

# ACADEMIC ADVISING INFORMED BY SELF-AUTHORSHIP THEORY

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*[Academic advisors] are positioned to facilitate a transformative experience for students—to help them make meaning around how the accordance or discordance of previous and current learning relates to their educational goals and aspirations.*

—Kincanon, *Translating the Transformative*, 2009

Many theoretical lenses contribute to an academic advisor's endeavor to facilitate student learning. Self-authorship theory, a relatively new developmental perspective on human psychosocial maturation, is a particularly powerful lens for academic advising because it focuses on the way individuals understand the world and make decisions within it. In particular, it emphasizes the development of an individual's capacity to balance critical evaluations of information, personal beliefs and values, and relationships with others when setting goals and taking action. This kind of complex thinking is a distinctive learning goal of higher education (e.g., American Association of Colleges and Universities [AAC&U], 2002), and advisors have a significant role in helping students achieve it (Baxter Magolda & King, 2008; Lowenstein, 2011; National Academic Advising Association, 2006).

Although self-authorship involves multiple aspects of an individual's development, in general it is characterized by a shift from less dependence on an authority to an intrinsic understanding of self that guides decision making. Self-authored individuals can balance external influences to develop their own internally generated beliefs, goals, and plans of action.

A self-authored student will not blindly follow parental expectations or expect advisors to tell her or him the major that will be best, nor will a self-authored student single-mindedly follow a gut feeling or passion. . . . Rather, the self-authored student will consider both external expectations and internally defined goals and values. (Pizzolato, 2006, p. 32)

Self-authorship theory is part of a family of constructive-developmental theories in cognitive psychology, which as a whole represents a major theoretical tradition

within academic advising. Like other developmental theories, self-authorship lends itself quite naturally to advising applications and points toward certain strategies that can be used to encourage students to more aggressively engage the developmental process. Because advising situations naturally include discussions of how students come to know themselves and their world, personal beliefs, and relationships with others, self-authorship theory forms a particularly applicable advising strategy to help students grapple with complex situations and gain empowerment to make difficult decisions. The theory highlights the educative role of academic advising by reminding advisors that discomfort is an important part of learning.

Self-authored decision making is consistent with the learning outcomes expected of students of higher education (Baxter Magolda, 2009b; Hodge, Baxter Magolda, & Haynes, 2009). Many individuals and organizations have articulated expected outcomes of higher education, including the ability to interact with diverse others in solving complex problems and to become actively contributing citizens skilled in critical thinking (e.g., AAC&U, 2002; Council for the Advancement of Standards of Learning and Developmental Outcomes, 2009).

In a turbulent and complex world, every college student will need to be purposeful and self-directed in multiple ways. Purpose implies clear goals, an understanding of process, and appropriate action. Further, purpose implies intention in one's actions. Becoming such an intentional learner means developing self-awareness about the reason for study, the learning process itself, and how education is used. Intentional learners are integrative thinkers who can see connections in seemingly disparate information and draw on a wide range of knowledge to make decisions. They adapt the skills learned in one situation to problems encountered in another: in a classroom, the workplace, their communities, or their personal lives. (AAC&U, 2002, chap. 3, para. 3)

The skills involved in self-authorship directly relate to those articulated in the AAC&U statement, particularly those involving self-awareness and integrative thinking. Consistent with the outcomes desired of higher education, the orientation toward self-authorship includes an individual's ability to handle complex information, interact with diverse others, and make nuanced decisions that acknowledge both intrinsic desires and external realities. "Promoting self-authorship enables learners to learn *how* to learn and think for themselves rather than *what* to learn" (Baxter Magolda, 2009b, p. 2).

