

Exploring the role of advising in Canadian post-secondary institutions: Findings, gaps, and
recommendations for Canadian advisors

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Advising has been slated as an integral part of Canadian student's post-secondary education (Pardy, 2016). Despite this claim, very little is currently known about advising in Canada's post-secondary institutions (Fricker, 2015; Pardy, 2016; Ellingham, Fernandez, & Fricker, 2016). Instead, Canadian advisor's knowledge about advising primarily relies on American literature (Fricker, 2015). Putting this into perspective: The claim of advising as an integral part of *Canadian* student's post-secondary education seems to be founded upon advising research from countries *other than* Canada.

I would argue that an overgeneralization is being made when applying the findings of advising research from countries other than Canada to Canadian post-secondary institutions and students. Canada, its post-secondary institutions, and its student populations, are not homogenous with those of other countries. To the extent that variability exists between countries, there is no guarantee that what is true about advising in a non-Canadian post-secondary institution will still be true in a Canadian post-secondary institution. While it may be the case that between-country differences have little impact on advising's relationships with students, there is not enough current Canadian advising research to even begin to test this claim.

I intend for this paper, and the study attached to it, to serve as a call to action for Canadian advisors and practitioners to begin conducting advising research that is based in Canadian post-secondary institutions. As discussed in the literature review below, there are a wealth of gaps in the Canadian advising research that need to be addressed moving forward. If Canadian advisors would like to further professionalize and align their work as an integral part of

Canadian student's post-secondary education, then they must begin to create and inform their practice with research that is uniquely Canadian. Not only could such research provide empirical support to Canadian advisor's claims of their importance in their post-secondary institutions, but it could also inform or create better Canadian advising practices, lead to better outcomes for Canadian students who use advising services, and lead to greater financial support of advising services in Canadian post-secondary institutions.

Current Canadian Advising Research

Reviewing the research that has been published on advising in Canada's post-secondary institutions gives mixed evidence of how integral advising currently is for Canadian students. For example, a review by Wiggers and Arnold (2011) of approximately 140 studies funded and published by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) indicated that student awareness and utilization of support services available to them is low. Despite the best efforts of post-secondary institutions and their staff, those students who could most benefit from support services were not being adequately informed about the importance and value of the supplementary assistance and interventions available to them. Not only does this mean that vulnerable student populations might remain at-risk, but it also poses a challenge to researchers looking to find reliable data on the relationship between advising and student outcomes in Canada's post-secondary institutions.

Conversely, test cohorts from Mohawk College in Ontario found that students classified as high- and medium-risk for leaving before graduating utilized existing advising and support services more than low-risk students (Finnie et al., 2017a); although it should be noted that the overall utilization of advising and support services was low at 22% and 14% of the respective

student populations. This may indicate that multiple levels of analysis are needed to truly determine how integral advising is in Canadian post-secondary institutions.

In the cases above, a provincial level of analysis revealed an unfortunate general trend (Wiggers & Arnold, 2011), while an institutional level of analysis revealed that there are exceptions to be had (Finnie et al., 2017a). This indicates that, however small, there are disparities in student awareness and utilization of support services available to them across institutions. Although there is no currently available research to support this, I would posit that these disparities are due to qualitative differences in what advising and support services are offered across institutions and of how these services are advertised and communicated to students. As Canadian advisors push towards further professionalization it would be interesting to see how cross-institutional disparities do and do not change.

Exploratory research done by the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BBCAT) highlights such cross-institutional disparities in Canadian post-secondary institutions (Pardy, 2016). Responses from 166 advisors across 38 BC Transfer System institutions indicated that there seems to be confusion by institutions and advisors regarding the roles of advising in supporting student's progression through their education, and that there is a disparity in advisor's training and professional development, advising delivery models, and use of technology for advising across institutions and years of experience. Survey responses also indicated that demand for advising services was increasing and that the population of advisees was becoming more diverse, possibly indicating that advising services are becoming a more integral part of Canadian student's post-secondary education.

With more students seeking advising services, there should be a greater push by Canadian advisors to professionalize, set advising standards and practices, and reduce the disparities between institutions and individual advising practitioners. As presented by Tim Fricker at the inaugural meeting of the Integrated Academic and Professional Advising CoP in 2015, one of the ways to begin professionalization is through advising research (Ellingham, Fernandez, & Fricker, 2016). Looking at the current state of Canadian advising research, the issue is not quality; the issue is that there simply is not enough Canadian advising research. This poses a problem because it means that there is no research replication and little convergent evidence to support the findings of any Canadian advising research.

Another issue for the identity of Canadian advising research is that the majority of the literature available is based on research conducted in Ontario (e.g., College Student Achievement Project Team, 2015; Finnie et al., 2017b; Finnie et al., 2017c; Legusov, 2017; Panacci, 2015; Veres, 2015). Currently, organizations like HEQCO have positioned Ontario as the leader of Canadian advising research. While the research coming out of Ontario is valuable and provides a strong foundation for other provinces to follow, it also means there is a provincial bias in what is known so far about Canadian advising in post-secondary institutions.

Gaps in Canadian Advising Research

As noted by Fricker (2015), what is suggested by current advising research is that advising in Canada is still in its infancy. This likely explains the general lack of Canadian advising research, as well as the significant disparities in advising covered in the section above. While this state is unfavourable in the short-term, it does present researchers and practitioners with the opportunity to identify gaps in Canadian advising and pursue *needed* research to address

these gaps. This includes gaps in knowledge about advising research and practice, and issues in Canadian post-secondary institutions that could be addressed by advisors and advising services.

