Review Symposium:

Three academic advisors at UGA offer their reflections on Craig M. McGill,
"Cultivating Ways of Thinking": The Developmental Teaching Perspective in Academic Advising,
New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource Development 28:1 (2016), 50-54.
Available at http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/nha3.20131/full

Reflections on Advising and Teaching

By Kate Daley-Bailey

McGill presents a brief historical survey of developmental academic advising which he describes as advising that is focused on the ongoing development of the whole student, in opposition to the more rudimentary prescriptive method of advising as merely a customer service-like transaction. According to McGill, thanks to the paradigm shift away from prescriptive toward developmental advising, today's advisors "are adult educators engaged in a complex process of teaching students to develop academic identities and plan their lives" (51). Despite this ideological shift, McGill laments that "many advisors still see their roles as course recommenders rather than teachers who are fundamental constituents of a college or university teaching mission" (51).

Some may bemoan reading yet another article praising developmental advising over the old foil of prescriptive advising. However, I think the value of McGill's article lies in his presentation of examples of how and what developmental advisors are actually teaching students. McGill identifies eight aspects of a developmental teaching approach in his advising practice. The eight elements are that advising is learner centered, teaches students how to think differently, respects a student's thinking and prior knowledge, acknowledges the vicissitudes of different students' emotional and cognitive levels, assess what students know and do not know, allows the advisor to "use scaffolding to build on what students do know," encourages advisors to "balance challenge with support" and educate students regarding the process of decision making (52).

The first element of developmental academic advising McGill points to is its learner-focused perspective. McGill recommends allowing the student to set a meeting's agenda as a way to engage the student in conversation around their current concerns. Rather than greeting advisees with a litany of requirements, he allows them to start the meeting and set the pace. He states that he often gives "students assignments to work on and then ask[s] them to make a follow up appointment" (52). While this arrangement is ideal for building an advisor-advisee relationship, the sheer mass of students many advisors advise over a semester may make this less tenable. Despite logistical setbacks such as limited appointment time, presenting students with a brief time at the beginning of each appointment to

voice concerns not only builds advisor-advisee rapport, it can also help advisors quickly ascertain any significant difficulties the student is encountering. From my advising experiences, I learned the need to slow down and attempt to meet a student where they were rather than jumping straight into discussing degree requirements. While I wanted to inform the student of what they needed to know as soon as possible, often the advisee's desire was first to learn who I was, if I could be trusted, and if I was truly invested in helping them. Teachers learn the same lesson too; effective teaching requires the teacher to slow down and focus their attention on their students.

Second, McGill suggests that advisors do not only educate students regarding university policies and major requirements, they also encourage students to reflect, think critically, and "make connections between their coursework and other aspects of their lives" (52). Students often miss the forest for the trees and have a difficult time discerning the nature of an academic degree. Faculty may be so engrossed in their own disciplines (as they should be) that sometimes they cannot imagine the need to make a case to students that their particular subject is significant to a chosen degree. When teaching entry level Religion courses, for example, I found it useful to ask students to name their majors and then give them specific examples of how the study of Religion would help them in their field. Want to study law? Determining what counts as "religion" is a major issue in American jurisprudence. How about medicine? Are you aware that many religions have prohibitions regarding the handling of blood? Interested in politics? How many aspects of a voter's political profile are informed by their religious beliefs or lack thereof? If advisors can help students make connections between the topics they are studying and their chosen field, students will be more invested in learning the material.

Third, a developmental academic advisor, as a rule, respects an advisee's "current way of processing information" and attempts to discern when challenging said advisee "would be too great for them in their current development level" (53). The fourth aspect McGill identifies as informing his advising practice is the recognition "that each student is at a different level emotionally and cognitively, with differing amounts of motivation" (53). And to this, he suggests that "[i]nstead of treating each student the same and holding the same expectations, developmental advisors meet students where they are, building on their current levels of knowledge" (53). One is reminded here of a similar pedagogical perspective in Con

fucius. In the *Analects*, Confucius, the great teacher, is asked the same question by two students of radically different temperament and motivation. Confucius responds to each student differently. When he is called upon to explain this deviation, he explains that each student, due to their differing characters and natures, needed different answers. Since Confucius lived in the 6th century BC, the wisdom of this sentiment is nothing new. McGill does not claim that these elements of developmental teaching are new but rather that these specific insights, familiar to educators, might be especially helpful to advisors who do repeatedly answer the same question but are learning to gauge which students need which answers to reach a desired result.

