RESEARCH BRIEFS

Strengths–based Academic Advising: Supporting Diverse Populations

Kody Schneider and Jeannine Kranzow
Azusa Pacific University

Abstract

As student demographics on college campuses are increasingly diverse regarding ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as age and generational status, it is the responsibility of those in higher education, including academic advisors, to reflect on current institutional approaches and structures and examine their impact on student success. Literature suggests that a deficit approach to diverse populations fails to support student flourishing. Conversely, strengths-based approaches to supporting students provide a unique perspective and help students identify their individual talents and strengths. This research brief reviews literature that supports the strengths-based approach to academic advising and provides recommendations for practitioners and faculty advisors about how to implement these strategies at their respective institutions.

Strengths–Based Academic Advising: Supporting Diverse Populations

Advising is increasingly seen as both essential and of great consequence to the undergraduate educational experience (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). Academic advisors play a key role in aiding students with developing academic and vocational plans and providing guidance about academic and cocurricular resources and supports. Throughout the literature, advising has been described through two fundamental approaches: prescriptive and developmental (Crookston, 1994). The prescriptive relationship between advisor and student is more transactional while the developmental relationship creates shared responsibility and mutual learning by both parties (Crookston, 1994). This research brief reviews the growing literature base that supports a strengths-based perspective of developmental academic advising.

NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER
FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE® AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Strengths–Based Approaches to Academic Advising

When campus populations were more homogeneous, a traditional, prescriptive, less flexible approach to advising was common; however, a one-size-fits-all approach with a diverse student body does not address the needs of all students (Crookston, 1994; Harris, 2018). Advising practices have evolved into a more developmental experience for students where the student and the advisor relationship is more collaborative, identifying areas for growth in the student (Crookston, 1994). Contrary to previous models that are often deficit-based approaches (Amador, 2018), more recent literature suggested that a strengths-based approach (SBA) better enables advisors to help multiple diverse student populations attain higher academic success (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005).

The SBA to advising is rooted in a theoretical framework consistent with developmental advising, student thriving, and positive psychology. By shifting academic advising to a developmental experience versus a prescriptive one, advising provides an environment through which staff can examine and address the challenges that can lead to student departure, or dropout (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). Specific challenges that marginalized populations of students face which can lead to departure include insufficient financial aid, inadequate preparation for college, limited awareness of or access to campus engagement opportunities, and student mental health (Amadore, 2018; Blaauw-Hara, 2016; House et al., 2020, Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). The developmental approach to advising creates an opportunity for the advisor to address these challenges that lead to departure through direct intervention and support or by connecting students to other applicable on-campus resources.

The dynamic components of the advisor-student relationship are unique to each student and can have a significant impact on a student's academic success. The SBA maximizes the focus on student talents as a foundation for creating an educational plan as well as developing a platform for turning these talents into strengths both in their studies and beyond (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). Instead of focusing on the difficulties and challenges, a developmental SBA helps students use a new lens through which to see themselves. Students can identify their natural talents, apply them to their lives, and refine these talents through this self-awareness (Soria et al., 2019). This is especially important when advising underserved, first-generation, and often-marginalized populations of students who may come to college with less confidence and more limited higher education exposure.

Benefits of a Strengths–Based Model

Serving Diverse Populations

A review of literature suggests one reason for the gap in achievement and/or opportunity for students from systematically underrepresented cultural and ethnic backgrounds as well as lower socio-economic backgrounds is the presence of an often unrecognized deficit-based model of academic advising. Deficit-based approaches are consistent with the prescriptive characteristics of more authoritative academic advising because of the stronger focus on students' weaknesses and skills that they lack. For marginalized groups, this deficit thinking of both advisors and students alike is rooted in a complex web of challenges, which might include less than adequate preparation for higher education, limited understanding of the college environment, and limited opportunity for affirmation of their skills and potential. Educators lacking knowledge or training in this area to support diverse populations can further perpetuate deficit thinking (Amador, 2018). Thus, it is the responsibility of educators to recognize the barriers and institutional practices that can be adapted to better serve those on their campuses.

Supporting Other Student Populations

In addition to providing a more personalized form of support to ethnically and culturally marginalized students, the SBA can support other transitioning students who sometimes struggle academically. One such group includes student veterans who bring many strengths and experiences but who frequently struggle with self-efficacy and acclimating to an entirely different culture than the miliary (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). Another group in this category is student athletes. In a recent study, Brecht and Burnett (2019) found that self-confidence and institutional commitment both predicted academic success with Division I student athletes. Using the SBA with these students would seem to both strengthen institutional commitment to athlete success and contribute to student self-confidence.

