Academic Advising for the Liberal Arts and Sciences

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Abstract. In this article, I provide an overview of academic advising in the United States, articulate a definition of academic advising for the liberal arts and sciences and defend three theses about the role of academic advising in promoting the sorts of critical thinking and civic engagement that makes the liberal arts and sciences an important catalyst for social and political change. First, I argue that academic advising is essential to the effective implementation of a liberal arts and sciences education and so, even if it were not a part of the concept of the liberal arts and sciences, it is essential to the realization of that concept. Second, I argue that advising is a part of the concept of a liberal arts and sciences education because of the role it plays in student-centered pedagogy, which is a cornerstone of the liberal arts and sciences. Finally, I argue that student-centered pedagogy is not limited to the classroom context, that it includes extra- and co-curricular life, and so our account of liberal arts and sciences education needs to be expanded. These three theses constitute a series of increasingly robust challenges to the model of liberal arts and sciences education developed by Jonathan Becker in "Liberal Arts and Sciences Education: Responding to the Challenges of the XXIst Century" and, for educators who have been trained in the Humboltian/European tradition, provide some practical lessons in the development and implementation of that model.

Keywords: academic advising; advising; co-curriculum; extra-curriculum; liberal arts and sciences education; student-centered pedagogy.

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In his defense of the role that a liberal arts and sciences education can play in the civic and economic well-being of a society, Jonathan Becker writes that a "Modern liberal arts and sciences education is … distinguished by a flexible curriculum that demands breadth as well as depth of study, encourages inter-disciplinarity, and enables student choice;" and he argues that this "is realized through a student-centered pedagogy that is interactive and requires students to engage directly with texts within and outside of the classroom" [Becker, 2015. P. 36].This account is accurate but incomplete: it elides the essential role that academic advising plays in a liberal arts and sciences education. To the extent thatBecker's paper serves as a blueprint of sorts for the development of liberal arts and sciences education for educators who have been trained in the Humbolt-

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ian/European tradition, it is important to correct this omission. In this note, then, which is intended to be a friendly amendment to Becker's analysis, I argue for the relevance of academic advising to a liberal arts and sciences (hereafter LAS) education. After developing an account of academic advising for the liberal arts and sciences, I defend three theses about the relationship between advising and LAS. The first claim—that academic advising is essential to the effective implementation of a liberal arts and sciences education—invites us to consider the academic adviser as a sort of curricular guide. The second claim, that the concept of student-centered pedagogy ought to be expanded to include academic advising, invites us to consider advising to be a kind of student-centered instruction. Finally, after having established that student-centered pedagogy is not limited to the classroom context, I introduce a more expansive notion of LAS that, while consistent with Becker's characterization, draws our attention to other ways in which a liberal arts and sciences education promotes the critical thinking and civic engagement that makes LAS education an important catalyst for social and political change.

1. What is academic advising?

We have a working definition of liberal arts and sciences education; we need now a definition of "academic advising." A brief history of American higher education will help us gain some purchase on the matter. Colleges of the 18th and 19th centuries were small, organized residential associations in which students lived and studied communally. This was a holistic educational experience in which college presidents and faculty oversaw extracurricular as well as academic activities and, acting *in loco parentis*, were responsible for the moral and personal wellbeing of the students. By the late 19th century, the size and diversity of the student body made this system impractical: instructors and college presidents simply could not tend to both their curricular and extra-curricular duties and, as a result, specialized advising appointments were made. These specialized advisers were typically called deans[1] and were, almost without exception, appointed from within faculty ranks. By the mid-20th century, as the student body became more diverse and academic training become more specialized, the need for specialization became even more pronounced, yielding a division between academic advising, which focuses on counseling students with regard to curricular issues and intellectual development, and personal advising, which focuses on personal issues and moral development.[2]

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[1] Terminology varies: in some places, they were called wardens and in others, advisers or faculty advisers. See [Cook, 2001] for more on these terminological variations.

[2] [Brubacher, Rudy, 1999] provides an excellent overview of the history of American higher education.

While there is a great deal of variety in the manner of implementation,[3] virtually all LAS institutions offer these twin modes of advising. The reason for this is straightforward: given the open and flexible nature of the LAS curriculum—given the agency the student exercises throughout the process, from the choice of a major to the choice of electives to the organization of a program of study—students require guidance and support in making informed and sensible decisions. With this in mind, let us offer an initial characterization of academic advising as *the practice of guiding college students in their intellectual development and curricular choices*.

