The Academic Advising Continuum: A Tool for Reflecting on the How and Why of Advising

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Abstract: Advising discourse is rich in theories and concepts. While these help to provide definitions and explanations to inform practice, they also present obstacles when practical decision-making must be based on shared understandings and expectations between stakeholders with different backgrounds and opinions. We propose an alternative approach to engaging in conversation about advising practice. The Academic Advising Continuum is a visual reflection tool which encourages stakeholders to explore the why and how of advising and to articulate their perspectives without the need for an a priori common vocabulary of advising. The outcomes of such explorations help stakeholders articulate expectations and identify needs and opportunities for change, creating a shared basis to further develop or revise existing advising practices. Examples of how the tool may be used are provided.

Keywords: advising continuum, advising discourse, reflection tool, advising theory

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we introduce a practice-based tool that complements theoretical understandings and conceptual classifications of academic advising approaches. The Academic Advising Continuum provides a scaffold for practice-based, exploratory conversations about what it is we do in advising and why we are doing it, taking into account the complexity of advising practice and the multiplicity of ways in which it can be performed.

The field of advising has a rich vocabulary and nomenclature. In fact, referring to the field comprehensively as "advising" suggests a more unequivocal and

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common understanding of what that word means than may actually exist. The discourse within this elusive field is populated with many different names for roles and activities: academic advising, personal tutoring, mentoring, coaching, counseling—often further specified through adjectives like "developmental," "appreciative," "intrusive," etc. Geographical location is one variable that determines terminology: what is called "faculty advising" in the United States is mostly referred to as "personal tutoring" in the United Kingdom, and "mentoring" at most Dutch universities. Next to national context, however, specific purpose, academic discipline, the professional context of those who advise (full-time advising staff, academic faculty, teaching staff, counselors), and models of delivery all contribute to a highly sophisticated and diversified taxonomy of advising.

Forging meaningful connections between words, actions, and ideas is always extremely complicated, and advising is a very clear case in point. The quest for finding the "right words" ("How do I say this properly?") arises from the desire to exchange points of view, to share or challenge beliefs, and to capture and develop new ideas. Through an almost Socratic process of meaning-making, an increasingly sophisticated articulation of concepts can help us understand what we mean by "advising" and, within that definition, what it is we intend to accomplish and how we operationalize those objectives into practice.

However, many stakeholders, whose participation in conversations about advising is essential, are unfamiliar with the scholarly and professional conversations where these concepts are developed and used. The confusion that arises from a lack of shared understanding and vocabulary between different institutional stakeholders—students, educators, advisers, administrators at all levels—can be highly counterproductive, particularly if such differences remain implicit or go undetected. Making discrepancies and commonalities an explicit part of the conversation, on the other hand, requires all stakeholders to articulate their perspectives further. Whether the further explication of perspectives leads to eventual consensus, or to a better understanding of where and how expectations differ, the process will always be beneficial. It will either confirm the common ground for further development or expose where gaps may have to be bridged and transparency needs to be improved.

Furthermore, even between colleagues who do share a common language and theoretical background, it is not always obvious how to connect daily practice with theory. In making such connections, it may be necessary to identify and map one's intentions with interventions, see how these correspond with various concepts and theories, and decide on a specific theory as an appropriate model for developing one's practice.

We contend that a thorough grounding in advising scholarship and vocabulary is not a pre-condition for stakeholders to have meaningful and productive conversations about the purpose, practice, and improvement of advising. While acknowledging the value of the broader, overarching discourse on definitions and terminology for developing and promoting advising as a field and profession (Larson et al., 2018; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008), we also believe that

contextually specific conversations would benefit practitioners at all levels. Those who intend to initiate, develop, or improve advising efforts at their own institutions or within their own units may experience a gap between abstract theories and the institutional expectations and possibilities they see in everyday practice. The Academic Advising Continuum, a tool we describe in this paper, enables contextually specific conversations, helping to describe the status quo as well as reflecting on ambitions and opportunities for change. We intentionally avoid terminology issues by using "advising" as a placeholder, focusing instead on two key dimensions of what advising and other related roles and activities (coaching, mentoring, etc.) have in common: methods and outcomes.

