the problem and expects the student to follow the advice. Within this model, the student doesn't accept any responsibility if the advice turns out to be misguided, and the approach doesn't encourage the student to "develop a sense of responsibility for their academic choices" (Appleby, 2001, ¶ 1). Moreover, within this model the responsibility of the advisor is simply to answer specific questions rather than to "address more comprehensive academic concerns" (King, 2005, ¶ 3).

Crookston is also credited with defining developmental advising, which he associates with student development theories and with three of Chickering's developmental vectors in particular: developing competence, developing autonomy, and developing purpose (Gordon, as cited in Frost, 2000). Crookston (1994) noted that "developmental counseling or advising is concerned not only with a specific personal or vocational decision but also with facilitating the student's rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem-solving, decision making, and evaluation skills" (p. 5). He believes that higher education and the advising process, as a result of the advisor and student engaging in a series of developmental tasks, can lead to students creating a plan for personal growth and self-fulfillment within their lives (Crookston, 1994; King, 2005). The relationship between the student and the advisor is crucial, with both parties being actively involved and sharing the responsibility for "the nature of the advising relationship and the quality of the experience" (Frost, 2000, p. 12). Appleby (2001) effectively sums up the relationship between advisor and advisee by stating, "This active, dynamic interchange that forms the essence of the developmental advising relationship produces trust, curiosity, enthusiastic participation, and a sincere desire to learn and grow" (p. 4). Moreover, Crookston views the advising process "as a teaching function based on a negotiated agreement between the student and the teacher [or advisor] in which varying degrees of learning by both parties to the transaction are the product" (p. 9). For Crookston, advising, or any other experience within the educational environment can be regarded as teaching if it results in the growth and development of the individual, group, or community (Crookston, 1994).

Closely linked to Crookston's developmental view of academic advising are O'Banion's (1994a) five steps in the dimensions of the advising process: "(1) exploration of life goals, (2) exploration of vocational goals, (3) program choice, (4) course choice, and (5) scheduling courses" (p. 10). O'Banion believes that these steps should be undertaken sequentially in order for students to explore "the broader developmental issues of…life and vocational goals" (NACADA, 2006, p. 6) prior to choosing a program of study. Furthermore, O'Banion exhorts that the institution should provide plenty of opportunities and meaningful experiences for students to explore all of these dimensions in order to reach their fullest potential. He believes that "students are responsible for making decisions throughout the process. It is the responsibility of the advisor to provide information and a climate of freedom in which students can best make such decisions" (O'Banion, 1994a, p. 11).

While O'Banion (1994b) is a staunch supporter of developmental advising approaches, he cites critics of his and Crookston's "either/or" approach and supports a more "and/or" philosophy, recognizing that prescriptive advising, as well as the use of both faculty advisors and advising professionals in the delivery of advising can be valuable depending upon the situation. Fielstein (1994) supports this notion stating, "Perhaps in our enthusiasm for developmental advising, we overlooked the obvious, the value of certain traditional, prescriptive activities as prerequisites to developmental advising. It could be that some of the so-called prescriptive activities have been given a bum rap and are actually critical building blocks that enable developmental advising to evolve" (p. 77). Using the analogy of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Fielstein

(1994) suggests that, "efforts to work with students on higher-level needs will be in vain unless basic needs have been met" (p. 78). It appears O'Banion and Fielstein are recognizing that an "integrated" (Heisserer, 2002) or "comprehensive" approach may best meet the individual needs of different students at various times and stages within their development and the advising process.

Another important academic advising paradigm is the "intrusive advising" model which recognizes the unique needs of "at-risk" students including those from ethnic or other minority groups, those students who are academically disadvantaged or on probation, students with disabilities, cognitive problems, or psychological issues which can interfere with academic success, or students from low-socioeconomic levels or with family or financial concerns (Heisserer, 2002; Holmes, 1996; Miller and Murray, 2005; Upcraft and Kramer, 1995). According to Upcraft and Kramer (1995), since many under-prepared first-year students are unlikely to seek academic and personal assistance of their own volition, intrusive advising is an effective method in which the advisors and the institution take the initiative in providing support services to help these students succeed. As Earl (1987) notes, "the *intrusive model* of advising is action-oriented to involving and motivating students to seek help when needed. Utilizing the good qualities of prescriptive advising (expertise, awareness of student needs, structured programs) and of developmental advising (relationship to a student's total needs), intrusive advising is a direct response to identified academic crisis with a specific program of action" (¶ 5). Miller and Murray (2005) discuss the importance of McGillin's (2003) concept of "resiliency" or the "ability to cope…[as] the best barometer for success" (¶ 7) and emphasize that academic advisors, through the concern they have for students and the one-on-one attention they provide, can play an important role in helping these at-risk students attain academic success. Advisors should work with students to develop an academic plan and should meet regularly with the students throughout the term, rather than the typical once or twice per semester advising sessions, to monitor the student's progress toward meeting the established academic objectives (Miller and Murray, 2005; Upcraft and Kramer, 1995). Earle (1987) reveals that, "intrusive advising has been shown to improve the effectiveness of advising, enhance student academic skills and increase retention" (¶ 14). Moreover, Heisserer (2002) and Holmes (1996) suggests other benefits include students feeling a greater sense of integration including feelings of being valued by and "belonging" to the institution, a stronger connection with their program of study, and increased motivation to keep up with their studies.

