

# **A Study of the Relational Component in an Academic Advisor Professional Development Program**

Mia R. Heikkila and Craig M. McGill  
Florida International University, USA

**Abstract:** The purpose of the study was to investigate the significance of the relational component of academic advisor training and development in the learning opportunities of the professional development program and the advisors' evaluation score.

In 2013, a public research university in the southeastern United States implemented a professional development program (PDP) for its professional academic advisors to increase learning opportunities, and consequently, the knowledge base of the advisors. The program was built upon the best practices established by the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 2012) and the National Academic Advising Association's (NACADA) Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising (NACADA, 2005). At the core of the program are an organized institutional support for advisor training and a requirement for each advisor to meet annual professional development goals in a form of Professional Development Units (PDUs). Advisors attend learning opportunities for which they receive PDUs and then report and reflect upon them through a web-based portfolio, and annually, the PDP leadership (one of their two work supervisors) assesses each advisor's performance.

In one of the most cited models in the field of academic advising, there are three components of academic advisor training and development: informational, relational, and conceptual (Habley, 1987). Of the three, the informational component is stressed too heavily in advising training and development while the other two are neglected (Habley & Morales, 1998). Yet, the relational component "is perhaps the most essential...since it seeks to address the actual process by which the information to a student is delivered" (Ford, 2007, para. 9). The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between the relational component of academic advisor training and development (Habley, 1987) in the learning opportunities of the program and the advisors' evaluation score. The research question for this study was: Do advisors with higher PDUs in the relational component achieve higher evaluation scores? The following research hypothesis was suggested: The number of PDUs reflecting relational content that an advisor completes has a statistically significant positive correlation with the advisor performance evaluation.

The extent to which the completion of the learning opportunities has an effect on the advisor performance evaluation and, subsequently, on field performance is unclear. Preliminary data analysis of the learning opportunities that advisors completed during the first year of the program will offer information on (a) quantity of the learning opportunities, and (b) quality of content completed by advisors.

## **Review of Literature**

The relevant literature falls into two areas: (a) Habley's (1987) framework of advising in training and development, and (b) supportive leadership and innovation policy in development of professional advisors.

### **Habley's Framework**

First, the conceptual focuses on students and student body, the philosophy of advising, and on the context of the school. The conceptual component is comprised of (a) a student's perspective and (b) a role of advising in an institution. A competent advisor understands the identity of an average college student and the typology of a student attending to a particular institution. Furthermore, the advisor must thoroughly comprehend the institution's expectations of academic advising, including the roles and responsibilities of the advisor and the advisee (Higginson, 2000).

Second, the informational dimension concentrates on proper laws, policies, procedures, resources, and departmental programs (Brown, 2008). Advisors must comprehend majors and programs to accurately advise students through the completion of their degrees (Nutt, 2003). The four elements of the knowledge component are (a) internal environment, (b) external environment, (c) student needs, and (d) advisor self-knowledge (Higginson, 2000). Accuracy is especially important because the advisor represents the university (Ford, 2007).

Third, the relational dimension focuses on interpersonal and communication skills for effective relationships with students. It consists of rapport building, reciprocal communication, solution-focused problem solving, and effective questioning techniques (McClellan, 2007). Without an emphasis on the relationship, advising becomes nothing more than the one-dimensional dissemination of information. Students accept the advice of trustworthy advisors who sincerely and genuinely care about the students' needs and progress (Brown, 2008).

An advisor's training should consist of each of the three dimensions: "without understanding (conceptual elements), there is no context for the delivery of services. Without information, there is no substance to advising. And, without personal skills (relational), the quality of the advisee-advisor relationship is left to chance" (Habley, 1995, p. 76). Unfortunately, very little training is given in relational area (Habley, 2004).

### **Leadership Support and Supportive Innovation Policy**

Despite NACADA's focused efforts for over four decades, academic advising is an emerging profession without a nationally-recognized certification process. Utah Valley University initiated a multi-step advisor certification program in 2007 to increase advisor development (McClellan, Moser, & Waterreus, 2008). Likewise, the professional development program under study was established to support advisors' growth as practicing professionals, as key decision-makers recognize the precondition of leadership and organizational support in shaping the advisors.