The fifth element of developmental advising McGill champions requires advisors to "listen for cues" from their advisees to determine what their advisees do and do not know. This provides the advisor with a critical window into the advisee's thinking, and allows the advisor to help them bridge the gap between their current forms of knowledge and ways of thinking to "more desirable ways of thinking within a discipline or area of practice," which is McGill's sixth aspect of developmental advising. These two elements are critical aspects of teaching anything to anyone. Advisors, like teachers, must discern what their students know and do not know. During my first few years teaching, I was consistently surprised by what my students knew, and just as surprised by what they did not know. Once I got a handle on this information, I could build a strategy to help them learn what I needed them to know.

Seventh, McGill recommends that advisors provide a comfortable space for students to scrutinize their assumptions and engage in the complexities of cognitive dissonance. His eighth and final aspect of developmental advising, and one that is probably the most difficult to teach, is walking students through the decision-making process so that they become familiar with the "building blocks of good decision-making" and learn to "assume responsibility for their own education destiny" (53).

Three years ago I came to academic advising from the trenches of adjunct teaching. Over a decade, I taught over fifty sections of different courses in the academic study of Religion at GA St. U., GPC, and here at UGA. I taught everything from Introduction to World Religions, Early Christianity, Theory and Methods, to New Religious Movements, and Religion and Popular Culture. McGill's words relating advising to teaching resonate with me because my teaching experience taught me that what I was teaching my students was not just content, for example when the second Jewish Temple was built, but also how to navigate murky ideological waters and come out the other side wiser and more mature. (The second Jewish temple was built in the year 70 CE, just in case you were curious).

Teaching the sensitive topic of religion, one that most Americans politely ignore, landed me in the heart of cognitive dissonance and demanded that I become attentive and intentional in my interaction with students. I learned many of the aspects of developmental advising covered in McGill's article. Advisors without teaching experience need not despair. As McGill aptly notes, advisors are instructors, the curriculum may be somewhat atypical but the critical thinking skills advisees can learn from advisors well-versed in the developmental method will prove invaluable to them in the future. ∎

Against Developmental Advising

By Ilya Winham

McGill argues for recognizing the "pedagogical potential" of academic advising, that is, its potential as a "teaching and learning endeavor" (50-51). McGill frames his argument as arising from reflection on his own practice of "developmental advising," and presents it against the foil of "prescriptive forms of advising" (50). The figure of the ineffective, non-student-centered, pharmacist-like "prescriptive" advisor has been conjured up since the 1970s by advocates of "developmental" academic advising to prove the sophistication and superiority of their approach to advising that incorporates "teaching," "challenging," and "supporting" the "development" of the "whole student."

In my view, the problem with McGill's essay is that he forces his reflections to fit into the inherited binary analytical framework of developmental versus prescriptive advising. On the prescriptive side are basic "transactional" activities related to recommending courses as well as monitoring students to make sure they do not make registration errors (50). On the developmental side are theories of student development and learning, as well as teaching methods, which form the theoretical and pedagogical basis of the practice of developmental advising. For McGill, college students are on their way to becoming responsible adults, and with respect to this process of personal development an advisor may help students "learn the specific skills, abilities, and strategies necessary to navigate their educational experiences, take control of their experiences, and make effective decisions concerning their educational goals, choices, and needs" (51, quoting Nutt, 2004).

Because McGill's reflections on his advising practice are structured around the prescriptive versus developmental binary framework, he fails to distinguish the proposition that advising should be approached as a form of "teaching and learning," from the distinctly different proposition that effective advising is or should be "developmental." McGill understands developmental advising primarily in terms of "incorporating teaching methods" into his own advising practice (51). But teaching methods are not necessarily "developmental." For example, Marc Lowenstein, an advocate of advising as integrative learning, argues that advisors should facilitate student learning of how their own educational choices fit together across a semester and over time. The goal of "learning in the advising setting," Lowenstein (2013) writes, should be to give "coherence and meaning to students' educations" (p. 246).

The purpose of academic advising for most of its history was to get students to interact with faculty, and this was, and still is, a great way to introduce students to the main mission of higher education, namely, to cultivate liberal learning. The best piece of advice an advisor can give advisees, according to Richard Light (2001), author of *Making the Most of College* and Professor of Education and Government at Harvard, is to tell them the following: "Your job is to get to know one faculty member reasonably well this semester, and also to have the faculty member get to know you reasonably well" (p. 86).