Another approach to academic advising is the learning-centered paradigm. Based on Crookston's belief in "advising as teaching", this approach places the teaching aspect of academic advising at the forefront. However, Lowenstein (2005) believes that Crookston's "very broad definition of teaching is unconvincing as a persuasive model for advising" (Lowenstein, p. 68). According to Lowenstein (2005), within this paradigm "the excellent advisor plays a role with respect to a student's entire curriculum that is analogous to the role that the excellent teacher plays with respect to the content of a single course. He or she also helps the student to understand, and in a certain sense, to create the logic of the student's curriculum. Thus, the advisor's instruction in the logic of the curriculum elevates the advisor's work to a central role in enhancing a student's education" (p. 65). Lowenstein supports the precepts of developmental advising which propose that advising should do more than simply provide information and should actively engage the student in learning and support his/her overall development. By assisting students in putting different aspects of their curriculum or course of studies into perspective, this approach enhances an individual's learning potential and enables students to better understand the relationships among courses and disciplines, effectively choose a complementary sequence of courses, understand the transferable skills and methods of learning they are developing, and "gain perspective on her or his entire education and provide an opportunity to develop higher-order thinking skills" (Lowenstein, p. 70).

Schreiner and Anderson (2005) proposed a new model of academic advising called strength-based advising. The researchers believe this approach is more beneficial in meeting the needs of today's diverse range of students than traditional advising. Rather than focusing on remediating individuals' "deficits" and weaknesses or problems, strength-based advising:

Shifts the focus of the advising sessions from areas of need to areas of talent and engagement…This approach enables advisors to identify and build on the inherent talents students bring with them into the college and university setting, teaching students to develop and apply their strengths to new and challenging learning tasks. This explicit focus on students' natural talents builds the confidence and motivation necessary for achievement and persistence in college. (Schreiner and Anderson, 2005, pp. 20 and 21)

Somewhat linked to this philosophy of focusing on students' strengths and talents is Cooperrider's suggestion of applying the concept of appreciative inquiry into academic advising. "Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them…AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to heighten positive potential" (Cooperrider and Whitney, as cited in Bloom and Archer Martin, 2002, ¶ 2). Since one of the roles of advisors is to ask questions in order to empower students and enable them to achieve their goals and greatest potential, Cooperrider encourages advisors to use positive open-ended questions, which will assist students in discovering their strengths, abilities and skills (Bloom and Archer Martin, 2002). Furthermore, this theory incites advisors to accord their full interest and attention to each student they advise, help students devise an academic plan which incorporates incremental, achievable goals towards attaining their academic and career aspirations,

and continue to provide support and assistance for students to work towards their goals throughout their academic program.

One final approach to academic advising, which builds upon the prescriptive-developmental paradigms, is the use of social constructivism in advising students from "high relational groups." Many non-Western cultures, which tend to value "community over self and personal relationships over individual achievement" (Markus and Kitayama, as cited in Kirk-Kuwaye and Libarios, 2003, ¶ 2) can be considered as high relational groups. These students may require a different advising approach which enables them to interact collaboratively and cooperatively. Social constructivist advising involves "educational planning and student services [that] are created by collaborative social interaction and knowledge creation among adviser, student and important others" (Kirk-Kuwaye and Libarios, 2003, ¶ 13). For example, students from high relational groups may initially prefer to engage in academic advising with others from their cultural group, believing that "knowledge is a production of meaningful social interactions" (Kirk-Kuwaye and Libarios, ¶ 7). However, once they have established a more open and trusting relationship with the academic advisor, it may be possible to utilize the more traditional one-on-one advising relationship.

Conclusion

It is evident that academic advisors have a broad range of theoretical perspectives and approaches to choose from in developing a personal philosophy of advising. Creamer (2000) noted that "students' understanding of themselves, from both their internal perspective and the advisor's external perspective in a real-world context, is associated with effectiveness" (p. 20) in advising. Through the application of these theories, advisors should develop an awareness of the fact that the techniques and questions they utilize to facilitate the advising process will vary as students progress through the developmental stages. As such advisors may consider their approach directed by the individual needs of the students and the mission, goals and values of the institution. Most importantly, however, academic advisors need to develop an awareness of the role that the aforementioned theories can and should play in supporting their personal philosophy and approach to academic advising.

