FEATURE

How Advisors Learn to Advise: *A Study*

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Advising, as a general function, is thought of as "the universal task in student affairs, because it exists at the foundation of much of the work [professionals] do" (Love, 2003, p. 507). Student advising has served a significant role in the higher education environment. As early as 1933, Allen Gaw noted that "advising is not an extraordinary or unusual phenomenon... [rather] it is the most common occurrence on any campus" (p. 180).

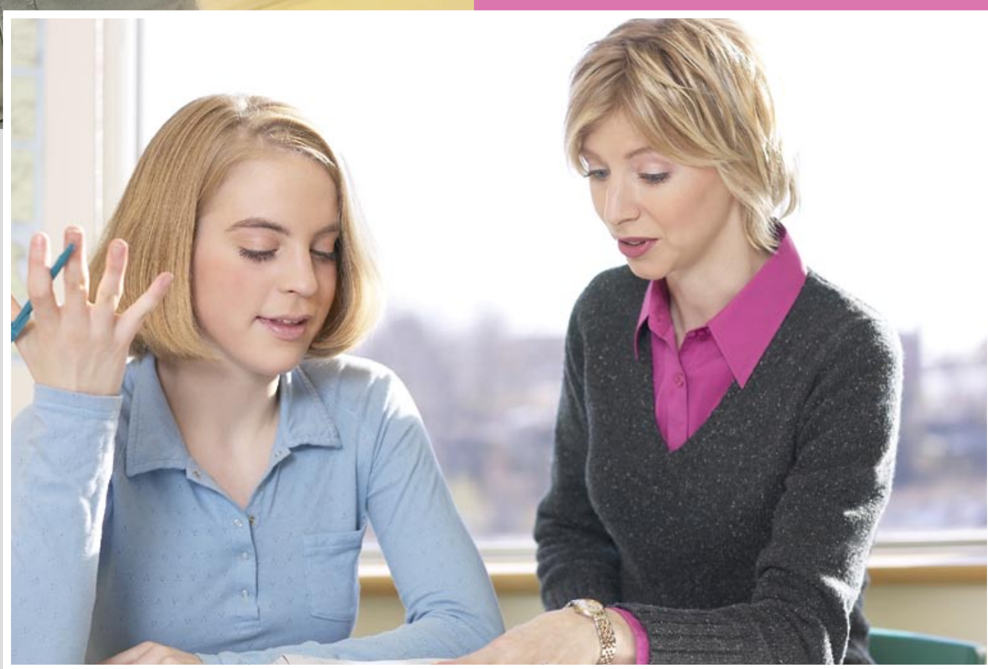
Advising a student organization is the responsibility of numerous student affairs professionals. This responsibility includes working with students individually, as an executive board and as a group. In addition, the advisor must be aware of an institution's policies and procedures and how those impact the student organization. The role of advising is complex and "may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (Light, 2001, p. 81).

Limited Training Programs

A limited number of training programs exist to prepare professionals for advising student organizations (Dunkel & Schuh, 1998). Resources that provide information about student organization advising exist in the form of handbooks and manuals (Bloland, 1967; Dunkel & Schuh; Schuh, 1987), as well as material that addresses the *do's and don'ts* of advising available on numerous campus Web sites. Dunkel (2004) says "advisers usually rel[y] on the observable experience they had as an undergraduate student working with their organization's adviser as the sole basis for how they currently advise an organization" (¶ 2).

Often an advisor is responsible for not only providing a learning environment, but also working with students on managing large fiscal budgets and limiting institutional liability related to student programming. It is the need for the advisor to balance both the student's development and institutional interests that make the student organization advisor a critical role on campus.

The current approach student affairs professionals use to learn how to advise a student organization is by role modeling and observation (Dunkel & Schuh, 1998), rather than an intentional approach grounded in theory and training. A number of professionals advise a student organization with no formal training and rely on role modeling from colleagues in the profession or their past experiences as a student organization member to direct their approach. Zachary (2001) recognizes that failing to differentiate the professionals' own experiences from those of the students with whom they are working can result in an experience for the student organization that is formulaic and not individualized. The student organization advisor must situate their advising approach in the needs of the students with whom they are working, rather than basing their approach on their own experiences or observations.



Advising a student organization is not only the duty of "providing direction for students in their leadership role, it is an opportunity for an individual to help guide students through their collegiate experience" (DeAngelis, 1999, p.1). However, there is a lack of research related to understanding how professionals responsible for advising student organizations learn how to approach their role. The study discussed here, conducted by the author, begins to explore these concepts and, hopefully, provides some initial insight into how student organization advisors learn to do their jobs.

The Research Study

Student organization advisors were interviewed during spring semester 2005 to understand how the individual advisor learned to become one and the process each used for advising a student organization. These two processes were analyzed to identify themes associated with how an advisor acquired knowledge about advising and how they approached their role.