This characterization is not fine-tuned enough to suit our needs, however, for it leaves undefined the key notion of guiding students. The standard distinction drawn in discussions of academic advising is one between *prescriptive advising* and *developmental advising*.[4]The prescriptive advising model conceives of the adviser as a provider of instructions or directions. It focuses on helping students complete the curriculum and is characterized by a "top-down approach; hierarchical relationship [between adviser and advisee]; one-directional flow of information and ideas, and the student as passive recipient" [Lowenstein,1999]. A typical prescriptive advising session involves closed questions ("have you taken a class that satisfies your science requirement?") and instructions ("you need to do so before you graduate").

The developmental model, by contrast, conceives of the adviser and advisee as equal partners in a conversation. It focuses on "facilitating the student's rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills" [Crookston, 1972. P. 12].Based on research in behavioral sciences and student personnel theory, it is student centered and involves open questions and an open domain of discourse. It assumes that "students are developing organisms demanding a personalized learning experience if they are to profit from college," [Brubacher, Rudy, 1999. P. 334] and focuses not just on the curricular options open to students, but on the social, emotional, and intellectual contexts of students' lives.

While this distinction grounds the contemporary literature on models of academic advising, it is reasonably viewed as being too reductive, and a number of additional alternatives to prescriptive advising have been developed; these include the *engagement model*[-Yarbrough, 2002] and the *collaborative model* [Lowenstein, 1999]. For present purposes, we needn't be concerned with the differences among these non-prescriptive models, which are minor and tend to focus on the components of the advising session.The salient point for us is that, while prescriptive advising is curriculum-centered, non-prescriptive is student-centered: it focuses on helping students develop "the skills and behaviors needed to become a learner and expands the domain of concern to include learning through the whole college experience" [Melander, 2002] (quot. in [Church, 2005]).

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[3] With refreshing clarity, the University of Oxford employs *academic tutors* and *moral tutors*. Harvard has advisory teams of *class advisors*, who provide academic advising, and *class deans*, who provide personal advising. Yale has *class advisors* (academic advisors) and *class counselors* (personal advisors). Other models include *faculty advisors*or (*professional*) *academic advisors*, on the one hand, and *deans of students* or *deans of student life*, on the other. See [Cook, 2001; Brubacher, Rudy, 1999] for more on these models and on the varied nomenclature.

[4] The distinction, first articulated by Burns Crookston and, independently, by Terry O'Banion, has formed the basis of virtually all discussion of academic advising since then. See [Crookston, 1972; O'Banion, 1972].

When we talk about academic advising, then, the sort of advising we have in mind is non-prescriptive, student-centered advising:[5]*the practice of guiding college students in their intellectual development and curricular choices by fostering the development of the skills and behaviors needed to become a learner through the whole college experience*.[6]

2. The role of advising in implementing LAS

Given this account of academic advising, and given our working definition of LAS, it should be evident that academic advising plays a central role in the implementation of a liberal arts and sciences curriculum. Indeed it seems peculiar even to set out the argument for this claim: the LAS model of education asserts that students have choices to make within a flexible curriculum, and the student-centered model of advising is all about guiding student choice and decision making. These choices range from the identification of a major program of study, to decisions about when and how to fulfill general education/distribution requirements, to strategies for balancing depth and breadth of study. Academic advisors help students recognize moments when these decisions need to be made and help them make informed choices. In this regard, advisers are guides, responsible for helping students understand and exercise their options and, more generally, to understand and utilize the liberal arts and sciences curriculum.[7]

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[5] *Intrusive advising* and *appreciative advising* are often discussed as alternatives to these models. Since they are compatible with the developmental model and, indeed, compatible with one another. However, they are better conceived of as modes of delivering student-centered advising rather than alternatives to it.

[6] Other considerations relevant to the development of an advising system (but not relevant to the present paper) include structure (faculty advisers, advising office, or mixed system) and, as observed in the previous note, the nature of the engagement with the student.

