

Is Advising Teaching? A Cognitive Information Processing Approach

Background

For years there has been a dilemma in the field of Academic Advising. This dilemma is illustrated by a question that is often asked and often danced around, “Is advising teaching?” The common answers to this question are at the root of the dilemma because they vary and depend on the perspective and situation of the person answering it. In short, many administrators and advisors feel as though advising is little more than a prescriptive exercise wherein an advisor authoritatively informs a student of what is required and then the student complies with little thought. Other advisors, typically those which have advising as a primary role, tend to express that advising sessions should not be inherently prescriptive. They believe that advising visits should focus more on developing a partnership between advisor and student. This way they set complimentary goals and better understand the role of each party in reaching them. Ultimately these professionals contend that advising students is really teaching and should employ learning theory. In essence, their goal is to teach students *how to go to college*.

While it is understood that there are situations when it is appropriate for advising sessions to be more prescriptive in nature, especially in early contact, advising in general should be viewed through the lens of the developmental advising paradigm. In this way there is an understanding that advising is teaching and an advisor/student partnership will develop as early prescriptive visits move to more developmental interaction.

New Student Orientation – A Prescriptive Approach

With the goal of teaching students how to go to college, it seems clear that an advisor, with the goal of developing a partnership with their advisees, should be familiar with the stages of information processing. When students begin their college career they are often overwhelmed while trying to make sense of all of the messages with which they are bombarded. From an advisor’s perspective, there are specific messages that are the most important for new students. Typically the advisor/student partnership begins at the new student orientation session which is designed and coordinated by advisors. It is during the new student orientation that advisors do what they can to see that the students obtain the information that they need in order to be successful students. There are many competing messages presented to the students at this time as well. They walk down hallways of voices trying to recruit them to this organization or that. Many students are there with parents who have their own agenda for their child. Advisors serving as the orientation staff need to be able to cut through all of this and capture the attention of the student.

The first strategy for this is to appeal to the sensory memory of the students by dimming the lights and beginning a light-hearted video production which introduces a group of student leaders, called the A-team, which have been extensively trained to assist in the orientation effort. Upon the completion of the video, the A-team is introduced again in person. This is done in a repetitive effort to help the names, faces and duties of the A-team move past sensory memory to their short-term memory because it is from these students that they will be instructed regarding a number of important procedural tasks a few hours later. It has also become clear that most of the new students are quite interested in the members of the A-team because they see them as what they want to become; comfortable, content and fitting in.

Additional efforts are made throughout the orientation event to push things from sensory to short-term memory. Whenever possible new students are encouraged to interact with the A-team who continually reinforce, in matter-of-fact way, what is most important. In small groups, a member of the A-team explains to the new students how to use available resources such as the general catalog, course schedule, university website and also the importance of and how to visit with their advisor.

The culminating activity of the event comes when the new students are given the opportunity to visit with their academic advisor. This visit is highly prescriptive in nature due to the large number of students. The simple goal of this advising session is to help new students obtain the classes they need for their first semester and help them feel as though they have truly accomplished something positive.

Intrusive Advising – Moving Along the Continuum

The responsibility of initiating the next advising visit is still largely that of the advisor and must come shortly after the orientation experience. Intrusive advising, an approach which requires advisor initiative, includes such things as a personalized email, letter, or even phone call from the advisor to the student to invite them in for their next appointment. This next appointment should ideally take place well before the registration period for the next semester's classes. The visit is meant to reinforce what the students were presented with at their orientation session before it is completely forgotten and focuses on what is next expected of the student. The session begins with a friendly, get-to-know-you conversation and rather than just listing required courses for the student, the advisor covers the course options along with an explanation of each course and what the student can expect to cover. It is wise for the advisor to make notes in the student's file regarding what is learned about the student for future reference. In the latter part of the visit there is typically a quick overview of the registration procedure and a few minutes are spent discussing the role of both the student and advisor along with what each can expect from one another. A future appointment is set and the advisor commits to follow up with the student in a few weeks to make sure that the registration procedure went well and the student is encouraged to contact the advisor with any questions.

At this point it is common for students with questions to contact their advisor.

Intrusive Advising moving to a Developmental Partnership.