### The Basics of Self-authorship Theory

The concept of self-authorship was first articulated by Kegan (1994) to describe a person's capacity to balance multiple external pressures to create an internally defined identity that guides complex decision making. A self-authored individual habitually and critically evaluates his or her values, beliefs, social relationships, and externally

imposed expectations to manage an internally consistent identity (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). The process of developing self-authorship is not linear, nor is it a once-and-done process. Rather, it involves shifts in perceptions and behavior patterns after much practice (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). Self-authorship requires development along three dimensions: the cognitive (coming to know information or phenomena), intrapersonal (considering one's own beliefs and values), and interpersonal (maintaining healthy relationships) (Baxter Magolda, 2009a).

Self-authored decisions are not egocentric ones. Rather, they reflect the construction of mutually beneficial, authentic relationships (e.g., ending destructive relationships or managing decisions to meet the needs of all parties involved) (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). Made by those with a clearly defined sense of self, these decisions are not self-serving. Self-authorship represents the development of "an internal belief system that allow[s] [the individual] to consider but not be overwhelmed by external influence, a coherent identity that yield[s] the confidence to act on wise choices, and mature relations to collaborate productively with colleagues" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). For example, a student may still decide to study a subject that her parents expect her to pursue, but that decision reflects self-authorship when made with an awareness of external expectations and based on an internally controlled sense of self. Scholars of self-authorship often refer to this internal belief system as *listening to one's internal voice* (see, e.g., Baxter Magolda, 2009a; Pizzolato, 2004).

Baxter Magolda (1992, 2001, 2009a) conducted a longitudinal study focused on the development of self-authorship among traditional-aged college students into adulthood. She further elaborated various elements of self-authorship, including the conditions that promote it in individuals. Those not engaged in self-authored ways of knowing follow external formulas and make decisions without thinking critically about them. College students in this developmental phase tend to believe in immutable truths, employ right-wrong and good-bad dichotomies, and expect authorities to provide answers and directions. Students entering college often have not yet met the challenge of developing an internally consistent identity that allows them to develop and achieve realistic, self-driven goals. In particular, Pizzolato (2008) noted that students' initial goals are often "inherited from others, particularly parents" (p. 20). Students use gut instincts, rather than a critical evaluation of their motivations, expectations, and realities, to generate decisions. Particularly relevant to academic advising, students often choose academic and career paths for extrinsic reasons and later find the outcomes unfulfilling or dissatisfying.

While in college, students often do quite well by following external formulas, meeting instructor requirements to earn good grades, following degree requirements to make appropriate progress to graduation, choosing majors that satisfy family members' agendas. Eventually, however, individuals may encounter situations in which external formulas no longer sufficiently lead to satisfactory decisions. Baxter Magolda found that graduates in their twenties begin grappling with problems arising in work and relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2001). She referred to this experience of

significant dissonance as *the crossroads* (p. 38). Individuals may be thrust into the crossroads when confronted with questions that a clear-cut right-or-wrong response cannot answer, encounter a new situation with no commensurate path to follow, or realize that following formulas leads to ungratifying destinations. The recognition of this dissonance, the hallmark of the crossroads, characterizes the beginning of self-authorship.

Students come to the crossroads when external formulas conflict with internal voices. However, students in the crossroads do not always embrace change because they may fail to recognize the dissonance of the crossroads or choose to leave it unresolved (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Individuals encounter the crossroads at different points. Some never recognize it or act on it while some encounter and respond to it fairly early. For example, those from oppressed or marginalized groups may enter the crossroads before their twenties and develop self-authored decision making sooner than their majority or commonly represented peers (Abes, Jones, & McEwan, 2007; Costello, 2010; Pizzolato, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007; Torres, Reiser, LePeau, Davis, & Ruder, 2006).

