

A Study on Servant Leadership and Its Role on Academic Advisors

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Abstract: This paper presents the Servant Leadership approach on academic advising and will examine whether or not it is effective in bolstering the overall student experience. To better understand its effectiveness, different theories and leadership styles will be explored. This study encourages university or college administrators to leverage findings to implement professional development strategies and effective training programs focusing on Servant Leadership.

1 Introduction

Many student affairs professionals are committed to pursuing goals and currently function according to mission statements; however, Servant Leadership may not be necessarily used as their benchmark. Supporting students' growth and development is a top priority and in order to become successful as contributing members of the society, implementing an effective leadership style will bolster the overall student experience.

Servant Leadership has been utilized successfully by many institutions and business organizations. It embraces the opportunity for leaders to embrace service to their followers. Greenleaf (1977) recommended ideal practices in achieving excellence while underpinning the moral and ethics of humankind. A servant-leader is the one who has a natural desire to serve and that desire branches out into serving others. Applying Servant Leadership to academic advisement brings an opportunity to improve student learning and development by deepening engagement, motivation, and most importantly, the student-centeredness of the institution. To concretize the theory of Servant Leadership, the current study will use Barbuto and Wheeler's (2006) five constructs of the said theory and apply them to academic advisement: Emotional Healing, Altruistic Calling, Persuasive Mapping, Organizational Stewardship, and Wisdom (p. 311).

2 Servant Leadership Approach

Student affairs professionals have an obligation to promote a healthy campus climate and create opportunities that support student growth. If serving students is the mission, then evaluating how academic advisors serve is important. According to Pollard (1997), development of the leader should move beyond self-development to inspire others to develop. Servant Leadership and student affairs professionals are greatly interconnected with having a strong emphasis on challenging students while supporting their desires for excellence. This leadership approach was coined by Robert Greenleaf delineating its most important facet: 'The servant-leader (advisor) is servant first... (they must) want to serve, to

serve first' (Greenleaf, p. 27). The advisor as a servant focuses on empowerment while remaining cognizant of being student-centered, engaged, and fulfilling their role as the motivator. Much to Greenleaf's philosophy of Servant Leadership as 'authentically concerned with serving followers' (van Dierendonck, p. 16), van Dierendonck (2011) argued that Greenleaf did not provide empirical validation of this approach and only made recommendations of what servant-leaders should do. He also stressed out that there is no mutual definition or theory among researchers for this leadership approach. Another argument by Gergen (2006) stated that Servant Leadership could be too idealistic and surrounded in a moralistic view resulting in less researchers to conduct a study with an intent to prove its validity.

According to Reddick (2011), a majority of student affairs professionals are currently practicing the Servant Leadership approach averaging from 3.01 to 3.62 with 4 being the highest. An online survey was conducted to evaluate the students' perception of their academic advisors' leadership practices using the definition of a servant-leader based on Barbuto and Wheeler's (2006) theory: Emotional Healing, Altruistic Calling, Persuasive Mapping, Organizational Stewardship, and Wisdom. The overall results concluded that these student affairs professionals sought to 'serve students first' and demonstrate the Servant Leadership approach. However, Emotional Healing scored the lowest out of the five key constructs disagreeing to survey questions such as "This person is good at helping me with my emotional issues" and is "Talented at helping me heal emotionally" (Reddick, p. 28). This could be due to the lack of formal training in counseling services or motivational interviewing skill sets by academic advisors. Student affairs professionals may not be in the position to diagnose mental illness, but students must be able to turn to the university when seeking help on their emotional issues.

3 Five Constructs

Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) specified that leaders using Emotional Healing are highly empathetic and great listeners, making them adept at facilitating the healing process. Students are faced with several challenges in their classes, personal obligations, family matters, and social

activities to name a few. They could be overwhelmed with such tasks while in the process of their growth and development. According to a study made by Thompson (2014), two out of five undergraduate students in the United States have rates of substance abuse and dependence. Young college students are newly thriving to a sense of self and have a desire to fit socially. This desire to fit in will influence and shape an adolescent's behavior to be more socially acceptable (Erikson, 1993). Having access to support services can help students feel better through building relationships while undergoing an emotional period. Servant Leadership aids in this process by providing them with opportunities for peer support, helping them for recovery, and being of service to others. This concludes that peer-based support brings development for students as the feelings of community, understanding, and interaction with people considered as great importance to them.

