Authentic Leadership and Academic Advising: Toward a Comprehensive Theory

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Academic advising is a discipline in search of a theory. Many scholars have offered their own opinions on what it would take for academic advising to ascend to the level of a recognized profession (Kuhn & Padak, 2008; Habley, 2009; Shaffer, LaLewski & Leveille, 2010; Larson, Adams, & Barkemeyer, 2013). Recently, Lowenstein (2012) has picked McGillin’s (2000) position back up, arguing that the development of a comprehensive theory unique to academic advising is singularly necessary for that transition to take place.

Since it became an examined activity with the seminal works of Crookston and O’Banion in the early 1970’s (Kuhn, 2008), academic advising has borrowed from the theories of other fields, largely the social sciences, education, and philosophy (Himes & Schulenberg, 2013). As Schulenberg and Lindhorst put it, academic advising “has recently relied on analogies and metaphors... obscure[ing] the uniqueness of academic advising and mask[ing] the importance of the scholarship that underlies its practice” (2008, p. 43). Others yet continue to argue in favor of analogical theory building, stating that advisors have both “license to draw upon a wide array of theoretical perspectives” and “the obligation” to do so (Hagen and Jordan, 2008, p. 32).

Perhaps now more than any other time in its history, scholar-practitioners in the discipline of academic advising need to be testing the theoretical waters. This paper will review contemporary examples of such explorations, principally within the field of leadership theory. Further, the argument will be made that, given the distinctive nature of the practice and the dynamics between its stakeholders, Authentic Leadership Theory in particular holds many advantages when considering how leadership theory can inform academic advising.
Academic Advising and Theory

In the second edition of *Academic Advising: A Comprehensive Handbook* (Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008), Hagen and Jordan’s chapter on the theoretical foundations of academic advising follows the pattern established in the first edition (citation, 2000), and advocates for no single theory. In fact, the authors instead contend that the “use of an array of theories will lead to an understanding of this broadly complicated phenomenon known as academic advising” (Hagen & Jordan, 2008, p. 17). In their presentation of “the most important and useful” theoretical approaches to academic advising, Hagen and Jordan divide them into two groups, normative and analogic. Most of normative theories come from the earlier days of advising theory or prior to and “exhort advisors to advise in a certain way,” while analogic theories borrow from other fields and apply them to advising and tend to represent more recent scholarship (Hagen and Miller, 2008, p. 19-31). Traditional normative approaches include the developmental advising movement, psychosocial and identity development theories, cognitive development theories, and personal preference or type theories. Examples of newer analogic efforts include narrative advising (from narrative therapy), applications of the Socratic Method, and social norms theory. Particularly when coupled with its first edition, the *Handbook* demonstrates a growing interest among academic advisors in exploring extant theoretical areas to inform their practice.

In the fall of 2013, a new reference text for academic advising was published with the intent of “expand[ing] the knowledge base… and link[ing] theory with practice” (Drake, Jordan, & Miller, 2013, p. ix). *Academic Advising Approaches* presents a variety of established advising practices and strategies in a contemporary context. In doing so, it too does not promote any one theoretical perspective. Instead, this source demonstrates a more contemporary status of theory in the field of academic advising, one that embraces an expanded theoretical base. The text begins
by tackling the dominant conceptual approach in the field, advising as teaching, by examining pedagogical theory, learning theory, and developmental advising. The editors then move on to other established yet different perspectives, including motivation theory (via motivational interviewing), appreciative inquiry (via appreciative advising), positive psychology theory (via strengths-based advising), self-authorship theory, counseling theories (via proactive advising), and advising as coaching (with its assorted theoretical background). Finally, Approaches offers a third section exploring “new lenses” that use theories from less familiar fields for academic advisors. These consist of constructivism, systems theory, and hermeneutics. Lowenstein concludes the Approaches, however, with a qualified reassertion of his position that theory is critical to the future of discipline.

**Academic Advising and Leadership Theory**

The Handbook and Approaches reveal the relatively unnoticed applications of leadership theory within academic advising scholarship. While Hagen and Jordan included “business, and the other professions” (2008, p. 32) in their laundry list of potential theoretical areas to explore, only one entry in either text (advising as coaching) touches on the field of leadership theory, and only marginally so. What follows is a review of the entries among the academic advising scholarship that specifically employ leadership theory centrally in their analyses.

