Identifying A Topic

Topic selection for any form of writing can be one of the most challenging tasks a writer will face. Not only must the topic be focused and relevant, but it must also be interesting enough to sustain the author's interest throughout the writing, review and publication processes.

Furthermore, writing ideas don't spring full blown like Minerva from the brow of Jupiter! They are developed and refined over time, via additional thought, discussions with colleagues and / or a literature review. An author may start with just a kernel of an idea, and that's OK. To capitalize on "sudden inspiration," many authors develop a system for capturing writing ideas as they occur (e.g., carrying around a small notebook or maintaining a file "in the cloud").

There are concrete ways to identify a topic for writing about academic advising. The four ideas below are presented in simple alphabetic order; no one of them is any more or less effective than the others. It is important that an author develop a topic-generation system that "works," even if that system is not specifically mentioned below.

1. <u>Apply a theory from the author's disciplinary background</u>. Many advisors have academic and professional backgrounds outside the field of academic advising. Whatever an advisor's background, there are likely some theories and ideas that can be applied to academic advising. For example, in business and organizational psychology, theories and frameworks abound regarding human motivation. Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) is one example. According to expectancy theory, human motivation is the product of three factors: expectancy, instrumentality and valence. Expectancy is the belief that, when individuals put in effort, they will achieve a goal. Instrumentality links goal achievement with reward; valence is the value the decision maker places on the reward. All three factors must be present to ensure motivation, and the theory overall can easily be applied to academic advising. For example, how can an advisor motivate students to come in for advising? How can advisors be motivated to engage in ongoing professional development?

2. <u>NACADA research resources</u>. On its home page NACADA provides quite a few resources for identifying topics. Using the search box at the top of the screen, prospective authors can enter "research resources" to see a link to the "research and grant writing resources" page, which includes the items discussed below.

   The association's **research agenda** (NACADA, n.d.) identifies several broad topics to stimulate research and writing. The three broad areas in the research agenda are the impact of academic advising on students, the context of academic advising and the theoretical basis of academic advising. Each broad area also has a few critical areas for research, such as the impact of advising on student retention (impact), use of technologies in engaging students in advising

(context) and connections between academic advising and higher education's broader learning mission (theoretical basis).

NACADA also maintains a **research listserv** that allows prospective researchers to interact with others in academic advising. Anyone can subscribe to the listserv, regardless of their level of experience and expertise in research and writing. The questions and topics people post to the listserv are diverse, and often include queries about identifying a topic.

Other resources include links to: a webinar recording focused on research in academic advising (Smith & Troxel, 2008), NACADA's book *Scholarly Inquiry in Academic Advising* (Hagen, Kuh & Padak, 2010), sample research articles and many others.

3. Pressing problems from practice. The important / chronic problems and issues advisors deal with regularly can be the basis for a writing project. For example, in a school where students with GPAs between 2.0 and 2.2 receive a registration hold that requires them to see an advisor, students quickly learn which advisors will simply "sign the form" and send them on their way, and which advisors will actually advise them! A potential research question, then, may focus on the characteristics of advisors / advisees in each group, how to motivate advisors who simply "sign the form" to engage students more completely or how to acknowledge the good work that dedicated advisors do in working with those students.

4. Published articles. Many published articles identify areas for future research; older studies can also be replicated to see if results have changed. Whether implicit or explicit, published articles can be great resources in identifying a topic. For example, Smith's (2002) *NACADA Journal* article studied first-year student perceptions of academic advising. (Smith provides an appropriately detailed discussion of his methodology that could easily be replicated to see if his results still hold; that same methodology could be applied to groups other than first-year students.

Research and writing are integral components of NACADA's mission and of the advising profession overall. By taking advantage of all the resources NACADA provides, prospective writers should be able to contribute meaningfully to the literature supporting the field.

References

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