**Academic Advising***By Joe Bandy, CFT Assistant Director*

If you ask instructors to choose one word to describe the work of advising, you will likely receive a variety of answers: educational, mentorship, informational, personalized, time-consuming, career-building, reflective, thankless, developmental, caring, box-checking, challenging, etcetera. Indeed, advising can involve many, often contradictory roles for instructors and staff in the best of conditions, and when institutions give precious little guidance for how to advise students well, it can be confusing, frustrating, and potentially harmful. As Sophocles stated in *Electra*, “No enemy is worse than bad advice” (1957: 166). So how may we ensure that our advising represents the best of these traits, and yields positive and transformative outcomes for our students? That is what this guide is intended to help us better understand.

At its core, advising is a form of teaching and therefore a primary way we as educators motivate and structure academic exploration, support student development (intellectual, professional, moral, social, personal), and encourage students to make their learning meaningful as they engage with their world. Advising has the potential to enhance educational missions by inspiring and guiding student learning, while also offering opportunities for institutions to develop successful mentorship and curricula.

**Organization of the Guide**

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**Professional Values in Advising**

If you are searching guidance on advising, you need look no further than the [National Academic Advising Association](https://nacada.ksu.edu/) (NACADA). Grounded in decades of dialogue and debate, NACADA is an international professional association of academic advisers that has identified guiding values, core competencies, and frameworks of advising that, together, provide a clear starting point.

Looking at the many cultural contexts and successful practices of its members, NACADA has identified seven core values that shape effective advising, which are worth quoting in full (see [here](https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Pillars/CoreValues.aspx) for PDFs in several languages). You may find one or more of these, or other, values more salient for you and your context, but they represent a thorough set of ethical commitments that guide the work of advising.

* *Caring* **–** Academic advisers respond to and are accessible to others in ways that challenge, support, nurture, and teach. Advisers build relationships through empathetic listening and compassion for students, colleagues, and others.
* *Commitment* **–** Academic advisers value and are dedicated to excellence in all dimensions of student success. Advisers are committed to students, colleagues, institutions, and the profession through assessment, scholarly inquiry, life-long learning, and professional development.
* *Empowerment* **–** Academic advisers motivate, encourage, and support students and the greater educational community to recognize their potential, meet challenges, and respect individuality.
* *Inclusivity* **–** Academic advisers respect, engage, and value a supportive culture for diverse populations. Advisers strive to create and support environments that consider the needs and perspectives of students, institutions, and colleagues through openness, acceptance, and equity.
* *Integrity* **–** Academic advisers act intentionally in accordance with ethical and professional behavior developed through reflective practice. Advisers value honesty, transparency, and accountability to the student, institution, and the advising profession.
* *Professionalism* **–** Academic advisers act in accordance with the values of the profession of advising for the greater good of students, colleagues, institutions, and higher education in general.
* *Respect* **–** Academic advisers honor the inherent value of all students. Advisers build positive relationships by understanding and appreciating students’ views and cultures, maintaining a student-centered approach and mindset, and treating students with sensitivity and fairness (NACADA 2017a).

To ensure we enact these values in advising, NACADA suggests mastery of a variety of core competencies that fall into three broad areas: *conceptual, informational,* and *relational*. Please see [here](https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Pillars/CoreCompetencies.aspx) for NACADA’s more detailed explication of this framework (NACADA 2017b).

**Conceptual Approaches**

Being an effective adviser usually begins with some philosophy of advising since that is what gives context to the values (above), clarifies expected outcomes, and defines strategies for achieving them. One’s theory or philosophy of advising provides the framework through which values and goals may cohere and lead to a reflective and effective practice. There are many conceptual theories of advising, but here we address three that have shaped much of the profession of academic advising throughout its history.

