

# Advising in Undergraduate Honors Programs: A Learner-Centered Approach

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*Findings from a study of undergraduate honors education introduce a new perspective into the debate over approaches to academic advising. Learner-centered advising emerged as a key attribute of high-quality honors programs. The learner-centered approach is consistent with a range of advising approaches and styles because through it advisors retain emphasis on student-learning experiences and development. Insights on existing advising perspectives and recommendations for advising honors students are discussed. Advisors and administrators are encouraged to examine both practice and underlying philosophy while conducting further research to develop advising theory that will inform effective practice.*

**KEY WORDS:** advising approaches, honor students, learning-centered approach, models of administrative organizational systems

## Introduction

In 1986, Friedman and Jenkins-Friedman introduced their volume *Fostering Academic Excellence through Honors Programs* with the cautionary statement, “One might assume that the brightest college undergraduates feel well served during their years on campus and that procedures for educating them are common knowledge” (p. 1). They accurately observed that many students with exceptional talent were enrolling at large, public universities due in large part to rising tuition costs at private institutions. While acknowledging the challenges of financial constraints and the perception of elitism among honors programs, they urged faculty members and administrators to seek out effective approaches and learn the factors, including the best approach to academic advising, that contribute to excellence in honors education. They offered a two-pronged imperative: First, universities must prepare for the growing segment of honors students, and second, and more significant, all colleges and universities must provide an environment where students will have opportunities to realize their full potential.

Friedman and Jenkins-Friedman’s concern for quality in honors education is still relevant today. The honors-student applicant pools and programs

are growing at many institutions, yet the leadership of most programs faces serious fiscal realities. The expectation to do more with less is putting great stress on those providing academic services and programs. Compounding this resources problem is a lack of empirical evidence about the features or attributes of high quality, undergraduate, honors programs; such information might ultimately enhance evaluation efforts and efficacy. While much has been written about the characteristics and learning styles of honors students, data reflecting the experiences and expectations of multiple stakeholders in honors education, including program directors, advisors, students, and faculty members who teach in honors programs, are absent. This limitedness of honors program investigations is evident in the lack of information available on advising honors students. Discussions of approaches to advising are traditionally focused at the macro level and encompass information on all learners; however, a growing number of investigators (e.g., Smith, 2002) have examined the relationship between advising styles and specific student populations such as first-year students.

In this article, I present findings on academic advising from a recent study of undergraduate honors education (Huggett, 2003) and introduce an approach to advising that is specific to honors students but can be used for insight into the relationship between advising, learning experiences, and students’ growth and development. Therefore, these findings may enlarge the continuing paradigm debate over the various approaches to advising all students. In this article, I include a review of the context for my 2003 research, an overview of the most commonly cited approaches to advising, a description of research methods, a discussion of relevant findings, suggestions for those who advise honors students, and a section in which I invite further research and commentary in this area.

## Background

Before a new perspective on advising that is unique to undergraduate honors students is offered, a concise overview of six general approaches to academic advising is warranted. I also describe some commonly held perspectives on advising honors stu-

dents found in the literature on academic advising and undergraduate education.

### *Approaches to Academic Advising*

For those who have kept current with the literature on advising, the sometimes competing claims over advising approaches or paradigms are familiar. Those who are new to the profession, however, may find that they have stumbled into a foreign place replete with unfamiliar landmarks. Because advising approaches have received significant attention elsewhere, I provide only a brief tour of the landscape. Six approaches or perspectives described with the greatest frequency and in the most recent literature on advising include prescriptive, developmental, integrative, collaborative/academically centered, intrusive, and praxis. A brief description, including the salient points and the names of the authors or key proponents for each approach, are presented.

#### *Prescriptive Approach*

The prescriptive approach gained recognition in 1972 after Burns B. Crookston and Terry O'Banion published articles that challenged traditional views on advising. Despite O'Banion's avowal that he never intended his 1972 article on advising to become a classic, and he strongly suspected that Crookston had felt the same way about his article (O'Banion, 1994b), both authors had created rich commentaries that remain a part of the discourse today. O'Banion has maintained that youthful enthusiasm may have contributed to the strong reaction of both authors toward the traditional approach to advising, which Crookston (1972/1994) referred to as "prescriptive." Crookston described the prescriptive relationship between the academic advisor and student as one in which the advisor is in control of the session and provides the student with advice. Under this traditional approach, the authoritative advisor expects the student to adhere to this prescription and considers the advisee to be lazy and to be motivated by extrinsic rewards such as grades, income, and credit. The relationship is based on status and characterized by a low degree of trust. In 2002, Smith reported that first-year students prefer prescriptive advising. His finding directly contradicts commonly held assumptions that students prefer developmental advising.