The perception of organizational and supervisory support in learning acquisition, innovative behaviors, and updating activities is crucial in the development of desirable advisors performance in an environment with revised expectations (Potosky, 2010). Self-efficacy or one's belief in the ability to perform a task (Brown & Warren, 2009) and self-rated job performance increased with perceptions of supervisory support and innovation policy (Potosky, 2010). Furthermore, an innovative and supportive organizational culture is not sufficient but must be accompanied by an innovative and supportive subculture, which is linked to motivation to transfer learning (Egan, 2008). Hence, a supportive and innovative leadership alone is insufficient; the leaders and advisors of distinctive colleges must genuinely echo the philosophy of the program and its performance expectations to gain successful results.

The performance expectations of PDP are specific and rigorous. Numerous goal-setting studies have found that specific and demanding goals increase job performance as opposed to more obscure goals, such as Do Your Best (Brown & Warren, 2009). PDP's performance measurement rubric (see Table 1) incorporates specific and demanding goals for its advisors, and

PDP offers organizational and leadership support for advisors to attain the goals. With specific and demanding goals combined with leadership and organizational support, PDP leadership expects to guide its advisors to achieve higher levels of professional development, and subsequently, higher levels of advisor performance correlating with students' increased success.

### **Method**

The program under study was established in 2013. The research was based on the scores given to 57 professional academic advisors on their performance in the program after the first year of participation. It evaluated the content of the PDUs completed by the advisors and the extent to which the completed PDUs correlated with the PDP leadership's evaluation of the advisors. The authors reviewed the content of each learning opportunity completed by the advisors in the PDP and coded them as (a) relational, (b) informational, (c) conceptual, and (d) other categories, and the content was analyzed with the use of a multiple linear regression analysis in SPSS. The first three sub-groups reflect Habley's (1987) three primary dimensions of advising, and the "other" group encompasses activities that did not belong to Habley's three dimensions.

The participants of the professional development program were 57 full-time professional advisors advising undergraduate students at a public research university in the southeastern United States; 70.2% were female ( $n = 40$ ) and 29.8% were male ( $n = 17$ ). The advisors represented all colleges (e.g., College of Arts and Sciences) at the university. The director of the program oversees their professional development. As part of the professional development program, these advisors earn professional development units (PDUs) through learning opportunities in one of four categories: (a) attendance; (b) presentation; (c) service; and (d) independent study, research, and scholarly activity. Some of these opportunities are required for all advisors (e.g., university-wide advisor meetings), and other opportunities advisors select to reach their individual professional development goals. The advisors input the learning opportunities into an electronic portfolio, which is monitored by the director for appropriateness. The expectation is that they then reflect upon the ways in which the learning opportunities relate to their professional development goals and the practice and professionalization of advising. The office provided the authors with a document listing the learning opportunities that advisors recorded in their portfolios. The advisors' names were redacted and replaced with an arbitrary numerical code.

Because the goal of this research was to investigate the significance of the relational component of advisor training and development (Habley, 1987) in the learning opportunities of the PDP and the advisors' PDP evaluation score, each learning opportunity was newly categorized according to Habley's (1987) framework. Thus, the authors categorized each learning opportunity as (a) relational, (b) informational, (c) conceptual, or (d) other. Whereas the original categorization of activities was by format and type, the new categorization of the learning opportunities was based on a qualitative measure of the content of the activity (see Table 2). For example, a session focused on procedures and policies would have been categorized as "informational," a session based on improving interpersonal skills would be marked "relational," and a webinar about a cohort of students would be "conceptual." The learning opportunities that could not be placed into one of the three categories, such as attending a conference where a number of sessions would vary based on content, were categorized as "other."

Before the categorization process, the authors met with the program director to clarify the meaning of each of the categories and the method of the categorization process. The authors

analyzed any learning opportunity that lacked clear identity to ensure consistency and created a master key detailing each learning opportunity, the number of PDUs, and the process of categorizing the learning opportunity. Rules were developed for certain types of activities: all publications (authored by the advisor), presentations (given by the advisor), and service (performed by the advisor) were categorized as “other” because they are hands-on activities where learning does not fit neatly into “informational,” “conceptual,” or “relational” vectors. Additionally, all reading activities were categorized as “conceptual,” except where there was a strong relational or informational component (e.g., “improving your interpersonal skills,” “Guidelines for working with international students”).

In order to categorize the learning opportunities, the authors relied upon two resources. First, any workshop that was offered appeared on a historical list containing information on the session, the date it was held, and the number of PDUs awarded for the session. Second, the program director was consulted for expert judgment in content categorization to (a) verify all categorization decisions, (b) locate more information about the activity when there was not enough information available, and (c) to ensure inter-coder agreement (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Once all learning opportunities were coded, the totals were calculated for each advisor.