Beginning in the 1970s, alongside the growth of developmental approaches to higher education generally, advising professionals began to question the traditional **prescriptive model** of advising. The prescriptive model was prevalent in academic culture for decades, and posited that the role of the adviser is to provide students with knowledge about programs, courses, and procedures. Students, once told, would do what was suggested, namely enroll in courses, majors, or other work that advisers deemed appropriate for their interests and aptitude. The adviser then would monitor student performance and determine what, if any, changes were necessary in the course of study, and would ensure students were on track to complete graduation requirements on schedule. Advisers were assumed to have the answers to all questions and therefore advice to students occurs a uni-linear, top-down fashion, from adviser to advisee. Throughout this process advisers were focused almost exclusively on the academic life of the student. Although generally regarded as atavistic and problematic, some institutions and academic cultures around the world still conceive of advising using the prescriptive model. Critics of the prescriptive model have found it problematic because imagines a fixed hierarchy between adviser and advisee, and thus disempowers students and privileges adviser knowledge over care for student development – each potentially disrupting or damaging student growth.

Critics offered a **developmental model** as an alternative, in which the adviser and advisee are partners in educational discovery and responsibility is shared in the advising process. According to Winston et al (1984),

*Developmental Academic Advising* is defined as a systematic process based on a close student-adviser relationship intended to aid students in achieving educational, career, and personal goals through the utilization of the full range of institutional and community resources. It both stimulates and supports students in their quest for an enriched quality of life. Developmental advising relationships focus on identifying and accomplishing life goals, acquiring skills and attitudes that promote intellectual and personal growth, and sharing concerns for each other and for the academic community. Developmental academic advising reflects the institution's mission of total student development and is most likely to be realized when the academic affairs and student affairs divisions collaborate in its implementation. (Winston, et al., 1984: pp. 18–19)

Here, rather than being a sage authority, the adviser is a *guide* who helps students to learn institutional culture, curriculum, and procedures, but does so in less prescriptive, and more collaborative relationship with the advisee. Drawing from developmental theories by Chickering (1969) and Perry (1970), and from Deweyian concepts of constructivism, this model places an emphasis on development that derives from knowing and doing, and therefore regards student development to be the result of active, experiential experimentation and critical reflection that is, by necessity, undertaken with greater autonomy (Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994; Grites 2013). Therefore, this model is deeply suspicious of any advising that imposes expectations and developmental paths, or that is interventionist in its communications with advisees, lest it do harm. Consequently, the developmental model places more of an emphasis on advisee autonomy and empowerment, which is developed through a shared and ongoing process of questioning, reflection, assessment, and decision-making, with advisers sharing relevant experience and resources along the way. While advisers may share resources, care must be taken to ensure that the identification of learning goals and the creation of academic plans is collaborative. Throughout this process, developmental advisers also take a holistic approach to student progress, focusing not merely on academic growth, but also on personal, social, and moral forms (Crookston 1972: 13). Because of this advising for academic purposes cannot be separated from career or personal advising (Grites 2013). This can result in a much closer and time-intensive relationship with student advisees, and can appear more like mentorship relations typically found between faculty and graduate students (for more on these relationships, please see the CFT guide on [Mentoring Graduate Students](https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/mentoring-graduate-students/)).

While the developmental model is still prevalent and guides much of academic advising throughout higher education, recent years have seen the growth of what we may term a **teaching/learning model** of advising. Derived from and consistent with much of the developmental model in its stress on collaborative adviser-advisee relationships, autonomous experimentation and reflection, and holistic development, the teaching/learning model places a greater emphasis on the role of advisers as educators who attend to learning outcomes and pedagogy. This was, in part, motivated by the belief that developmental models were often vague in their conceptualization of development itself, relying more on practice than theory. Therefore, authors such as Ryan (1992) and Drew Appleby (2001) have mined the teaching and learning literature and conclude that effective advisers can learn from effective teachers. Both must master their subject matter, prepare well, engage students actively, provide regular feedback, encourage student autonomy and self-evaluation, provide problem-solving tasks, deliver information clearly, use good questioning skills, exhibit care and respect for students, promote inclusivity and equity, and stimulate higher level cognition. Consequently, those in the teaching/learning model, such as Reynolds (2010), regard the adviser as a teacher who can borrow learning principles from educators (e.g., Angelo 1993), principles to which we will return below. What is it the students should learn? Hemwall and Trachte (2005) suggest the curriculum of advising might best be focused on the institutional mission and curriculum, skills of higher order thinking, and ways students might connect personal interests or goals to that of the institution and its many resources. In short, the teaching/learning model builds upon the holistic and collaborative features of the developmental model but focuses upon advising as primarily educational, and therefore borrows from the scholarship of teaching and learning to structure advising relationships.