THE ACADEMIC ADVISING CONTINUUM

The main purpose of the Continuum is to stimulate and facilitate conversations about the state of advising at a personal level, within a program, at an institution, or even nationally, without the need for a priori consensus on a definition of advising. The Continuum positions activities, programs, visions, and missions within an advising landscape, defined by two dimensions: the *how* and the *why* of advising. Conversations that are scaffolded with the aid of the Continuum can begin as an analysis of a single advising intervention, a review of comprehensive institutional practice, or anything in between.

On the metaphorical map that represents the advising landscape, preferred methods and intended outcomes can be seen as the latitude and longitude that together determine where a certain advising intervention, or an entire institutional strategic agenda, resides. A "you are here" on that map can be established at many levels, with and for diverse audiences: from the individual practitioner to an entire institution and for staff as well as for students. Locating oneself along the two dimensions of how and why facilitates a concrete and contextual reflection on practice. At the same time, it does not require taking an a priori stance on broad theories or philosophies. The Continuum is a means of making an inventory and critically reviewing the relationship between what is done and what is being aimed for; it raises important questions about what one intends to accomplish with and for students and whether current practice fits that purpose. The outcomes of such a critical review help articulate needs and opportunities for change and set objectives for the further development or revision of existing advising practices. They may also help identify the specific advising models and theories that turn out to be relevant for a particular practice a posteriori and that may help to scaffold development and revision. Additionally, an important part of the process is that a common vocabulary will emerge, based on the local context in which the conversation takes place, to facilitate exchanges and collaboration between various stakeholders.

Figure 1
The Two Dimensions of the Academic Advising Continuum

student
agency

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participation ⸻ o u t c o m e s ⸻ realization
d
s

student
dependency
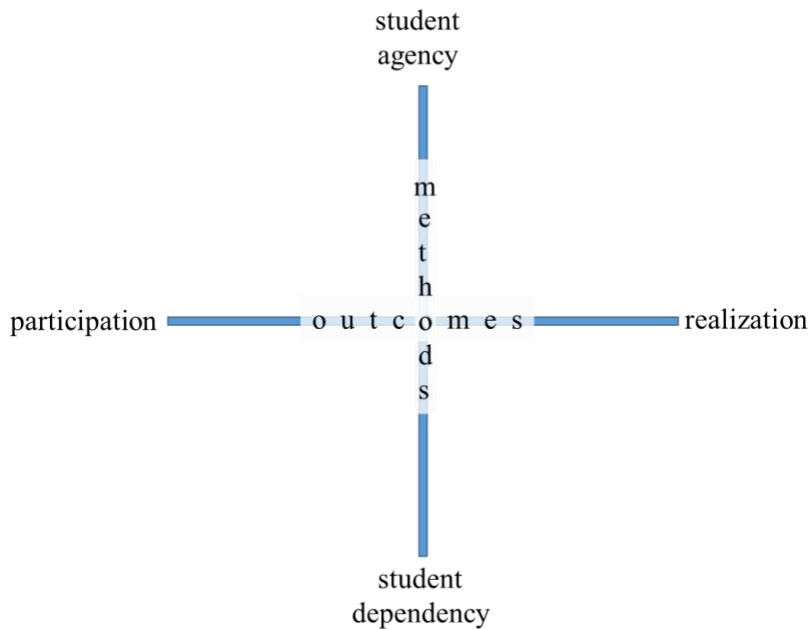
The Academic Advising Continuum we propose is based on a simple idea: imagine a diagram consisting of two axes, one horizontal and one vertical (see Figure 1). In this diagram, the horizontal axis represents intended outcomes of advising, the vertical axis preferred methods. Combining a certain intended outcome with a specific preferred method leads to a unique position on the diagram that characterizes the specific item under review—a single intervention, a departmental strategy, an institutional vision.

As we will see, even the distinction between how and why may not always be as obvious as it seems. In fact, when the intended outcomes of what we do align closely with the ways in which one tries to achieve them, that distinction may be hard to draw or even come across as artificial. The value of separating these two dimensions lies in how it operationalizes a familiar distinction, a reduction that makes sense intuitively even though it may be challenged upon deeper reflection. The assumption here is not that the optimal analysis of advising practice depends on a strict distinction between outcomes versus methods but that the how and the why are commonly accepted starting points for reflection and review. Needless to say, once decisions about purpose and approach have been made, well-defined and aligned outcomes and methods of delivery will contribute to fulfilling those aspirations.