Such advice, and the goal of academic learning that it is meant to achieve, is not part of McGill's repertoire. Instead, the main goal of his advising is for students to leave his office "in a different state [of mind] than when they come," which for him is good because "even the slightest transformation or thought-provoking conversation can cause cognitive dissonance and thus, the opportunity for growth (though this is certainly never guaranteed)" (53). This is precisely the problem with developmental advising. As Hemwall and Trachte (1999) put it: "the literature on developmental advising . . . emphasizes the development of individual students and loses sight of the centrality of liberal learning, the main mission of higher education" (p. 6).

McGill not only divides advising up into developmental and prescriptive elements, he also attempts to confine the latter to academic advising's pre-theoretical and pre-professional period that came to an end in the early 1970s. According to McGill's recounting of this familiar history, O'Banion (1972) inaugurated the new epoch of developmental advising that swept away accounts of advising as "a perfunctory process of ensuring students were taking the correct courses" and proposed instead a five-step process: "(a) exploration of life goals; (b) exploration of vocational goals; (c) program choice; (d) course choice; and (e) scheduling classes" (51). As developmental advising itself evolved and became widely accepted in the advising community, the older, prescriptive approach was routinely criticized and regarded as a problem that needed to be solved, often through the use of advanced technology that promised to streamline course selection and scheduling and thus free up time for advisors to deal with developmental, career, and personal matters. Together, developmental advising and technology were supposed to liberate advisors from their primitively prescriptivist ways, ushering in a new professional era of theory- and methods-based practice.

This, of course, is not what happened. Courses still need to be recommended, discussed, and planned-out prior to registration, often in a prescriptive fashion, and academic advisors are the experts, as much as anyone can be, in helping students do this efficiently and correctly. Technology has yet to make routine prescriptive tasks any less time-consuming or reduced the need for one-on-one in-person advising meetings to go over courses before registration. Developmental advising did not refute the theory or practice of prescriptive advising, making it obsolete. Rather, developmental advising is engaged in a permanent argument against a competitor it cannot refute. McGill continues the argument, keeping alive the dream of providing advisors with an authoritative, disciplinary basis for claiming to be teachers who deal with the complexities of the "whole student" in higher education and who therefore can produce knowledge in their field comparable to the knowledge produced by faculty.

To lay my cards on the table, I believe that attempts to form a professional academic or scholarly identity for academic advising by equating advising with teaching are misguided and doomed to fail. Today, advising is a mandatory pre-registration meeting that is increasingly done by university staff and administrators, and its value to universities, as McGill notes, is in increasing retention and graduation rates (50). These are the facts that define the purpose of academic advising today. Oddly enough, it's often professional advisors who do not fully recognize this reality or take the time to contemplate it. If advising is to have a purpose and value beyond its effect on retention and graduation rates, advisors will have to do more than work directly with students, addressing their registration and graduation-related issues. This need to do more than focus on the pedagogical potential of advising is the animating impulse behind Janet Schulenberg and Marie Lindhorst's seminal article "Advising is Advising." In order to establish a scholarly identity for academic advising, they argue, "the concerns and interests of academic advisors should span many areas of higher education, and advisors should not limit their scholarly attentions to working directly with students" (Schulenberg and Lindhorst, 2008, p. 44).

But as far as working directly with students goes, whereas McGill would have developmental teaching attitudes instilled into advisors during training and development activities (54), I would have advisors trained to think about how to advance the purpose of a liberal arts education. As I argue in my letter to the *NACADA Journal*, "a professional advisor could, for example, help students understand: that their major need not be vocational preparation but is rather a point of coherence for their entire education; that they are not just completing requirements for their major but learning to master a field of study; that their general education requirements and prerequisite classes are not annoyances standing between them and their major but distinct opportunities to explore our complex world; that what is valuable about a liberal arts education is studying what you are sincerely interested in and enjoy, and by doing so you will develop marketable skills including the capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems" (Winham, 2018). Call this what you will, but please don't confuse it with "developmental" advising. ∎

References

Hemwall, M. K., & Trachte, K. C. (1999). Learning at the core: Toward a new understanding of academic advising. *NACADA Journal*, 19(1), 5-11.

Light, R. J. (2001). *Making the most of college*. Harvard University Press.

Lowenstein, M. (2013). Envisioning the Future. In *Academic Advising Approaches: Strategies that teach students to make the most of college* (pp. 243–258). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Nutt, C. (2004). Assessing student learning in academic advising. *Academic Advising Today*, 27(4). Retrieved from http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Assessing-Student-Learning-in-Academic-Advising.aspx.

O'Banion, T. (1972). An academic advising model. *American Association of Junior Colleges Journal*, 42 (6), 62-69.

