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The Survey of Advisors at UGA: A Profile of Our Career Aspirations

By Rathan L. Kersey

As advising at UGA continues to grow and the field of advising transforms, a general interest in sharing knowledge and understanding of scholarship has emerged. In order to understand the interest level in creating a scholar-practitioner community at UGA, Shannon Perry and I designed a multiple-purpose survey to help gather ideas for cultivating a successful advising scholarship community and to assess the resources needed to create a scholar-practitioner advising culture. As a growing and changing community, it is important to understand who we are as well as our various interests and aspirations related to advising. Therefore, in writing this article, I decided to focus on developing a profile of current advisors at UGA and uncovering the levels of advisor interest in participating in scholarship related to advising.

The profile is drawn from the survey responses, which by its nature cannot be assumed to be a complete and accurate picture of our advising community. The survey can, however, serve as a natural starting point for our continuing discussion of the nature of advising, the role scholarship can and should play in advising, and point towards future actions and ideas on how to accomplish the mission of the Scholar-Practitioner Committee.

Who Are We?

Seventy-five people responded to the survey, of which 66 are staff (or professional) advisors, while 9 are faculty advisors. Of the professional advisors, 37 (56%) are very new to the profession, having 3 or fewer years of experience. Eighteen respondents (27%) have between 3 and 10 years of experience. Eleven respondents (16.7%) have more than 10 years of advising experience.

When asked about prior scholarship experiences, 23 people responded. Six respondents noted that they had or are pursuing advanced graduate degrees. Three respondents noted that they were pursuing a self-study of advising theory. Four respondents noted conference participation, either attending or presenting (2 respondents). Finally, four respondents noted specific research experience, either in pursuit of their education or writing articles for publication.

Levels of Advising Scholarship

To assess advisors' current level of participation in advising scholarship as well as their aspirations in this area, we used David Freitag's (2011) four-fold classification of professional advisors: "advising practitioner, emerging professional, advising profession, or advising scholar." To come up with the statements for the survey, we adapted Freitag's descriptions of each level:

- Advising Practitioner: I consider myself a competent advisor because I communicate information accurately to my students, help them solve problems, and make referrals when necessary. I have heard of NACADA but have not joined yet, although I would if my institution paid the dues. I attend advising conferences when sponsored by my institution. Advising is my job, but I feel little to no connection to a field of academic advisors.

- Emerging Professional: I do not want to just "do a job" as an advisor, instead I want to be a professional and be treated as one. I am thinking about joining NACADA. I love to learn from others in the field of academic advising through publications, webinars, and conferences. I work on improving my practice of academic advising during work hours, but rarely take my work home with me. I am beginning to ask for, and take on, more responsibilities. I either have post-graduate work in an area applicable to advising or am making plans to improve my educational standing.

- Advising Professional: I believe that academic advising is a profession and treat it as such. I am an active member of NACADA and attend local, state, and national conferences even if I have to pay for them. I actively seek further education opportunities to improve my advising credentials. I invest a number of hours outside of my office to improve my knowledge of advising and work on my advising skills.

- Advising Scholar: I am a leader in the field of academic advising focusing some of my time on the larger issues involving advising administration or advancing the discipline of academic advising through scholarly inquiry. I stay apprised of, and add to, the current body of literature in the field of academic advising. These pursuits often require that I spend more than 40 hours per week on my job and attend numerous advising conferences and seminars per year. I am constantly thinking about ways to improve and promote the field of academic advising.

When we asked advisors about their perception of their current advisor classification, 20 (33.9%) identified themselves

as Advising Practitioners. Thirty (50.9%) respondents identified themselves as Emerging Professionals, while 5 (8.5%) perceived themselves as Advising Professionals. Finally, 4 (6.8%) respondents classified themselves as Advising Scholars.

The data clearly show a general aspiration to improve ourselves as advising professionals. Ten respondents (17.5%) aspire to continue to be, as Freitag (2011) calls them, "the backbone of many advising systems" and stay at the Advising Practitioner level. On the opposite end of the spectrum, 17 (29.8%) aspire to become Advising Professionals and 12 (21.1%) are striving to become Advising Scholars. Taking these two questions together, the top two levels go from 9 respondents to 29 aspirants—a 222% increase! Our data show that people aspire to higher levels of scholarship in advising.

When disaggregated by group, an interesting finding emerges. Among our most veteran advisors (more than 10 years of experience), 7 (87.5%) respondents identified themselves at either the Advising Practitioner or Emerging Professional levels, while 1 identified with the statement beginning, "I am a leader in the field of academic advising . . . ." Three (37.5%) respondents did aspire to that Advising Scholar level, but 5 (62.5%) aspire to remain at those first two levels.