Knowledge Gaps

One of the larger knowledge gaps in the Canadian advising literature seems to come from the rigour of research design and analysis methodology (Fricker, 2015). For example, research from focus group sessions by the BBCAT (Pardy, 2016) provided opportunities for students to comment on their own experiences with advising in their post-secondary institution. Responses from the students indicated that: 1) Advisor availability conflicted with student's class and work schedules. 2) Advisors should have more time so that they can provide greater assistance to students. 3) Mandatory advising should be used with caution, as it could cause students to withdraw instead of engage. 4) Drop-in, online, and group advising are extremely helpful. 5) Adopting technology such as online communication (live chat or email), career development tools (LinkedIn), and degree audit software, would greatly benefit students. 6) The area of advising needing the most improvement is providing information and advice connecting education to workplace skills and occupations.

While the students' responses hold great value as insights, they cannot be taken as representative of student experiences at a population level due to the use of focus groups. This weakness is recognized in the BBCAT's (Pardy, 2016) report, as it is indicated that "institutions may wish to conduct more complete and comprehensive reviews of student opinions in their own institutional contexts." The use of more quantitative and experimental methods could help identify broader issues that can be addressed by Canadian advising researchers and practitioners.

This would also provide data that is easier to incorporate into meta-analyses, which would allow for a broader view of Canadian advising.

Other gaps in the literature largely consist of *finding answers* and *creating solutions* to some of the problems identified in previous research, and then conducting research to see whether those answers are true and whether those solutions are effective. For example, Wiggers and Arnold's (2011) study found that student awareness and utilization of support services available to them is low. What this research does not answer is *why* this finding exists or *how* to solve this finding. The whys and hows are discussed in the study but they were not a part of the study itself, thus they remain primarily as conjecture. There are a number of Canadian studies that have sought out the whys and how's (e.g., Finnie et al., 2017a; Finnie et al., 2017b; Finnie et al., 2017c), but more studies like this are needed if Canadian advisors are to develop research-based practices developed from Canadian advising research.

Institutional Gaps

The largest institutional issue that is discussed in the advising literature appears to be student success. The concept of student success is often framed in terms of retention and graduation rates, likely because attrition rates have endured in post-secondary institutions for several decades (Reason, 2009). In the American literature, advising has been found to be a critical component in improving student success (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014). A number of books have been published on the subject, aiming to provide practitioners, administrators, and policy makers with theories and frameworks to address the problem. For example, Habley, Bloom, and Robbins' (2012) book *Increasing Persistence: Research-based Strategies for College Student Success* grounds itself in empirical research,

providing an overview of the literature and offering research-based recommendations for intervention.

Unfortunately, there is very little Canadian research on student success, and there are no theories or frameworks that discuss retention and graduation rates at Canadian post-secondary institutions. Furthermore, there is little Canadian literature about the practice of advising in post-secondary institutions, and there is no pan-Canadian literature that explores the empirical relationship between academic advising and student success (Fricker, 2015). Because of this massive gap in the literature, Canadian advising researchers and practitioners have a strong case to secure funding and begin exploring these issues. Without the creation of knowledge about advising in Canada, there is currently no way to ascertain how the American literature does and does not apply in the Canadian context.

Another institutional issue advising is thought to address is knowledge transfer from post-secondary institution into occupation (Guertin, 2015; Howell-Carter, Nieman-Gonder, Pellegrino, Catapano, & Hutzler, 2016). This issue arises after the issues of retention and graduation rates has been resolved; once a student has completed their degree, taking the knowledge they have learned and transferring it in a way that is meaningful to employers is still needed to start their career paths.

Psychology literature on transferability suggests that skills and knowledge valued by employers, such as critical thinking, are domain-specific and do not generalize beyond the tasks on which they were taught (Lilienfeld, Ammirati, & Landfield, 2009; Willingham, 2007). While this may seem like a dead end at first, it may also be an opportunity to better integrate advising into student education. There is a great deal of American literature arguing for an *Advising as*

Teaching Model (McGill, 2016). At its core, the *Advising as Teaching Model* proposes that advisors should provide general education to students, along with their regular duties, to help them develop the soft skills valued by employers (Lowenstein, 2015). By structuring these soft skills within a general education course, as opposed to a specific subject, it may be possible to address the issue of domain-specific transferability found in psychology research.

Future Directions for Canadian Advising & Advising Research

Up to this point, I have identified a number of variables that may or may not have an impact on advising research and practice in Canada. Certainly, the impact these variables have is open to speculation, or to conclusions based on research from non-Canadian countries and populations. But until the necessary empirical research has been conducted, the true impact these variables have on Canadian post-secondary students' success will remain unknown. Proponents for the professionalization of advising in Canadian post-secondary institutions have argued that the current quality of empirical evidence on advising and its relationship with student success is weak, and that more rigorous analytical and design methods are needed to support the growth and identity of advising in Canada (Fricker, 2015).

With this in mind, there are a number of future directions that Canadian advising researchers and practitioners could take to improve the condition of advising in Canada: (1) Establish clearly defined purposes and goals for advising research and practice; (2) Conduct advising research at multiple levels of analysis (nationally, provincially, and institutionally); (3) Conduct advising research with more rigorous designs (e.g. experimental); (4) Utilize technology to improve advising outreach, and to collect data on how students use advising services; (5)

Publish advising research and data so that other Canadian advisors can make use of it, and so meta-analyses on Canadian advising can be conducted.

Conclusion

Advising research in Canada is currently in its infancy (Fricker, 2015). Canadian advising researchers and practitioners should look at this not as a problem, but as an opportunity to lay the foundations for the future of advising in Canada's post-secondary institutions. Looking to the American literature it is clear that advising can have an impact on student success in American post-secondary institutions, but it is much less clear in Canada. By conducting new, high-quality, Canadian advising research, Canadian advisors have the opportunity to provide clear empirical evidence for their impact on Canadian student's success, and to drive innovation in Canadian advising.

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