This discovery supports the suggestion that self-authorship could be provoked if individuals receive appropriate challenge and support (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Pizzolato, 2006). Pizzolato (2003) identified a particular point—*the provocative moment*—when a student in the crossroads takes action. She suggested that college educators, including academic advisors, can create these conditions for students. Pizzolato (2005) described one student's provocative moment:

After the acceptance letters from various colleges came home prior to freshman year I had to make this decision [whether to attend college], because as a member of my family you MUST work for the family, like my father and his father. I had to choose. My options were to go to school or carry out the business. . . . I thought about myself and . . . I became more confident in the fact that I am independent of my family's business and will become my own entity unassociated with the business. (p. 629)

As individuals build skills in coordinating their beliefs, identities, and social relations, they build habits that move them through other elements of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008). "Becoming the Author of One's Own Life" represents an element in which individuals actively work on developing "internal perspectives and self-definition" (Pizzolato, 2003, p. 798). As this thinking pattern becomes more habitual, individuals build *Internal Foundations* on which they consistently employ their internally defined perspectives to evaluate situations and guide action (Pizzolato, 2003, p. 798). Participants in Baxter Magolda's (2009a) longitudinal study became comfortable with this type of self-authorship in their thirties. Individuals continue to move in and out of each of these self-authorship elements over a lifetime as they encounter different challenges.

## Reflective Conversations

Baxter Magolda's (2008) work stresses that "self-authorship evolves when the challenge to become self-authoring is present and is accompanied by sufficient support to help an individual make the shift to internal meaning making" (p. 271). Learning environments that promote self-authorship share particular characteristics: While offering support through collaborative relationships, they consistently challenge learners to grapple with ambiguity and to see themselves as knowledge constructors (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). Baxter Magolda (2002) described support for self-authorship as "good company" for the developmental journey. She and other authors have noted that due to the supportive, relationship-oriented nature of their work, advisors are ideally situated both to provide good company and to provoke students to tackle questions that lack clear-cut answers (e.g., Baxter Magolda & King, 2008; Pizzolato, 2006).

Academic advisors regularly engage students in handling decisions with multiple possible outcomes, such as those associated with choice of major, challenges to past self-understandings of academic strengths, and changes in interests and goals. Because the majority of college-aged students follow external formulas, they often look to advisors, faculty members, and parents as authorities who can provide the definitive directions for success (Baxter Magolda & King, 2008). In addressing complicated areas of student inquiry, advisors can employ reflective conversation techniques that encourage students to think through complex situational issues and identify their own interpretations and solutions (Baxter Magolda & King, 2008). However, advisors need to refrain from offering solutions to problems and instead focus on helping students discover their own paths to success. For example, in a reflective conversation about choice of major, an advisor might ask, "What has surprised you about X? How has it changed the way you think about Y?" or "What is the most important thing you've learned about your academic interests so far?" Such queries help students situate themselves as knowers as they attempt to make meaning of their experience as they are living it.

The critical role of reflective conversation easily reconciles with prevailing notions of quality academic advising. However, when pressed for time, advisors find that telling, rather than asking and listening, feels like a more efficient use of appointment time. By keeping self-authorship as a theoretical focus, the advisor is attentive to the role of collaborator and reflective conversation partner, and thus encourages students to build more complex ways of knowing. Such conversations can challenge students to wrestle with the complexities in their decisions while talking through the issues without experiencing judgment. For example, Bob confesses in an advising session that his math skills are not as good as he initially thought. As someone with experience relevant to the student's challenge, Sharon collaborates with Bob to identify the differences between his collegiate and high school experiences. Perhaps Bob discovers that his expectations about the appropriate amount of study time built in secondary

school no longer applies, he has not adapted to the collegiate teaching style, or he finds the subject less than intellectually compelling. Each of these attributions for Bob's difficulty warrants a different conversation and a unique student action. Academic advisors can provide a safe, nonjudgmental space for frank conversations where students identify their own interpretations.

Advisors can challenge students to recognize crossroads moments by initiating provocative conversations. Perhaps Bob does not consider his math skills a problem, but Sharon notes that his algebra midterm grade is significantly lower than his marks in other classes. Sharon might encourage Bob to talk about the classes in which he feels successful and direct him to speculate about the reasons for the good outcomes. After recognizing Bob's academic achievements, Sharon shifts the conversation to the courses in which Bob is struggling. Without such supportive provocation, Bob may never have mentioned his math performance. However, by encouraging Bob to address a disappointing grade, Sharon helped move him toward self-authored habits of reflection.

