ADVISING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: EXPLORING TRADITIONAL AND EMERGING THEORY
BY JULIA PANKE MAKELA

The Challenge

Recent reports on academic readiness for college are quite staggering. *Measuring Up 2004* sounded the alert regarding college preparation of students across the nation, suggesting "the time has come for addressing accumulated deficiencies" (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004, p. 8) in the preparation of high school graduates for college. According to this report, compared with students a decade ago, more high school students are enrolling in college preparatory courses and today's teachers hold higher qualifications, yet these gains have not translated into higher rates of on-time high school graduation or enrollment in higher education.

Examining the academic readiness of a national sample of high school students in the class of 2002, Green and Winters (2005) found that only "34% of all students… left high school with a regular diploma and the other qualifications necessary to apply to a minimally selective 4-year college" (p. 8) based on high school course sequences and standardized test scores. Qualitative studies have also shown a lack of social and personal college readiness in three main areas: study skills (e.g., Byrd & MacDonald, 2005), self-esteem and self-regulatory strategies (e.g, Ley & Young, 1998), and cultural capital (e.g., Valdez, 1996).

Recognizing that college is an important endeavor for most, if not all, students, rather than considering whether or not to accept underprepared students, the question has become "how to identify and assist them" (Ley & Young, 1998, p. 43). What then happens to students who arrive on community college campuses underprepared? Nationwide, "about 2.5 million undergraduates participate in developmental education during any given year" (Boylan, 1999). That includes 40% of all college students entering 4-year and 2-year institutions, each taking at least one remedial course in math, reading or writing (Blumenstyk, 2006). When considering only community college students, the percentage is much greater. Adelman (1995) reported that over 60% of students entering community colleges have enrolled in at least one remedial course.

Remedial courses, however, are just one piece of a larger umbrella of developmental education. According to the National Association for Developmental Education (2001), developmental education "promotes the cognitive and affective growth of all postsecondary learners, at all levels of the learning continuum. [Its] programs and services commonly address academic preparedness, diagnostic assessment and placement, development of general and discipline-specific learning strategies, and affective barriers to learning" (p. 1). Key components of developmental education include not only coursework, but all forms of learning assistance, such as tutoring, mentoring, and supplemental instruction; as well as personal, academic, and career advising to address the needs of the whole student. In many community colleges, these services are led by student development professionals.

The Opportunity

Considering the current gaps in academic, social and personal college readiness factors, multifaceted interventions are required for community college students who are high-risk due to low readiness. Second chance, open access mission community colleges "should not label students as failures" (Clark, 1980, p. 18). Rather, students with low college readiness should be assisted to discover their abilities, interests and strengths as they apply to academic courses and career opportunities. They need to be challenged to develop not only academic skills, but the life skills and knowledge necessary to become successful learners who can navigate the college culture (Jarrell, 2004).

Community college advising and counseling practitioners provide a productive setting for establishing a positive tone for self and academic discovery, while assisting students in finding their place within higher education. They are often students' first contact with the institution and are well suited to inform students of appropriate preparation for college and assist students with developing needed skills and competencies (Jarrell, 2004; Rosenbaum, 1998). Forde (2001-02) called for the advising and counseling structure of higher education to serve as the linchpin for a "student and institutional partnership" (p. 26). Several scholars have provided evidence to support the effectiveness of this strategy. For instance, Boylan, Bliss and Bonham (1997) found a relationship between the availability of advising and counseling services to community college students in developmental education and higher pass rates in both remedial mathematics and remedial English courses. Dale and Zych (1996) found that enhanced student services programs for developmental students increased student satisfaction and retention. Still, other authors have stressed the importance of taking action early in the first year and continuing to provide these services throughout students' college experiences (Jarrell, 2004; McMillian, Parke, & Lanning, 1997). Yet, what aspects of advising and counseling contribute to student success? What schemas are used to guide advising and counseling efforts? How do we know these schemas produce the best results for the resources and energy invested?

Comparing Current Advising Strategies for Students with Low College Readiness

Initial evidence supports that advising and counseling programs have made a clearly positive impact on the success of developmental students (Light, 2001) and have great potential to continue and build upon their successes. However, a positive impact is attainable when student development professions understand the structure, strengths and weaknesses of traditional advising theories and strategies. Learning from past experiences helps advisors devise new approaches and position themselves as true institutional and student partners in the learning process.

Early Advising Strategy Descriptions

One of the earliest, most referenced (and most controversial) advising strategies for under-prepared students employed by community college student services advisors and counselors is what Burton Clark (1960) termed "cooling-out". The goal of this approach is to encourage students who are "over aspiring" to leave transfer programs and enter a terminal curriculum, rather than dropping out of higher education altogether. According to Clark, the cooling-out process consists of five steps: pre-entrance testing, counseling interviews at the beginning of the semester, mandatory orientation to college courses, improvement notices for students doing unsatisfactory work, and finally probation for those who cannot maintain minimum grades. The key idea is a "soft denial," presented gradually with objective data and external cues, rather than immediate rejection or labeling students as failures. Counseling provides support throughout the process and demonstrated alternative pathways for achievement. Clark (1960) concluded that this as a process in which a student "does not fail, but rectifies a mistake" (p. 575).