Despite a remarkable diversity within the domain and the lack of consensus among its scholars, Northouse (2012) defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 5). Many definitions of academic advising also include the theme of influence and the structural elements of processes and goals (NACADA, 2003). Northouse (2012) also documents well the dense field that is of leadership theory, a complexity reaffirmed by the meta-analytical work of Dihn, Lord, Gardner, Meuser,
Linden, and Hu (2014) when they report the identification of “66 disparate leadership theory [thematic] categories” (p. 45). A review of the academic advising scholarship reveals sporadic forays into only three predominant categories, situation leadership, servant leadership, and transformational leadership.

**Situational Leadership**

Lerstrom’s “case study” (2008) is one of the earliest examples in the academic advising literature of a direct application of leadership theory onto the practice of academic advising. As the title of his article indicates, Lerstrom makes use of Situational Leadership Theory to examine academic advising. The connection between the development of followers in Hersey and Blanchard’s model and the dominance of developmental theories in academic advising was the inspiration (Lerstrom, 2008). As a first step, Lerstrom’s work makes an astute connection between the fields of academic advising and leadership theory. In its anecdotal and models approach, it does not, however, anything by way of empirical or quantitative evidence often called for in leadership theory scholarship.

Yarbrough’s (2010) dissertation also utilizes Situational Leadership Theory as a theoretical lens. It deviates from Lerstrom’s work, though, by actually conducting empirical research, connecting follower ability and willingness to engage in academic advising behaviors and outcomes. Though it appears Yarbrough’s research has not seen further publication to date and the connections drawn in her study do not reflect the most contemporary understanding of academic advising or leadership theory, as a model for the integration of the field of academic advising and leadership theory, her dissertation is a step in the right direction. The research outcomes, however, focuses largely on student development, college readiness, and self-
reporting, and it does not provide significant correlative evidence in support of applying situation leadership theory to academic advising (Yarbrough, 2010).

**Servant Leadership**

McClellan (2007) holds a doctorate in Leadership Studies from Gonzaga University. One of his first positions in higher education was that of director of advisor training and development. It is no wonder, then, that his work is among the earliest in the academic advising literature to directly apply leadership theory to academic advising practice. McClellan (2007) applied the “theoretical-philosophical construct” of Servant Leadership Theory to advising, yet again only in an analogic sense, and not in an empirical or quantitative sense. He concludes his examination with a wish: “Hopefully this will spawn interest in further exploration of this relationship in both theory and practice.”

Years later, McClennan would get his wish when Paul, Smith, and Dochney (2012) set out to test his Servant Leadership hypothesis. This interaction between advising scholar-practitioners is the only example to-date where direct scholarly discourse has taken place on the integration of leadership theory in the field of academic advising. While, ultimately, Paul, Smith, and Dochney’s findings validated McClellan’s supposition, the primary importance of this publication for the current study is its empirical methodology. The findings, however, hold significant limitations as the study was conducted at only one university in the southeastern United States and was purposely sampled (Paul, Smith, & Dochne, 2012, p. 60). Replication efforts would be beneficial.

**Transformational Leadership**

Johnson’s (2007) exploration of clinical supervision in a psychology graduate program is may be the first linkage made between Transformational Leadership Theory and academic
advising. The article frequently alludes to academic advising as a related practice to faculty mentorship and supervision. As the Transformational Leadership Theory does, Johnson (2007) contrasts transactional and transformational leadership, applying the dichotomy to the supervision of graduate clinicians. As is the case with most of these first steps, the study does not provide any quantitative support for doing so, only anecdotal.

As Lerstrom (2008) did, Drozd (2010) found associations between academic advising and leadership theory via student development theory, Chickering specifically. While such a transitive approach may not hold up under closer scrutiny, Drozd’s empirical approach connecting Transformational Leadership Theory’s concept of follower preferences to perceptions of academic advisor behaviors serves as a model for the proposed study and future scholarship of this nature. For example, her study produced quantitative evidence that “transformational leadership activities were transferable to activities performed by undergraduate academic advisors,” that “students do prefer the developmental advising approach which is parallel to transformational leadership,” and that “finding[s] from this study refuted the transformational gender notion” (Drozd, 2010, p. 46-48).