Grounded theory methodology was used to explain emergent themes and provide results that are grounded in fieldwork (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Purposeful sampling and criterion sampling (Patton) were used to interview two participants at each institution. Two voluntary participants were contacted at three types of institutions. These selected participants were identified as full-time employees who were directly responsible for advising a student governance organization or policy board. The final sample consisted of four participants: two from a large public research institution and two from a private liberal arts institution. This included two women and two men, and all held a master's degree in higher education and student affairs, college student personnel or related field.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcribed for analysis. Each participant was given a pseudonym. The questions used focused on how advisors acquired knowledge and skills regarding advising student organizations, as well as the advisors' relationships with student organization constituents.

The participants included Rudy, Julia, Peter and Ella:

- Rudy is employed at a large public institution and has been an advisor in the profession for 15-plus years.
- Julia is employed at a private liberal arts institution. This is her first professional role and she is directly responsible for advising two student organizations.
- Peter is employed by a large public institution and has been directly responsible for advising a student organization for six to 10 years.
- Ella has been in the profession for two years and is employed at a private institution.

Advising is often considered the "universal task" in student affairs.

Emergent Themes

The data analysis revealed two categorical themes with a variety of elements within each category.

The first theme dealt with the process of knowledge acquisition related to being an advisor and how the individual applies knowledge to practice. Guided by the interview questions, each of the four participants articulated a process for how they learned their roles and how they applied that knowledge in practice.

An awareness of the relationship between the advisor and the constituents of a student organization emerged as the second theme within the data. Also guided by the interview questions, the participants voiced how they interact with individual members, the officer team and the entire organization.

The two categorical themes within the data introduce two models for understanding the complexity of establishing a relationship with a student organization and how knowledge concerning advising is acquired and applied in the field.

Acquisition and Application of Knowledge about Advising a Student Organization

The acquisition and application of knowledge related to advising theme revealed two specific components: the impact of a professional's exposure to advising and the resulting trial and error approach they used.

Exposure to Advising

Exposure and previous involvement in student organizations as an undergraduate influenced the techniques professionals used when working with student organizations. The participants consistently expressed role modeling and observation as methods of knowledge acquisition. A professional's exposure to advising as either a student or a professional impacts the decisions made about their own advising approach.

Rudy illustrated the importance of role modeling in how he learned to be an advisor, explaining, "Definitely [through] role modeling … I definitely have patterned a lot of my style, leadership style as well as advising style, after [the director of Student Activities at my undergrad institution] and I would say a few others along the way … I try to emulate.

Julia also shared the importance of role models when discussing how she learned to become an advisor, saying, "I … watched people, supervisors that I had. Especially in grad school, I started paying attention to them a lot more. I started a little bit in undergrad, just picking out things, what made that person so good … . I really just pay attention, I really watch things. I co-taught a leadership class with a supervisor of mine in grad school and … she would coach me through things, but it was watching her that really help[ed] … ."

Julia added that her observations helped her learn how to relate to students. She also incorporated what she thought were strong points of her advisors into her own style.

Julia and Rudy provide examples of how professionals rely on observation and mentoring to establish their advising approach. Literature on student organization advising affirms that the current approach to advising is based primarily on lived experiences and role modeling (Dunkel, 2004; Dunkel & Schuh, 1998). This study aimed to confirm that.

Trial and Error Approach

A connection that emerged within the data illustrated how the impact of using observation and role modeling as a method of knowledge acquisition leads to a trial and error approach in practice.

Another important aspect that needs to be addressed is the participants' initial comfort level with advising. They were asked to share if they felt prepared to advise a student organization and they expressed how they felt when they first began advising. Each shared a slightly different comfort level. Two participants said they did not feel prepared when they first began directly advising a student organization, with one saying, "No...I think I felt very thrown into the situation."

Another said that at first, he "thought [he] was totally prepared" and then "realize[d] ... I really didn't know what I thought I knew."

The lack of initial comfort with advising should be taken into consideration when addressing the emergent relationship between a professional's exposure to student organization advising and a trial and error approach in practice.

Peter expressed how he used the method of observation to apply those techniques to his professional role as an advisor, explaining, "I think by observing folks first and foremost, and for me that's how I've learned how to do anything. ... I cannot [effectively] learn by reading. I need to either learn by doing or ... I learn by watching and then I do."

Ella said, "[You] kind of do your best and learn from your mistakes, what works and what doesn't."

Julia added, "I think it was tough figuring out my role." She articulated a need for hands-on experience illustrating the trial and error approach. "... Going in and seeing what works ... I don't think that was received very well ... and now I don't do things like that," she said.

Rudy explained his trial and error approach, saying, " [I will] watch what you do, I'm going to copy that and then I would also say you know the book learning and the classroom learning has helped frame that—helped break it down, describe it, put it into a student affairs language to communicate with folks, but it really hasn't changed that much from the role modeling that was done."

The trial and error approach to advising has been proposed in the literature as an approach advisors use to figure out how to work with an organization (Dunkel & Schuh, 1998). However, the question that still needs to be answered is, if the advisor of a student organization is imitating the practice of another professional and adjusting that practice with trial and error techniques, at what point does the advisor establish their own approach to advising?