Connecting "Cooling Out" to Modern Career Advising Strategies

Though controversial and possibly even offensive to community college advocates, what Clark has defined as "cooling out", in its ideal case, parallels modern models of academic and career advising. Drawing these comparisons is an interesting thought experiment which can reflect the strengths and weaknesses of

advising actions and their underlying intentions. For example, these parallels are productively illustrated in Cognitive Information Processing, an emerging career theory (Sampson, Peterson, Reardon, & Lenz, 1992). Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) is a recent career theory that is quite analogous to Clark's cooling-out. CIP fundamentally breaks academic and career decisions down into three categories: gaining knowledge, making decisions, and understanding career thoughts (Reardon, Lenz, Sampson, & Peterson, 2000; Sampson, et al., 1992).

Gaining knowledge is made up of knowing about yourself and knowing about your options. In gathering self-knowledge, students explore their interests, skills, and values. This sets the foundation for successful career choices, because it is believed that students find the greatest success when they choose majors and careers that fit their personal combination of interests, skills, and values – when they enjoy their work, are skillful at their tasks, and are passionate about what they are doing. Exploring options comes next, which consists of students considering the academic, career, and social activities that are available to them.

Decision-making occurs when students compare the self knowledge gathered to the information about their options. Ideally, it is a process of making sense of the information gathered, typically narrowing choices down to a handful of potential options, and weighing the remaining opportunities against interests, skills, and values. Students then make and carry out their first choice, evaluating progress along the way.

Students' career thoughts permeate through all of the other areas of information gathering and career decision-making processes (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1994). The key idea is that positive academic and career thoughts make it easier to work through the career decision-making process and find successful solutions. Negative thoughts can make it more difficult every step of the way. Table 1 contains examples of both negative and positive thoughts provided by Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders (1996). Sampson et al. (1994) assert that often getting stuck in the process of making academic or career decisions has more to do with students' thinking than their abilities. Students who are feeling depressed, overwhelmed, or anxious may find it impossible to move their academic or career decisions forward. Counselors can help students look at how their academic and career thoughts are affecting them. With negative career thoughts, it is important to ask: Is thinking this way realistic? Is it helpful? When students decide that their thoughts are not helpful or appropriate, counselors can assist them in reframing those thoughts.

Strong parallels between Clark's cooling-out can be drawn. Students begin with exploration of their skills (pre-education testing) and exploration of interests and options (orientation to college courses). As the students move through their education, they pick up external cues (grades in courses, need for improvement notices) and internal cues (feelings, concerns and successes discussed in counseling sessions) regarding their performance. From those cues, students make a decision to continue on their current path or to change directions.

An Important Diversion from "Cooling Out"

As is demonstrated in these connections to this recent career theory, Clark's early observations of orientation strategies could be seen as accumulating support from the advising and counseling professions. However, cooling-out diverges from CIP in one essential manner. CIP was created to be open and transparent processes where the student is primarily responsible for gathering and processing information, as well as making, implementing, and evaluating decisions (Reardon et al., 2000). Clark (1960) took a different approach in stressing that in an imperfect system "one dilemma of a cooling-out role is that it must be kept reasonably away from public scrutiny and not clearly perceived or understood by prospective clientele" (p. 60). Clark's reasoning for this is that general knowledge of the cooling-out strategy may decrease its effectiveness. Perhaps his concerns were warranted, as perceived secrecy became central to the cooling-out controversy. Authors have described cooling-out as an "elaborate counseling procedure" (Cotgrove, 1962, p 40) and a "covert institutional process" (Hellmick, 1993, p. 17), resulting in the "extension of a class-based tracking system into higher education" (Karabel, 1972, p. 540) that works against working class and lower socioeconomic status (SES) students. Such a strong reaction deserves further inquiry. Is cooling-out an advising method that is plagued by a lack of definitional clarity? Or, are students really experiencing negative side effects resulting from a covert and deceitful advising strategy?

<u>Current Day Pitfalls Emerging from an Early Strategy</u>

In recent years, many community colleges have put forth great effort to both maintain standards of higher education and decrease the stigma associated with remedial education (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002). The word "remedial" has often been replaced with "developmental," reflecting the community college's view of these courses – a temporary stage of learning. Developmental courses have been considered a "second chance for a student to enhance skills" and a "positive and necessary step toward the fulfillment of the student's ultimate goals" (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002, p. 256). Regardless of the good intentions of this developmental language, it serves its purpose only when students clearly understand its meaning.