HORIZONTAL AXIS: INTENDED OUTCOMES

Advising is outcome driven. Sometimes those outcomes can be described in terms of the ultimate educational goals of a degree program, desired attributes of graduates, or institutional strategies. Supporting students in attaining such goals

may be somewhat similar to supporting employees in a company towards achieving some tangible outcome: the creation of a product, the delivery of certain services, etc. Such advising outcomes have to do with the "realization" of end goals, and we place them towards the right-hand side of the horizontal axis in the Continuum. Here one would find outcomes of advising that are closely connected to the academic goals of a course or discipline, well-defined professional competencies, or specific skills students may acquire, such as lifelong learning, global citizenship, and critical thinking. The nature of these outcomes can be those defined by the institution, advisers, or students. Any group of stakeholders can use the diagram to position the outcomes for advising as they see them or as they know or expect them to be perceived by others.

Sometimes, advising outcomes have more to do with the conditions that impact students' ability to engage. In order to achieve a degree or specific graduate attributes, students need to be able to come to class, to participate in the educational process. Here a comparison can be made with companies supporting their employees in meeting the conditions to participate as employees, their specific role within the business process. We refer to these outcomes as conditions for "participation" and place them towards the left of the horizontal axis. For example, outcomes of advising that impact conditions for participation include alleviating mental health challenges, lack of belonging, socio-economic barriers, literacy gaps, etc.

Traveling from left to right across the horizontal axis we go from outcomes that are the conditions for any individual or group to participate and engage in their education, to outcomes that are highly context-specific (related to the purpose and mission of a program or institution or the personal educational objectives of students). The notion of an axis stresses the idea of a continuous range of outcomes, rather than a dichotomy. Some outcomes may clearly reside on one of the far ends of the spectrum (e.g., specific mental health issues, highly specialized academic or professional competencies), but many outcomes combine aspects of both. Some questions can be about the very act of studying as much as specific aspirations within a field of study: Who am I? Where am I going? What are my values and my goals?

Outcomes can be intended, assumed, implied, or just happen; in most advising practices, we encounter a little bit of everything. In addition, outcomes on either end of the axis may vary, depending on who formulates them. Articulating and describing outcomes to locate a practice on the Continuum is an important first step towards making decisions and setting priorities among diverse stakeholders.

VERTICAL AXIS: METHODS OF DELIVERY

Just as there are a range of outcomes in advising, there are a wide variety of methods for the delivery of advising. The method of delivery is the way we choose to get to an outcome. Within the variety of methods for delivering advising, a fundamental distinction can be made between those that revolve around attaining

the outcomes for students and those that revolve around attaining outcomes by students. Or we may understand this distinction as solving problems for students versus empowering students to solve problems themselves.

Towards the lower end of the vertical axis of the Continuum, we find advising methods that are founded on the premise of "student dependency." Within the current advising discourse, "dependency" may have negative connotations, but the term here has no inherent positive or negative association. The merit of a dependency-driven advising intervention depends on its intended outcome. The provision of basic information that helps students find their way through institutional procedures is commonly accepted as an integral feature of advising. But it may be helpful to reflect on the extent to which students should take responsibility for themselves to be informed. There are many issues and challenges that merit intervention aimed at resolution for the student, such as cases of acute mental distress or illness. Advising in such cases emphasizes caring and is diagnostic, responsive, and ad hoc. But other challenges facing students, such as making sound decisions on matters related to the curriculum or future careers, may be harder to reconcile with a dependency-oriented approach to advising.

Towards the higher end of the vertical axis, we locate advising methods that are centered on "student agency." Here, advising takes on a learning and teaching approach, and the necessary expertise for advisers is pedagogical in nature. In these approaches, student agency is instrumental in attaining outcomes. Advising that is agency-oriented is usually not ad hoc but works with predefined student learning outcomes, organized in the form of an implicit or explicit advising curriculum and supported by an intentionally provided series of interactions. Higher on the axis does not necessarily mean better. When it comes to making decisions about their studies and future goals, there are likely to be long-term benefits for students that arise from providing them with the means to develop ownership. However, at times of acute personal crisis, a strong emphasis on agency may do more harm than good.

Intended outcomes and methods of delivery manifest themselves in all kinds of ways. Most notably, we recognize them in the form of the interventions that make up an advising program (group or individual sessions, an advising program calendar, peer advising, flipped advising activities, the use of [e-]portfolios, etc.), roles and job-titles used (mentor, academic adviser, coach, etc.), and formally stated goals (particular students' goals, mission statements, program objectives). However, upon further reflection and scrutiny, we see that intended outcomes can also be implicit, even when they are assumed to be generally shared, similar to the "hidden curriculum" of an institution. Actual roles and duties may differ from what formal job titles suggest, depending on department or individual. Many informal aspects of practice may have as much impact as formal interventions, such as approachability of staff and even the feel of physical offices. Furthermore, students come with expectations and perceptions about the purposes and outcomes of advising that may differ from both explicit and implicit institutional goals or aspects of culture.

