

Academic Advising for High-Achieving College Students

Sarah B. Dougherty

The Pennsylvania State University

In this article, the author examines the current literature on academic advising for high-achieving college students, an area that constitutes a sparse and unexplored field. Researchers use a number of terms and definitions to refer to high-achieving college students. An exploration of these terms aids in specifying the characteristics and abilities of this population and, consequently, appropriate advising methods. The existing literature on high-ability students provides limited empirical grounding for advising strategies, but highlights the need to address specific academic concerns such as the needs of high-achieving students from underrepresented minority groups. The author presents an overview of the specific characteristics and concerns of high-ability students, including academic and career issues, which are two common topics discussed in college advising sessions. The author concludes by offering recommendations for future research.

Academic Advising for High-Achieving College Students

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reveal that the two most influential factors of student persistence and success in college are academic involvement with peers and out-of-class contact with faculty members. The academic advising relationship is one avenue for maintaining a continual relationship between students and faculty or professional advisors (Strommer, 1995). While consistent, high-quality advising is essential, academic advisors need to be cognizant of the variety of needs students have and consider their diverse backgrounds, abilities, motivation levels, and interests.

High-achieving students, for instance, have needs that are different from other students. Not only do these students have unique concerns that can affect them socially, personally, and developmentally, but many also experience high levels of pressure to remain exceptional students (Winston, Miller, Ender, Grites, & Associates, 1984). Unfortunately, these students are often overlooked in the advising process because they typically excel in academics and appear to work in a self-reliant manner. Too often, educators mistakenly assume that high-achieving students do not require as much advising because they are autonomous, self-motivated, and know how to attain their goals (Glennen & Martin, 2000). High-ability students, however, may not have the maturity or prior experiences necessary to form long-range career and academic plans (Winston et al., 1984).

According to Robinson (1997) and a handful of other scholars, research focusing on the needs of academically talented students is scarce. Although many studies focus on advising underprepared students (Brown & Rivas, 1993; Hartman, 1986; Walter, 1982), considerably less research is available regarding academic advising for high-achieving students. Moreover, the limited number of research studies that focus on high-achievers are primarily concerned with advising students during the kindergarten through high school years (Robinson, 1997). Much of the research pertaining to high-achieving college students has focused on curriculum and admissions criteria rather than on academic advising (Gerrity, Lawrence, & Sedlacek, 1993). A critical examination of the existing literature on the process of academic advising for high-achieving students at the postsecondary level is needed to identify goals for future research and practice. In this paper, I attempt to address this need by investigating the unique characteristics of high-achieving students in order to determine effective methods of advising such students.

Defining the Target Group

Before delving into the research and practice literature regarding effective methods of advising high-achieving students, it is essential to explore the various terminologies used to describe this group of students. Moreover, highlighting the distinct characteristics of gifted, high-achieving, high-ability, and honors students is necessary because these terms are not synonymous, and each group of students displays slight variations in terms of characteristics. It is also important to establish a common language for understanding this target population of students. Once these terms are clarified, I will use them throughout my literature review as appropriate.

Although high-ability students continue to enroll in colleges and universities as they have in past generations, the characteristics of this population have changed over recent years (Beatty, 1994). Institutions have been enrolling high-ability students from a wider age range than ever before, particularly younger students who have not yet turned eighteen years of age. According to Beatty (1994), “[Students] may be participating in college programs for gifted and talented students while in middle school and high school; they may be post-secondary enrollment students; they may be full-time early admits” (p. 74). Some of the incoming gifted college students are minors and some are only in their early teen years. As a result of the wide disparity in age, advisors need to be aware of the various stages of development students may be experiencing, as well as their unique needs as high-achievers. Academic advisors should consider adopting a parent-like role when providing support and advice for minors (Beatty, 1994). Higher education faculty and academic advisors are being asked to develop academic environments that not only support all academically qualified and highly motivated students, but also increase the educational opportunities available for them (Hochel & Wilson, 1996).