The structure and hierarchy of courses has also resembled an approach of easing students into higher education. Within a study conducted by Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum (2002), course offerings were analyzed and divided into the following four categories: (a) pre-credit remedial, (b) college remedial, (c) ambiguous college credit, and (d) definite college credit. While the status of credit earned in the first and last category were clear, whether or not credit would be applied to the college transcript was quite blurry for the middle two categories. College remedial courses typically counted for credit at the community college, but would not transfer to another institution. Ambiguous college credit counted for some programs of study at 4-year institutions and did not apply for others.

The true test of the success of developmental terminology and course hierarchies is if students understand what type of credit they are getting for the courses they are taking and plan to take. Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) found that in their sample of 610 students taking remedial courses "73 percent of the students… were either unclear or wrong about the actual status of their remedial courses" and "students who were taking multiple remedial courses seemed more confused about their situation" (p. 262). This is strong evidence that even with the best of intentions, reframing remedial classes may cause considerable confusion in students understanding the full implications of their course decisions. With respect to cooling-out, this study suggests that advising strategies with a basis in soft language that hides the true nature of remediation may do more harm to students than good.

Future Directions

Learning from these dissenting views and pitfalls allows advisors and counselors to reshape their strategies for maximum effectiveness. Of particular importance will be clarifying techniques and goals, increasing the transparency of the advising process, and closely tying advising efforts to learning opportunities that continuously serve students throughout their community college experience.

<u>Clarifying and Broadening Definitions</u>

When advisors and counselors are seen as employing a strategy of "cooling-out" students, the process gains a negative connotation. Baird (1971) was on the right track when he expanded the categories of students into those who decreased their aspirations (coolers), those who increased their aspirations (warmers) and those who kept their original aspirations (stayers). Recognizing the capability for the increase of student educational aspirations as a result of specific advising strategies helps reinforce the process as a positive endeavor, helping students discover and achieve their academic and career goals. Within this process students have a full menu of choices – warming, cooling, or staying – as they discover their interests, skills, and options, as well as attend to internal and external cues that mark their progress.

<u>Making Advising and Counseling Strategies More Transparent</u>

The second primary struggle with early advising strategies has been the suggestion of secrecy in carrying out the process. Add this to increasingly ambiguous terminology and course hierarchy, and the result is a

seemingly covert process that breeds mistrust and hurts credibility. Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) state that the "deception is inappropriate here" (p. 264). Community college students are typically adults with complex responsibilities who are making considerable sacrifices to pursue higher education. Students deserve to make

educational decisions based on clear and accurate information. It is important for higher education institutions to recognize that students have other options for education that are appropriate for certain students. Students can make the best, most committed decisions to their education only when they clearly understand what milestones they need to reach. The bottom line is getting students to take a more active, engaged, and intentional role in their own academic and career choices.

Ensuring Early, Continuous, and Connected Advising and Counseling

Finally, students with low college readiness benefit most from early, continuous access to advising services that simultaneously address academic, social, and personal readiness needs. Skills for success such as time management, goal focus, self-regulation, and cultural competency must be cultivated over time to encourage student success (Jarrell, 2004). While further research is needed to more fully understand how advising services can best help students improve these life skills (Ley & Young, 1998), the advising and counseling professions have made clear statements regarding their role in the larger picture of the learning process. In 1996, The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) published *The Student Learning Imperative*, that declared that the concepts of "learning, personal development and student development are inextricably intertwined and inseparable" (p. 2). This was the first time that an a national statement solidly moved student affairs out of a supportive, service-providing role, and into one as a direct contributor to student learning (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002). Building off this statement, ACPA teamed up with the National Association of Student of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) to publish *Learning Reconsidered*, which details "an argument for the integrated use of all of higher education's resources in the education and preparation of the whole student" (ACPA & NASPA, 2004, p. 3). More recently, the National Council on Student Development brought seasoned and rising stars in the field together to discuss the future vitality of community college student development services. This group recognized the increasingly complex lives of community college students, and set a high bar for the profession, stating that the role of student development goes further than preparation for the academic and the world of work, rather their role is "to help students realize their full potential and exceed it" (Garrett, Bragg, & Makela, in press, p. 14). This vision both requires and encourages student development professionals to take a leadership role on their campuses to advance positive change.

National statements and visions such as these provide a foundation for advisors and counselors to hone, redefine, and integrate their efforts across student development professional specialties (such as this article's exploration of popular career theory with the traditional cooling-out academic advising strategy). However, to achieve these goals, advisors must first more clearly define their roles and techniques, while becoming transparent in their strategies to engage students in learning, exploration, and decision-making. Only then will we be able to more fully address the academic, social, and personal readiness gaps that increasing numbers of students will inevitably bring to open access, comprehensive community colleges.

Table 1. Sample Positive and Negative Career Thoughts

Sample Positive Career Thoughts	Sample Negative Career Thoughts
"I'm really good at making decisions."	"I'll never find a major that I really like"
"I know several occupations that interest me."	"If I don't pick the right major the first time, I'll be a failure."
"I may not be great at math right now, but I am working hard and learning fast!"	"I know what job I want, but someone is always putting obstacles in my way"

* Adapted from Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders (1996).

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