HOW TO USE THE ACADEMIC ADVISING CONTINUUM

A diagram with two axes suggests mathematical precision. However, the process of locating oneself within the Academic Advising Continuum is qualitative and discursive in nature. Where individual advisers, advising programs, and entire universities are positioned along the two axes is not the function of any kind of fixed advising algorithm but the result of reflection and discussion. That an answer cannot be given for the position of an intervention will be as insightful as a well-articulated argument for a certain location, as it may reveal that certain actions are being done out of habit, without a clear rationale for why or how.

Previously, we gave a few examples of outcomes and methods. How might we plot these examples on the Continuum? Providing ad hoc crisis support for a student in distress would be located at the bottom left. Making decisions for students concerning their curriculum and future career would sit at the bottom right, while facilitating students in making those decisions for themselves makes for a spot in the top right quadrant. Creating opportunities for students to reflect on and draw conclusions about non-academic, personal issues has its place in the top left quadrant.

Figure 2
The Four Quadrants of the Academic Advising Continuum
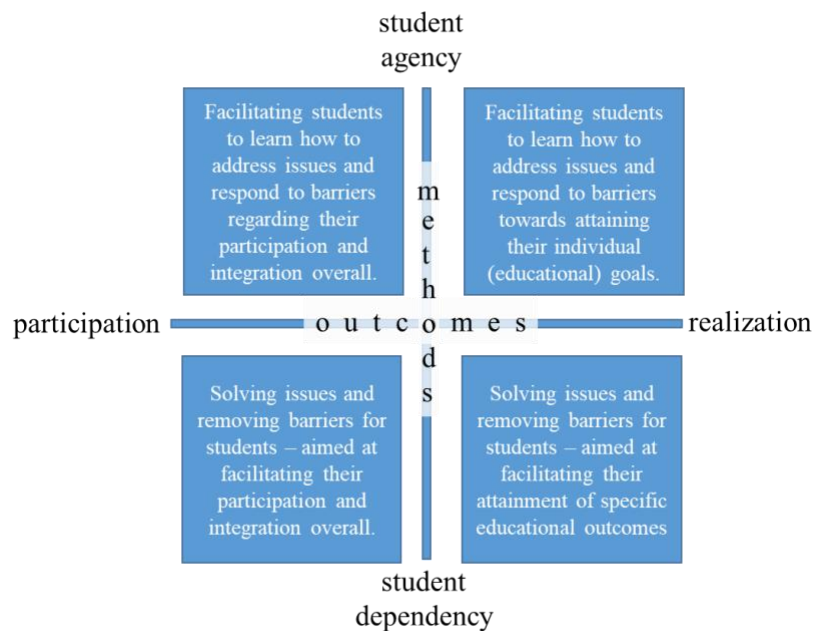
The Continuum makes it possible to position perspectives on advising in a meaningful way, while avoiding the need to subsume those perspectives under a theory or to first develop conceptual definitions. In its most basic form, a stakeholder could simply position themself on the Continuum to represent their

general stance towards advising in terms of outcomes and methods. Figure 2 presents broad descriptions for each of the four quadrants within the Continuum, which may suffice if a quick and general characterization is all that is required. A richer assessment can be obtained by plotting aspects of advising on the Continuum, be it interventions, intended outcomes, roles, or other aspects. When done methodically and comprehensively, this will result in a visual representation that captures the underlying, fundamental ideas about advising of individual stakeholders, advising units, and even entire institutions.

In the workshops we conducted with the Continuum in several stages of its development, we found that a relatively open assignment (starting with the identification of interventions, roles/job titles, and outcomes, followed by discussion of their position along the two axes), quickly led to profound conversations about individual and institutional perspectives on advising. Table 1 shows examples of items that came up during these conversations and that participants positioned on the Continuum. Figure 3 offers a visual representation of what the result of such an exercise might look like. In this case, the role of "counselor" was placed in the lower left quadrant and associated with outcomes and interventions that are mostly aimed at solving issues and removing barriers for students, facilitating their participation and integration overall. The role of "mentor" was seen as being located in the upper right quadrant, along with outcomes and activities meant to facilitate students learning to address issues and respond to barriers towards attaining their individual educational goals.

