

Enhancing the Culture of Students' Engagement; A Futuristic Outlook to Higher Education Advising Approaches in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: *Academic advising represents the foundational core of academic services. Though it is considered by many as a service that can be provided by administrative staff with minimal help from the faculty members, recent studies show that the involvement of the teaching faculty in the process is of great importance. In the new millennium the international tendencies towards the academic advising is leaning towards creating smaller clusters amongst students where mentorship and leadership practices are positively acting to create a culture of students engagement. This article proposes an advising approach based on Bloom's appreciative advising, it presents an example of enhancing the students' engagement with the advising process in the Higher Education in Saudi Arabia. The suggested example is divided into four developmental phases that appropriates between MacDonald's Tutoring Cycle (2000) and the Appreciative Tutorⁱⁱ suggested by Jenna Grogan (2008). It promotes students leadership and encourages forming communities of practice and applies social constructivism and Vygotsky's ZPD.*

Key Words: *Appreciative Advising, Leadership, Students' engagement, Mentoring, Higher Education in Saudi Arabia*

Introduction:

Academic advising represents the foundational core of academic services. Though it is considered by many as a service that can be provided by administrative staff with minimal help from the faculty members, recent studies show that the involvement of the teaching faculty in the process is of great importance. Academic advising is not a specific domain of offices as much it is the medium through which the closest interaction can happen between students and faculty members. With full realization to its impact on students' success and career, academic advising can play a pivotal role in connecting students with learning opportunities and attainment of key learning outcomes. In the new millennium the international tendencies towards the academic

advising is leaning towards changing the traditional forms of academic advising in offices and loads of papers to creating smaller clusters amongst students where mentorship and leadership practices are positively acting to create a culture of students engagement. Such changing views towards academic advising determine more involvement and specialized training to the staff, student mentors and faculty members. Students do not necessarily come to university knowing what advising is, they need to hear the story from a colleague or a friend who may bring its importance closer to their minds. As partners in the same goal which is the students' success, advising should start not when students come to the advising office/faculty, it should begin through close circles where students are promoted to full immersion in higher education experience. Creating such one-to-one relationship may become increasingly difficult with the increasing numbers of students especially in a booming area like Saudi Arabia. The purpose of this study is to investigate the role played by faculty members in enhancing the culture of advising and increasing student's engagement. Through a qualitative reading of international literature and practices of academic advising and with special focus on Higher Education in Saudi Arabia, the study proposes practical procedures to boost students' engagement through leadership and mentoring. The crucial role of the advising faculty members is to be deeply investigated here and strategies to enhance the faculty role in the fostering students' engagement are to be suggested. Drawing from my experience as the coordinator and the academic advisor of the parallel education program in the Department of English and Translation at Taibah University, I developed an advising cycle that allowed me to communicate directly and periodically with my students. Special attention was given to special needs students who need some one-on-one meetings due to certain academic or personal reasons. I believe that this cycle can be applied in other programs in Higher Education institutions especially at women colleges where in most cases the academic advisor will act as the career advisor and a counselor at the same time. Motivation, leadership, close relationship and presence are among the most needed qualities.

Theoretical Framework:

In addition to the personal experience highlighted in this study it is founded on both Macdonald's Tutoring Cycle with its six phases (2000), and Huston Bloom's Appreciative Advising Methodology (2008). It proposes an appreciative advising cycle that is culturally sensitive to

Saudi Arabia. Jenna Grogan's *The Appreciative Tutor* (2011) is also one of the frameworks employed here with specific orientation to Saudi Arabia. These frameworks are investigated in the lights of Social constructivism theory and Vygotsky's ZPD.

Background:

Academic Advising is described in Hunter & White as: "The only structured campus endeavor that can guarantee students sustained interaction with caring and concerned adult who can help them shape a meaning learning experience for themselves" (2004). The idea of students' engagement in academic advising is not new, *Involving Colleges* (1991) focuses on the elements of students engagement with academic life and centers academic advising as one of the pivotal services that lead to students' success in the future (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates). Later in their (2005) they discussed the dimension of the college experience as including both student behaviors and institutional conditions, they describe engagement as the intersection between the two.

In his *Leaving College* (2003) Tinto emphasized on the fact that the success of the graduates mainly depends on their engagement in the college experience. In "Learning for the New Global Century" Susan M. Campbell and Charlie L. Nutt stated that the success and progress of the graduates do not solely depend on what they learnt but on what they learnt what they needed to know about professional and civic life (2008 p. 2).

Review of Advising Models:

Despite the fact that there are different models of advising, the role of the faculty is a crucial role in almost all of them with different levels. The review of recent models of academic advising indicates a broader scope of university advising, it includes different structures and it varies from one institute to another. The most common models of advising practiced in Higher Education differ based on the level of the involvement of the faculty in the process (Tuttle, 2000; Kuhlmann, 2004).