### Results

A preliminary analysis was conducted in SPSS to determine the relationships among independent variables (relational, informational, conceptual, and other). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) resulted in the following means ( $M$ ) and standard deviations ( $SD$ ): Other had the highest mean for PDUs ( $M = 42.42$ ,  $SD = 32.842$ ), conceptual the second highest mean for PDUs ( $M = 34.86$ ,  $SD = 15.618$ ), informational had the third highest mean for PDUs ( $M = 33.28$ ,  $SD = 18.947$ ), and relational had the lowest mean for PDUs ( $M = 7.91$ ,  $SD = 8.131$ ) (see Table 3).

Levene’s Test of Homoscedasticity shows significant results (Levene’s Statistics = 16.383,  $p < .05$ ). Some study findings advocate for a discontinuation of preliminary tests of equality of variances due to error rates (Zimmerman, 2004). Therefore, the ANOVA results are interpreted, although with caution. The ANOVA yielded to significant results  $F(3,224) = 30.163$ ,  $p < .05$  suggesting that there is significant difference among the four categories. Tukey’s post hoc analysis was conducted, and it revealed two subsets. The first subset consisted of relational category ( $M = 7.51$ ), and the second subset consisted of informational ( $M = 33.28$ ), conceptual ( $M = 34.86$ ), and other ( $M = 42.42$ ) categories. The relational category displays a significantly lower mean for PDUs in comparison to informational, conceptual and other categories.

To investigate a relationship between evaluation scores given to advisors and each new category, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted utilizing SPSS. The correlation table using Pearson Correlation yielded significant correlation between dependent variable PDP score and independent variables informational ( $r = .429$ ,  $p < .05$ ), conceptual ( $r = .321$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and other ( $r = .619$ ,  $p < .05$ ) PDUs. Relational PDUs proved to be insignificant ( $p > .05$ ) (Table 4).

The linear regression model resulted in significant increase in  $R^2$  for the model ( $\Delta R^2 = .741$ ,  $F[4, 52] = 37.228$ ,  $p < .05$ ) indicating that 74.1 % of the variance of the four PDU categories of relational, informational, conceptual, and other count toward the overall PDP Score (Table 5). The coefficients table shows that informational category significantly contributes to PDP Score ( $\beta = .016$ ,  $t = 6.722$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that each unit of informational PDUs results in .016 units increase in PDP score; conceptual category significantly contributes to PDP Score

( $\beta = .008$ ,  $t = 2.781$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that each unit of conceptual PDUs results in .008 units increase in PDP score; and other category significantly contributes to PDP Score ( $\beta = .014$ ,  $t = 10.013$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that each unit of other PDUs results in .014 units increase in PDP score. The relational category does not have a significant contribution to the PDP Score ( $p > .05$ ).

The tolerance of (a) relational equals to .948, (b) informational equals to .910, (c) conceptual equals to .951, and (d) other equals to .948. Each tolerance value approaches the value of 1.000, and the individual categories can be presumed to be independent of each other with minimal occurrence of collinearity (see Table 6).

### **Discussion and Limitations**

Our hypothesis was that the increased number of professional development units reflecting relational content that an advisor completed would have a statistically significant positive correlation with advisor performance evaluation. Although the original hypothesis was not confirmed by the findings, the findings substantiate the claim made in the previous body of literature that the relational component is underutilized in advising training and development (Ford, 2007; Habley & Morales, 1998). This study found that the learning opportunities categorized as relational constituted less than eight PDUs on average ( $M = 7.91$ ) while the number of PDUs earned from the learning opportunities in the other three categories were higher and approximating each other (informational,  $M = 33.28$ ; conceptual,  $M = 34.86$ ; and other,  $M = 42.42$ ). The results may have differed from our hypothesis due to either a small sample size (57 participants), a low frequency of relational PDUs accumulated by advisors, or a combination of the two. This may explain why the relational category did not yield significant findings in comparison to the other three categories that had higher frequencies of PDUs and resulted in statistically significant findings. However, the findings add to the knowledge base of professional development of advisors