Robinson (1997) pointed out that the environment plays a large role as to whether a student is considered gifted. For instance, educators may perceive a student as high-ability in one institution of higher education, but not quite as gifted in a more demanding context where all the students are high-achievers. To circumvent such confusion, Robinson (1997) referred to gifted students in higher education as:

the highest achieving two percent to five percent of students in a given college, recognizing that local criteria will vary widely and that students’ profiles of ability may be sufficiently uneven that a student may be distinctly gifted in one domain and not in others.
(p. 219)

Defining “gifted students” has changed over the course of the past few decades. This term, coined by Terman in 1925, was originally intended to signify high-ability students (Manning, 2006). In 1969, Congress ordered a study by the U.S. Commissioner of Education to investigate the degree to which the needs of gifted and talented children were being addressed (McClellan, 1985). The resulting document, which came to be known as *The Marland Report* (1972), provided a definition of giftedness that remains the most widely accepted definition used by both state and local education agencies. The report stated,

Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who, by virtue of outstanding abilities, are capable of high performance...These are children who require differential educational programs and/or services beyond those provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and the society. (Marland, 1972)

The Marland Report also outlined areas in which gifted children have the potential to demonstrate achievement: leadership capacities, creative and/or productive thinking, visual and performing arts, psychomotor ability, academic aptitude, and general intellectual prowess. Although the Marland definition has been debated over the years (i.e., psychomotor ability should be eliminated), many of the key elements have been upheld, retaining a broader outlook on students’ demonstrated and potential abilities.

Researchers have offered a variety of generic definitions of “gifted students.” For example, Manning (2006) noted that the label “gifted” referred to students of high intellectual or academic ability. McClellan (1985) proposed that gifted students are not necessarily born with high talent, but can acquire high academic ability through environmental opportunities. Definitions of gifted are also influenced by cultural and socioeconomic factors. For example, lower income communities place a strong emphasis on preparing students for employment rather than college. These economically disadvantaged communities might perceive gifted students as those who excel in carpentry or mechanics and not necessarily in academics (McClellan, 1985).

Despite the varying definitions, scholars tend to focus on two major characteristics of gifted students: natural talent and the ability to apply this talent to life situations (McClellan, 1985). Researchers frequently substitute the terms “high-ability” and “talented” to describe “gifted” students. According to Gordon (1992), “High-ability students may be described as

those who performed well in high school and are recognized as potential scholars upon entry into college, or those who perform extremely well in academic work after they are enrolled” (p. 98).

Another indicator, “giftedness,” is more commonly used to distinguish high-performing students from their counterparts who are also above-average in academic ability. “Giftedness” includes the interaction of creativity, intellectual ability, and task commitment. According to the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) (2005), a gifted person is someone who shows, or has the potential for showing, an exceptional level of performance in one or more areas of expression. The various abilities of gifted individuals can range from very specific (i.e. a strength in mathematics or technology) or very general (i.e. a special talent in leadership skills or creativity).

One group of high-ability students can be more easily distinguished from gifted or high-achieving students. Honors students are those high-ability students who actually enroll in an honors program while attending school (Cosgrove & Volkwein, 2005). The term “honors” describes an organizational status, while the terms “high-achieving,” “high-ability,” “talented,” and “gifted” refer to individual characteristics. College and university honors students are typically those who excelled in high school and ranked within the top 10 percent of their class (Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989). Honors students usually obtain high scores on the American College Test (ACT) and the SAT, and are often confident in their abilities to excel in college (Upcraft et al., 1989).

In this way, honors students are very similar to the “high-ability” and “gifted” students mentioned earlier. I must be careful, however, to emphasize that honors students and high-ability students show similarities in their academic characteristics but not in their degree of success. Cosgrove and Volkwein (2005) found that honors students have higher graduation rates and shorter time-to-degree than their high-ability counterparts who are not enrolled in an honors program.

The need for more definitive distinctions among the various titles seems obvious, but such a task is beyond the scope of this paper. Throughout my review of the literature on high-ability students, I often found researchers using the terms gifted, academically talented, and high-ability interchangeably (Beatty, 1994; Glennen & Martin, 2000; Gordon, 1992; Robinson, 1997). Therefore, in the absence of a clear rationale for choosing among these terms and the inconsistency of definitions for each term, I use the terms “high-ability,” “high-achieving,” and “gifted” interchangeably as well. Even though high-ability, high-achieving, and gifted students display

similar characteristics as “honors” students, I only refer to the former when describing these students, because research indicates that honors students typically possess different levels of motivation, anxiety, and perseverance than their high-ability counterparts (Upcraft et al., 1989). Finally, I use the term “honors” only when referring to those students who are enrolled in some type of honors program at a college or university.

Characteristics of High-Achievers

The most evident characteristic of high-achieving students is their academic capabilities (Winston et al., 1984). According to Upcraft and colleagues (1989), “They [high-ability students] are more active learners, able to think for themselves, and depend less on a professor for information and decision-making” (p. 353). Educators often assume that high-ability students experience college with little difficulty because they are academically talented. However, despite this assumption, Gerrity, Lawrence, and Sedlacek (1993) identified a list of potential challenges typically faced by high-achieving college students, which advisors need to keep in mind. Potential issues include peer relationships, expectations of others, early career foreclosure, early questioning of values, career development, coping with setting future goals that might not pay off for years to come, and the need for guidance in long-term educational plans.

