

# Thriving in Academe

## RELATIONAL ADVISING

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education ([www.podnetwork.org](http://www.podnetwork.org)). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson ([drobert@fiu.edu](mailto:drobert@fiu.edu)) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery ([mflannery@nea.org](mailto:mflannery@nea.org)) at NEA.

## ■ Relational Advising

As academic advisors, we aspire to promote self-esteem, encourage intellectual growth and inspire curiosity. But we often find ourselves crunched for time and overwhelmed with wearisome tasks like scheduling classes and signing forms. How can we rethink our roles?

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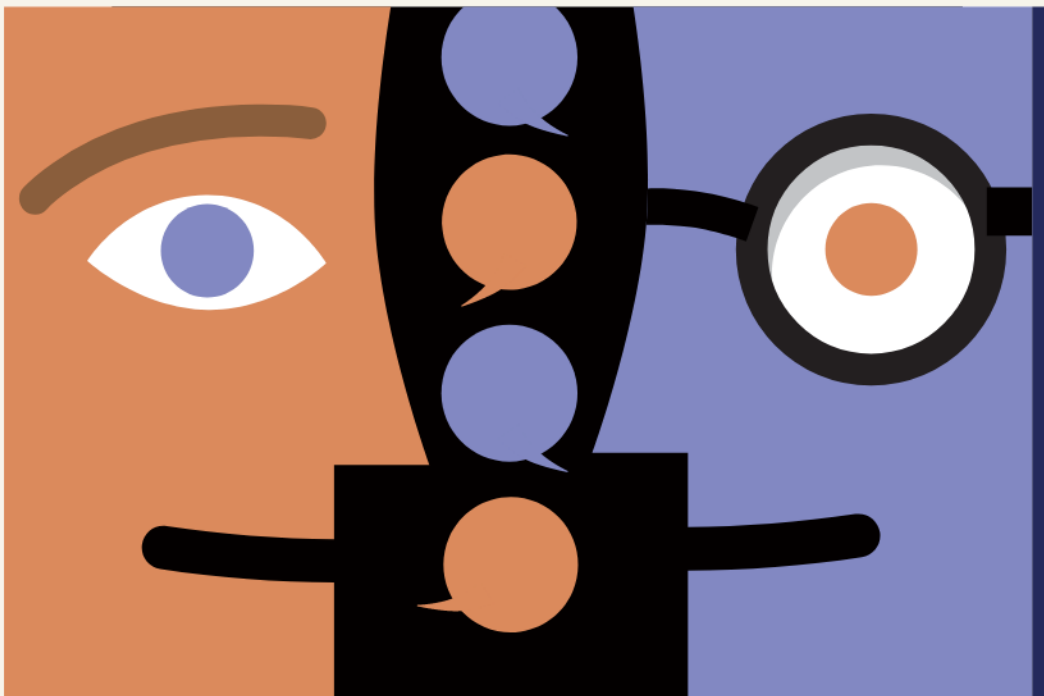
Academic advising is a primary factor in undergraduate retention, student success, and student satisfaction. Many faculty and professional advisors recognize we play more than an administrative role, and that our advising relationships support intellectual growth and academic success. However, most of us also complain of inadequate professional development and reward to support quality advising. Most advisors also report vague or even conflicting expectations at their institutions (NACADA, 2011). Perhaps what is needed is a shift in perspective. By thinking of ourselves as *relational advisors*, we can become more intentional and effective in our main goals, which are not to schedule classes or keep students “on track,” but to foster learning and growth. So what is a relational advisor?

### Traditional Models

For the past four decades, the scholarship and practice of advising have been

dominated by the *developmental* approach. Many point to Crookston’s 1972 essay as introducing the concept and indicating a paradigm shift. Crookston described developmental advising as “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). This was in contrast to *prescriptive advising*, which focused on disseminating information and keeping records of students’ academic progress.

Most advisors today would agree that pure prescriptive advising, without developmental support, is rare; the developmental approach is what they practice. However, we have found evidence in the literature and our own interactions with colleagues and students that when asked to describe advising, most focus on prescriptive tasks such



## Meet Jennifer Snyder-Duch and Harriet L. Schwartz



**Jennifer Snyder-Duch, PhD**, is associate professor of communication at Carlow University in Pittsburgh, PA. Her teaching, research and outreach focus on media criticism, media advocacy, and youth media. **Harriet L. Schwartz, PhD**, is associate professor of psychology and counseling at Carlow University and Lead Scholar for Education as Relational Practice for the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute. She has authored and co-authored several journal articles in the areas of teaching as relational practice and qualitative research methods. *Schwartz and Snyder-Duch have just co-edited a monograph on teaching and emotion for the Jossey-Bass series New Directions for Teaching and Learning.*

as scheduling and understanding university policies. Further, in the literature, advising scholars and practitioners still strive to conceptualize the developmental approach. Although the scholarship is vast and worthwhile, something is missing in our collective understanding of quality advising. We believe that one glaring problem is the lack of focus on the advisor-advisee *relationship*. We propose that the relationship is, in fact, the most important factor in effective undergraduate advising, not the tasks, nor the interpersonal style of the advisor, nor even the developmental process.