Student Development and Retention

Extensive research (Schreiner, 2010) suggested that as higher education professionals help students to identify and apply their strengths, students are more likely to enjoy and maximize their learning and development opportunities. Similarly, researchers have identified positive correlations between students' strengths awareness and engagement, self-efficacy, overall optimism, and retention (Soria et al., 2019). These strengths conversations also have positive impacts following students' graduation, as researchers have suggested that leaders who continue to maximize their strengths in their careers show improved performance in the workplace and increased goal attainment, fulfillment, and well-being (Soria et al., 2019). Conversations about strengths identification and development that promote overall student

success can be implemented throughout students' college or university experiences.

Facilitating Strengths–Based Perspectives

An obvious starting point for institutional change in serving marginalized populations is to shift paradigms from deficit approaches to considering advising and supporting services that target students' assets and strengths. As academic advisors and other student affairs practitioners reconsider their perspectives and move away from deficit thinking toward considering assets and strengths of students (while helping students to make the same shift), higher education professionals have an opportunity to reframe their approach(es) to support diverse student populations (Braskamp, 2016). The SBA is focused on communication and dialogue with and about each individual student. Advising within this approach is typically characterized by asking questions about student's history, experiences, choices, and successes (vs. making assumptions about their past or present). This creates an environment for the student to reflect on, recognize, grow, and maximize their strengths.

While strengths-based advising can be used without utilizing an assessment, much of the research focused on the SBA was completed utilizing the Clifton StrengthsFinder 2.0 (renamed CliftonStrengths) instrument. The assessment and principles are informed by multiple developmental theories, but its conceptual framework is defined by the user's (student's) measured and defined talents and strengths, intrinsic motivation and goals, and the role of their respective environments (Braskamp, 2016). Upon completion of the instrument, results noting the student's unique strengths and talents are provided. These results can serve as a springboard for student affairs professionals and faculty to individualize their approach to working with each student (Braskamp, 2016). The instrument is ipsative in nature meaning that regardless of similar user results, individuals who receive the same top five strengths likely maximize their talents in completely different ways (Soria et al., 2019).

Regardless of whether a campus opts to use a strengths-identifying assessment, faculty and practitioners can seek to identify and develop strengths of students to create personalized forms of support. A campus culture of positivity and a strengths perspective cultivated by faculty, advisors, and other student support professionals is critical to helping students (Braskamp, 2016). This process of helping students to identify and develop their strengths can empower students to employ these talents in their everyday lives while attending college and beyond. If this approach is practiced universally, all student populations will naturally be supported in ways that seek to focus on what they bring versus their shortcomings.

Implications

While there is research supporting strengths-based advising practices, more research is needed about academic advising outcomes related to general outputs (including strengths-based outcomes) (Ruiz Alvarado & Olson, 2020). An outcomes approach will give institutions a clear understanding of whether students can identify and understand the implications of their strengths while also ensuring that conversations are focused regularly on a strengths versus deficit model. We describe this and other implications for practice and research in the subsequent sections.

Methodologies and Informing Practice

Deconstructing Identity-Neutral Support Services

Literature identifies that most support and retention strategies implemented by institutions are considered identity-neutral efforts (Amador, 2018). Colleges and universities have historically developed practices that are neutral in order to make them more accessible and inclusive of students' various intersecting identities and backgrounds. However, more recent research indicates that these identity-neutral approaches are insufficient in recognizing the specific needs of the diverse student population (Pendakur, 2016). By deconstructing identity-neutral support services, practitioners can focus on the multifaceted aspects of identity and identify how they inform a student's college experience, (Pendakur, 2016). From an advising perspective, this manifests by recognizing the inherent differences between students, identifying their unique needs and necessary forms of support, and ultimately reframing the deficit-based approach into a focus on their strengths and abilities. By facilitating an identity-conscious approach, advisors are able to link a student's unique identity and set of talents and strengths with a personalized set of resources and services that provide optimal support.