Unfortunately, high levels of anxiety often coincide with high-achieving students’ academic pursuits. They may not only face high levels of competition with their peers, but are also likely to feel parental pressure to pursue advanced professional degrees in fields such as medicine or law (Winston et al., 1984). Winston and colleagues demonstrated that gifted students are found to be more anxious than their peers. Many high-ability students have parents, friends, and teachers who expect them to reach certain standards, which are usually set at high levels.

In addition to their academic issues, many high-achieving students share personal characteristics that can either be beneficial or detrimental during college life. For instance, high social studies, math, and composite ACT scores are positively correlated with the personality traits of enthusiasm, trust, astuteness, and assertiveness (Gordon, 1992). In addition, high-ability students have higher expectations of college life (Gerrity et al., 1993). Prior to college, they may anticipate that their classes will be stimulating and inspiring, and they may expect regular and meaningful dialogue with faculty. According to Gerrity and colleagues (1993), “disappointment often leads to sharp regret and cynicism” (p. 43).

On the other hand, many high-achieving students lack good study habits and time management skills, despite their academic acuity (Gordon, 1992). Glennen and Martin (2000) found that high-ability students typically possess poor study habits, time management skills, lack of social maturity, and unrealistic expectations of college life. Moreover, high-achieving first-year students are often unprepared to meet the high, academic, and social demands of college (Glennen & Martin, 2000). These problem areas are a result of not being challenged in high school and of regularly being at the top of the class with little effort (Robinson, 1997). As a result, many high-ability students experience trouble adjusting to academic competition, heavy workloads, and peer interactions (Glennen & Martin, 2000).

According to Gordon (1992), “A few high-ability students may simply be ‘burned out’ from the intensity of performing in high school and may want to pull back from too much involvement when they enter college” (p. 99). High-achieving students tend to avoid involvement in social and recreational activities because of their anxiety over maintaining high grades (Winston et al., 1984). As a result, these students may lag in the development of ease in social situations due to their avoidance of social activities (Winston et al., 1984). Throughout a gifted student’s college tenure, certain times may be more stressful than others, and students will benefit from the close advisor/advisee relationship during these points (Strommer, 1995). Therefore, advisors should not take the academic and personal adjustment of their high-achieving students lightly.

High-ability students may also have career concerns that are different from those of other students (Gordon, 1992). Many experience confusion and indecision throughout their career development process (Schroer & Dorn, 1986). According to Gordon, “They are often dealing with issues of multipotentiality, identity concerns, clarifying values, and pressures to choose a major or career area” (p. 99). As defined by Fredrickson (1979), a multipotential person is “Any individual who, when provided with appropriate environments, can select and develop any number of competencies to a high level” (p. 268). Multipotentiality refers to students who consistently earn high scores across multiple academic domains including ability and achievement tests, as well as their regular class exams. According to Fredrickson (1979), multipotentiality “is believed to affect most gifted students, resulting in a unique source of conflict and stress for them” (p. 268).

Academic Advising for High-Achieving Students

Overall, the research that is available on high-achieving college students has pinpointed a number of personal characteristics that are important for an academic advisor to consider. It is also critical for advisors to remember that high-ability students have distinct characteristics beyond their academic abilities, which will affect the way they make decisions, plan vocations, and adjust to environments (Winston et al., 1984). There has been a growing awareness that gifted students need a different method of academic guidance to realize and fulfill their potentials (Gerrity et al., 1993). Based on the literature reviewed, four common themes have been identified that influence the manner in which these students are advised: 1) identity foreclosure, 2) flexibility, 3) advisor effectiveness, and 4) pre-college characteristics.

Identity Foreclosure

One theme that plays a role in the advising of high-achieving students is “identity foreclosure” (Winston et al., 1984). Due to parental praise and recognition, many gifted students make educational decisions early in life without having explored other alternatives. The concept of “identity foreclosure” was first introduced by Marcia (1980) in his taxonomy of adolescent identity (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). As cited in Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2005), Marcia asserts, “The identity-diffused person has yet to experience an identity crisis or exploration but has committed to an occupation and to a set of goals, values, and beliefs (usually due to indoctrination or social pressure by parents and/or significant others)” (p. 320). Premature foreclosure on educational or career choices is detrimental because the student has not yet undergone self-exploration and has not participated in the practical experiences that are key in identifying one’s goals, values, or beliefs. High-ability students, for example, may focus on an academic major solely because they excelled in this particular academic field throughout their early education. These students need time to reflect on their choice in a “non-pressured atmosphere” that is open and supportive (Winston et al.).

