Eric White and Janet Schulenberg make the case that academic advisors have a particularly significant role to play in helping students reach higher-learning outcomes.

By Eric White and Janet Schulenberg

Academic Advising—
A Focus on Learning

“What major will get me the best job?”

“I’ll just take this class to get that requirement out of the way.”

“I want to drop this class because the professor doesn’t teach us anything. I guess she expects us to learn the material on our own.”

Such statements, common among college students, portray higher education as a credential accomplished by the passive completion of a set of prescribed tasks. They illustrate a student’s lack of awareness of the learning and changing that is supposed to occur as a result of his or her engagement with the curriculum and cocurriculum in higher education. Unfortunately, many students complete their college careers without having these fundamental assumptions challenged, and graduate as passive learners who are good at following formulas prescribed by others. Unless institutions make students aware of the larger learning outcomes, challenge and support students to achieve them, and demonstrate to students to what extent they are meeting these outcomes, this lack of awareness will persist.

While all college educators need to focus attention on helping students recognize and achieve the larger outcomes of higher education, academic advisors are in a strategic position to engage students in thinking about the larger purposes of their educations. Because academic advising is situated at the intersection of each student’s various educational experiences—from major to general education to experiential learning to cocurricular experiences—an advisor can focus students’ attention on their emerging skills in harnessing multiple ways of thinking and knowing, on connecting diverse learning experiences, and on translating skills across various settings. As Marc Lowenstein describes in his thought exercise, “Academic Advising at the University of Utopia,” when academic advising is conceived and supported as an educational endeavor, there is tremendous potential to produce college graduates who are able to integrate their educational experiences, reflect on their learning, and articulate and demonstrate their growth.

Members of NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising (formerly the National Academic Advising Association) have laid much of the groundwork for the transformative potential of academic advising through championing the role of advising as an educational endeavor. In tandem with a statement on its educational role, NACADA identified some potential learning outcomes of academic advising:
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The student learning outcomes of academic advising are guided by an institution’s mission, goals, curriculum, and cocurriculum. These outcomes, defined in an advising curriculum, articulate what students will demonstrate, know, value, and do as a result of participating in academic advising. Each institution must develop its own set of student learning outcomes and the methods to assess them. The following is a representative sample. Students will:

- craft a coherent educational plan based on assessment of abilities, aspirations, interests, and values
- use complex information from various sources to set goals, reach decisions, and achieve those goals
- assume responsibility for meeting academic program requirements
- articulate the meaning of higher education and the intent of the institution’s curriculum
- cultivate the intellectual habits that lead to a lifetime of learning
- behave as citizens who engage in the wider world around them

This sample of outcomes represents the ideal core of the academic advising experience. However, meeting this ideal across higher education institutions is still an unattained goal. Making a nationwide shift to implementing advising as an educational endeavor that supports achievement of this goal and measuring its outcomes entails understanding how the role of advising has changed over time and developing creative ways to measure higher-order learning.

**The Changing Focus of Academic Advising**

THE HISTORY OF ACADEMIC ADVISING has only recently been the focus of study in higher education. Janet Schulenberg and Marie Lindhorst describe the first conceptualization of academic advising as a source of guidance as students were given the chance to develop personalized courses of study in the late nineteenth century. The formal expansion of curricular choice at high-profile universities generated concern for students’ academic decision making. College faculty were concerned that students consult experts when making decisions about what subjects to study. The original intention of formalizing the advising relationship was that interaction between student and advisor (a faculty member or a dean of students) would help students construct meaningful and rigorous educational plans as they pursued personalized programs of study.

As overly flexible curricular choice was reined in through the development of general education programs and majors in disciplinary fields, the advisor’s role shifted to include conveying these requirements and documenting students’ progress. Unfortunately, this clerical role became the dominant activity for many advisers by the mid-1920s at many institutions, and continues to be the principal activity of advising in many settings. In fact, a survey of current advisor training programs described by Charlie Nutt shows that...
many new advisor training programs focus exclusively on the “to-do” list of degree requirements that students must complete, with little or no acknowledgment of the conversation about academic decisions that is supposed to undergird that work.