Academic advising has been empirically linked to increased student retention (Astin, 1993; Pascarelli & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987) and because sound interpersonal and communication skills are critical to effective advising (Hughey, 2011), it is essential that advisors receive proper training in relational competencies. Counseling theories regarding the counselor-client relationship (Sue & Sue, 1990) can be fruitfully applied to advising insofar as a healthy advisor-student relationship could produce significant results, such as increased student retention and graduation rates and improved student learning and satisfaction. The quality of relationships between advisors and students may correlate to students' academic outcomes (Ford, 2007) in a similar manner that the quality of alliances between therapists and clients has been linked to therapeutic outcomes (Horvath, 2001). It is likely that advisees' perception of positive rapport enhances trust and builds authentic advisor-student relationships. Empirical findings show that qualities, such as warmth, empathy, and congruence, improve a professional-client relationship (Lambert & Barley, 2001). Therefore, the advisees may be more receptive to advisors who care about the advisees' needs. In addition, with proper training, advisors may recognize signs of distress and anxiety, which may increase retention. Although it is out of the purview of their professional practice to diagnose mental health and counsel these students, being able to make appropriate referrals is vital to the health and success of students.

The relational component was not found significant in this study, but future research should investigate the importance of relational competencies in advisor training and development. Although the current body of literature adequately demonstrates the importance of relational competencies to effective advising and its role in retention, many training programs

undervalue or neglect the relational component altogether (Habley & Morales, 1998). Our findings revealed that advisors were relatively unengaged in relational learning opportunities, but the cause is unknown. Future researchers should seek to understand the reasons why advisors are not participating in relational activities and the ways in which relational learning opportunities could improve advisor performance. Some considerations include lack of learning opportunities representing the relational component, a disconnect in understanding the relevance of relational component to advising and building advisor-student relationships, lack of interest in the relational component, and lack of supervisor support in engaging in relational activities. Suggestions for future studies include a repeat of the current study with a larger sample size and researching programs that engage advisors in the relational component (adding frequency to the relational component). Suggestions for existing programs include developing clear and unambiguous expectations for professional development components, especially with relational concepts.

### Conclusion

This study investigated the significance of the relational component of advisor training and development (Habley, 1987) in the learning opportunities of the program and the advisors' evaluation score. Although the hypothesis was not confirmed by the findings, the results add to the knowledge base of professional development of professional advisors, signifying that the relational component is underutilized in advising training and development (Ford, 2007; Habley & Morales, 1998). In building advising training and development programs, there needs to be a concerted effort to add relational competencies to learning opportunities to practice skills and techniques. For example, through shadowing, the use of case studies, role playing, clinical observation, and cognitive apprenticeships (Duslak & McGill, 2014), advisors can have the opportunity to bolster their relational skills and competencies. Advising administrators should bear this in mind as they construct robust, comprehensive programs that give equal weight to informational, relational, and conceptual components.

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## Tables

Table 1  
*PDP's grading rubric of academic advisors*

PEP	2	3	4	5	Score
PDU's	< 100	100 >	125 >	150 >	
Categories	1	2 -3	4	5 - 6	
Goals	NI	FME	CEE	FEE	
Learning Outcomes	NI	FME	CEE	FEE	
Reflections	NI	FME	CEE	FEE	

Note: NI = Needs Improvement; FME = Fully Meets Expectations; CEE = Consistently Exceeds Expectations; FEE = Far Exceeds Expectations

Table 2

	Representative example 1	Representative example 2
Relational	Students with emotional disabilities: Responding to advisors' questions	Helping underrepresented students succeed: How to influence student engagement, learning, persistence
Informational	Excess Credit Surcharge Training	Innovative Educators webinar: developing an effective advising protocol for veterans
Conceptual	NACADA Webinar: Soldiers to Students: Academic Advising for Returning Veterans	Innovative Educators webinar: supporting academic and professional development
Other	State Conference: Florida association of international educators	Southern Association of Pre-law advisors conferences

Table 3  
*Means and Standard Deviations of four categories*

Variables	M	SD
Relational	7.51	8.131
Informational	33.28	18.947
Conceptual	34.86	15.618
Other	42.42	32.842

Table 4  
*Pearson Correlation of PDP Score and PDU categories*

	r	p
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Relational	.115	> .05
Informational	.429	< .05
Conceptual	.321	< .05
Other	.619	< .05

Table 5

*Model Summary and ANOVA for PDP Scores and PDU Categories*

Model	R2	$\Delta R2$	df1	df2	F	p
1	.741	.741	4	52	37.228	< .05

Table 6

*Coefficients table*

	$\beta$	t	p	Tolerance
(Constant)	1.723	12.009	p < .05	-
Relational	.009	1.693	p > .05	.948
Informational	.016	6.722	p < .05	.910
Conceptual	.008	2.781	p < .05	.951
Other	.014	10.013	p < .05	.948