Drozd’s (2010) empirical and direct approach to considering the linkages between leadership theory and academic advising eschewed the dominant analogic approaches of previous scholarship and serves as a model for the proposed study. Recent developments in the discipline of academic advising include calls for stronger measures of accountability (Lozada, 2012). This trend, coupled with increased expectations from students and family members for trustworthiness, relationship-building, and compassion, Authentic Leadership Theory is a worthy addition to the above efforts. What follows is a brief review of Authentic Leadership Theory, its history and development.
**Authentic Leadership**

One of two seminal publications that came as a result of the Gallup Leadership Institute in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 2004, Gardner, Avoilio, and Walumba’s (2005) *Authentic Leadership Theory and Practice* is foundational for the theoretical approach to Authentic Leadership. As such, any discussion of the theory must include this work. The comprehensive text covers it all, from the field’s earlier practitioner roots, to the theory’s structural components, to the need for further empirical testing and validation (Gardner, Avoilio, & Walumba, 2005).

Walumba, Avoilio, Gardner, Wernsing, and Peterson (2008) define Authentic Leadership as “a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of the leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development” (p. 94). These themes are frequently echoed in definitions and concepts of academic advising (NACADA, 2003).

Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, and Dickens published an updated state of the theory in 2011. Their review of the scholarship over the six years since the 2004 institute stands as a critical re-evaluation of the status of Authentic Leadership scholarship. The proposed study draws heavily from their “agenda for future AL research” (Gardener et al., 2011, p. 1139) in building its case for connecting academic advising to Authentic Leadership Theory. The authors review the various settings in which the theory has been applied, then call for “more extensive use of qualitative methods to provide thick narrative descriptions of leadership processes and contexts, including the dynamic interplay between authentic leadership, authentic followership, and positive ethical climates” (Gardener et al., 2011, p. 1141). Academic advising is just such a climate.
The Proposed Study

Authentic Leadership’s emergent nature also makes it a strong candidate for applications to academic advising. One assumption made by the proposed study is that academic advisors do not view themselves as leaders. Advisors’ assigned advising populations, however, could easily be considered followers and the practice of advising as leadership of a sort. Moreover, in the discipline of academic advising, the concept of leadership is frequently viewed as solely a function of institutional position or title, educational background, or professional organization experience. The proposed study aims to utilize the informal and emergent nature conceptualized within Authentic Leadership Theory to further explore and articulate these observations.

As the relationship between advisor and student continues to become more steeped in accountability and expectation, explorations of advising theory should further consider approaches that incorporate a moral/ethical component. There are also likely to be connections between the structure of Authentic Leadership Theory and existing advising approaches, such as appreciative advising, narrative advising, and motivational interviewing. Expecting findings include differences in self-reported leadership conceptions between advisors of different levels in title and position. Additionally, the proposed study is expected to demarcate where the assumed similarities between Authentic Leadership Theory and academic advising exist and do not. The intent of this exploration of the nomothetic network will be critical for both disciplines (Gardner et al, 2011).

To explore the relationships between Authentic Leadership Theory and academic advising, a study is proposed whereby advisors from specific populations will be targeted and an existing Authentic Leadership instrument will be deployed. Participants are purposefully intended to come from three distinct groups of academic advisors: 1) “front-line” advisors with
no supervisory or position-based leadership expectations, 2) members of the Emerging Leaders Program from NACADA, and 3) advising administrators. The Authentic Leadership Questionnaire will be used to assess their perceptions of their leadership and its authenticity. Other instruments will be evaluated for adaptation or direct deployment, or perhaps developed, to probe the connections between the activity of academic advising and leadership-followership dynamics present in Authentic Leadership Theory. Finally, demographic information will be sought regarding both the respondents and their institutions for cross-tabbing and contextual differentiation.

**Conclusion**

Efforts to inform both academic advising theory and leadership such as Drozd’s should be continued; scholars on both sides continue to issue calls for just such inquiry. If academic advising is going to reach Lowenstein’s perhaps unattainable goal of a comprehensive theory unique to academic advising or remove it from the agenda entirely, theoretical fields from all disciplines should be explored as aggressively as previously dominant theoretical fields have been. The proposed study would continue that work in the area of Authentic Leadership; a field that the author feels has much in common with the practice of academic advising. Should the proposed study be conducted, results would be shared both at advising conferences and in the scholarship outlets available in both disciplines.
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