As institutions asked more and more of faculty during the mid-twentieth century, especially of those faculty at research universities, certain roles, such as that of academic advisor, were correspondingly diminished. By the 1960s, many institutions added a complement of staff advisors to the cadre of faculty who were called on to advise. These advisors came from student personnel or counseling fields and brought their theoretical perspectives with them. Many of the first primary-duty advisors adopted a view of academic advising as an endeavor to facilitate student psychosocial development. The “developmental” focus on the “whole student” became a distinctive rallying point for those whose primary role was to advise, and was used to contrast the “prescriptive” model, which was often equated with a cartoonish version of advising at its worst.

Consistent with the counseling focus of its first full-time practitioners, the scholarship conducted around academic advising focused heavily on psychosocial issues and methods. Outcomes were thought to be measurable using standard quantitative psychological tools and theories. Since advising was equated with counseling, learning outcomes were not explicitly considered, and instead, outcomes regarding perceptions were measured. At many institutions today, this “developmental” perspective has become synonymous with paying individual attention to students, and measurement of outcomes tends to focus on student perceptions and satisfaction. Critics of developmental advising models have pointed out the de-emphasis on academic learning compared to inter- and intrapersonal development.

In recent years, however, a different perspective on advising has become prominent—that advising is primarily an educational endeavor. Adoption of the logical outcomes of this perspective is not unanimous, but there is a growing consensus that advising should focus on student learning. Martha Hemwall and Kent Trachte contend that:

... academic advisors should engage their advisees in dialogue about the purpose and meaning of course requirements. They should talk with advisees about the educational goals, and related values, of the curriculum. Advisors need to help students understand why “citizens of the world” should understand different ways of thinking about the world... advisors [should] prompt advisees to engage in critical self-reflection or to see connection between ideas and consequent action. (pp. 8–9)

Today it is the role of the academic advisor to teach students how to put together a course of study that is individually meaningful. This work is accomplished in an increasingly complex system, which is often incomprehensible or mysterious to students and misunderstood by the world at large. As part of this process, the advisor must help students discover the structure and rationale for the curriculum they have chosen. Certainly advising involves the relay of some factual and procedural information, and also engages the student in developmental processes as they become more independent in their decision making. But it is primarily an educational endeavor meant to help students come to new understandings about their own academic journey, and develop skills to inform other decisions they make in the future.

NACADA’s learning outcomes challenge conceptions of academic advising as the clerical monitoring of degree requirements. The learning outcomes also push beyond the traditional “developmental” model of academic advising. The higher learning goals of advising are consistent with those articulated for higher education; for example, they align with the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (1LEAP) Principles articulated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. It is every educator’s responsibility to help students recognize and achieve these goals, but the academic advisor is positioned as the one universally present institutional representative who can ask a student to synthesize the entirety of his or her learning experiences.

Academic advising has evolved into a multifaceted endeavor carried out by both academic faculty and other educators. NACADA represents one of the largest student-oriented associations in higher education. The vast majority of its 10,000 members practice advising as their primary institutional duty, although faculty advisors and administrators are also active members of the association. It is not clear how many academic advisors there are nationally, though it is suspected this figure represents only the “tip of the iceberg” of advisors on college and university campuses. Many with primary duties beyond advising are not members, nor are the vast majority of faculty whose duties include advising. Academic advisors thus represent a very large constituency on college campuses across the nation. With tens of thousands of academic advisors in place and thousands of hours spent advising students, the
question of what students are learning in these contacts is not trivial.