References

Appleby, D. (2001, March 19). The teaching-advising connection. *The Mentor : An Academic Advising Journal* . Retrieved May 24, 2007 , from http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/appleby0.htm

Bloom, J.L. & Archer Martin, N. (2002, August 29). Incorporating appreciative inquiry into academic advising. *The Mentor : An Academic Advising Journal* . Retrieved May 24, 2007 , from http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/020829jb.htm

Creamer, D.G., & Creamer, E.G. (1994). Practicing developmental advising: Theoretical contexts and functional applications]. *NACADA Journal, 14 (2)* , 17-24.

Creamer, D.G. (2000). Use of theory in academic advising. In Gordon, V.N. and Habley, W.R. *Academic Advising: A comprehensive handbook* . San Francisco : Jossey-Bass.

Crookston, B.B. (1994). A developmental view of academic advising as teaching. *NACADA Journal, 14(2)* , 5-9.

Earl, W.R. (1987). Intrusive advising for freshmen [Electronic version]. Retrieved May 24, 2007 , from the *NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources* Web site http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/Intrusive-Freshmen.htm

Evans , N.J. (2003). Psychosocial, cognitive, and typological perspectives on student development. In Komives, S.R. and Woodard, D.B., Jr. *Student services: A handbook for the profession* (4th ed.). San Francisco : Jossey-Bass.
Fielstein, L.L. (1994). Developmental versus prescriptive advising: Must it be one or the other. *NACADA Journal, 14(2)* , 76-79.

Frost, S.H. (2000). Historical and philosophic foundations for academic advising . In Gordon, V.N. and Habley, W.R. *Academic Advising: A comprehensive handbook* . San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Heisserer, D.L. (2002, March). Advising at-risk students in college and university settings. *College Student Journal* . Retrieved May 24, 2007 , from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FCR/is_1_36/ai_85007770

Hendey, W.G. (1999, January 20). Developmental advising: A practical view]. *The Mentor : An Academic Advising Journal* . Retrieved May 24, 2007 , from http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/990115wh.htm

Holmes, S. (1996). *Intrusive advising as a model for retention* . Retrieved May 24, 2007 , from
http://www.diversityweb.org/diversity_innovations/student_development/recruitment_retention_mentoring/intrusive_advising.cfm

King, M.C. (2005). Developmental academic advising. Retrieved May 24, 2007 , from NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources Web site http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/dev_adv.htm

King, P.M. (2003). Student learning in higher education. In Komives, S.R. and Woodard, D.B., Jr. *Student services: A handbook for the profession* (4th ed.). San Francisco : Jossey-Bass.

Kirk-Kuwaye, M., & Libarios, N. (2003, December 5). Expanding the prescriptive-developmental advising continuum: Using social constructivism as an advising approach for students from high relational groups [Electronic version]. *The Mentor : An Academic Advising Journal* . Retrieved May 24, 2007 , from http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/031205mk.htm

Lowenstein, M. (2005). If advising is teaching, what do advisors teach? *NACADA Journal, 25(2)* , 65-73.

McGillin, V.A. (2003). Academic Risk and Resilience: Implications for Advising at Small Colleges and Universities. In Hemwall, M.K. & Trachte, K.C. (Eds.) Advising and Learning : Academic Advising from the Perspective of Small Colleges & Universities. Manhattan , KS : NACADA.

McKewen, M.K. (2003). New perspectives on identify development. In Komives, S.R. and Woodard, D.B., Jr. *Student services: A handbook for the profession* (4th ed.). San Francisco : Jossey-Bass.

Melander, E.R. (2002, November 27). The meaning of "student-centered" advising: Challenges to the advising learning community. *The Mentor : An Academic Advising Journal* . Retrieved May 24, 2007 , from http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/021127em.htm

Miller, M.A., & Murray, C. (2005). Advising academically underprepared students. Retrieved May 24, 2007 , from the *NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources* Web site http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/Academically-Underprepared.htm#int

National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). (2006). *What is academic advising?* Manhattan , KS : National Academic Advising Association.

O'Banion, T. (1994a). An academic advising model. *NACADA Journal, 14(2)* , 10-16.

O'Banion, T. (1994b). Retrospect and prospect. *NACADA Journal, 14(2)* , 117-119.

Schreiner, L.A. , & Anderson, E. (2005). Strengths-based advising: A new lens for higher education. *NACADA Journal, 25(2)* , 20-29.

Smith, M.K. (1999). *Life span development and lifelong learning* . Retrieved May 24, 2007 , from http://www.infed.org/biblio/lifecourse_development.htm

Upcraft, M.L., & Kramer, G. (Eds.). (1995). *Intrusive advising as discussed in the first-year academic advising: Patterns in the present, pathways to the future* . Retrieved May 24, 2007 , from Barton County Community College Web site http://www.barton.cc.ks.us/academicadvising/advisementhandbook/intrusiveadvising.htm

---

Cite this resource using APA style as:

Williams, S. (2007).From Theory to Practice: The Application of Theories of Development to Academic Advising Philosophy and Practice. Retrieved -insert today's date- from *NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources* Web site: http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/Theories.htm