Relationship between the Advisor and Student Organization Constituents

Participants were asked to distinguish between how they interact with the individual members of the organization (including officers), the officer team, and the entire organization as a group. The resulting data were consistent among all four participants. They said they spend the majority of their time with individual members (including officers), engaging them in one-on-one meetings/discussions.

Ella described her relationship with individual members, saying, "I do start off every year when I have new students [by] having a one-on-one with my chairs and talking about expectations, and I send them an e-mail and let them know to come prepared with that ... . I try to have bi-weekly meetings to follow up with them."

A relationship with the officer team offers the opportunity for group communication where the advisors said they can be present and comment on the direction of the organization.

Ella added, "I do build close relationships with my chairs and the exec team [and] the vice president, but not as much with ... their individual committees."

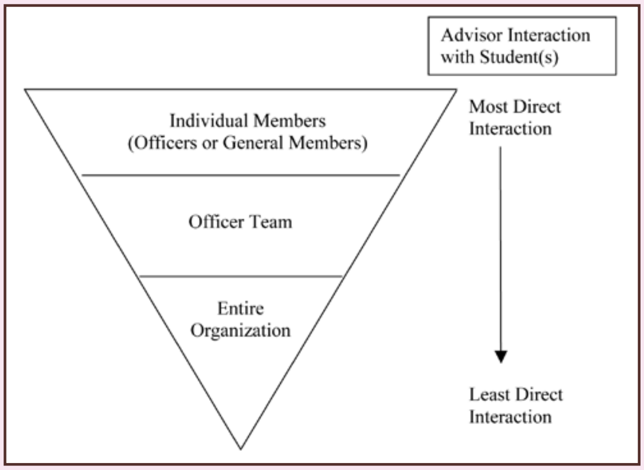
Participation with the entire organization is where the least amount of interaction occurs.

"So you know anytime you're dealing with a group of five or more, it's difficult to have a meaningful discussion," Peter said. "It's difficult to challenge just because of the size of the group and the background of individuals, so [when] sharing or communicating or advising a group, I tend to be more generic, more factual, more detailed, more black-and-white just because I realize how the group reacts to things ... ."

Commenting on the differences among these constituencies, Rudy said, "I'm a lot more communicative when they [students] are individual ... the organization is not mine ... I think that's their mechanism for find[ing] out about each other and practicing their leadership roles, so I think it's healthy for me to be a part of those [meetings], but I ... usually say I should only be at 50% of them."

The relationship between the advisor and the student organization constituents can be described through an inverted cone that illustrates how the interaction moves from the most direct interaction on an individual level to the least direct interaction with the entire organization. See Figure 1.

***Figure 1*. Relationship between an advisor and student organization constituents**



Concluding Observations

I believe this study provides an initial insight into how advisors of student organizations learn to advise these groups and how they apply that knowledge to practice. A limitation of the study is the size of the sample population. However, a unique aspect of the study is the consistency in the responses offered by the participants.

The emergent themes serve to confirm existing opinions in the field regarding how advisors learn and apply their knowledge about advising a student organization. Student affairs professionals are expected, in most cases, to have grounded their practice in theory (developmental, environmental, cultural, etc.). In student affairs practice, though, we often find that practice is based on lived experiences and not theory (Upcraft, 1994).

Baxter Magolda (2003) recognizes that "ironically, what educators expect of students and what educators provide as an educational context are often contradictory" (p. 235). She explains that students are rewarded for acquiring and reproducing knowledge (knowledge acquisition) and are not learning how to explore multiple perspectives to establish their own views (knowledge construction). This can be translated to the practice of student organization advising with the thought that the educator (advisor) expects that, under their guidance, the students will develop into self-authored individuals who can construct their own knowledge as an organization taking into account multiple perspectives to develop their own views, in which a rich discussion about the topic would evolve.

Emergent Themes of Study

- **Acquisition and application of knowledge about advising a student organization**
- **Relationship between the advisor and student organization constituents**

Instead, the advisor may be viewed as the authoritative figure that will provide information the students can acquire and reproduce to their peers (knowledge acquisition). The model illustrating the interaction between the advisor and the constituents may support the dissemination of knowledge from the advisor to their peers, rather than the advisor working on a more consistent level with each constituent group to ensure they are constructing their own knowledge and views.

Baxter Magolda (2004) advocates the goal for the 21st Century to be the adoption of self-authorship as the central goal of higher education. However, to situate student learning in the needs of the students, the educator must understand what it means to be self-authored. If the current advising approach consists of the mimicking of past experiences or the interpretation of a mentor's approach, what do professionals need in order to be able to transition from the practice of applying their own experiences to one in which they can use multiple perspectives to establish their own advising approach?

Further research needs to be done in order to understand how advisors self-report their individual advising approach. This study did not yield definite data on a specific advising approach; rather, it perhaps helped validate that advisors learn through role modeling and observation and helped provide a foundation upon which to understand the relationship between the advisor and the organization constituents. The results from this study have also been used to create a survey instrument to explore these issues through a national sample.

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