**Measuring Learning Outcomes for Academic Advising**

How to assess whether a student can articulate the meaning of higher education and the intent of the institution’s curriculum is far more complex than knowing that a student is aware of a last day in a semester to drop a course or that they found their advisor to be knowledgeable and friendly. The challenge of measuring complex learning is one that is shared by all educators. But just as academic advisors are positioned to challenge students to recognize and achieve these larger outcomes, they are also positioned to observe their success in doing so. Producing convincing evidence that these outcomes have been achieved is still the challenge ahead for both advising and higher education. What academic advising does to address the measurement of learning outcomes can provide others with a relevant template for their own field, and those developed in other areas can inform measurement of advising outcomes.

The assessment literature in academic advising reflects the changing perspectives on the field. In its early days, when advising was more of a clerical, procedural process, advising was assessed for the accuracy of information provided to students and availability of the advisor. Satisfaction surveys were de rigueur, and still are in many places. As the developmental perspective of advising gained dominance, measures of advising’s effect focused on students’ psychosocial development and were heavily influenced by common research methods used in psychological studies.

Certainly accurate information is a necessary component of any interaction with students in higher education, be it in the classroom or cocurricular and advising settings. However, surveying students’ perceptions of the accuracy of the information they have received does not measure the kind of learning that should occur in an academic advising setting. For example, while accuracy of information and availability of the advisor are important concerns, we view them as similar to a course instructor conveying current information and being present in class and for office hours. Both are necessary, but not sufficient, to facilitate student learning. We all understand that course grades and teaching satisfaction surveys are not measures of student learning; the same is true for graduation rates and satisfaction surveys of advising.

The challenge of coming to grips with the questions about learning outcomes is twofold: (1) each institution needs to accept advising as an educational endeavor and identify the relevant learning outcomes and (2) reliable and valid methods to determine if these outcomes that have been met need to be developed.

While the potential range of learning outcomes is wide, all advisors acknowledge that there is a certain amount of administrative minutia that all students need to know to be successful students. How students come to know of these rules, regulations, and policies is determined by how the institution wants this knowledge imparted. Some of this can be communicated in one-to-one sessions with advisors, but much of it now is on multiple websites functioning like textbooks where students are encouraged to go to do their “homework.” Starting first with the very obvious (learning the rules and policies of the institution) provides a foundation on which to add more substantive outcomes. The task of assessing whether or not a student can access the basic policies and procedures of their college can be handled with the same kind of test that might ask a student who signed the Emancipation Proclamation, when did Shakespeare live, or what is Margaret Mead known for studying. There is little doubt that students need to know when a major can be declared, what the general education requirements are for a specific program of study, or what cumulative grade point average is needed to maintain enrollment in a particular major. Institutions can either provide students with these facts or show them how to access them in either printed or online manuals.

At the other end of the spectrum are the outcomes that require more than the memorization of facts or even the knowledge of where the facts might be located. For example, measuring that students have crafted a coherent educational plan based on an assess-
Advising must help students see beyond their immediate occupational goals to the world outside their jobs. They should be prepared to take their place as an active participant in a democratic society rather than as a passive consumer of civic goods and services.
through competitive scholarships to students enrolled in the Division. As part of the scholarship application process, students are asked to write an essay detailing what they have learned as a result of working with their academic advisors in the Division. Their consistent responses over the years, that advisors have helped them appreciate general education as more than something to “get out of the way,” have helped us better understand this population’s perspective on learning through advising.

Through this exploration process, students learn that the fields of studies open to them at a comprehensive research university are much wider than they imagined when they initially enrolled. They have learned to make appointments with their advisors to discuss their educational options and to describe their experiences in classes. Significantly, they often report that they have learned to view the relationship between their major choice and a future career choice as indirect, recognizing they have many options for majors that will lead to their first career choice or to a variety of occupational or avocational options. Students often use this scholarship application essay to describe their educational journeys and to recount how they have been able to see a world beyond their own major and career choice. In their writing, they have imagined themselves using their educational experiences to make societal contributions at the local, state, or national level, depending on their ambitions. Readers report that the essays indicate students have internalized many of the learning outcomes the Division has identified as important.

