

# Theoretical Reflections: Theory and Philosophy Should Always Inform Practice

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## *Theoretical Reflections*

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The Theoretical Reflections series is sponsored by the NACADA **Theory and Philosophy of Advising Commission** with the assistance of Chair **Sarah Champlin-Scharff** (Harvard University) and incoming Chair **Janet Schulenberg** (Pennsylvania State University).

Editor's Note: Hilleary and Janet will serve as panelists for the upcoming NACADA Web Event, ***Emerging Issues in Academic Advising Theory***. [Learn more and join the conversation!](#)

What is a theory? What is a philosophy? Why should we all care?

Academic advising interactions can and do profoundly alter individual lives, and as such, it's important for us to reflect on what we think we know and to recognize how we came to that understanding. For example, when a student seeks advisor input on selecting a general education course, what guides the response? Setting aside some pragmatic concerns of what courses are available, or what requirements the student has already completed, the advisor's response is influenced by beliefs about the role of general education in meeting higher education's outcomes as well as by what the advisor knows about students like the one who posed the question. In this very typical interaction, the advisor uses both **theory** (what is known about patterns of student behavior) and **philosophy** (the intended outcomes of education) to inform practice.

Every advising interaction we have should be grounded in intentional philosophical perspective and guided by systematically developed theory. Together, philosophy and theory provide a foundation for the ways we carry out any particular interaction. However, these terms have multiple meanings, and have been used inconsistently and interchangeably in the advising literature. Clarity regarding philosophy and theory in advising is critical for the field because together, they can clarify what motivates our actions, can improve collaboration, and can enhance outcomes (Lowenstein, 2012; Jaeger et al., 2013).

Clarifying our language around these issues is particularly important as the field develops a more robust literature base and as practitioners discuss these topics in both private and public forums. To that end, we offer the following:

### **Philosophy**

When used in academic advising (as in the "Theory & Philosophy of Advising Commission"), the term *philosophy* is meant to indicate critical examination of practices and assumptions. Dewey (2008) describes philosophy as reflective thinking that lays the context for experience. A philosophy is thinking about our

thinking. This usage is consistent with other definitions of philosophy as a way of using critical, logical, and systematic thinking to examine deeply held beliefs or social practices (Warren, 1989). A philosophy is a way of thinking that provides the context in which decisions about action are made, and prompts us to devote attention to intentions and ethics.

In addition, a critical and systematic way of thinking about current beliefs and practice adds intentionality and deliberation to our work (Dewey, 2008). This intentionality occurs in a personal philosophy, developed and maintained by an individual, and in a community-based or discipline-based philosophy, developed and maintained by a social group. A personal and community based philosophy share the same premise; both examine deeply held beliefs and practices. As a member of a community, a personal philosophy should align with a community held philosophy; otherwise there may be inconsistency, contradiction, and dispute for the individual, the community, or both.

## **Theory**

In academic advising, we are often most concerned with theories which describe various elements of human behavior that typically derive from social sciences; however, theories from humanities have been used to inform practice. A theory is a set of statements, principles, or ideas by which authority we make claims about the world (Hagen, 2005). In other words, a theory is an explanatory construct that helps structure action by identifying key relationships that can be used to explain, predict, or change a phenomenon (Jaeger et al., 2013). For example, cognitive dissonance theory predicts what humans will typically do when confronted with situations that bring their reality and expectations into conflict. Advisors can use this theory to predict results from particular interventions. When based in scientific disciplines, theories are testable and can be falsified through empirical observations.

## **Relationship between philosophy, theory, and practice**

Philosophy and theory are perpetually linked; philosophy influences how one sees the world, theory shapes how one intentionally interacts with that world. A philosophy impacts the definition of important problems and theories provide strategies to arrive at solutions to those problems. Together, philosophy and theory guide decisions about the approach taken in an academic advising encounter.

For example, an advisor may engage a student in reflective conversation about the student's decision to drop a course. But why? What drove that choice of approach? Perhaps that advisor is informed by self-authorship theory, which suggests that students need to be prompted and supported in reflective thinking in order to help them make meaning of an educational experience. But why does the advisor think self-authorship theory and its subsequent methods are relevant to his or her work? Self-authorship theory is based in the philosophy that it is desirable for individuals to learn to balance a complex array of factors, including their own identities and values, when making decisions. If the advisor subscribes to the philosophy that higher education ought to promote students' abilities to do this, and the philosophy that academic advising plays a role in meeting these outcomes, then self-authorship theory is relevant, as are the methods that stem from it. When presented with a different scenario, the advisor may draw from other relevant theories to interpret and react to the situation.

But what if the advisor does not—or feels too pressed for time to—approach advising from a basis in theory and philosophy? How would the advisor decide what is important? How would the advisor be guided in how to proceed? For example, an advisor who has not considered his or her personal advising philosophy, or

the philosophy of education espoused by his or her institution, or who has not acquired a tool kit of theories and their attendant approaches, may encounter the same student who is considering dropping a course in a transactional manner. Or, worse, perhaps the advisor reacts to the situation from habit, or assumption, and responds in ways that damage a student's resiliency or commitment to education.

## Conclusion

Academic advisors are privileged to have the opportunity to interact with students in ways that help them grow, learn, and achieve their goals. But that interaction comes with significant responsibility to practice from a basis in scholarship. Thinking deeply about what we accomplish through academic advising and about why we think particular practices are relevant is a fundamental responsibility of all advising practitioners. To practice without this basis is akin to going to work naked. Clarifying the language of philosophy and theory will enable all advisors to participate in the conversation about what we think we know and how we came to those conclusions. This conversation is a critical part of clarifying the professionalization of academic advising (Smith, 2013), and is the foundation of responsible practice.

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