Many high-achieving students also feel more pressure from their family members to choose a major that is academically rigorous or to choose a prestigious career even if these are incompatible with the student’s interests and skills. Advisors can play an important role in strengthening students’ personal identities by helping them understand and refine their likes, dislikes, strengths, weaknesses, abilities, limitations, and values (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). High-ability students need equivalent, if not more, academic assistance to clarify their goals, work values, and

life roles in relation to their future careers (Winston et al., 1984). Most importantly, advisors who are assisting students in their educational and vocational decision-making must further develop high-ability students' self-awareness if they have experienced identity foreclosure (Winston et al., 1984).

Advisor Effectiveness

Another theme presented in the literature regarding the advising needs of high-achieving students is the effectiveness of the advisor. When assisting high-ability students, advisors should focus on key areas such as affording a positive personal support climate, developing self-awareness and self-esteem, improving social and academic skills, fostering an attitude of flexibility and adjustment, challenging students to maximize their potentials, and familiarizing students with services, resources, and the curricula (Upcraft et al., 1989). Effective advisors know the interests and backgrounds of students and discuss with them more than just routine, academic matters. However, with this responsibility, academic advisors must prioritize what is most pertinent and where to focus most of their attention, due to the time limits of academic advising (Ender & Wilkie, 2000).

Pre-college Characteristics

Pre-college characteristics serve as the third theme that influences the manner in which high-achieving students are advised. Advisors should be aware when assisting high-ability students in making important academic and career decisions (Winston et al., 1984). Many first-year high-achieving students find it difficult to adjust to college life. They sometimes resort to their old, inefficient high school study habits and do not realize the differences in college courses, testing procedures, and curricular requirement. Moreover, the increased competition typical of higher education requires that these students work more copiously and diligently, which may be difficult since they may never have had to perform in this manner during high school. In addition, educators often mistakenly assume that high-achieving students have an easier time adjusting to personal changes in a new environment. These students need support and assistance to adapt successfully to their new social and academic atmosphere. It is crucial for advisors to recognize the pre-college characteristics of high-achieving students and encourage these students to confront challenges and strive to reach their potentials (Winston et al., 1984).

Institutional Size

Institutional size is the fourth theme that plays a role in determining the type of advising high-achieving students might receive. Depending on

the size of the postsecondary institution, the nature and expertise of the undergraduate advising system differ (Robinson, 1997). For instance, at small colleges, advisors and faculty may recognize high-ability students more easily than at large universities since the student body is much smaller. Large universities with a high undergraduate student population often present more competition, and it is easier for gifted students to slip by unidentified and unassisted (Robinson, 1997). The daily routine of independence and self-reliance that served students well in high school might not work the same way because college offers a much wider range of choices, resources, and services. However, this range of opportunities typically only benefits those students who assertively seek them out and take advantage of them. When gifted students bypass these services and the advising system, they lose out on valuable opportunities, such as career counseling, honors programs, scholarships, internship opportunities, and research experiences (Robinson, 1997). Furthermore, when administrators at colleges assume that students are responsible for seeking academic advising, they inadvertently foster an atmosphere of indifference (Strommer, 1989).

How can advisors establish a method that allows them to identify high-ability students? These students can most easily be recognized during the admissions process by reviewing pre-college test scores such as the SAT, by examining high school academic records, and by contacting references (Robinson, 1997). Advisors should investigate those incoming records that reveal highly talented students. These students should then be assigned advisors who specialize in working with this population of students and who are willing to inform these students of the most beneficial resources and services for their needs (Robinson, 1997). These suggestions for identifying high-achieving students seem feasible only in smaller institutions. Considering the mass of students who enroll in large, state universities, it would be difficult to assess each student so thoroughly and, then, appropriately assign students to specific advisors based on their academic and personal characteristics.

Robinson (1997) also recognizes that identifying gifted students in this manner is ineffective because such procedures often miss students who show great potential. Talents such as creativity, motivation, and unique ability are not often reflected in SAT scores or in high school transcripts. Furthermore, these procedures do not capture the students who develop their potentials once they experience the intellectual stimulation that may have been missing in high school. Robinson asserts, "Whatever the system of identification, it will need to be permeable enough to recognize students who have been missed and to be open to students who take the initiative to

identify themselves” (p. 232). Unfortunately, Robinson does not suggest any remedies that might improve the problems associated with identifying gifted college students.