Early-Entry Programs

Implementation of early-entry programs on college campuses has become a widespread initiative for institutions of varying types and sizes. Designed for a more effective transition to college, these programs include but are not limited to Federal TRiO programs such as Upward Bound, Student Support Services, and Educational Opportunity Programs as well as early entry programs for admitted students such as Summer Bridge and more general new-student orientation programs (Amador, 2018). While these specific programs fall under various functional areas, they provide optimal opportunities for SBA. Early entry programs offer opportunities for underrepresented students to familiarize themselves with services and resources, connect with institutional agents and peers, and even take introductory courses (Harper, 2012). Each of these programs provide ample opportunities for SBA to occur. By introducing strengths-based assessment tools, providing initial resources and

services to build on these strengths, and connecting students with academic advisors, students begin their educational journey with more focus on the qualities and experiences that will help them succeed. These programs provide students with the opportunity to transition efficiently and make institutions feel smaller and easier to navigate (Harper, 2012).

Strengths-Based Mentorship Opportunities

A final suggestion in supporting students in an SBA is through individualized mentorship opportunities. Mentoring has the potential to positively impact student self-efficacy and academic achievement, especially among underrepresented groups (Amador, 2018). Creating intentional opportunities for structured mentoring with staff and/or faculty can play an important role in providing anti-deficit (strengths-focused)

support for these students (Amador, 2018). Mentorship on campuses is oftentimes informal in nature, but providing intentional mentorship opportunities for underrepresented and diverse populations of students can be extremely beneficial to a students' academic achievement and retention.

Using intentional, outcomes-based advising can yield positive results for students (Kraft-Terry & Kau, 2019). While organic relationships grow out of mentoring, combining structured, intentional, outcomes-based mentorship creates opportunities for connection outside the classroom that can enhance the probability of academic success. An SBA that includes connecting students to mentors sequentially can create more opportunities for underserved populations of students to engage with faculty and staff in ways that positively influence their collegiate experience.

References

Amador, L. (2018). Strength within: *Addressing structural opportunity gaps for men of color at 4-year universities through a strengths-based approach* (Order No. 10825323) [Doctoral dissertation, California State University, Long Beach]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Blaauw-Hara, M. (2016). "The military taught me how to study, how to work hard": Helping student-veterans transition by building on their strengths. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 40(10), 809–823.

Braskamp, L. (2016). StrengthsQuest on the college campus: *From concept to implementation*. Gallup Inc. https://www.strengthsquest.com/193751/strengthsquest-college-campus-concept-implementation.aspx.

Brecht, A. A., & Burnett, D. D. (2019). Advising student-athletes for success: Predicting the academic success and persistence of collegiate student-athletes. *NACADA Journal*, 39(1), 49-59. doi: https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-17-044

Crookson, B. B. (1994). A developmental view of academic advising as teaching. *NACADA Journal*, 14(2), 5-9.

Harris, T. A. (2018). Prescriptive vs. developmental: Academic advising at a historically black university in South Carolina. *NACADA Journal*, 38(1), 36–46. https://doi.org/10.12930/nacada-15-010

Harper, S. R. (2012). *Black male student success in higher education: A report from the national Black male college achievement study*. University of Pennsylvania, Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education.

Kraft-Terry, S., & Kau, C. (2019). Direct measure assessment of learning outcome–driven proactive advising for academically at-risk students. *NACADA Journal*, 39(1): 60–76. doi: https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-18-005

Pendakur, V. (Ed.). (2016). *Closing the opportunity gap: Identity-conscious strategies for retention and student success*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Ruiz Alvarado, A., & Olson, A. B. (2020). Examining the relationship between college advising and student outputs: A content analysis of the NACADA Journal. *NACADA Journal, 40*(2), 49–62. doi: https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-19-33

Schreiner, L. A. (2010). The thriving quotient: A new vision for student success. *About Campus, 15*(2), 2–10.

Schreiner, L. A. & Anderson, E. (2005). Strengths-based advising: A new lens for higher education. *NACADA Journal, 25*(2), 20-29.

Soria, K. M., Werner, L Roholt, C. V., & Capeder, A. (2019) Strengths-based approaches in co-curricular and curricular leadership: Opportunities to magnify students' thriving. *Journal of Leadership Education, 18*(1), 116-132.

Author Information

Kody Schneider, *Azusa Pacific University*, kodyschneider@apu.edu

Jeannine Kranzow, *Azusa Pacific University*, jkranzow@apu.edu

About Research Briefs

Research briefs are published by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC. The mission of the National Resource Center is to support and advance efforts to improve student learning and transitions into and through higher education.

NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER
FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE® AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

www.sc.edu/fye/research