#### *Developmental Approach*

Crookston (1972/1994) contrasted 10 dimensions of the prescriptive advising approach with an approach he called "developmental." He posited that

advisors using the developmental approach regard advising as teaching, and he said that developmental advising is "based on a negotiated agreement between the student and the teacher in which varying degrees of learning by both parties to the transaction are the product" (Crookston, 1994, p. 9). Crookston drew upon two assumptions from student development theory to define the developmental advising approach. First, "the university [is] viewed as an intellectual learning community within which individuals and social systems interact in and out of the classroom," and second, individuals at the university "utilize developmental tasks within and outside of the university for personal growth" (Crookston, 1994, p. 9).

O'Banion (1972/1994a) provided a model of academic advising anchored in the developmental approach. O'Banion's developmental model can be described as an academic advising process with five dimensions: exploration of life goals, exploration of vocational goals, program choice, course choice, and course schedules. In recent years, however, O'Banion, along with others (e.g., Grites & Gordon, 2000), revisited the prescriptive versus developmental advising debate. O'Banion (1994b, p. 117) observed the "value in a both/and perspective rather than an either/or perspective."

#### *Integrative Approach*

Drawing upon and extending the work of O'Banion, Burton and Wellington (1998, p. 13) offered a variation of the developmental model. They referred to it as the "integrative approach" and described it as "nonlinear and holistic." They stated, "Every advising session provides the opportunity to engage in discussion and action related to dimensions of O'Banion's paradigm" (Burton & Wellington, 1998, p. 19). They found greater utility in the integrative approach because it is dynamic and offers greater flexibility than the developmental approach does for advisors who wish to put it into practice. They suggested that O'Banion's five dimensions be integrated in a circular, overlapping pattern. In addition, under an integrative approach, "the student stays at the center of the advising and learning experience and controls how much self-analysis occurs and how much he or she allows advisors, faculty members, and others to influence his or her choices" (Burton & Wellington, 1998, p. 15).

#### *Collaborative Approach*

The collaborative model was advanced by Lowenstein (1999) as an alternative to the developmental theory of advising. He contended that

developmental advising “is not the appropriate opposite of prescriptive advising” He also argued, “Developmental advising is not a style of advising; it is a theory about the content of advising.” In contrast, he posited that collaborative advising is the opposite of prescriptive advising. He proposed this academically centered paradigm as an alternative to the developmentally centered paradigm by arguing that the former paradigm relates to college teaching while the latter relates to counseling. He further distinguished the two approaches by suggesting that the goal of the developmentally centered paradigm is “facilitating student’s intra-personal growth and development” while the goal of the academically centered paradigm is “facilitating the student’s ability to interact with and draw maximum benefit from the academic program and curriculum.”

#### *Intrusive Approach*

Although Glennen (1975) had suggested that improved retention and reduced attrition rates are the result of intrusive advising, the intrusive approach to advising had received relatively little attention until Jeschke, Johnson, & Williams (2001, p. 46) found that “students receiving intrusive advising reported greater satisfaction with advising” and “felt more connected to the department.” Drawing upon the work of Glennen (1975) and Garing (1992), they characterized the intrusive approach as follows: “[It] shares the individualized characteristics of developmental advising, but under this model, student-advisor contact is inevitable and is not dependent on student initiation” (Jeschke et al., 2001, p. 47). Advisors who adopt this approach actively forge connections with students and build upon initial contacts to develop ongoing relationships with them.

#### *Praxis Approach*

Hemwall and Trachte (1999, p. 7) developed a strategy based on praxis because they believe that “the concept of developmental advising moves the focus of academic advising away from academic learning toward a broad concept of student development.” Invoking the work of the Pablo Freire, they advanced a strategy grounded in critical self-reflection and suggested that advisors “should engage their advisees in dialogue about the purpose and meaning of course requirements” (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999, p. 8). Based on their experiences in small academic institutions where the “faculty are at the center of advising,” they have rejected the use of student development theory because it “maintains a focus on individual development” (p. 9). Instead,

they argued that praxis is a better approach because it “reconnects academic advising to the main mission of our institutions: student learning” (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999, p. 9).

#### *Approaches to Advising Honors Students*

Information on perspectives or goals for advising honors students is typically nested within larger discussions of advising special populations, and it may or may not be addressed within the framework of one of the major approaches to advising. Discussions about advising honors students often include the observations of seasoned professionals, findings from the literature on the personality characteristics of honors students, and lists of recommendations for advisors and program administrators. The authors of these sources acknowledge the unique nature of advising honors students, and many cite the combination of personality characteristics, educational and vocational potential, and the diversity of honors program models in their discussions. Tacha (1986, pp. 54–55) posited, “An advising program for honors students differs significantly from an advising ‘system’ defined to meet enrollment needs for the total student body” because advising for an honors student “is more of an inquiry into academic opportunity broadly defined.” She offers eight goals to be advanced in an advising program for honors students: challenge and enrichment, integration of knowledge, diversity of contacts, exposure to new interests, academic achievement, development of future teachers and scholars, recruitment (the program is designed to attract high ability students to the institution), and development of leaders. Tacha suggested that these goals can be accomplished through student-faculty mentoring and recommended that advising programs offer opportunities for students and faculty to build mentoring relationships.