- 1) The faculty only model where a group of students will be assigned to certain advisor.
- 2) The satellite model: Advising is maintained and controlled by different academic units

3) The self-contained model: Separate advising units as centralized offices are responsible for the advising process with limited interaction with the faculty.

4) Shared- supplementary model: faculty members provide academic advising but are assisted by professionals in supplementary officesⁱⁱⁱ.

As indicated in the models listed above faculty members are involved in all models of advising and the studies that refer to the importance of the role played by the faculty in the success of the advising process and in the life of the advisee is increasing^{iv}.

The Role of the Faculty Member:

There is no doubt that the role played by the academic advisor is indispensable in guiding the students to choosing the right path and finding the right area of studying. This role becomes even more crucial in advanced level as it should help the student finding the right job and getting the needed training for the job market. The literature about advising includes surmountable amount of success stories where the role of the advisor can never be underestimated. Meanwhile the advising faculty faces challenges such as the teaching load, inadequate training in addition to the fact that the time and effort spent in advising do not directly affect the promotion of the faculty member (Swanson 2006)^v.

The advising process is more than pointing out courses and ensuring that the student is taking the courses in the right order. It is rather a relation of mentoring and should include other aspects than the academic factor solely. Some of the critical questions that are still unanswered with regard to the advisor advisee relation include; Does the job of the advisor end by referring the advisee to the needed courses? How much should the academic advisor be academically involved with the advisee? What are the guarantees that the advisee applied what was discussed in the advising session? Such questions are usually raised whenever the discussion of the role of the advisor is raised and remained unanswered as they depend mostly on the level of trust between the advisor and the advisee in addition to many other elements that need more examination and analysis than this current paper.

Creating a Culture of Engagement:

The Tutoring Cycle proposed by MacDonald (2000) and developed by Bloom, Huston and He (2008) is probably one of the clearest examples that centers round the student with the purpose of bringing his/her strengths to the fullest. In her discussion of the appreciative tutor Jenna Grogan and proposed another model that appropriates between MacDonald's and Bloom's models (2001). The following case study employs Grogan's model of the appreciative tutor along with the theoretical frame of the social constructivism. It suggests an advising example that promotes leadership amongst students and enhances the culture of students engagement with advising faculty that proved to be particularly useful in providing academic and social support especially to academically at risk students. The suggested example promotes concepts of cooperation's and sisterhood in the community of the students that can be propagated in Saudi Arabia as it enhances some ethical concepts that are foundational in the mindset and the culture of the students. It builds on the social constructivism theory and observes Vyotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Appreciative Advising:

Appreciative advising is an advising approach that celebrates the unique differences of students and embraces their wildest dreams and designs a plan of action (Bloom, Huston, & He 2008). It is based on the direct contact with the advisee who helps to build mutual understanding and trust. It also depends on collecting feedback from the advisee and from the faculty and administrative staff who are in close contact with him in order to make necessary interventions and changes for the future. It is always described as a cycle as it does not end with choosing the right courses, it is rather a lengthy process that requires patience, and understanding and reflection from the advisor.

MacDonald (2000) defines the Tutoring Cycle as "a set of 12 steps which you can learn and then use to guide [tutors] through a tutoring session" (p.24). His suggested cycle provides the following steps to allow advisors and advisees to plan and move forward from one step to the following according to a designed cycle:

- 1- Greeting and climate setting

- 2- Identifying the task
- 3- Breaking the task into parts
- 4- Identifying thought processes which underlie task
- 5- Setting agenda for the session
- 6- Addressing the task
- 7- Tutee summarizing content
- 8- Tutee summarizing underlying process
- 9- Confirming
- 10- What's next
- 11- Arranging and planning next session
- 12- Closing and good-bye (MacDonald, 2000 p. 24).

The above approach was developed into an advising locked cycle that is known as The Appreciative Advising proposed by Bloom and et al (2008) is based on an appreciative mind set and building trust between the advisor and advisee and strengthen close ties between the advisee, the faculty and the student's body. The appreciative advising cycle is composed of six phases: 1- Disarm, 2- Discover, 3- Dream, 4- Design, 5- Deliver, 6- Don't settle (p. 23). In her "The Appreciative Tutor" (2011), Jenna Grogan uses MacDonald's cycle as a guide to create her phases of appreciative tutoring. Her strategy appropriates between MacDonald's and the appreciative advising strategy suggested by Bloom, Huston and He (2008). Similarly Grogan's cycle depends mostly on trust building, creating leadership and collecting data from feedback. It consists of six phases as follows:

- 1- Welcome
- 2- Identify
- 3- Prioritize
- 4- Apply
- 5- Confirm
- 6- Foster Independence (p. 83).