Academic advising is a relational practice.

### Relational Practice

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) supports a message that many of us wish our advisees and administrators would take to heart—that the connections students make with us and others in their learning communities will help them to overcome obstacles, clarify direction, and thrive on their academic journey. Created by Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues in the 1980s, RCT proposes that people are at their best and healthiest when they engage in growth-producing relationships. This is contrary to typical human development theories which purport that we are at our most developed

when we make it on our own. RCT indicates that this growth is driven by and evidence of *The Five Good Things*: energy, self-esteem, knowledge, ability to take action, and desire for more connection.

## TALES FROM REAL LIFE > CONNECTING WITH ADVISEES

A colleague once told me she thought of advising as moving students toward independence. As they progressed through college, she felt she should see them less often because they have learned the ropes. Advising as relational practice has

us seeing differently. It does not highlight student autonomy as the primary outcome of advisor-advisee interactions. Meaningful connections with advisors— even brief exchanges—may give upper-class students, with typically increased workloads and more

challenging school-life balance, the support they need to move forward. As I have made the transformation to a more relational approach, I now notice the email updates from advisees who are studying abroad, the unsolicited questions about grad school applica-

tions or job interviews, and the office pop-ins— “I noticed your door was open...”— as indications of a good advising relationship. RCT supports the idea that the desire for more connection is central to advising— not merely the icing on the cake as some might view it, or

additional work/stress as others may suggest. I recognize in myself that I have a positive reaction to these types of connections; they make me feel a little more zest for what I do and reinforce my commitment as an educator.

Scholar-practitioners applying RCT in education have used it to consider pre-college areas such as school counseling and youth mentoring as well as in higher education to improve teaching, career counseling, and understanding of the student experience. The theory and related research provides students and advisors with a message that challenges the championing of the rugged individual and instead celebrates the wisdom of reaching out. RCT also reminds advisors to remain cognizant of cultural context, an awareness that may assist our work with students of color, students in poverty, women, immigrants, and LGBTQ students – all who may experience our institutions, including faculty and staff, differently than majority students.

## Being a Relational Advisor

The developmental approach views the student as active in her learning; relies less on the authority of the advisor and more on negotiation and trust; focuses on students' strengths and interests rather than deficiencies; and emphasizes growth rather than grades and degrees.

Research suggests that this work helps students persevere, engage with critical feedback, and see themselves as active participants in their own learning. But what does this look like in advising practice?

**Energy and Self-esteem.** In an advising session, your attention might be on the practical goal of class registration, for example, but be careful not to ignore what

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might happen in the conversation around that task. If you show interest in what students say they are experiencing in and out of the classroom, this is more than small talk or ice-breaking. Research shows students are likely to feel a boost of energy and self-esteem by having their ideas validated and by talking about something that interests them, one-on-one, with a faculty member who is equally engaged.

**Mutuality.** RCT posits that both people in a growth-producing relationship experience positive elements. This is not acknowledged much in advising literature where the focus is on student development. We find that recognizing the mutuality of advising relationships has a positive effect on our practice. We often get excited when advisees share what they are learning. We feel energized by learning something new and witnessing a student's interest in learning. In addition, our self-worth is increased when students reach out to initiate engagement, demonstrate an understanding of our disciplines, or take our advice.

For us, conversations with advisees deepen our understanding of student needs. We

can learn from their struggles and improve our advising practice, assess the strengths and weaknesses of our curricula, or make suggestions to student support staff. Advising also contributes to our teaching as we are reminded of the big picture—students' curriculum and co-curricular activities—so we can teach our courses as connected to their full learning experience.

This dynamic is well explained by Douglas Robertson's (2001) model of teacher/learner-centeredness, which would describe the advisor-advisee relationship as intersubjective with advisors "attending to both their own and their students' emotional life and the way in which they interact and influence each other" (p. 10).