New advisors (3 or less years of experience, 34 total respondents) identify as 35.3% Advising Practitioners, 52.9% Emerging Professionals, and the rest, or 11.8%, as Advising Professionals. While no one in this group identified themselves as an Advising Scholar, 6 (18.8%) respondents aspired to that highest level. In fact, the top two levels go from 4 respondents to 20 aspirants—a 400% increase! This is much more in line with the whole group than with our most veteran advisors, which raises the question: what happens between the time period advisors are new to the field to when they are approaching the twilight of their career?

Conclusion

The advisor classifications formulated by Freitag do not constitute the only definition of advising, nor are they the best path for all advisors. Many advisors have long and valuable careers and do great work with their students while rarely engaging in scholarship. The field of advising scholarship is a new one, encompassing and informing only a few generations of advisors. We can learn much from advisors at all levels to improve our practices. Advising scholarship can also play a valuable role in shaping our practices here at UGA, just as it is doing at institutions around the world. I believe that in the world of academia, engaging in scholarship as advisors will go a long way towards increasing our profession's visibility, prestige, and rewards.

This article is merely a first look at our advising community at UGA. Freitag (2011) concluded that as advisors, we "have the freedom and opportunity to choose to be advising professionals and scholars of academic advising." I invite everyone to make that choice and join our burgeoning community of Advising Professionals and Advising Scholars. ■

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Advising Frodo: Toward a Humbler Advising Approach

By Justin Burnley

The Fellowship of the Ring (1954), volume one of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, contains many instances of its protagonist Hobbits asking advice of the powerful, the immortal, and the Wise. The Wise seldom offer unguarded advice, however, and occasionally refuse to offer advice at all. These exchanges mirror advising practices to some degree, and can serve as examples of humility and a shifting of responsibility that encourages students to shape their own educational path.

Why do advisors find themselves in positions where advice is difficult to give? One reason is that an advisor's knowledge is limited. One of Gandalf's first conversations with Frodo about his quest for Mt. Doom leads him to say, "But you cannot see very far … Neither can I … At any rate you are not ready for that long road yet." Tom Bombadil, upon rescuing Frodo and his companions from the dangers of the Old Forest, answers questions about their relative safety by saying, "But do not trust my guess; for I cannot tell for certain. Out east my knowledge fails. Tom is not master of Riders from the Black Land far beyond his country." These are examples of guide figures who understand their own limitations. They cannot foretell the future or control things beyond their own sphere of influence, and do not give advice about "further stages in the larger plans of which they are only a part" (Nelson, 2002, p. 49). Gandalf and Tom's advice implies that they are able to focus their advice only on the here and now, the short road within one's own country.

Elrond, after forming the Fellowship and outlining Frodo's quest, echoes Gandalf's uncertainty when he says, "I can foresee very little of your road; and how your task is to be achieved I do not know." Elrond couples his uncertainty with the addition, "I will send out messages, such as I can contrive, to those whom I know in the wide world," offering to aid by the strength of his influence. Advisors can model for students the value of networking and the role of resourcefulness in avoiding the unknown and can also display the way short-term planning prepares a student for long-term success. A well-connected advisor can make specific person-to-person referrals for a student, saving time in establishing contacts. Gathering information from multiple sources of campus expertise provides well-informed solutions to ambiguous problems. In addition to modeling this behavior to demonstrate its value, an advisor can discuss with a student methods to establish that student's own network, reinforcing these methods by reminding the student of key support figures.

Even for those who *can* tell something of the future, advice can be dangerous. Galadriel offers Frodo a look at her mirror, which shows "what was and is, and in part also what shall be." Tolkien's magic mirror could just as well represent the shadowy dynamic of advising. An advisor draws upon not just his or her own experiences and knowledge, but also the stories and experiences of previous students with whom they have spoken. As Hagen (2008) puts it, "The advisor will likely use a narrative to tell that student why the action lacks fidelity with other narratives," proving a point through their own stories or stories they have heard from others (p. 18). Yet Galadriel denies her role in helping Frodo interpret what he sees, saying, "I will not give you counsel, saying do this, or do that. For not in doing or contriving, nor in choosing between this course and another, can I avail." She leaves the interpretation of information and the choices that follow entirely to Frodo. Nelson (2002) defines Galadriel's role as "She cannot and will not make their decisions for them, but she can clarify the choices they have and affirm the inclinations which will allow them to keep going—even in the midst of doubt and uncertainty" (p. 53). And yet she is not without encouragement, saying, "Yet I think, Frodo, that you have courage and wisdom enough for the venture … Do as you will!" Subtracting her own advice from the decision-making role empowers Frodo to discover his own will and wisdom. Advisors who readily give information but remain humble about deciding on a course of action empower students to shape their own education, prompting them to make choices about the information provided to them.

