NACADA Core Competencies

Conceptual

C 3  Theory relevant to academic advising.
C 4  Academic advising approaches and strategies.
C 5  Expected outcomes of academic advising.

Relational

R 2  Create rapport and build academic advising relationships.
R 6  Facilitate problem solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning, and goal setting.

The Developmental Advising Approach

Keegan Hange

Post-secondary education affords students an opportunity to learn and grow in many ways, both in and out of the classroom. The realm of the advising relationship is an important component of that process. Developmental advising is a holistic approach that embraces advising as a teaching opportunity to not only help a student choose classes and develop a career path but also navigate how their college experience is changing them as a person.

Developmental advising views the advisor as a facilitator rather than director of the student’s educational experience, building a partnership of shared responsibility with the student. Whereas in prescriptive advising, the advisor is a dispenser of answers, in developmental advising, the advisor guides the student to learn to discover the right answers for themselves, strengthening students’ critical-thinking and decision-making skills. The Colorado State University advising website lays out the objectives, “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.”

Missouri State University describes some behaviors of developmental advising in their Theories of Advising page; for example, “Advisor provides information about workshops and seminars in areas such as career planning and study skills, in addition to courses and class schedules,” and “Advisor assists student in identifying
alternatives and weighing consequences when facing difficult decisions.” An advisor might also question a student’s reasons for making a particular decision, not to be antagonistic, but to check that they’ve thought them through. Advisors can encourage students to explore and make use of all the resources available to them at the institution and reflect on those experiences as part of the learning process. Developmental advising is also responsive to how a student’s needs change as they proceed on their college journey and grow in autonomy.

While each student presents a unique set of circumstances, developmental advising is informed by a range of educational, psychosocial, and other theories, including Chickering’s Seven Vectors of Student Development and Sanford’s Theory of Challenge and Support. The University of Puget Sound provides an excellent summary of several of these theories.

Implementing developmental advising can be challenging, and Virginia Gordon shares ten barriers to using this approach and offers some solutions in her article, “Developmental Advising: The Elusive Ideal” in the December 2019 issue of the NACADA Journal. One barrier she mentions is that students often expect that advising in college will mirror their ‘get a list of classes’ experience of guidance in high school. Advisors can combat this by communicating their expectations for a more collaborative working relationship early in the advising experience.

Developmental advising takes a comprehensive approach to student learning, enriching and broadening their college experience and giving them even greater range of skills to take with them into their careers and lives.

For further reading:

NACADA- Developmental Academic Advising

Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching- Academic Advising