[7] Cathleen Smith and Janine Allen's study of over 2,000 college students demonstrates the relevance of academic advising to the development of

Without such guidance, students would enjoy only the most minimal of benefits of the LAS curriculum and might not enjoy them at all. While it is possible that students might avail themselves of the options and opportunities the LAS curriculum presents to them without such guidance, it is unlikely. It would require knowledge of the content and methodology of academic disciplines with which they are unfamiliar, understanding of their own learning strengths and weaknesses, an awareness of the curricular implications of course selection, and so on. It would require, too, an understanding of the complexities of particular programmatic structures and how to work within them. At my institution, for instance, students do not simply declare a major, as is the case at other colleges and universities. Rather, they go through a formal process called moderation,[8] for which they prepare written materials and have taken particular classes in their intended program of study, and for which they must begin preparing at least a semester in advance. It is simply unrealistic to expect students to understand and manage such things without assistance, especially if those students come from educational cultures that do not prepare them for the kind of study required by a liberal arts and sciences curriculum.

To this end, it is worth noting that academic advising is positively correlated with student satisfaction and persistence to graduation. Students, especially first-generation students, who do not have relationships with academic advisers are more likely to drop out of college before completing their studies.[9]This suggests that the guidance provided by academic advisers is essential to the successful implementation of LAS: without it, students will not reap the benefits of their education. In this regard, while academic advising may not be an essential feature of LAS, it is essential to accessing it, a necessary condition for LAS to thrive.

No surprise, then, that is so much attention paid in the US to academic advising for first-generation college students[10] and more generally, to students in their first years of study,[11] before they have chosen majors. This is the case at Ivy League universities like Princeton,

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what they call “cognitive maps,” or the ability to understand and utilize the curriculum. See[Smith, Allen, 2014].

[8] http://www.bard.edu/undergraduate/curriculum/moderation/

[9] See[Light, 2001] for more on the relevance of advising to student persistence and satisfaction generally. For more on the relationship between advising and retention for first-generation students in particular, see[Swecker, Fifolt, Searby, 2013].

[10] See for example the several articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education’s* series on Diversity in Higher Education devoted to “The Challenge of the First Generation Student” May 22, 2015.

[11] The National Resource Center for the First Year Experience (http://www.sc.edu/fye/) contains a vast repository of resources and programs designed especially for first-year students.

where freshman advisers help students who are new to college identify "opportunities for learning and personal growth … understand requirements, weigh [their] options and, ultimately, set [their] path"[12] and Stanford University, where "advisors work directly with [students] in one-on-one interactions to help [them] develop [their] scholarly interests … overcome obstacles… [and] take advantage of academic opportunities and resources outside of [their] major department."[13]It is true also at highly ranked liberal arts colleges like Williams College, where first-year advising is about the process of "exploring the intentions that each student has in structuring his/her first year; defining the values of a liberal education that are most important for each student [and] encouraging students to see the connections between the courses they are taking and other aspects of their life at Williams."[14]

This rationale for developing a substantive system of academic advising is especially relevant in the case of students who have been raised in the Humboltian/European educational tradition. Given their unfamiliarity with much of the form and content of the LAS curriculum, they are effectively first-generation students. They will have similar questions, concerns, and confusions about curricular options and requirements and require similar help in making informed decisions that will lead them to balanced programs of study. In short, their experiences will be virtually identical to the experiences of first-generation college students in the US and, like them, they will require especially attentive advising if they are to graduate.

3. The role of advising in a student-centered pedagogy

Having made a case for this minimal role for academic advising in LAS, I wish now to make a stronger claim: the advising relationship, properly conceived, is a student-centered instructional relationship and so ought to be considered a feature of LAS.

Our working definition of LAS includes student-centered pedagogy, in which "the classroom is not a one-way conveyor belt of knowledge from professor to student. Specifically, instruction does not simply consist of a teacher reading lectures to students, as is common throughout much of the world. Instead, learning within the classroom is an interactive process' [Becker, 2015. P. 44].To be sure, such a pedagogical approach is essential to a liberal arts and sciences classroom. But if student-centered education does not stop at the classroom door— if academic advising is, like classroom instruction, part of the interactive learning that is essential to LAS's student-centered pedagogy—then advising, too, is essential to LAS.