At most postsecondary institutions, academic advisors meet with every student enrolled in the college or university. As a result, advisors might be the best source for identifying high-ability students. To aid in the identification process, advisors should be familiar with the characteristics of high-ability students so that they can provide appropriate counseling or refer these students to a special advisor who works solely with high-achieving students. Moreover, advisory meetings with students typically involve assessing students’ academic progress over the course of their college tenure. Therefore, advisors are suitable candidates for recognizing those students who exhibit their talent later in college.

Guidance for Advisors Working with High-Ability College Students

Understanding the characteristics of high-achieving students is the first step in implementing an effective advising session. Some of the literature on high-ability students provides guidance for advisors in establishing successful approaches when working with this population. For example, advisors should help students clarify their values (Gordon, 1995). Choosing a major and career path is often confusing for these students since they have the potential to succeed in a variety of fields (Gordon, 1992). As a result, value clarification can help students prioritize and narrow down a career aspiration that is most suitable for them. Most often, advisors can help students remove potential careers from their lists rather than add to their lists. Advisors should also help high-ability students identify combinations of areas of interest (Gordon, 1995). According to Gordon (1995), “Often, combining several interests leads to an entirely new, more satisfying alternative that had not previously been considered” (p. 57).

Robinson (1997) also discusses the various disappointments that high-achieving students might face, and how advisors can help with these issues. For instance, a grade of B- will not signal a red flag for a professor, yet for a high-ability student who is used to getting A’s, the grade may be a sign that he or she is having difficulty with new or challenging material. It may also indicate that the student is having trouble with self-discipline, or is perhaps falling into the temptation of over-socializing, now that he or she is away from the structure of family living. In addition, a B- may trigger a feeling of failure in a student who has never before received such a grade. Robinson asserts, “Unless he or she asks for help, however, no one else is likely to be alerted to a situation in which prompt but minor intervention might be exceedingly helpful” (p. 224).

Another way that academic advisors can assist high-ability students is by encouraging them to actively experience their undergraduate tenure in the broadest way possible. According to Strommer (1995),

The rapid expansion of knowledge, breaking down of disciplinary boundaries, and the accelerating rate of change should challenge our best students to seek a variety of experiences and to develop their skills and broad areas of knowledge to the greatest extent possible. (p. 33)

It is also important to encourage gifted students to participate in internship opportunities, study abroad, mentor other students, learn another language fluently, and conduct research with faculty. Finally, peer assistance and mentor relationships are two additional approaches that may benefit high-ability students, particularly during their first year (Winston et al., 1984). First, a peer advisor can relate to the anxiety and overwhelming feelings that a first-year student may experience. Moreover, an older, high-achieving peer can serve as a source of motivation and as a positive role model for the younger student (Winston et al., 1984). Peer assistance also lets young, gifted students know that they are not alone in their drive or serious pursuit towards academic excellence; it helps to share their ambition and achievement with others for mutual support (Upcraft et al., 1989).

A mentor relationship with a faculty member, advisor, or student affairs educator can promote a stable relationship that gives the high-ability student structure and support throughout their college tenure (Winston et al., 1984). Also, this relationship often helps the high-achieving student develop his or her interpersonal relationships, personal identity, and intellectual competence (Winston et al., 1984). Gifted students should also frequently assemble together in groups and discuss their common concerns and feelings about choosing a major and/or career (Schroer & Dorn, 1986). In these groups, gifted students can support each other through personal and career development issues as they may often confront similar challenges and anxieties at the same time.

Connections to Student Development Theory and Recommendations for Practice

Throughout this paper, I have attempted to establish the academic and personal characteristics that are common among high-achieving college students. My review of the available research on advising gifted students leads to two related observations. First, we can ask whether the criteria that constitute effective advising for high-achieving students differ markedly from the criteria of effective advising practices for all

students. For instance, much of the literature I reviewed suggests that advisors need to be familiar with graduate programs, prerequisites, and career information as many high-ability students are interested in areas for which graduate or professional study is required. Advisors of high-ability students seek to open doors to graduate study by familiarizing them with specific resources. However, all students interested in graduate study, whether they are high-achievers or not, should have access to the same information, advice, resources, and direction as gifted students. In fact, I think that these students might need even more information, support, and encouragement as they consider the alternatives available to them.