Altruistic Calling describes the desire to make a significant difference in others' lives. Leaders who are high in this construct will put others' interest above their own (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Badhwar (1993) claims that altruism 'has typically been regarded as identical with moral concern' (p. 90). Moreover, the pursuit of one's own interest out of duty contains a moral worth but it cannot be motivated by self-interest. Staying accountable is crucial and the initial step is through listening. It is a skill that involves practice to be receptive and valuing the ideas of others. Moreover, listening is more than just remembering what is said, it is an 'attitude that begins with a genuine interest in other people and what they are trying to express' (Campbell et al., p. 313). Academic advisors tend to be busy imparting policies and procedures to students; however, truly listening to students' needs is a powerful tool for problem-solving and a significant element for relationships as well as an ultimate vessel for learning and growth. McClellan (2007) made a good point that through listening, servant-leaders gain awareness of the problems they face and overcome them. Young (2002) articulately wrote that 'Listening helps us go to the depth in order to sense the lift that comes as leadership forges the way. From listening, we get insights and creative thoughts to lead' (p. 252).

Leaders who demonstrate Persuasive Mapping 'encourage others to visualize the organization's future and are persuasive, offering compelling reasons to get others to do things' (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006, p. 319). It is a fundamental skill of an effective advisor and servant-leader to persuade others to take actions that nurture their growth and development. Greenleaf believed that motivation is the impetus for Servant Leadership as opposed to coercion and manipulation. In the 2015-2016 National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report, academic advising was deemed helpful in persuading students to persist until graduation (Noel-Levitz, 2015). McClellan (2006) reiterated that the heart of effective motivational advising involves listening to, empathizing with, and exploring alongside students as they strive to understand the nature of the challenges or conflicts they are dealing with. Advisors can encourage students to make choices and take actions that will lead them in positive directions and can be there to support them throughout this process. In doing so, the advisor becomes a facilitator of the motivation process, but respects that it must come from within the

student. In addition, developing a bigger picture with a perspective and plan results to a tangible vision. When servant-leaders understand this process, they are able facilitate development and implementation of plans (Goleman et al., 2002). Thus, the advisors' ability to foresee the potential of students and reify a plan for achieving their goals is absolutely essential for their success.

According to Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), Organizational Stewardship is 'an ethic or value for taking responsibility for the well-being of the community and making sure that the strategies and decisions undertaken reflect the commitment to give back and leave things better than found' (p. 319). Colleges and universities provide rich opportunities for developing leaders through both curriculum and co-curriculum. These activities create extensive learning opportunities for leadership development through various collaborative projects such as residential living, service learning, community work, and student organizations. A leader is not necessarily someone who holds a formal position, but rather someone who is able to effect positive change for the benefit of others. Spears (2002) defined stewardship as 'holding something in trust for another' (p. 7). The central idea of stewardship is the use of power and, from Greenleaf's perspective, those who hold power must learn how to execute it from the perspective of servanthood. Thus, it is a form of responsibility that leaders have. Academic advisors, whether they recognize it or not, hold tremendous power. Light (2002) pointed a relevant statement that 'Good advising maybe the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience' (p. 81). It manifests from the nature of relationship and through this relationship, students gain a deeper understanding and access to the world of the institution. Several opportunities can be practiced by academic advisors through developing academic and career plans for students, providing guidance when they experience challenges as well as directing them to useful resources. Therefore, advisors possess a consequential power to their role in the institution and this power represents stewardship. As McClellan (2006) added, advisors 'hold in trust the future of the students they advise' (p. 48).

The last construct is Wisdom, which is the ability to predict outcomes and reflect on past experiences of students (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Student affairs leaders high in this construct are considered as ideal mentors and teachers. While students feel confident in receiving guidance from those who have ample wisdom, mentoring is an essential role of advisors. Effective advisors remain critically aware of their environment and continuously remain knowledgeable as well as incorporating professional development that advances their advising skills. According to a study conducted by Fitzpatrick and Paul (2015), the best predictor of student satisfaction and advising behavior is Wisdom with high student ratings of 5 or near being the highest. They analyzed the correlation between two variables and the results of their survey has exhibited a strong relationship using the Servant Leadership approach.