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[12] https://odoc.princeton.edu/advising

[13] https://undergrad.stanford.edu/advising/about-advising/advising-essentials-undergraduates

[14] http://dean.williams.edu/academic-advising-and-resources/

In the previous section, I characterized the adviser as a guide; I am now suggesting that the adviser is also an instructor. And just as an instructor in an LAS setting teaches not through lectures but through discussion and conversation, so does the adviser. This is the difference, discussed in section one, between prescriptive advising and student-centered advising, the difference between telling a student what classes to take and talking with a student about how to construct a program of study that allows the student to explore interests and deepen passions—to “climb inside [the advisee’s] head,” as Richard Light puts it [Light, 2001. P. 83]. It is worth noting in this context that Light’s study of the factors that promote success in college included interviews with a number of highly successful students (Rhodes and Marshall Scholarship winners) about the factors that promoted their success. Over 2/3 of them pointed to the fact that “at key points in their college years, an academic adviser asked questions, or posed a challenge, that forced them to *think about the relationship of their academic work to their personal lives*’ [Ibid. P. 88].[15]

Recall that student-centered advising is the practice of guiding college students in their intellectual development and curricular choices. In our characterization of advisers as guides, we were focused on curricular choice; when we think about advisers as instructors, we are focused on intellectual development. As Marc Lowenstein writes, the adviser who is focused on this aspect of her job “helps students put each part of the curriculum into perspective … helps the student focus on modes of learning that are being mastered and understand that intellectual growth involves mastering a variety of learning methods … [and] helps the student synthesize an overview of her or his education and gain an understanding of its structure or logic” [Lowenstein, 2005].

In performing the guidance function, the adviser helps the student access the LAS curriculum. In performing this educational function, the adviser helps the student learn the lessons of LAS, to recognize the value of the breadth, depth, choice, and flexibility of the curriculum. And if learning these lessons is a part of an LAS education then, insofar as these lessons are learned through the advisory relationship, advising is essential to LAS.

4. Advising and LAS reconceived

Becker’s definition of LAS privileges the classroom components of education: the curriculum (it must be flexible, demand breadth and depth of study, encourage inter-disciplinarity, and enable student choice) and pedagogy (it must be student-centered, interactive, and require students to engage directly with texts inside and outside the classroom). The argument that advising constitutes an instructional context invites us to reconsider the conceptual boundaries of a liberal arts and sciences education. If student-centered instruction—a cornerstone of LAS— takes place in an extra-curricular context, can we look beyond the classroom to find other markers of the liberal arts and sciences? I argue here that we can.

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[15] [Reinarz, Ehrlich, 2002. P. 53]yields a similar result: “Students reported receiving the most helpful advice on the general goals and benefits of a liberal arts education” even though “the predominant topics discussed with advisors concerned choice of courses for distribution requirements or ultimate career.”

As we saw in section 1, the nation's first colleges were organized residential associations in which students lived and studied communally and in which college presidents and faculty oversaw extracurricular as well as curricular activities and were responsible for the moral and personal wellbeing of the students. This role dissipated by the late 19th century, as the student body grew and became more diverse, and specialized advisers were introduced, yielding a divide between academic advising and personal advising.

What was an integrated function—educating the whole student—became a divided function and, as time wore on, this division became more pronounced. The result is the sort of thing we see in our initial account of LAS: a privileging of the curricular to the exclusion of the extra- or co-curricular.

What would it look like if we were to attempt a re-unification, if we were to heed the of American Association of Colleges and Universities' call for "a dramatic reorganization of undergraduate education to ensure that all college aspirants receive not just access to college, but an education of lasting value … that will promote the kind of learning students need to meet emerging challenges in the workplace, in a diverse democracy, and in an interconnected world" [Ramaley, Leskes, 2002]?[16]We would include in our accounts of student-centered pedagogy the sorts of teaching that occur outside of the classroom. This would include academic advising, as we saw earlier, and a host of other things that are not properly considered curricular.

It would include, for instance, extra-curricular activities like student government, Model UN, and debate. Participation in programs like these helps students gain important skills in critical reading, writing, and discourse, to evaluate evidence and craft and respond to arguments. It would include, too, participation in literary magazines, which teaches collaborative inquiry and provides students with the opportunities to teach as well as to be taught, and volunteer programs and civic engagement projects, which provide students an opportunity to consider issues from other points of view and to engage in political discourse. Extra-curricular activities like these provide a sort of living laboratory for students to test what they learn in the classroom and in addition, they are themselves opportunities for interactive learning outside of the classroom.

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[16] Interestingly, President Abbott Lawrence Lowell of Harvard set the goal of the American university in almost the same terms 100 years earlier: "The object of the undergraduate department is not to produce hermits, each imprisoned in his own intellectual pursuits, but men fitted to take their place in the community and live in contact with their fellow men [Brubacher, Rudy, 1999. P. 335].