My second observation concerns the intra-group characteristics of high-achieving college students. With so much individual variability among gifted students, is it really useful to categorize them all into one “high-achieving” group? Moreover, is it reasonable for advisors to use the same methods and techniques when dealing with all high-achieving students? For example, high-achieving Black students may experience some of the same frustrations and challenges as high-achieving White students, but may have another set of challenges resulting from negative stereotypes and racial attitudes (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cockriel, Cuyjet, & Gosset, 1998; Smith, Roberts, & Smith, 1997). Furthermore, high-achieving Black males may experience different challenges than high-achieving Black female students (Clark, 2004; Plummer, 1995).

To determine the most effective advising strategies and techniques for high-ability students, educators need a thorough comprehension of student development theory and how it can serve as a foundation for understanding the needs of high-achieving populations. Multiple theories exist from which educators can draw upon when designing appropriate advising practices. However, considering the demographics of today’s students, it is essential that advisors be familiar with theories about the cognitive, personal, and psychosocial development of college students. Advisors should also possess an understanding of the differing developmental issues that students with disabilities, gay and lesbian students, and racial/ethnic minority students experience, which will most likely affect their academic and career decision-making. Although alternate theories can contribute significantly to our understanding of student development, I provide two examples here, focusing on theories of Chickering (1969) and Sanford (1962). It is important to keep in mind, however, that Chickering and Sanford’s studies do have limitations regarding the sample of students studied. Other theorists have developed current conceptualizations of Chickering and Sanford’s theories, which could also serve to enhance our understanding of student development in contemporary society.

Chickering's (1969) theory of identity development provides a psychosocial framework for the personal development of college students. Chickering views the establishment of identity as the primary developmental issue that students strive to solidify during their college years. He identifies the following seven "vectors" of development that young adults typically experience: 1) developing competence, 2) managing emotions, 3) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, 4) developing mature interpersonal relationships, 5) establishing identity, 6) developing purpose, and 7) developing integrity. In order for most students to experience a successful passage into mature adulthood, these seven developmental tasks are critical. Chickering and Reisser (1993) also identify key aspects of the college environment that exert powerful influences on student development including institutional objectives, institutional size, student-faculty relationships, curriculum, teaching, friendships and student communities, and student development programs and services.

High-achieving students also identify with Chickering's theory. Even though all seven of his vectors can serve as a framework for the delivery of academic and career advising, three main vectors — developing competence, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, and developing purpose — can provide the basis for a strong developmental advising service (Gordon, 1988). Students' development in the areas of competence, autonomy, and purpose is enhanced when advisors provide quality learning opportunities, when they show respect, support, and authenticity, and when they seek to interact with students in a variety of environments (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The seven vectors remind us that advisors should refrain from focusing solely on a student's academic talent, and should consider each student's identity development as a whole. High-ability students need to realize that they have more to offer than just their intelligence. One potential drawback of assigning gifted students to special advisors is the possibility that advisors and students will attend only to academic concerns and will lose sight of the student's other needs and attributes. To prevent this, advisors should focus on the high-ability student as a unique, multidimensional individual first, and then as a high-achiever second. It is the advisors' responsibility to help high-ability students achieve a clear and comprehensive self-concept.

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), "Individual students experience the same environment differently, based on their own level of development" (p. 5). Advisors must recognize that students experience

these vectors at different rates, depending on a variety of contextual factors, which include their emotional, ethical, intellectual, and interpersonal frames of reference. Moreover, students frequently find themselves reexamining concerns that related to vectors through which they had previously worked. Therefore, it is critical that advisors respect students' individual differences, developmental rates, and experiences.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) raise a critical point in the second edition of *Education and Identity* when they assert, "We also recognize that developmental patterns described by psychosocial theorists may have been skewed by the exclusivity of their samples... Nontraditional students and members of minority groups often were left out altogether... These deficiencies are now being corrected" (p. 35). Despite these recent corrections, future research is still needed on the personal and academic development of women, racial/ethnic minority students, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students, and so on.

Chickering's (1969) theory of identity development offers more than just an explanation of the issues that students face. His theory also provides guidance for educators who want to enhance college students' growth and development. Chickering and Reisser (1993) state,

Development for college students, which today includes persons of virtually all ages, is a process of infinite complexity. We propose the seven vectors as maps to help us determine where students are and which way they are heading. Movement along any one can occur at different rates and can interact with movement along the others. (p. 34)

Another theorist, Sanford (1962), studied the personality development of first-year college students, but many of his theories can be applied to undergraduate college students of traditional age (18-22 years) as well. Sanford characterized learning as a process of challenge and response. College students develop and grow when presented with a challenging situation that requires a new type of adaptive response (Sanford). For change to occur, internal or external stimuli must disturb a student's equilibrium and cause a feeling of instability or dissonance. The challenge should be great enough that a student's existing modes of adaptation are not capable of correcting it, thereby, causing the student to make new responses and expand his or her personality. If the stimuli are insignificant or routine, then the student will simply react as he or she typically has and no change will occur. If appropriate stimuli are implemented, however, the student will then change (Sanford, 1962). According to Sanford, "These happenings

result in the enlargement and further differentiation of the systems of the personality, and set the stage for integration on higher levels” (p. 255).