Gordon (1992) described the ways in which high ability students differ from other college students and reminded advisors that these students may be dealing with issues that advisors had not expected because of the students’ potential for academic success. For example, students may fear success or failure, or they may limit exploration of educational or vocational alternatives to please parents or significant others. She also explained that students may experience difficulty selecting a major or career field because “they have the potential to succeed in many areas” (Gordon, 1992, p. 101). Likewise, advisors should realize that the identification and clarification of advisees’ personal and work values may assume even greater importance

“for students who may already have an idea of their interests and abilities” (Gordon, 1992, p. 101).

Ender and Wilkie (2000, p. 123), after acknowledging research in which honors students are characterized as creative and goal oriented (Day, 1989; Gerrity, Lawrence, & Sedlacek, 1993), advanced a developmental advising perspective and concluded, “The honors college student is an ideal candidate for a developmental advising relationship.” They organized their discussion of honors student characteristics around the three student development themes of academic competence, personal involvement, and development or validation of life purpose. Echoing Gordon, they acknowledged that honors students may set high academic expectations and reminded advisors that academic competence is still a relevant topic that advisors should address when working with honors students. They encouraged advisors to teach honors students how to manage these expectations and request assistance when necessary.

Ender and Wilkie (2000) also examined the developmental theme of personal involvement and suggested that advisors recognize that honors students are often very involved in campus organizations and activities and may need to discuss the consequences of being overinvolved in personal interests while pursuing a rigorous academic program. They also examined the third developmental theme: developing or validating life purpose. They believe this area may require the most attention and participation from advisors because honors students are more likely to attend graduate school and may be more inclined to pursue and participate in additional opportunities that provide challenge or enrichment than are other undergraduates.

Robinson (1997), writing specifically about the role of universities and colleges in educating honors students, identified similar considerations as Ender and Wilkie for advising honors students. She observed that some highly capable students may experience academic drift because they rely on habits that served them well in high school but are no longer useful or appropriate in college. She noted that some students who need assistance will go unnoticed because their performances are still acceptable (e.g., earning a grade of B instead of A) to the instructor or advisor. She suggested that at colleges and universities where resources permit, honors students could be identified and assigned to an advisor who will require an advising contact or appointment. This proactive approach may benefit those students hesitant to initiate communication with an advisor, and as McDonald (2003, p. 63)

pointed out: “These students [*high achievers*] may be the least likely to seek help from academic advisors or other support services on campus.”

### Context for Study

I examined undergraduate honors education and specifically identified the attributes of high-quality undergraduate honors programs from the perspectives of stakeholders in honors education. While honors education is promoted widely in the literature on college and university selection and in the promotional materials published by institutions, it has attracted relatively little scholarly attention. Although some of the publications provide information on teaching and learning in honors education (e.g., Braid & Long, 2000; Fuiks & Clark, 2000; Reihman, Varhus, & Whipple, 1990), the bulk of the authors writing on undergraduate honors education have addressed administrative concerns such as enrollment or program development. While these publications, along with others in which program models are described (Austin, 1986; Capuana, 1993, & Dehart, 1993), provide valuable and much-needed information to honors program administrators and faculty members, most sources are descriptive and not drawn from original research. The literature on academic program quality is likewise limited, and only a handful of empirical studies have helped to close the gap in the understanding of academic program quality as experienced by program stakeholders or participants.

### The Study

I designed this study to develop a theory of high-quality honors programs (i.e., an ideal type) to advance the knowledge and understanding of undergraduate honors education, and ultimately, to guide stakeholders in efforts to improve undergraduate teaching and learning. To accomplish these goals, I conducted the study in two stages. In the first stage, I identified characteristics of high-quality honors programs as described by stakeholders and published researchers. The stakeholders who informed this study were students who participate in honors programs, faculty members who teach honors courses, and administrators of honors programs. In the second stage, I identified attributes of program quality in two ways: by conducting open-ended interviews with stakeholders and by testing the salience of the characteristics of honors programs identified in the first stage.

For the purpose of this study, I used the definition of high-quality honors programs that was offered by Haworth and Conrad (1997, p. 15):

High-quality honors programs “contribute to enriching learning experiences for students [*and*] ... have positive effects on their growth and development.” Haworth and Conrad developed this definition after extensive review and synthesis of the literature on academic program quality and in preparation for their comprehensive study of program quality in master’s degree programs. I selected their definition because it emphasizes both student learning and development; it also is consistent with the diversity of honors program types.

### Research Methods

I designed and conducted the study based on the principles of qualitative research. With the goal of developing a grounded theory of quality in honors education, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), I attempted to learn from stakeholders and to understand how they interpret and assign meaning to their experiences with honors education. In a grounded theory approach, the researcher develops concepts and hypotheses through constant comparative analysis. While a positivist expectation may be used to explain and predict phenomena in grounded theory, the emphasis is on theory generation through observation, reflection, and discovery.