*Reflection Questions*: There is great complexity to the histories of advising in higher education, and each model comes with an array of assumptions and consequences that affect advising. What is your advising philosophy? What of these or other models do you find most appealing or useful? How might you improve your philosophy to better support your advisees and make your work more effective and enjoyable? You might consider writing a statement that guides your approach and helps you give clarity and structure to your advising. For examples of such statements, please see [these](https://advising-portal.uni.edu/example-advising-philosophies) from faculty at the University of Northern Iowa.

**Informational Resources**

Whatever the model one uses, advisers must have some mastery of the many **Informational** resources for advising, particularly the following:

* Institutional mission and culture
* Curriculum and requirements
* Policies and procedures
* Legal guidelines for advising
* The needs of the diverse and emerging students
* Disciplinary or professional expertise
* Campus and community resources
* Relevant information technology

This knowledge will vary across institutions, within them (across schools, departments, programs, and other units), and by the adviser role as a staff or faculty adviser, advising supervisor or manager, learning professional or trainer, or others. Please be attentive to your own institutional location or role and what informational resources are necessary for you to meet your goals.

For faculty and staff at Vanderbilt University, there are a variety of resources that may prove useful to you as you develop your own mastery of the requisite advising information:

*Vanderbilt Course Catalogs*

* [Undergraduate Catalog](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/catalogs/documents/UGAD.pdf)
* [Graduate School Catalog](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/catalogs/documents/graduate.pdf)

*Vanderbilt’s Undergraduate Schools*

* [School of Engineering](https://engineering.vanderbilt.edu/academic-services/AcademicAdvising/index.php)
* [Peabody College](https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/admin-offices/oas/peabodyadvising_undergrads.php)
* Arts & Science
	+ [General advising resources](https://as.vanderbilt.edu/advising/)
	+ [College of Arts & Science Pre-major Academic Resource](https://as.vanderbilt.edu/advising/caspar/about/).
	+ [Major advising](https://as.vanderbilt.edu/advising/major.php)
	+ [Pre-Professional Advising](https://as.vanderbilt.edu/advising/preprofessional.php)
* [Blair School of Music](https://blair.vanderbilt.edu/academics/registration-faq.php)

*Vanderbilt’s Graduate and Professional Schools*

* [The Graduate School](https://gradschool.vanderbilt.edu/)
* [Arts and Science](https://as.vanderbilt.edu/)
* [Peabody College](https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/admin-offices/oas/peabodyadvising_professionals.php)
* [School of Engineering](https://engineering.vanderbilt.edu/academics/graduate/)
* [Owen School of Management](https://business.vanderbilt.edu/contact/meet-the-academic-programs-and-student-life-team/)
* [School of Law](https://law.vanderbilt.edu/academics/academic-support-resources.php)
* [Divinity School](https://divinity.vanderbilt.edu/portal/)
* [School of Nursing](https://nursing.vanderbilt.edu/index.php)
* [School of Medicine](https://medschool.vanderbilt.edu/)