Sanford’s statement can be applied to high-ability students. As presented earlier, advisors need to be aware of their student’s academic talent, yet not overlook the fact that each is an individual first and only secondarily representative of the gifted label. High-ability is just one aspect of the student’s multidimensional identity. Additionally, advisors should seek to provide a combination of challenge and support tailored to the particular student’s level of development. The degree of challenge and support should depend on all facets of the student’s personality and not just on his or her highly talented nature. Advising in this manner will assist the student in adapting appropriately to the challenges he or she might encounter.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

The vast changes occurring in the population demographics of college students have elicited a tremendous response from theorists and practitioners who recognize the need to address such diversity. Many existing student development theories have been expanded and updated to be more inclusive of the diverse array of students who represent today’s college and university population. These theories exhibit a greater sensitivity to the developmental processes of special populations including high-ability, differently-abled students, students of color, and gay and lesbian students, to name a few. Campus services, curricular and pedagogical practices, and institutional policies and procedures have also been adjusted in order to reflect and better serve the modern college population.

Despite such improvements, further research is needed to obtain a better understanding of students from special populations. Existing research on high-achieving students is quite limited; therefore, it is difficult to determine what method(s) of advising will best serve the needs of this population. If, based on future research studies, we learn that high-ability students profit from special advising, it is nonetheless important for advisors to work collaboratively with each high-ability student. First, advisors must build rapport and get a sense of who each student is (e.g. age, culture, personal experiences, values, etc.), thus viewing each as a multifaceted individual and not just as an academically-talented student. By getting to know students individually, advisors will become aware of the multiple contextual factors that impact each student’s academic and career decision-making. Next, advisors must analyze the student’s needs, determining specific advising methods, interventions, and/or resources that will be

most appropriate. Regardless of the advising technique implemented, it must take into account the student's individual experiences, personality, culture, and talent, all of which play a significant role throughout the entire advising process.

During development, college students' attitudes and behaviors also vary depending on their cultural background, gender, and sexual orientation (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito 1998). A deeper understanding of how these factors play a role in the attitudes of college students needs to be examined further. With regard to practice, advisors should offer assistance in light of students' culture and background since life events have such a powerful influence on their overall development. A key component of advising is to work with each student from the stage of development that he or she is currently experiencing, keeping in mind the individual's life experiences, personal coping skills, and distinct traits. As Evans et al. (1998) note: "Educators must be cognizant of the different backgrounds and needs of their students and adjust their interactions and interventions to address these differences" (p. 42).

Sanford (1962) asserts, "Work in the area of personality theory definitely points to the conclusion that significant personality development does continue throughout the college years" (p. 683). Advisors must therefore "know the entering student, to know him as an actual or potential scholar, to know him as a person and to see him against his background and against the college environment and its subcultures" (Sanford, 1962, p. 249). It is the advisor's responsibility to sensitively explore the students' life experiences, relationships, and education, and advise students in light of where their perceptions are at that time.

One task for future researchers lies in answering an important question: Who is the high-achieving college student? With such limited research available, our understanding of this population remains tentative. Whether or not advising programs serve these students as a special population or include them in mainstream programs, more research is needed to assess what, if anything, distinguishes high-ability students from their counterparts. Likewise, research that assesses the impact of particular advising methods and their resulting outcomes for high-ability students is needed to aid advisors in providing efficacious advising to this promising group of students.