Schulenberg, J. K., & Lindhorst, M. J. (2008). Advising is advising: Toward defining the practice and scholarship of academic advising. *NACADA Journal*, 28(1), 43-53.

Winham, I. (Forthcoming 2018). Letter to the Editor: Is Advising a Political Activity? *NACADA Journal*.

Toward A More Learning-Centered Advising Practice

By Shannon Perry

McGill lays out eight elements of a developmental teaching perspective he applies in his own advising practice. He believes advisors ought to teach advisees about decision-making and cognitive processes and that they must adopt a learner-centered model, taking into account individual learner differences regarding prior knowledge and experience, motivational factors, and supportive needs. While I agree with McGill's essential vision, I seek here to draw on my own knowledge and experience to elaborate on his suggestions for how advisors may implement more learner-centered strategies.

The first element of McGill's developmental teaching advising perspective involves cultivating a learner-centered practice. His recommendation, however, to start appointments by asking what the student would like to discuss overlooks the fact that, too often, advisees haven't thought about what they would like to know or to do, or the breadth of topics advisors might be able to help with. Furthermore, students often ask informational questions that do not necessarily lead to exploring decision-making or cognition-related challenges. Without specific discussion protocols, prepared questions, or supportive resources, McGill's proposed instructional goals may receive little or no attention in a standard advising meeting.

One possible solution that I am pursuing is to use UGA's learning management system, eLearning Commons (eLC), to synthesize important information and resources, arranged by topic, for my advisees. Malcolm Knowles, the father of andragogy, the "art and science of teaching adult learners," emphasizes creating learning environments that encourage self-direction and allow learners to explore specific interests or topics aligned with their academic or career goals (Conlan, Grabowski, & Smith, 2003). In my experience, students appreciate and use resources that help them organize complexity. An advising eLC that integrates information (e.g., major application requirements, an organized list of student organizations) with modules pertaining to decision-making, metacognitive tools, motivation, etc., would allow students to understand the broad reach of advising.

Such an online resource would also allow students to investigate advising-related topics they deemed important in a flexible and less time-restricted way. It could also help emphasize the person-centered, rather than information-oriented, nature of advising. Making quality advising resources readily available can help prepare students for more transformational conversations during face-to-face appointments. All advisors at UGA may request the creation of a non-ATHENA eLC course for their advising purposes (see http://ctl.uga.edu/elc/course-requests).

Another learning-centered element of McGill's advising practice involves scaffolding. Scaffolding is the process whereby "the teacher helps the student master a task or concept that the student is initially unable to grasp independently." Central to the idea of scaffolding is allowing a learner to do as much of a given task as they can without assistance. The advisor/teacher only steps in where necessary (Lipscomb, Swanson, & West, 2004). While McGill offers the instance of an advisor paraphrasing a confusing university policy, I challenge us all to find deeper ways to tap into this constructivist learning strategy.

I find scaffolding important because sometimes just providing the answers can disable a learner by teaching them to rely on my authority rather than investigating ways to find their own answers. As often as possible, I invite students to use my computer in our appointments. When a student asks, for example, questions about major application requirements or some other easily retrievable information, I ask how they might find that information on their own. Where would they start? What search terms would they try? I offer more guidance only if they don't know where to begin. The trick, of course, comes in asking these questions in a helpful, rather than patronizing, way.

There are many other ways to incorporate scaffolding into advising practice. I often model how to use a resource such as the Bulletin or "think aloud" how to analyze and interpret information on a degree audit or website. Ideally, I turn the computer over to the student and allow them to do further exploring, jumping in only when needed or asked.

In summary, if we agree with McGill that advising should teach students about how to make decisions and how to think in integrative and growth-oriented ways, we will have to think differently about how we advise. We will have to consider how to support our students beyond our limited face-to-face and email interactions. We will have to think about whether we scaffold properly and whether we empower students to solve their own problems. We must seek to answer one of advising's most vexing questions: How can I design my own advising practice to create transformational, rather than transactional, learning experiences? ∎

References

Conlan, J., Grabowski, S., & Smith, K. (2003). Adult Learning. In M. Orey (Ed.), *Emerging perspectives on learning, teaching, and technology*. Retrieved from http://eplt.coe.uga.edu/index.php?title=Adult_Learning

Lipscomb, L., Swanson, J., & West, A. (2004). Scaffolding. In M. Orey (Ed.), *Emerging perspectives on learning, teaching, and technology*. Retrieved from http://eplt.coe.uga.edu/index.php?title=Scaffolding