The Focus of the Study:

The suggested advising strategy makes use of Jenna Grogan's cycle of the Appreciative Tutor (2011). The cycle is built on an adaptation of the above mentioned MacDonald's cycle and lends

itself to the application of social constructivism theory and Vygotsky's ZPD as well. This study focuses on the application of the suggested advising example for a group of students of parallel education program at English Department at Taibah University (2012-3). The program included more than 150 students at different levels of the undergraduate program. A large number of students (more than 50%) were at risk students with GPA of 2 or below. Due to different and tangled academic and social factors the majority of the students were at risk of losing contact with the advising faculty and dropping from the program. An empirical research was conducted to propose a strategy to apply appreciative advising and to promote students' engagement with the advisor and the teaching faculty. The following procedures were taken to enhance the culture of advising amongst this particular group of students. The approach practiced strategy is divided in four phases; I- Pre-advising examination and planning, II- Advising practices and III- Leadership and Clustering, and IV- post advising follow up and feedback:

I- Pre-advising Examination & Planning:

- 1- Examination of academic manuscript of students with special focus on those at risk.
- 2- Dividing the group according to their academic performance to two groups:
 - a- regular students and b- at risk students

II- Appreciative Advising Practices

- 3- A general meeting was conducted to the whole group to promote students and explain the new advising strategy.
- 4- Individual advising sessions were scheduled
- 5- Faculty and staff meetings were conducted to emphasize the importance of providing extra support and scaffolding to the at risk students.

III- Leadership & Clustering

- 6- Dividing students into smaller groups or clusters and provide them with twin ship examples and introducing ideas like "The Study Body" and promote the concept of communities of practice and social constructivism practices amongst them.
- 7- Assign group leaders amongst the students to promote peer tutoring
- 8- Conduct periodic meetings with group leaders.

IV- Post Advising Follow up and Feedback:

- 9- Collecting feedback from students, faculty and group leaders based on designed surveys.
- 10- Set a timeline to repeat the cycle at least twice during the term.
- 11- Plan and propose an action plan for further actions and future strategies.

Detailed Explanation of the Strategy:

I- Pre-advising Examination & Planning

This phase is considered a crucial stage as it places the foundation and structure for the following phases. It is also helpful when the assigned advisor is/was has taught the particular group of advisees as this will allow the advisor to form an idea about their academic performance. It also creates an atmosphere of familiarity which can be invested in trust building during the advising process. I was fortunate to have taught this particular group of students for more than two years prior to my assignment as an academic advisor and coordinator to the program. It allowed me to read and examine their transcripts with a clearer background about the students' academic performance and a level of awareness of their social issues. Due to time limitation and the critical academic state of a large number of students in the group they were divided into two groups and an action plan was designed for each of the two groups and both plans were included in the general intervention and action plan. Students' transcripts were thoroughly examined and the courses they needed to complete for the completion of the program were listed according to the urgency of offering.

II- Appreciative Advising Practices

Interaction and communication characterize this particular phase. A series of meetings were conducted with students, staff and faculty. The objectives of these meetings were to 1- explain the new advising strategy, 2- help students and staff regain trust in the efficiency of the program, 3- provide students, faculty and staff with information about the facilities provided and the support they can get and, 4- provide contact information and possibilities of communication between students, faculty and staff.

Another set of meetings on smaller scale were conducted for faculty, students and staff separately to enhance the practice of the proposed advising strategy.

Due to the large number of students in the program (150 students), they were divided into groups according to their academic performance and their level. The freshmen students were less problematic as a set of courses were pre designed for them and most of their issues were addressed in the group meetings. For special cases and issues individual meetings were scheduled.

Solving the issues and schedule conflicts to the junior and senior students however was the real challenge. Thus students were grouped based on their academic level and performance and one-to-one meetings were planned and scheduled for those with particular academic and social issues. Some of the common issues were long absences due to certain family matters, transportation issues, family quarrels and health issues, they were addressed as possible and other faculty members were involved in the process to find solutions to the pressing matters within our capacities. More complicated cases were reported to the administration to take needed procedures according to the laws and regulations. This stage determined direct contact with the advisees and helped in building the trust. The one-to-one meetings allowed students to identify their needs and regain self-confidence. It also allowed the advisor to explore students' potential and help to provide advice and support needed for their future planning. Rather than focusing on weaknesses, the concepts of scaffolding^{vi} and supportive learning environment were enhanced.