### Sampling

I selected a multisubject, multisite design to reflect the broad array of programs and experiences under the rubric of honors education. To enhance heterogeneity, I selected four different cases (honors programs) at two public, research/doctoral universities in two midwestern states. The programs were not selected for their perceived reputations or any such identification as high quality programs. All participants in the study were assured of the confidentiality of their responses according to human subjects/Institutional Review Board guidelines and approval. As an additional measure of confidentiality, which was especially important because some programs were small with limited staff, I assigned pseudonyms to each program and institution.

The four cases, and the reasons for their selection, are described as follows: Case one is based on a small honors program located in a school of business and was selected because it offered me the opportunity to examine honors education in a professional school. This case is referred to as the “Honors Program in the School of Business at Midwest University.” Approximately 40 students participate in this honors program each year.

Case two is based on a large honors program in

a college of letters and science and is the largest honors program at this particular university. I selected this case because at this institution a large and diverse number of enrolled students may pursue honors recognition in the liberal arts, in the major, or both (comprehensive honors). This case is referred to as the “Honors Program in the College of Letters and Science at Midwest University.” Approximately 1,000 to 1,400 students participate in this honors program each year.

Case three is based on a midsize honors program in a college of agricultural and life sciences. This case is referred to as the “Honors Program in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at Midwest University.” Approximately 150 to 200 students participate in this honors program each year. I selected this program because, in addition to offering honors in the major (with some exceptions), it also offers options for honors in research as well as individualized honors.

Case four is based on an honors college open to students in every department. This case is referred to as the “Honors College at Central Midwest State University.” Flexibility and freedom for students to design their courses of study, including a mix of honors and nonhonors courses, are the advertised trademarks of this honors program. In addition, a residential component is included in the program. Approximately 1,600 students are enrolled in the honors college.

I used theoretical (not random) sampling as an overall strategy for the selection of participants. Theoretical sampling, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 183), can take several forms, including the purposive or deliberative selection of sites, persons, and documents. Theoretical sampling allows the researcher to select individuals whose participation is believed to contribute to enlarging the developing theory (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 65). In this study, I initially queried program directors for their suggestions and to access names of junior and senior students enrolled in honors programs. I also talked to faculty members who currently teach honors courses or have taught honors courses within 2 years prior to this study.

In all of the programs examined, both faculty members and administrators served as advisors to students participating in the honors program under study. I focused on seniors because of the likelihood that they had enrolled in a greater number of honors courses and had participated in a greater number of honors activities than did their underclassman peers. Likewise, they were more familiar with non-honors courses and had encountered a greater num-

ber of experiences as college students than other undergraduates. After establishing contact with an initial group of participants, I employed snowball sampling, as described by Bogdan & Biklen (1998), to expand the number of participants. The snowball sampling technique allows the researcher to ask participants for the names of other individuals whose participation will contribute to development of the emerging theory.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The primary sources of data were interview transcripts and documentary evidence. I conducted on-site interviews with students, faculty members, and administrators in the four honors programs between February 2002 and June 2002. The final number of participants was 58: 6 program administrators, 19 faculty members, and 33 students. Each interview was approximately 60 to 90 minutes. I conducted the interviews as dialogues, and used primarily open-ended questions and probes for clarification. The discussion and questions were circumscribed by the research question, "What are the attributes of a high-quality honors program?" and by three subquestions developed by Haworth and Conrad (1997, p. 22): What steps or actions do stakeholders take to implement or enact the attribute? What ways do these actions enhance students' learning experiences? What positive effects, or outcomes, do these learning experiences have on students' growth and development? However, these questions were not used as a formal interview protocol. When prompting was required, I asked the participant to reflect on his or her experiences by posing questions such as "Where did the real learning occur in this program?" or "What do you think has been the most valuable aspect of this program?"

With only one exception, I audio recorded and transcribed each interview to provide an accurate and enduring record of the interview. Additional sources of data included documents produced in honors programs for current students and faculty members, brochures and other documents produced in universities for prospective students, and Web sites designed for current and prospective students. My personal field notes, including observations, reflections, descriptive notes, and analytical memos, composed another source of data. I employed QSR NUD\*IST N4 Classic (2000), the qualitative data software, to assist with the management and analysis of the data.

I simultaneously collected and analyzed data throughout the study. Prior to beginning data analysis, I established decision rules to enable the sys-

tematic identification of the attributes. First, to be included in the analysis, each attribute must have been considered important by participants in at least three of the four programs in the sample, and second, each attribute must have been considered important by participants in at least two of the three participant groups in the sample. I engaged the constant comparative method, as described by Conrad (1982) and Glaser and Strauss (1967) to allow for the systematic, ongoing, open-ended, inductive discovery of grounded theory.