Finally, what advising model best shows a wise approach to helping a student plan for the future, empowering the student to think independently, while at the same time maintaining an appropriate role for the advisor? Hagen (2008) concludes "How do we know that we have given the student good advice? Well, we can't, of course, but if we adopt a stance of humility and reverence toward the student—the same stance we use to interpret a difficult text—we can get close" (p. 17). He stresses the value of a humble approach that uses the tool of interpretation to bring one close to truth. Frodo's interaction with Gildor, an elf he meets while leaving the Shire, can serve as a model for a humbler advising approach, one that focuses more on a student's story while relying less on one's own experiences to help a student make choices. Gildor calls advice "a dangerous gift, even from the wise to the wise, and all courses may run ill," echoing Gandalf and others' uncertainty of the future. He goes on to say "But what would you? You have not told me all concerning yourself; and how then shall I choose better than you?" Like Galadriel, Gildor places the burden of choice on Frodo, but no less importantly he also strives to learn about the person in front of him in order to inform his advice. Gildor is the inquisitive advisor of the bunch, one whose qualifiers on his advice are interrogative. The humility revealed by his questions places value in the advisee's own perspectives, opinions, and decision-making abilities. Humility can offer something akin to wisdom, an ever-present acknowledgment that choices do not always turn out the way the chooser intends. ■

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The Promise and Peril of Big Data in Advising

By Michael Hill

Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think, one of the early books for general readers on the subject of data collection, was published just over three years ago. It may be difficult to imagine now, but in those days the phrase "big data" was only beginning to come into common use. Those of us who didn't actually know what it meant soon started pretending we did. Anyone working in the business of selling, finance, public relations, or manufacturing suddenly "knew" instinctively that big data was a big deal, even if that was all they knew.

The notion that data and commerce have coalesced into something new and inseparable is no longer news. All along, college and university administrators have been paying attention too, as have many companies who serve them in IT capacities. Today data collection has made its way into the realm of higher education and holds the promise to improve retention and help students graduate. How successful individual educational institutions will be in interpreting the data they collect remains an open question. The stunning example of data misinterpretation during the recent presidential race must surely give pause before reflexively placing too much trust in the accuracy of conclusions based on raw data.

Personal data on students has long been collected by academic institutions, and most, including UGA, have begun aggregating it to measure and predict academic outcomes. Private companies wishing to sell their services to colleges and universities have also joined in. In either case, an institution using such data is faced with a number of ethical questions. How much transparency should there be, for example, between the institution and the student on whom it is collected? How might data be shared among institutions wishing to harvest it for research purposes? Do private companies have an obligation to share how their algorithms are made, or must subscribers simply trust that these companies know what they're doing? After all, sharing how data is made into something valuable might jeopardize the very product these companies wish to sell.

In September, when UGA advisors were given a first look at how data collected on UGA students might be used to improve advising, many were surprised, and some concerned, to hear that such data should not necessarily be shared with a student to whom it pertains. However, a different approach is suggested by results of a recent survey conducted by Wakefield Research, "more than three quarters of college students (77%) believe schools should be using *more* of their personal information to enhance their college experience—both inside and outside the classroom" (Ellucian, 2016).

Even as researchers at institutions like Stanford and Carnegie Mellon Universities create and experiment with data-powered algorithms, so too, says *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, have "publishers, venture capital investors, and foundations. They've poured hundreds of millions into new companies and new products vying to score big contracts with colleges, sometimes promising to be the 'robot tutor' for struggling students" (Blumenstyk, 2016). Whether data is collected by private companies, individual institutions, or foundations, the complex questions raised remain the same; foremost among them, what to do with it, to whom does it belong and, finally, how much can it really tell us?

George Siemens, a respected theorist on digital technology, warns of the lack of transparency, particularly on the part of private companies who, in an effort to protect market share, generate algorithms that remain unavailable to researchers and thus impossible to validate. "Students should care an awful lot," he says, "because they're the ones being sorted algorithmically" (Blumenstyk, 2016). Perhaps so, but it seems not. Over the course of five years since Purdue University has experimented with its Signals data modeling project, "not a single student has asked about how their privacy is protected" (Arnold, 2010).

Even if students apparently care very little about protecting the privacy of their personal information, many advisors may have left the UGA brown bag event where the topic was introduced with the nagging feeling that once seen, information pointing to possible trouble in a student's academic future cannot be put back in the box. We might consider too that such information may potentially far outlive the short window in which it could pertain to an advising session. Purdue's practice has been to share risk levels with students, and its research into doing so has uncovered an interesting result, one UGA may want to consider. According to a 2010 article by Kimberley Arnold in *Educause Review*, "Once a [Purdue] student became aware of his or her risk level, more often than not the student addressed behavioral issues to become more successful in the class."

UGA's own experiment with using student data to improve academic outcomes certainly holds promise, and at a time when the cost of higher education is being ever more scrutinized, it shows a high level of accountability toward its students. As implementation goes forward and student data becomes available to us, UGA advisors must have clear assurance that the information collected is entirely accurate and well protected, even in light of the students' own apparent lack of concern for privacy. As we develop our own best practices around using data to help improve student outcomes, we might consider whether complete transparency in the collection and interpretation of data might just be the best way to enhance student experiences. ■

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