Table 1

Examples Positioned on the Academic Advising Continuum by Method (Agency–Dependency) and Outcome (Participation–Realization)

Intervention	Outcome	Role
One-on-one goal-setting conversations	Equity in access to education	Mentor
Workshops on time management	Definition of personal goals	Full-time adviser
Individual assistance with course registration	Understanding of intended outcomes of academic curriculum	Student/peer
Peer-to-peer first-generation student orientation sessions	Timely and relevant registration for courses	Academic/faculty in advising role
Online information about institutional procedures	Student ability to adopt a metacognitive stance	Counsellor
Workshops on setting career and life goals		Career coach

Figure 3

Plot of Outcomes, Interventions, and Roles of Advising Approaches
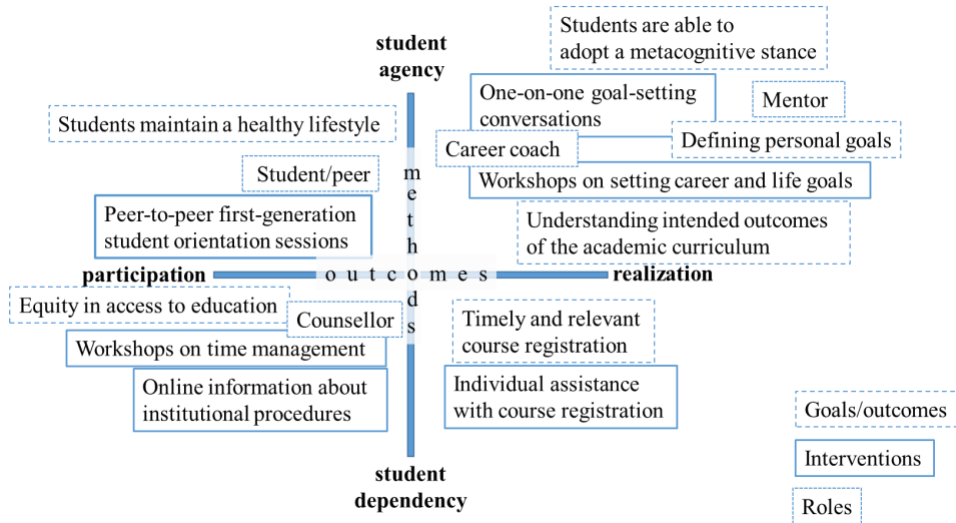
Whether the Continuum is used for exploration by an individual adviser, an advising unit, or the entire institution, the exercise will always be highly reflective in nature. The process of finding and reasoning for or against the position of interventions, outcomes, and roles can confirm or challenge implicit assumptions and institutional culture as well as explicit, formal policy. When done with various stakeholders, the Continuum also provides insight into how perspectives and expectations may vary between groups. In turn, those confirmations and revelations can serve as a starting point for individual professional development or for further developing institutional visions and strategies.

Figure 4 represents a hypothetical situation in which the expectations of students, advising staff, and higher-level administrators (representing the institutional vision for advising) vary considerably. How each group placed various aspects of advising on the Continuum suggests that both students and the institution at large harbor expectations for advising mostly from a perspective of student dependency. When it comes to participation in education and to realizing goals through education, both students and the institution expect those who are in an advising role to take the lead, despite the more agency-oriented aspirations of those who advise. Identifying interventions, outcomes, and roles and seeing their distribution across the Continuum can serve as a starting point for analyzing the nature of differences in perspective. From there, stakeholders can analyze problems and discuss strategies towards improvement. For example, an analysis may reveal that communication about the purpose of advising is inconsistent, insufficient, or absent. In such a case, initial strategies towards improvement will have to focus on developing a unified vision and communication.