In the first stage of data analysis, I read the transcripts from the 57 interviews that had been audio recorded and the notes from the single interview that had not been recorded. I also reviewed program documents and field notes at this time. Following the decision rules established earlier, I recorded data incidents (e.g., references such as "welcoming environment" or "faculty champion") found in multiple programs or across multiple participant groups. I accomplished this task by reviewing incidents at the program level and also at the participant group level. I also recorded incidents in which interviewees mentioned that attributes of high quality programs were absent from their programs. As I proceeded with this preliminary round of coding, I coded data into categories aligned with the research question and three subquestions: attribute, actions taken to enact the attribute, barriers to enacting the attribute, consequences for learning experiences, and the effects on students' growth and development. At the conclusion of this stage of data analysis, I had tentatively identified 19 attributes of high-quality undergraduate honors programs.

In the second stage of data analysis, I returned to the code file and the interview data and searched for evidence to support or disprove the preliminary list of attributes. I sought evidence to refine the original attribute or to discover a new attribute that might have been missed during the initial stage of data analysis. During this second stage, I also began to examine the data, across programs and participant groups, to glean additional details about the attributes and the actions as well as the consequences and effects. Through careful review and constant comparison of the data incidents, I developed a rough theory of program quality. After refining the list and discovering areas of overlap between two or more attributes, I trimmed the initial list of 19 attributes to 12. At this point, I altered the names of some of the attributes so that they could be used to provide an accurate description of the functions related to them.

In the third stage of data analysis, I delimited and

tested the theory by reviewing the code file and examining the fit between the data and the emerging theory. When I was no longer able to find additional data incidents to support or refute the emerging theory, the requirements of theoretical saturation were satisfied and the 12 attributes were grouped into three thematic areas called “clusters.” Finally, I developed a summary of the theory, which includes descriptions of the actions taken by program participants to enact the attribute, the consequences for students’ learning experiences, and the effects upon students’ growth and development. This summary was instrumental for undertaking the fourth stage of data analysis: writing the theory.

I gave careful attention to the trustworthiness or credibility of findings and interpretations. To insure the accuracy of the record and heighten my awareness of subjectivity, I maintained a detailed research log with memos and reflexive notes on the research process. I constructed interview notes soon after completing an interview session, and this enhanced the production of thick descriptions, which as explained by Geertz (1973), is an additional means to insure validity. In addition, I used periodic member checks and the triangulation of multiple data sources to enhance validity.

### Findings

After extensive data analysis and testing, 12 attributes of an ideal, high quality, undergraduate, honors program emerged (Huggett, 2003). One of the attributes, learner-centered advising, can be used to gain insight into the ways in which students, faculty members, and administrators define advising, establish expectations for the student-advisor relationship, and take actions that have significant consequences for student learning.

Perhaps not surprising, the topic of academic advising was highly charged and evoked some of the most passionate responses received during this study. Very early in the study, I discovered that students, as well as program administrators and faculty members, hold high expectations for the academic advising experience. More important, they often employed an expanded definition of academic advising that was not characterized solely by the number of advisors (both faculty and non-faculty) available or the accuracy and timeliness of the advice provided to students. Mentoring, a closely related concept to advising, emerged as an attribute but was discussed solely in regard to undergraduate research experiences.

After reviewing the data from across the sample, I found that use of learner-centered advising had sig-

nificant consequences for honors students’ learning experiences and had contributed to their positive growth and development. In fact, I chose the term “learner-centered approach” to describe this attribute because in addition to being important to student learning, development, and growth, it is a characteristic of advising relationships in which the needs of the student as a learner are the primary focus. Instead of limiting the advising experience to a review of academic rules and requirements, advisors who use a holistic, learner-centered approach can tailor it so that an individual’s interests and background can be considered. Likewise, advisors using a learner-centered approach can consider personal growth and development of the student but primarily within the context of teaching and learning. This nuance in the definition may help explain why this comprehensive approach to advising encompasses a broad array of advising approaches, including prescriptive, intrusive, collaborative, and developmental. No single advising style or approach, as presently represented in the advising literature, emerged as exclusively appropriate.

To better understand the concept of learner-centered advising, I describe the attribute as it relates to the three subquestions posed in the study: First, what actions do stakeholders take to implement or enact learner-centered advising? Second, in what ways do these actions enhance students’ learning experiences? Third, what positive effects do these learning experiences have on students’ growth and development?

### *Stakeholder Actions that Enact Learner-Centered Advising*

Participants in this study indicated that in a high-quality honors program, the advising relationship begins early in the undergraduate’s college career, often at an orientation sponsored by the honors program. This early introduction strategy is used to introduce students to the usual advising topics, such as scheduling procedures and degree requirements, and also connects students with advisors who introduce themselves, welcome students, and forge a personal connection with them. Through the introduction session, program faculty and staff members send the message that they care about students. They also want to whet the students’ appetites for future academic opportunities. Therefore, an early orientation (or other mechanism) to connect students with advisors is an important step in setting up future advising interactions. For example, the program director in the College of Letters and Science at Midwest University told me:

A lot of these students, they really want someone that they know that they can come to. A lot of what they're looking for is a small liberal-arts kind of college on this big campus, and part of that entails working very closely with a person and viewing that person and not a number. So, one of the things I wanted to provide was that kind of a welcoming kind of warm environment.