*Other Vanderbilt Advising Resources*

* [Immersion Vanderbilt](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/immersion/). Immersion Vanderbilt provides undergraduate students with the opportunity to pursue their passions and cultivate intellectual interests through experiential learning. This intensive learning experience takes place in and beyond the classroom and culminates in the completion of a final project. Faculty and staff may learn more about Immersion Vanderbilt through the Faculty/Staff portal [here](https://sso-login.vanderbilt.edu/idp/SSO.saml2). Also, Immersion Vanderbilt has a Faculty Information document that clarifies the role of the Immersion Faculty Adviser, Immersion requirements, and timelines for advising, among other valuable information.
* [The Martha Rivers Ingram Commons: Academic Resources](https://commons.vanderbilt.edu/studentlife/academicresources.php). The Commons Center is the community crossroads of The Ingram Commons living and learning community and is the heart of the first-year experience. The Commons is home to a variety of resources that may be supportive of student advising needs.
* [Tutoring](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/tutoring/). At Vanderbilt Tutoring Services, students have the opportunity to meet individually with a talented staff of tutors who will help them enhance their academic performance through the power of collaborative learning.
* [Writing Studio](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/writing/). The Writing Studio fosters conversation, collaboration, and critical reflection on writing. Open to all members of Vanderbilt’s scholarly community, the Studio provides opportunities to receive constructive feedback from trained consultants and to develop strategies for all stages of the writing process.
* [Career Center](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/career/). The Career Center offers a full range of services to help students with whatever plans they have for the future. Whether it’s a career, a summer job, an internship, graduate study, a fellowship or scholarship, they can help students with everything from making career (and major) decisions to writing a resume to connecting with key employers and alumni.

*Reflection Questions*: What informational resources are most critical for you to know for you to be a successful adviser? What community or campus resources will be most helpful to you and your advisees? What informational resources do you not have that you need to acquire?

**Relational Skills**

Lastly, effective advisers possess competencies in **relational** **skills** that constitute the practices of advising. These skills are many (NACADA 2017b), but include the ability to…

* Articulate a personal philosophy of academic advising
* Build rapport in advising relationships
* Communicate inclusively and respectfully
* Plan and conduct advising interactions
* Promote student understanding
* Engage in ongoing reflection and assessment
* Facilitate problem solving, decision-making, meaning making, and goal setting.

However, all of this is easier said than done. Knowing *what* is to be done may only be the start of your advising, and what poses the greatest challenge may be *how* it is to be done. If advising is simply another form of teaching, then we might divide the work of advising into educational strategies designed to enhance cognitive development and those that address affective or emotional dimensions of learning. Of course, there is always a dialectical, mutually constitutive relationship between the cognitive and affective, the intellectual and emotional, but for the purposes of organization, these categories may be helpful.

Advising strategies that focus upon cognitive development may borrow heavily from learner-centered approaches. Reynolds (2010) highlights several teaching techniques borrowed from the classroom that may prove particularly effective.

* *Active learning*. Consistent with the developmental perspective, students benefit from being actively involved in advising through active reflective prompts about strengths or weaknesses, student-driven research on academic and career paths, defining goals and plans, and building the skills or knowledge they need. In all of these activities, students may and should take initiative to reflect upon their interests and growth needs, to research learning opportunities, and to design learning plans that can be then be the subject of advising dialogue.
* *Goal setting*. Advisees, like students, learn best when they have “explicit, reasonable, positive goals” so that they may internalize the purpose of the curriculum, become more meta-cognitive and autonomous, and better integrate their cognitive, professional, and personal development. That is, advising is not merely box-checking, but helping students to define learning and developmental objectives that they can use to guide their growth. This may require creativity in developing goals and learning plans that go beyond satisfying requirements, but actually satisfy student growth needs.
* *Reflection and self-assessment*. Early, frequent feedback is critical for advisee success, both in the form of adviser assessments and advisee self-assessment. This requires intentional reflection on advisee goals and plans and how they may change. According to George Kuh (2007), “students who meet with their adviser at least twice in the academic year tended to take part in the five benchmark activities found to be important for student success and engagement [in the National Survey of Student Engagement]” (in Reynolds 2010). That is, assessment should engage advisees in the work of critical reflection regularly so as to remain adaptive to challenges advisees face or new opportunities that emerge.
* *Peer learning*. As in coursework, advisees have great potential to educate each other in ways that are empowering via, say, student panels on advisee experiences (e.g., major selection, study abroad, or service-learning opportunities). Advisee peer education also has the opportunity to inform faculty or staff advisers about student experience, and relieve them of adviser burdens when time or labor demands are high.