As Baxter Magolda's work suggests, and Pizzolato's research elaborates, movement out of the crossroads and toward becoming an author of one's own life requires dissonance and discomfort. Disequilibrium is a particularly critical aspect of self-authorship theory, and advisors and other higher education personnel should make students feel unsettled sometimes; they should present students with problems and dilemmas they cannot readily solve or reconcile. For example, when meeting with a student choosing a major primarily because she believes it will lead to a job acceptable to her parents, an advisor can ask for evidence-based reasons that such a major would offer a satisfying postgraduation career.

When situated with proper support from a reflective and collaborative relationship, individuals may address dissonance, an aspect that distinguishes application of self-authorship theory from other related developmental perspectives. Pushing students to feeling uncomfortable runs contrary to customer service principles set forth at some universities and the helping-oriented impulses of advisors; however, to help students see and navigate the crossroads, the advisor must nudge the student into new territory by challenging extrinsic motivations and simplistic interpretations of situations. Done with appropriate support, this challenge can lead the student to develop higher levels of self-authored abilities, consistent with the learning outcomes of higher education.

## The Learning Partnerships Model

Baxter Magolda and King developed the learning partnerships model (LPM), which translates self-authorship theory into particular actions that can be used in educational settings to encourage self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2009b; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). This model encourages practitioners to balance challenge with support and emphasizes the central role of the learner to exercise both freedom of choice and responsibility in action (Baxter Magolda, 2009b). The LPM is based on three basic

principles: validate students as knowers, situate learning in students' experiences, and define learning as mutually constructing meaning. While all of these principles can be addressed through reflective conversation, they can also be implemented through other strategies that encourage reflection, such as minute papers or questions asked in preparation for an advising appointment (Kincanon, 2009).

### **Validate Students as Knowers**

As a locus of learning in higher education, academic advising presents the opportunity for students to see themselves as able to construct knowledge and possess ideas inherently their own (Pizzolato, 2008). Engaging in reflective conversations, advisors can help students recognize and validate their role as knowledge constructors. Through reflective, collaborative conversations students accept multiple ways to view any situation, recognize the complexity of knowledge, and appreciate their own role in its construction (Pizzolato, 2008).

As students discuss their interpretation of experiences and construct meaning from them, advisors serve as collaborators in supporting the self-authorship process. They support students addressing challenges, providing a safe space in which to reflect and make meaning and serving as a sounding board for ideas. Before advisees reach the crossroads, advisors must build a trusting relationship to ready students to engage in a provocative moment. They can employ principles of positive psychology (such as those included in motivational interviewing, as discussed by Judy Hughey and Robert Pettay in chapter 5, and appreciative approaches to advising, highlighted by Jenny Bloom, Bryant Hutson, and Ye He in chapter 6) to help students remember ambiguous situations they successfully negotiated toward satisfying outcomes. In this reflection, students need to detail the reasons they had been successful in previous situations and devise a plan to use those behaviors to tackle current challenges (Pizzolato, 2008).

However, to implement strategies consistent with validating knowledge creators, advisors need administrative support. Of paramount importance, advisors and students need time and space to build relationships that enable significant conversations (Pizzolato, 2008). Therefore, advising loads must be balanced with advisors' other duties to accommodate appropriate appointment length and availability. To build authentic relationships, Pizzolato (2008) suggested, based on research results, that student appointments should span at least 30 minutes, and each student needs access to multiple appointments in a semester if desired.