Negative examples also illustrate the point that honors students must be reached soon after arriving on campus. Students who did not make an early advising connection were critical of this breach, and one student, a bacteriology major at Midwest University, even recommended that the orientation for honors students occur prior to matriculation at the university-wide summer orientation. He explained that the summer orientation experience was unsatisfactory for honors students because the advisors who staff the orientation were "just used to the typical student who needs general advising. There was no advising whatsoever towards honors students." He had hoped to meet with an advisor who would address topics related to honors program requirements and opportunities.

In high quality programs, learner-centered advising is continued well beyond orientation. Advisors utilize a variety of formats, including general advising sessions, peer advising opportunities, and individual appointments, for learner-centered advising. An assistant director of the program at Central Midwest State University discussed the content of individual advising appointments. He explained that a 1-hour appointment is important because "we need that hour of talking especially if it's a [new] student, because they're really involved in developing . . . [a] strategy to determine where their real interests are." This administrator placed emphasis on the advisor's efforts to become acquainted with students, their interests for learning, and their goals. Students acknowledge this personal approach and value the friendships and sense of trust that can develop as students and advisors grow comfortable talking about sensitive issues such as grades and aspirations.

Some students, however, reported that their advising sessions were impersonal and brief. They said that advisors had failed to address the questions they considered important to enhancing their learning experiences. For example, a student at the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at Midwest University described his frustration with an advisor who stopped short of asking questions about his major or motivation to study a particular subject:

I personally felt very much like my advisor didn't take any interest in me. The first time he met with me he didn't ask me anything other than "What's your major?" Well, he knew what my major was! He didn't ask me: "Where do you want to go with this? What do you want to do with this?" He didn't even take the 30 seconds it would have taken to kind of give him a picture of where I was heading with my major. . . . And I basically would come to him with the list of courses I was planning on taking every semester and he would cross check it with the list of classes that I was expected to be taking for the major. I was a little disappointed with my advising experience.

Many of the students interviewed for this study had expected more than a perfunctory review of their course schedule and shared disappointments in advising experiences that were fragmented or disconnected from their academic and career goals. Disenchanted, some students avoided advising altogether or switched advisors after an unsatisfactory experience.

#### *Consequences for Learning Experiences*

By placing students' learning at the center of the advising relationship, advisors and students are able to address program requirements and then consider questions and discussions that have significant consequences for learning experiences. When advisors take a holistic approach to advising, they encourage students to explore courses and new experiences that will complement their degree programs. Specifically, they talk about classes, senior thesis topics, faculty research areas, special class projects, research assistantships, scholarship opportunities, graduate school plans, and career aspirations. The assistant director for internal relations at Central Midwest State University provided an example of a common advising situation in which he had asked a student to reflect upon or reconsider his plans, even though they were in accordance with program guidelines:

If a student were to be . . . proposing some honors options and sitting here talking about the program for next year, I'd say, "You really would probably be better off if you looked for some honors courses for two reasons."

He continued the role play to illustrate the techniques he would use to advise the student to consider an alternative plan that would meet his needs and afford him a small class experience.



Advisors who engage in learner-centered advising also encourage students to consider innovative approaches to designing their learning experiences. Occasionally, faculty members incorporate advising into classroom experiences. A psychology professor at Midwest University described the type of advising he offers as part of a required seminar:

We talk about graduate school and how to prepare for graduate school, how to find a good advisor, the sort of homework one needs to do, how to prepare yourself for grad. rec. [*graduate record*] exams appropriately, and then what types of jobs are out there. While we are very good at helping people think about graduate school as an option, what all of us did as faculty members, but what I think we need to do more of is to help even our honors students think about other career options—not everyone wants to go to graduate school.

Students spoke favorably, and sometimes in glowing terms, of advisors who adopted the learner-centered approach. They were appreciative of advisors who talked with them about their background and interests and then helped them select courses that would enable them to learn more about certain topics, disciplines, and careers.

For some students, a learner-centered approach to advising meant that their advisors provided suggestions or encouragement to pursue new experiences, such as research assistantships or internships. For example, a student at Midwest University shared her initial reservations about engaging in research:

Well, I first heard about the research program in high school, so I thought, “Oh my gosh, can I handle honors in college?” that sort of thing. Especially the mentality of coming from a small school and city, I wasn’t sure if I could handle it.

She then explained that her advisor provided the information and support she needed to overcome her fears and make the decision to undertake a research project.