Figure 4
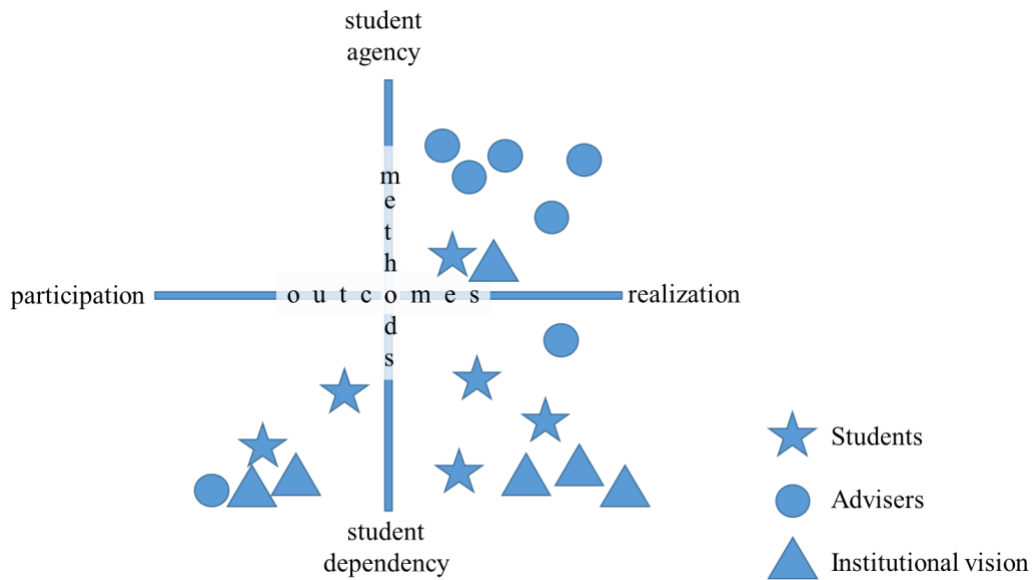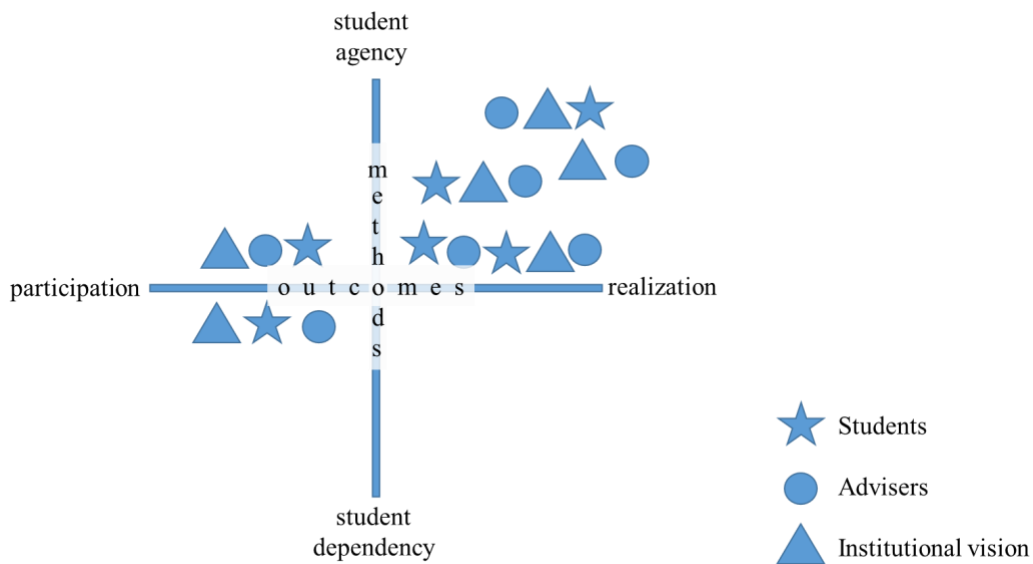*Diverging Perspectives on Advising Among Stakeholders*

Figure 5
Converging Perspectives on Advising Among Stakeholders

The visualization in Figure 5 shows a different hypothetical situation, in which perspectives among stakeholders align much more. Here, students, staff, and the institution have similar expectations about the role of advising. All stakeholders see

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advising as characterized by interventions, roles, and intended outcomes that predominantly serve the purpose of helping develop student agency, even in issues related to participation. In the latter area, all see a more modest role for advising as well. In this situation, strategies towards improvement could focus on further professional development for those in advising roles, the development of new interventions, and extending the reach of advising.

In short, the exercise of plotting the specific combination of outcomes and methods that define each of the quadrants, and the delineation provided by the axes, provides concrete input for reflexive questions that revolve around the why and how of advising, such as:

- Do we have a coherent vision on advising?
- Are we predominantly caring or teaching through our advising?
- Are we caring (or teaching) on the appropriate issues (or are we pampering or abandoning our students)?
- What do we see as (the boundaries of) our individual and institutional responsibilities?
- How connected is our advising to disciplinary learning and teaching?
- Is there mostly congruence or divergence between the perspectives and expectations of various stakeholders?
- To what extent are perspectives a matter of transparency and clear communication?
- Which aspects of our advising do we want to strengthen and develop further?