While not from a representative sample of exploratory students at Penn State, these essays provide interesting insights into the perspectives of a slice of the student population and yield more data than could be obtained from a typical focus group. Advisors interested in student self-report of learning might find such an approach useful. Other samples of student writing can be mined for additional data on student learning. For example, at the end of each academic orientation session at Penn State, students are asked to identify the most important concept or topic they learned from the session. The students’ responses suggest that many of the desired learning outcomes have been achieved and help the institution document student perceptions of learning from the orientation experience.

Academic majors designed by individual students are particularly rich sources of data about learning through advising. Often these programs of study have a great deal of flexibility and depend upon the student working closely with an advisor to craft a baccalaureate education suited to their skills and interests. Because these degrees typically carry general titles that may hold little meaning to the job market or to professional and graduate schools, the students must articulate their rationale for engaging in the activities that make up their educational experience. Typically students in individually designed majors are required to complete capstone projects that synthesize the learning they have achieved through such curricular and cocurricular experiences as undergraduate research, study abroad, or civic engagement. These projects are rich sources of evidence about student learning. Because students in these degree programs must build and maintain a close partnership with their advisor, the learning outcomes achieved can also be seen as a reflection of the educational role of academic advising. In fact, whenever students seek the counsel of academic advisors about deciding which courses to take, majors to declare, or cocurricular activities to participate in, the educative role of advising is enacted. The learning outcomes they achieve are, in part, a result of the work of advisors.

**Why Assess**

**CONTEMPORARY HIGHER EDUCATION FACES** increasing pressure from external sources to demonstrate accountability. As support for higher education dwindles at public institutions, and as every program, service, department, and unit may be asked to justify its existence, the activity of academic advising is not exempt from these pressures. With no one (or thing) to replace the staff academic advisor, with faculty advisors stretched to their limits not only with advisees but teaching and research responsibilities as well, with
technology not able to respond to the “human needs” components of advising, academic advising finds itself surviving within a environment of diminishing resources, having to do more with less, and, ironically, with greater student demands for contact.

Coupled with dwindling financial support for higher education is the phenomenon of rapidly rising tuitions and an economic climate of fewer jobs for college graduates who are burdened by historically high loan debt. It is of little wonder then that colleges and universities have been asked by those who pay the bills to account for themselves. Questions are being asked about how money is spent and, perhaps more fundamentally, just what students have learned after their investment of time and money.

However, these external pressures and calls for accountability are eclipsed by an even more pressing reason to assess student learning—to improve it. Assessment activities, such as those described here, lead to more purposeful academic work among students and to collaboration among educators to design these activities. Because assessment allows students to articulate the purpose, value, and logic of their educations, they are more likely to internalize these messages and, as future taxpayers and problem solvers, make more informed decisions about their levels of support for higher education. Academic advisors play an important role in helping students learn the higher purposes of their educations and in helping future policymakers see the value of college attendance.

CONCLUSION

TODAY, ACADEMIC ADVISORS have moved beyond the belief that the substance and sum of their roles is in creating and implementing a plan of action with a student or determining whether or not a student participates in a particular activity or takes a particular course. Some of the central work of an academic advisor now is helping students draft semester-by-semester curricular plans and engage in cocurricular activities and then in developing plans to assess the learning that emerges from these experiences. The profession of academic advising is now based on the assumption that student learning transcends mere participation and must be measured by more than credits earned or number of activities attended. During today’s advising sessions, students ideally learn relevant academic policies and, at the same time, consider how their learning in one class complements their learning in another. They should also come to a deeper understanding of the rationale underlying their chosen curriculum, put their current academic decisions into the context of their previous experiences, reflect on a growing recognition of their intellectual interests, discuss the external and internal factors that affect their academic goals, practice the habits of lifelong learning, take charge of and assess the quality of their own educations, and make adjustments as necessary. The advisor’s responsibility in that relationship is to focus on the learning students accomplish and to help institutions develop rich approaches to capturing that learning.

Notes