It would also include campus life programs and structures: dormitories, dining halls, student centers, and so on. Consider the dormitory. If any aspect of contemporary college life is extra-curricular, residence life is. But dormitories still can serve the educational mission of the college. This is where students on a residential campus spend the vast majority of their time, after all—where they do their studying, write most of their papers, read most of their texts. If we treat the dormitory as a site of education, we open up new ways of engaging students. Many colleges and universities have living-learning communities, for example, and it is common for first-year experience programs to feature first-year interest groups ('figs')—thematically based residential units—or to have the residents of a dormitory enroll in several of the same classes, some of which might even take place in the dorm.[17]This has become increasingly popular in the last 10–15 years, but it is based on an old and familiar principle—the same one that informed the earliest colleges: organized residential associations that exist for the purpose of educating those who live in them.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that dormitories or dining halls are a necessary component of a liberal arts and sciences education. Indeed, in some places, a residential campus is neither practical nor possible. In such cases, it may be more challenging to foster interactive learning outside of the classroom, but it is by no means impossible. Student clubs can still meet in pubs, coffee shops and bookstores. Students can still organize politically and socially and they can still collaborate artistically and academically. What is important is that they have opportunities to be active agents in their learning and that such opportunities exist outside of the classroom as well as within it. We can still have *organized associations* of students even if they are not organized *residential* associations.

Nor am I suggesting that the classroom experience should cease to be of primary importance to LAS.I am suggesting that, while the classroom experience is a necessary part of LAS, it is not sufficient, that aspects of student life such as student clubs and, where possible, campus life structures such as student centers or dormitories, are also needed.I am suggesting that a liberal arts and sciences education consists of a classroom education *and* a complex of experiences, commonly caught up under the heading "student life," that LAS education takes place both inside the classroom and outside of the classroom.I do not claim that any one of these campus life experiences is necessary, but participation in student life is. What sets the classroom experience apart from campus life is that it is a necessary part of an education in LAS. Given the realities of contemporary higher education, however, it is insufficient to ground such an education.

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[17] See http://www.collegetransition.org/promisingpractices.research.learning-communities.html.

Much of this resonates with what Becker describes as the "benefits of the liberal arts wager."Indeed, there is a sense in which what I describe here as the non-curricular elements of a LAS education are part of his "'system" of education, by which [he means] "an ensemble of patterns' that determine the educational process, including the curriculum and pedagogy" [Becker, 2015. P. 36–37]. His salutary attitude towards debate and Model UN suggests that this is so, that he sees a role for extra-curricular programs such as these in a liberal arts and sciences education. Regardless, my point— and I think it does range beyond his—is that programs like these and also programs that are not so clearly tied to classroom experiences —likewise constitute a part of that ensemble of patterns. In their residence halls and dining commons, on student judicial and honor boards, on teams and in clubrooms, in fraternities and sororities, in social clubs and honor clubs—in all these ways, students learn how to interact with others, how to lead and be led, how to take their place in their communities. They learn nothing less than how to make sense of their place in the world, how to behave in adult society—they learn "to take their places in the community and to live in contact with their fellow men."

5. Conclusion

I began this paper by developing an account of academic advising for the liberal arts and sciences. This account is non-prescriptive and student-centered; it treats the student as an active agent in his/her education and it treats the adviser as a mentor to the student. I described how the adviser guides the student through the flexible curricula that are a hallmark of LAS and I claimed that this is essential for the successful implementation of LAS. I also argued that academic advising ought to be considered, along with flexible curricula and student-centered pedagogy, a part of LAS. These two claims—that academic advising is essential to the successful delivery of liberal arts and sciences education, and that academic advising can reasonably be considered integral to LAS—form the main thesis of this paper: academic advising is an essential component of a liberal arts and sciences education.

This led me to suggest that liberal arts and sciences education takes place outside of the classroom as well as within it. This is not to say that any particular extra-curricular program or structure is necessary, but that shared experiences outside of the classroom are. More needs to be said about this, of course and in particular about how to create opportunities for such experiences in non-residential LAS settings. This is not the place for that discussion; my point here is simply to invite the reader to consider the broader frameworks in which liberal arts and sciences curricula flourish and, in particular, to remind the reader that a liberal arts and sciences education is about helping the student—the *whole* student—to flourish.A flexible curriculum that allows the student agency in his/her education is essential to this goal. A student-centered advising system that empowers the student to make good use of this curriculum is also essential, and so is a system of student life that promotes agency and learning outside of the classroom as well as within it. LASeducation is about educating the whole student and education does not stop at the classroom door.

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