**Advising Episodes.** The usual advice on advising implies that effective relationships are long-term and time-intensive. However, as Schwartz and Holloway (2014) found in their study of graduate students' relationships with faculty, growth-producing advising relationships need not be long-term or very personal. A single interaction has the potential to produce *The Five Good Things*. An effective invitation to connect, engaged presence, care, and enthusiasm can turn even brief exchanges into meaningful encounters for students.

**Self-reflection.** "Relational practice is not a series of steps but rather a stance we take as we engage with our students" (Schwartz & Holloway, 2014, p. 14). Being a relational advisor demands we reflect on our practice

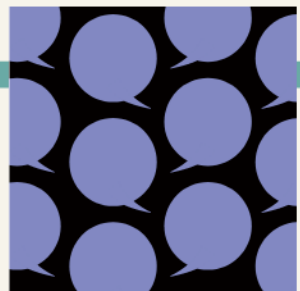
## BEST PRACTICES > HOW TO GET STARTED

How can colleges and universities begin to integrate Relational Practice into professional development for advisors?

- RCT practitioner Kristen Shrewsbury at James Madison University reports: "We invited advisors from across campus...together for a Relational Cultural Theory-informed webinar series. This fostered

stronger relationships among advisors while we learned about RCT and addressing the pain of social exclusion (e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia). We then were able to consider how this knowledge supports our daily efforts. I've also been invited to NACADA webinars with the same cross-campus advisors."

- At Carlow University, we held a professional development session on relational advising to encourage faculty to consider how the advising space can be a safe space for struggling students as well as for students who wish to try on academic and career goals that may seem out of reach. We also explored the rela-



tional advising space as a source of continuity for students throughout their college career, and the role of advisors as mentors who can suggest opportunities and potentials that advisees cannot yet see for themselves.

and view *the Five Good Things* as central to every advising relationship, formal or not, long-term or brief. We (and our institutions) must avoid seeing ourselves primarily as a content authority, or even as a guide to academic success. Rather, we acknowledge our role as collaborator and recognize the significance of our relationship, not just our advice, in advisees' college experience.

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### Institutional Culture

While our goal here is to encourage advisors to rethink their role and encourage a relational approach, we certainly recognize the need for institutional support. Academic advising is a part of the workload for faculty at many institutions. Some value the time spent with advisees and even see their role as advisor as supporting their university's mission. Others view it as a burden on top of heavy teaching, service and research obligations. Even the most committed advisors will burn out easily if not supported by a culture that values faculty-student relationships. Evidence points to the positive role of academic advising in retention, and RCT provides a framework to understand this dynamic. This should get the attention of administrators and allow us to advocate for more and better quality professional development and more faculty time for relational advising in order to see an effect on retention.

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### ISSUES TO CONSIDER

#### **BUT I'M NOT A THERAPIST... HOW CAN I BE A RELATIONAL ADVISOR?**

Some advisors prefer to stick with the administrative side of the job. Listening to a student discuss anything from roommate problems to loss of a loved one can be overwhelming and can leave advisors unclear about their role. We asked Erica J. Seidel, Psy.D., an assistant professor at the City University of New York's Borough of Manhattan Community College and a private practice therapist, for guidance:

**Q: When a student brings up a personal problem, how do I know when to provide support and when to refer to counseling?**

EJS: A strong relationship between an advisor and student can have an enormously positive impact on a student's educational experience. It is healthy for advisees to talk about their personal lives. Like all of us, students benefit from authentic connec-

tions – there is tremendous value in simply being heard and feeling like you matter to someone. Listen to the student, show respect, be non-judgmental and express genuine care and concern. You don't need to be a mental health professional to establish a relationship that can make a difference.

However, when students consistently move the conversation away from advisement and onto personal issues, they may be sending the message that they need additional support. A referral to the counseling center is appropriate. In addition, any time you suspect that a student might hurt him or herself or someone else, refer to a counselor.

**Q: Supporting students who are dealing with personal challenges, even when appropriate, can be draining. Any advice on how to handle this?**

EJS: Stay attuned to your own need for support. Engage in activities you enjoy, however brief, to bring balance and relief into your workday. Take a walk, talk with a colleague,



call a loved one, stretch – find strategies that work for you and practice them daily. Taking care of yourself is an ongoing effort so don't wait for a particularly stressful day to set up a routine. And don't underestimate the power of mindful breathing, which can be practiced anywhere.

**Q: Is it appropriate for advisors to self-disclose our own similar struggles when we think it might help a student?**

EJS: Everyone faces difficult times. It may be validating for a student to hear about how you dealt with some of your own similar struggles. Your goal is to be helpful to students without burdening them with unnecessary personal information or shifting the focus to your experience. Avoid being too specific about your personal life and aim for examples that students can relate to.

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