4 Relevance

Academic advisors have a responsibility to keep students

informed of major requirements and any changes to existing policies and procedures. In addition, their function as an advisor is important especially by providing accurate information, helping students connect their academic, career, life goals, and making appropriate referrals to campus resources. They seek to help students formulate a plan for their future based on the students' past achievements, present ventures, and future interests. Thus, advisors should challenge students to explore various opportunities for the sake of their future development and success.

Promoting student success in higher education has been a long-term assessment in colleges and universities. In a published study by Camp and Dean (1998), student success is defined primarily in academic terms as maintaining academic progress, graduating, and lessons applied in life while in school. In contrast, students define student success on a less academic scope and more in a general life satisfaction. This includes happiness and satisfaction as the principal measures of success. According to Habley (2004), the quality of interaction between a student and a concerned individual on campus is a large component for student success. Hunter and White (2004) also added that academic advising can help students to shape meaningful learning experiences. Without quality advising, students may be proficient in the class but still be at risk of dropping out if they are unable to gain social support and involvement. Quality academic advising can promote student success by consistently serving as a point of connection and directly familiarizing students about the importance of personal responsibility. Furthermore, advisors should encourage students with substantial learning opportunities both in and out of the classroom. Dixon et al. (2013) predicated in a study that academic advising impacts student success and it can be further developed as a tool to help students attain their goals and aspirations.

Paul et al. (2012) validated that Servant Leadership is germane to academic advising behaviors due the leader's focus on student's growth and development. Powers and Moore (2005) made a valid point that 'The inner components of the servant-leader character – building community, commitment to the growth of people... are powerful value assets that have as much relevance for the servant-teacher as they do for the servant-leader' (p. 125). This also applies to the character of a servant advisor. Servant-leader advising concentrates solely on serving students rather than to employ skills or strategies (McClellan, 2007). A report from the 2017 effective practices for student success, retention, and completion indicated that 89.5% of four-year, private institutions ranked one-on-one advising by professional staff as a top-rated practice (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017).

In contrast, studies on student satisfaction with advising approaches gave inconsistent results (Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015). This has led to the development of new paradigms stemmed from leadership theories like Transformational Leadership and Servant Leadership. Paul et al. (2015) found that the Servant Leadership model could be a feasible approach to academic advising. Effective academic advising is grounded in the central motivation of the advisor. McClellan (2007) asserted that 'advisors who are not motivated by genuine

love interest for students and a desire to serve are more likely to see them as unmotivated and in need of prescriptive, directive advisement' (p. 43). Servant-leader advisors are driven by a desire to serve students and have a concern for their budding young minds. As this desire grows deeply within the advisor, this results to a natural behavior in genuinely serving others and loving students. Thus, this is a veritable exemplary of the characteristics of a true servant-leader.

5 Conclusion

Academic advisors are in a unique position to engage and interact with students outside of traditional classroom experience. The use of Servant Leadership in academic advising is impactful for student success and student satisfaction; however, further research is needed as it has been largely left unexamined. The importance of advising revolves around the nature of an ongoing relationship and building a positive rapport between the advisor and student.

This study encourages university or college administrators to leverage findings to implement professional development strategies and effective training programs focusing on Servant Leadership. It would also be beneficial to evaluate academic advisors' knowledge of Servant Leadership and whether they feel this particular leadership approach resonates with their profession. If Servant Leadership behaviors are to be utilized as an approach in academic advisement, these specific five key constructs should be thoroughly explored. Commitment to growth and development is fundamental to servant-leaders, particularly to academic advisors. Creamer (2000) stated that 'the purpose of academic advising is student learning and personal development' (p. 19).

Student engagement is key to student success and retention; and as Tinto (2014) succinctly affirmed, 'engagement matters' (p. 5). Every person who is part of an institution is a contributing factor to student success, including a staff who warmly greets students as they walk inside the campus, people who prepare meals in residence halls, and the public safety officers who ensures the security of the students. Student success is simply providing excellent service to students no matter how big or small they are.

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