### *Effects on Students*

Students get more than a list of recommended classes or faculty contacts when their advisors engage in learner-centered advising. Their dialogue with advisors creates a long-lasting effect as students find ways to connect classroom and out-of-classroom learning that will bridge undergraduate work to career opportunities or graduate study. An advising professor at Central Midwest State University

emphasized that, as an advisor, his role “is not necessarily getting [*students*] better courses, but giving them the personal advising, spending more time with them and being a faculty member rather than sending them to the regular undergraduate advisors who are not academics.” He explained why he felt this interaction was significant and how it affected his students:

They never have worked in the business or at least know people who work in the business. So I think that . . . they get the extra career counseling that some of our undergraduates won’t get. Help them sort out what part of the business they like, or what they don’t like, so here are some other options for exploring potential careers within the field.

Other advisors who participated in this study shared this personal-advising philosophy, and several explained that they felt a sense of responsibility to provide the type of connections that others had made for them at the beginning of their careers. The students who found advisors who practiced learner-centered advising recognized the importance of the approach, and many expressed a sentiment of gratitude. A business student at Midwest University spoke candidly about the critical role his advisor has played as he forged career connections:

Yeah, he’s my advisor and we’re actually going out to lunch tomorrow; it’s a great relationship. In addition to that kind of thing, I have gone out to lunch with him periodically. When I began interviewing last fall, he knew what I was looking for and he gave me some contact information. I talked to the contact information, went through the recruiting system, and ended up with a job offer with them out in San Francisco, and it was all from the same connection I had established with my . . . professor! Another opportunity I would have never had.

Some of these connections were more abstract than that presented by the student who had found a job through his advisor contact. In this study, I found that advisors discuss issues or controversies that might be encountered in the field or profession and invite students to formulate their own opinions or responses. For example, a pre-medical student at Midwest University described an advising relationship in which she discussed connections between her major, a proposed research assistantship, and her future work as a physician. She recalled:

We talked about the different options, and he said that research puts you at a different mindset. And especially since I want to become a doctor, he said that as a physician I'm going to be confronted with problems all the time where you can't find the answer in a textbook. And he said if I did the research it would be easier to formulate the questions and understand what's going on and be able to think of how I could go about solving the question.

This conversation marked a turning point for the pre-med student, demonstrating that her work as an undergraduate was both significant and inextricably linked to her future medical training and career as a physician.

### Discussion

What does the learner-centered approach to advising convey about advising honors students? In this final section, I discuss the approach and the relationship of it to other perspectives on advising. I specifically address areas where the findings of this study offer opportunities for advisors and advising administrators to examine and improve current practice and for practitioners and researchers to explore opportunities for further investigation.

#### *Where Does The Learner-Centered Approach Fit?*

The findings of this study indicate that one of the hallmarks of high-quality honors programs is an advising approach in which student learning is the focus of advising efforts. Specifically, advisors' style may not matter nearly as much for student learning, growth, and development as do the actions of advisors, administrators, and honors students nor as much as the consequences of those actions. The stakeholders who participated in this study offered a portrait of advising that shows multiple styles or perspectives. They also indicate that the most effective approach is flexible enough to accommodate advising style and perspective changes throughout a student's academic career. For example, the learner-centered approach resembles, in many respects, the integrative approach. Burton and Wellington built the integrative approach on perspectives from O'Banion, whose model is steeped in the developmental tradition.

In keeping with the integrative model, advisors who use the learner-centered approach become acquainted with students, and then in a nonlinear manner, discuss interests and explore options to further student academic and career goals. Over time, each will reflect on the discussions and decisions,

and he or she will revisit plans and goals with new insights and expectations.

Some of these advisor-advisee discussions, as described by participants in this study, fit into the praxis approach offered by Hemwall and Trachte. These discussions align with their approach because advisors engage their advisees in critical dialogue as a means to evaluate and change goals and values. Likewise, advisors may draw on the praxis approach when they challenge advisees to think critically about the purpose of requirements or relationships between courses. This approach is consistent with the learner-centered approach because, as seen in the study, students expect to accomplish more at the advising session than a review and validation of their course selections. The characteristics of honors students (e.g., creativity and willingness to "play" with ideas) may be the reason that the praxis and learner-centered approaches are compatible.

Intrusive advising may also be useful to advisors of honors students. The intrusive strategy can be used to initiate the advising relationship or ensure that students meet with an advisor periodically. Honors students interviewed for this study reported that they sometimes did not seek an advising appointment because they were in good academic standing and were able to navigate registration processes on their own. In such cases, intrusive advising could serve as the catalyst to initiate an advising relationship. Over time, this relationship could evolve and multiple perspectives could be introduced into the dialogues.

The interview data analyzed for this study underscore the primacy of academic content, which may reassure advisors who believe that personal or student development has supplanted student learning as a goal of advising and who are particularly uncomfortable in situations they feel are more appropriate for a personal counselor than an academic advisor. In that respect, the findings of this study lend support to Lowenstein's claim for an academically centered paradigm. However, at the risk of sounding like a politician advocating for a bigger tent, I suggest that advisors can embrace approaches that affect both personal development and student learning. These preliminary results support a key argument for those who have argued that developmental advising has always been centered on learning.