USING THE CONTINUUM: AN EXAMPLE

While Figures 4 and 5 reflect hypothetical cases, we have used the Continuum in a similar manner with real stakeholders at several universities. One such engagement was with a large Irish university that was seeking to embed an enhanced advising process across the institution. We helped faculty members of a particular college within the university explore how they could reimagine and improve advising. The participants in the workshop had been unaware that the university had centrally determined a new policy and objectives for academic advising across colleges. The advisers had not been involved in developing the institutional-level objectives. As a result, they lacked buy-in and were hesitant about implementing the objectives and policies. We decided to use the Continuum as a focus for discussions on the vision and purpose for advising within the university and the college. Participants were each given a printed copy of the Continuum similar to Figure 1. Descriptions of the quadrants were deliberately omitted from this handout to better convey the idea that the Continuum is a continuous two-dimensional space in which a perspective could be positioned, rather than open to only four positions.

Participants were given a short presentation introducing them to the Continuum, during which they were shown Figure 2 with descriptions in the quadrants. They

were then given 15 minutes to independently reflect on their individual perspective on the current state of advising at the university and what they believed to be the perspectives of the institution and the students. Participants were asked to position the three perspectives on their handout, using the same symbols shown in Figure 4.

Once they had completed this individual activity, participants formed groups. Some groups consisted of participants from the same discipline, whilst others consisted of participants from different but related disciplines. Groups were asked to explain to each other why they positioned the symbols where they did on their respective individual handouts, as well as transcribe their results onto a shared Continuum diagram for the group. This provoked rich discussion amongst the participants as to the purpose and nature of the advising currently provided within the college. Since advising was not a substantive part of an academic faculty member's role within the institution, they rarely had the opportunity to share their practice and perspectives, and they found this process to be very beneficial.

Because advisers operated individually with discrete groups of students, variability in practice and perspectives was inevitable, even in groups where participants were drawn from the same discipline. Encouraging participants to share and transcribe their perspectives onto the shared diagram provided an immediate visual representation of variation in perspectives. There was some consistency among the participants in terms of what they believed student and institutional perspectives of advising were, but there was a clear discrepancy in their own perspectives on advising and those they attributed to the institution. This led to further group discussions regarding the newly developed institutional advising objectives and how these aligned with their own practices and perspectives. Examples of current practice were shared within discussion groups, which resulted in suggestions around how they might approach advising to better align with the university's objectives. This was useful in shifting the mindsets of and creating buy-in for some participants.

The exercise clearly demonstrated that although participants had little grounding in academic advising terminology and theory, the scaffolding provided by the Continuum allowed them to have meaningful discussions about what they did and, perhaps more importantly, why they did it. Out of these discussions, a shared and socially constructed perspective emerged that enabled them to think through how their advising process could be improved in ways that aligned with the institutional vision.

CONCLUSION

Normative theories of advising offer guidance that may not be universally applicable due to the intricate and multifaceted nature of advising practice. Relying on existing theories as a starting point may present obstacles to further scholarly exploration or practical decision-making. The Academic Advising Continuum serves as a valuable tool for practitioners, discouraging an undue fixation on

specific advising theories or existing concepts when initiating conversations or starting to think through advising practices in particular contexts.

Through a conversational, reflective process, the Academic Advising Continuum helps explicate the role and position of advising based on a juxtaposition of intended outcomes and preferred methods. The level of analysis (from individual to institutional) further determines where the potential benefits of such analyses lie—leading to specific goals for individual professional development or to new visions for institutions.

The Continuum does not resolve the definition and terminology issues mentioned at the beginning of this paper. In fact, it represents an alternative way of scaffolding conversations and reflections on advising that does not require consensus on those issues and that pertains to the specific advising context to offer new concrete, practical insights. As such, the Continuum does not prescribe any specific follow-up action. As a form of advising, it resides firmly in its own top right corner, providing a structure for exploration and learning, rather than concrete recommendations. We do believe, however, that the kind of exercise the Continuum offers is necessary for developing and improving advising. Only when you know where you are can you decide where you want to be, where you want to go, and how to get there.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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