III- Leadership & Clustering

Students may learn from each other better than from an advisor they can be aware of more circumstances about each others' lives better than their advisor or the faculty member. Based on the concept and theory of social constructivism, the students were divided into smaller groups, each group has a student leader and the leader works as a link in communicating with the advisor to discuss any problematic issue that may arise. Student's leaders were encouraged to contact the advisor constantly and provide support and guidance to their peers. Training sessions were periodically conducted to guide student's leaders and to assure the importance of their role. The practice of student advising leader enlarges on the ethical Islamic values of sisterhood and helping each other^{vii}. This was sensitive to the students' religious background as the value concepts that are appraised in Islamic system. Cooperation, help and support are promoted amongst the students which showed favorable results in the advising process and in their academic development. Many other examples show favorable results for promoting students'

leadership in the area of students advising such as Crocker, Kaha & Allen (2014) as they presented a similar example of promoting students leadership and building students clusters. Another similar example is presented by Fierke (2012), both articles present personal experiences with promoting students' leaders and the positive results it reflects on building a culture of students' engagement. The local culture of the students at Al Medinah was also utilized in enhancing the culture of cooperation and support as the Medinah is known in Islamic history by its hospitality and the culture of brotherhood and sisterhood in early Islamic history. Such cultural and historic reference was found to be extremely motivating to students and brought a sense of reward to those who work as student advisors. In this stage I applied an appropriated example of Maslow's hierarchy needs for mentors (qtd. In Wright 2010 p.34). Maslow's table of hierarchy respects and responds to the different needs of the advisee and suggests different procedures for each stage.

Additionally, I introduced the idea of "a study buddy" through which students were encouraged to work in pairs in and out the classrooms. The practice proved to show positive results in students' improvement as reflected in their academic development and grades and from the feedback provided by their students' leaders and teaching faculty. The idea was taken further as the students were teamed with some groups from the morning (regular) cohort to enhance the experiment further.

The use of technological advances in communication was also encouraged and promoted amongst students as they were encouraged to form email groups to share study material and Whatsapp groups to communicate with advisor and students' leaders. The feedback collected from these groups was very helpful as the response was instant.

IV- Post Advising Follow up and Feedback:

Post advising and feedback is an important phase of the appreciative advising cycle. It closes the cycle and provides the advisor with guide line to improve the practice. A survey was created to test students' satisfaction with the advising process and its developmental phases. The information collected through the survey was used to develop the strategy in the following years. The survey was prepared based on Anderson et al's (2001) revision of Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) conceptual framework as it presents a method of classifying learning outcomes in a hierarchy and links between the advising process and advising in the same developmental

manner. The same approach was also presented in Smith and Allen (2014, p. 53) and in Muehleck, Smith & Allen (2014, p. 64). Guidelines were also applied from Bloom, Huston and He's appreciative advising surveys (2008).

Conclusion:

Advising is an important factor in students' success in the academic life and in the life outside the university. Appreciative advising is a practice that promotes the culture of students' engagement with the advising faculty and administrative body. It depends on building trust and a close relationship between the advisor and the advisee. An advising cycle that is appropriated from Bloom's (2008) and Grogan's (2011) cycles of appreciative advising was presented in this paper. The case study presented in this paper demonstrates how the proposed cycle was applied to a group of students particularly at the parallel education program at the Department of languages and Translation at Taibah University. The four developmental phases proposed in this study present a model of how the culture of students' engagement with advising can be enhanced in Higher Education institutions in Saudi Arabia. It is linked to the culture of the students as it promotes concepts of help and support which are foundational values in Islamic value system. It makes great use of the social constructivism concepts of communities of practice as it encourages students to be active members in their student communities. It allowed them to develop both academically and socially utilizing Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. The proposed cycle emphasized the role of the feedback and collecting information from both the advisees and the teaching faculty to be used in improving the advising approaches and strengthen the models of advising practiced in Saudi Arabia's initiations of Higher education. The cycle presented in this paper can be considered as a beginning to an application of an advising system that is more engaging to students and makes use of students' leadership practices.

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ⁱⁱ The term Tutor is used in many studies as to mean advisor or mentor. It is used her in this meaning.

ⁱⁱⁱ A review of the university websites of some lead universities in Saudi Arabia showed that the majority of the universities practice the one or another of the above mentioned models.

^{iv} For more information on advising models also see Douglas J. Swanson, Ed. D (2006). "Creating a Culture of "Engagement" with Academic Advising: Challenges and Opportunities for Today's Higher Education Institutions"

^v For a detailed list and explanation of the challenges facing the faculty member see Swanson 2006

^{vi} <http://edglossary.org/scaffolding/>

^{vii} "Help each other to goodness and heedfulness. Do not help each other to wrongdoing and enmity. Heed Allah. Allah is severe in retribution". (Holy Quran Surat al-Ma'ida: 2). Also the Hadith literature is loaded with examples guiding Muslims to cooperate with each other and support brothers and sisters.