#### *Implications for Practice*

The findings of this study confirm many of the traditional beliefs about advising honors students.

Through firsthand and sometimes engaging accounts, the interviewees offer advisors data that can be used to improve understanding of the best advising to honors students. Drawing from these data, I outline seven areas that merit attention, either as considerations or as specific recommendations for practice.

*Early contact.* Advisors must forge an early connection with students. The information provided at these initial sessions is important, but in addition, these activities hold powerful symbolic value. Students view early connections as evidence of an advisor's commitment to work with them as they negotiate initial tasks as undergraduates. In addition to the usual advising topics such as class registration and course selection, honors students may need to clarify honors program requirements. Therefore, advisees find value in using early advising sessions or orientations to preview future opportunities. Honors students receive significant amounts of information about opportunities (e.g., research projects, special seminars) prior to matriculation, and they often require advising to discern which opportunities to pursue and when they should take advantage of them.

*Multiple venues.* The honors students interviewed for this study expressed similar examples of positive advising experiences. They experienced these positive advising encounters in a variety of venues, including one-on-one, group, and peer advising sessions, as well as via E-mail dialogue with advisors. However, the findings of this study revealed that advisors or program administrators must be clear about which sessions will include information specific to the honors program. Participants in this study described negative experiences in which students who had expected an advisor to be knowledgeable about the honors program were disappointed in their advising encounter.

*Encouragement and support.* Students with significant academic potential still welcome and may need the encouragement and support that advisors provide. The encouragement may be especially critical to students early in their college experiences; however, some students reported experiencing greater academic challenges in the second year when they encountered courses that required new skills or study habits. Because this study was conducted at large universities, participants also noted that encouragement and support were important to students who graduated from very small high schools.

*Challenge.* Honors students benefit from challenge in the advising relationship as much as from

challenge in the academic environment. This means that advisors should invite students to examine their academic goals, describe their aspirations, reflect on their decisions, or speculate on the possible outcomes of pursuing specific opportunities.

*Forward thinking.* By providing opportunities for honors students to discuss postgraduate plans, advisors provide a different context within which advisees can explore different courses or majors, integrate their learning, and clarify vocational goals. The participants in this study did not perceive discussions of postgraduate plans as an attempt to narrow their academic focus; instead, they noted positive consequences of these discussions on their learning experiences.

*Basic skills.* Participants in this study characterized successful advising relationships as those grounded in respect, trust, confidentiality, humor, empathy, and good listening skills.

*Person not the position.* In this study, the debate over the relative effectiveness of faculty versus non-faculty advisors was almost nonexistent. The students interviewed for this study recognized that faculty and nonfaculty advisors brought different knowledge and skills to the advising relationship, but they seemed to hold all advisors to the same standards (e.g., Do they ask about my interests? Do they care about my learning experiences? Do they think about my questions?). Faculty advisors in this study did not express frustration over a perceived need for counseling skills. Instead, several reported they could make unique contributions to the advising relationship, such as providing information about the field or discipline. Of course, the absence of obvious discord over who should undertake advising responsibilities may be due in part to the unique focus of this study or even to the individuals who elected to participate. In either case, the results point to the need for additional study in this area.

### *Implications for Research*

The complex nature of advising and significance to the academic experience underscore the importance of pursuing original research that will help advisors understand the means to provide effective advising. Creamer (2000, p. 31) has expertly outlined the need for theories of academic advising and encouraged advising professionals to "become builders of theory that can explain the complex phenomena associated with effective practice." McGillin (2000, p. 374) also recommended, "We must first clarify what advising is and is not by generating a theory of academic advising," and "research must also move beyond single-campus, single-program

investigations.” Research into approach definitions may also help advisors understand Lowenstein’s (1999) distinction between styles of advising and theories about the content of advising. Both Creamer (2000) and McGillin (2000) acknowledged the contributions made by theorists in other areas, including student development and learning theory, but Creamer and Creamer (1994) called for original research on the effects of advising on students. They contended that research on the effects of advising on students “reflects an over-dependence on student satisfaction as the dependent variable in the research design” (Creamer & Creamer, 1994, p. 17). In contrast to previous investigations, I designed this study on honors students around a definition of quality that placed students’ learning, growth, and development—rather than student satisfaction—at the center of the investigation.

The findings offer a small window into understanding advising for a particular student population, honors students. However, the limitations of this particular study (e.g., limited number of programs and lack of longitudinal data) highlight additional areas for research at either the departmental, program, or institutional level.

Advising professionals may also want to consider engaging in research to learn more about the issues specific to their own program, student population, or advising units. My study on honors students may serve as a foundation for others interested in examining their personal or departmental approach to advising, reasons for engaging a particular style or perspective, and the best methods available to assess the fit between an approach and effective practice.

Many questions still remain: What actions should advisors take to foster the advising relationship? What consequences do current advising approaches have for learning experiences? These are important questions that merit attention and study, not only because of their potential to explain the advising experience, but also because of their potential to make advising better for all students.

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