References

- Ancis, J., Sedlacek, W., & Mohr, J. (2000). Student perceptions of campus cultural climate by race. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 78*(2), 180-185.
- Beatty, J. D. (1994). Advising special groups within the undecided student population. In V. Gordon (Ed.), *Issues in advising the undecided college student* (pp. 67-83). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina: National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience.
- Brown, T., & Rivas, M. (1993). Advising multicultural populations for achievement and success. In M. King (Ed.), *Academic advising: Organizing and delivering services for student success, New Directions for Community Colleges*, No. 82. (pp. 83-96). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chickering, A. W. (1969). *Education and identity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clark, R. (2004). Interethnic group and intraethnic group racism: Perceptions and coping in black university students. *Journal of Black Psychology, 30*(4), 506-526.
- Cockriel, I., Cuyjet, J., & Gosset, J. (1998). African Americans' perception of marginality in the campus culture. *College Student Journal, 32*(1), 22-32.
- Cosgrove, J. R., & Volkwein, J. F. (2005, May/June). *Examining four outcomes of college honors programs: Academic performance, retention, degree completion, time to degree*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Institutional Research, San Diego, CA.
- Ender, S., & Wilkie, C. (2000). Advising students with special needs. In V. Gordon & W. Habley (Eds.), *Academic advising: A comprehensive handbook* (pp. 118-143). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fredrickson, R. H. (1979). Career development and the gifted. In N. Colangelo & R. T. Zaffrann (Eds.), *New voices in counseling the gifted* (pp. 264-276). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

- Gerrity, D. A., Lawrence, J. F., & Sedlacek, W. E. (1993). Honors and nonhonors freshmen: Demographics, attitudes, interests, and behaviors. *National Academic Advising Association Journal*, 13(1), 43-52.
- Glennen, R. E., & Martin, D. J. (2000). Summer honors academy: A descriptive analysis and suggestions for advising academically talented students. *National Academic Advising Association Journal*, 20(2), 38-45.
- Gordon, V. N. (1988). Developmental advising. In W. R. Habley (Ed.). *The status and future of academic advising: Problems and promise*. Iowa City, IA: American College Testing Program.
- Gordon, V. N. (1992). *Handbook of academic advising*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Gordon, V. N. (1995). *The undecided college student: An academic and career advising challenge* (2nd ed.). Springfield, IL: Thomas.
- Hartman, R. C. (1986). *High school to college: Advising disabled students for success*. Project HEATH. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors, Washington, DC. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED278888)
- Hocheil, S., & Wilson, C. E. (1996). *Challenging the superior student using honors contracts* (Report No. HE 029 786). Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Diego, CA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED402859)
- Manning, S. (2006). Recognizing gifted students: A practical guide for teachers. *Kappa Delta Pi Record* [On-line serial], 64-68. Retrieved, March 16, 2007, from <http://www.kdp.org/pdf/RW06%20Manning.pdf>
- Marland, S. P., Jr. (1972). *Education of the gifted and talented*: Report to the Congress of the United States by the U.S. Commissioner of Education. Vol. 1, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- McClellan, E. (1985). *Defining giftedness*. 1985 Digest. Reston, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED262519)
- National Association for Gifted Children*. (2005). Washington, DC. Retrieved March 16, 2007, from <http://www.nagc.org>
- Niles, S. G., & Harris-Bowlsbey, J. (2005). *Career development interventions in the 21st century* (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill Prentice Hall.

- Pascarella, E., & Terenzini, P. (2005). *How college affects students* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Plummer, D. (1995). Patterns of racial identity development of African American adolescent males and females. *Journal of Black Psychology, 21*(2), 168-80.
- Robinson, N. M. (1997). The role of universities and colleges in educating gifted undergraduates. *Peabody Journal of Education, 72*(3 & 4), 217-236.
- Sanford, N. (1962). *The American college: A psychological and social interpretation of the higher learning*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Schroer, A. C. P., & Dorn, F. J. (1986). Enhancing the career and personal development of gifted college students. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 64*, 567-571.
- Smith, T. B., Roberts, R. N., & Smith, C. S. (1997). Expressions of prejudice among college students over three assessments. *College Student Journal, 31*, 235-237.
- Strommer, D. W. (1995). Advising special populations of students. In A. G. Reinartz & E. R. White (Eds.), *Teaching through academic advising: A faculty perspective*, *New Directions for Student Services*, No. 62 (pp. 25-34). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Strommer, D. W. (1989). Designed for first year students: University colleges today. *Journal of the Freshmen Year Experience, 1*(1), 17-31.
- Upcraft, M. L., Gardner, J. N., & Associates (1989). *The freshman year experience: Helping students survive and succeed in college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Walter, L. (1982). Lifeline to the underprepared: Successful academic advising. *Improving College and University Teaching, 30*(4), 159-163.
- Winston, R. B., Miller, T. K., Ender, S. C., Grites, T. J., & Associates (1984). *Developmental academic advising: Addressing students' educational, career, and personal needs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sarah B. Dougherty wrote this article as a M.Ed. candidate in Higher Education at The Pennsylvania State University. Sarah graduated in May 2006 and is currently employed as an assistant director/senior research analyst in the Office of Research and Prospect Development at The Pennsylvania State University. She can be reached at sbd138@psu.edu.