However, advising relationships also involve affective dimensions. Giving appropriate attention to them can ensure the advising relationship is more engaging, trusting, motivating, and productive. Here are a few of the affectively oriented strategies of advising that may be helpful.

* *Presence.* Presence may be many things, but at its most practical it involves the simple acts of displaying openness to students’ interests and listening actively through focused attention and questioning that seeks to clarify or encourage reflection. While straightforward these can be difficult to realize in the busy lives of faculty, staff, and even students themselves, and therefore it may be necessary to schedule advising time and communicate clearly with students about mutual expectations for it.
* *Respect and acceptance.* Advising will be more engaging and productive when students feel accepted for who they are and respect for their time and interests. Insofar as advising can emulate counseling relationships, it may be helpful to consider counseling techniques that communicate respect and acceptance, particularly the act of offering students what Carl Rogers discussed as “unconditional positive regard.” This may be achieved via welcoming and affirming body language, as well as a caring, warm speaking style (O’Brien and Hartnett 2009). The latter refers to a more conversational, non-judgmental, and reflective tone. This unconditional positive regard does not exclude rigorous assessment but ensures that a foundation of trust and understanding exists before a critical examination of advisee strengths and weaknesses, or appropriate paths of development they may pursue.
* *Empathy and encouragement.* Advisees often can feel misunderstood or uncertain about the advising relationship or about how they are to get the most out of higher education, generally. They also may experience various forms of marginalization socially or academically that can leave students feeling fear or apprehension about advising. Therefore, it is imperative to offer empathy by expressing understanding, particularly any sharing any life experiences or common feelings that help advisees to see their experience as a part of a growth process. Indeed, adopting a growth-oriented approach to advising (assuming intellectual and personal capacities are not fixed but malleable) can empower advisees to see their own growth as, in part, under their control and encourage them to build their strengths (Dweck 2000). Similarly, helping students identify and develop their strengths in an asset-based approach – rather than focusing exclusively on weaknesses in a deficit-based approach – can support their sense of self-efficacy and -regulation.
* *Motivational strategies*. Advisees, like students in classrooms, are motivated when they understand the value or meaningful application of their knowledge and skills. Therefore, advisers have a motivational role to play in communicating this value (Reynolds 2010), and in setting expectations and planning reflective assessment processes that can keep students accountable to their and institutional goals for their development.
* *High achievement expectations*. Motivation also may be enhanced by higher expectations. While goals and expectations should be defined collaboratively and thus tailored to each advisee, advisers should demand that advisees find growth towards meaningful and challenging goals (Reynolds 2010).

While these affectively oriented strategies may seem too touchy-feely to many in higher education who have become accustomed to the bruising rigors of academic critique or who are burdened by hectic and distracted work lives, we assure they are helpful to your advising practice. They are built upon insights from psychological and educational research and can make the advising relationship more productive and enjoyable, in addition to more humane and just for all. Indeed, no advice for advisers may be more important than to practice kindness. As Aldous Huxley’s famously wrote, “It is a bit embarrassing to have been concerned with the human problem all one's life and find at the end that one has no more to offer by way of advice than 'try to be a little kinder'” (1977).

*Reflection Questions*: Which relational skills are most important for your advising context or role? Which relational skills, cognitive or affective, do you believe you already possess, and which do you need to develop? How might your skills grow in ways to better enable holistic development of your mentees or advisees?

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