### **Situate Learning in Students' Experiences**

In any learning setting, students should be encouraged to use their existing knowledge and experience as a foundation for interpreting new situations. Academic advising inherently focuses on student experiences, and therefore advisors enjoy a significant opportunity for engaging in self-authorship development via LPM principles. Once

empowered as knowers, students can identify the obstacles that might hinder achievement of their plan and collaborate with advisors to identify possible strategies to overcome roadblocks (Pizzolato, 2008). For example, a student struggling in a math class, like Bob did, needs to identify strategies to meet the specific difficulties related to the course or topics covered. The advisor who simply refers the student to tutoring or a study skills class does not necessarily help the student uncover the fundamental problem with math. In addition to offering appropriate referrals, the advisor who helps the student unpack the particular source of the challenge also provides the groundwork for determining solutions unique to her or his circumstance, thereby situating the solution directly in the advisee's own personal experience. In addition, as students develop the habit of critically evaluating a situation, ferreting out root causes, and identifying specific strategies to meet the challenges at hand, they develop the self-authorship skills that translate to the higher-level problem solving and critical thinking expected as outcomes of higher education.

### **Define Learning as Mutually Constructing Meaning**

In reflective conversations, advisors contribute perspectives to help students reach nuanced interpretations of their experiences. In this role, the advisor is not an expert, but a partner who is also learning from and with the student. Advisors encourage students to seek additional knowledge from others (e.g., faculty members, peers, professionals in their target career area) and then help them think through these multiple perspectives to identify their own interpretations and plans of action. For example, when working with someone selecting a major, the advisor may help the student separate family perspectives from those of peers and develop his or her own interpretation of a good fit. With advisors as collaborators (i.e., good company on the road to self-discovery), students articulate future goals based on their own self-understanding and consider how their current actions relate to their goal attainment (Pizzolato, 2006). As students recognize and practice using their internal voices, they become increasingly trusting of themselves (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

### **Translating Theory to Advising Practice**

Self-authorship theory can be translated into practice in many advising situations, particularly those that require students to make decisions and set goals. Baxter Magolda (2008, p. 283) encouraged educators to

- assist students in building their internal foundations through reflective conversations;
- help reduce the distraction of external pressures, such as peers, family, or social expectations so students can find their own voice;
- encourage students to act on their internal voice, trust it, and align beliefs with action.



By keeping these practices in mind, advisors can help students recognize crossroads issues and may be able to pose questions that trigger provocative moments.

### Examples of Self-authorship Practice

*Taylor enters college as an engineer because he performed well in high school math classes and his teacher suggested that engineering may be a good major for him. Candace enters college as a pre-med major because she wants to help people. Rachael wants to make a lot of money as a dentist and plans a biology major despite disliking science and math.*

All three students have made a decision without significant reflection on the academic focus they have chosen, their interests in the subjects they will be studying, or realistic notions of the career paths they imagine. All three follow external formulas: Parents, teachers, or societal stereotypes defined the terms. An academic advisor can draw on principles of self-authorship theory to challenge these students to consider and articulate the reasons for their academic focus and support them to make choices with awareness of both external and internal motivations. For example, prior to attending orientation, their advisors could ask Taylor, Candace, and Rachael to research the skills and knowledge they will learn in their targeted majors. At orientation, the advisors could initiate brief reflective conversations about the reasons the chosen study areas attracted their interest and subsequently challenge them to think about their motivations and perceived knowledge of these majors. Throughout the semester, the advisors continue to prod the students toward self-authorship. For example, Taylor's advisor could suggest an in-depth exploration of the engineering curriculum, especially regarding the ways the physics requirement will influence his learning, while Candace's advisor could challenge her to define more fully her ideas about the meaning of "helping people."

*After a semester, Taylor recognizes that engineering is not a good major for him.* After talking to his father, who works in finance, he asks his advisor to switch his major to business. He emphasizes that he needs to make the change immediately so that he can register for the proper classes the following semester. Self-authorship theory suggests that Taylor reached a crossroads, potentially containing a provocative moment that could propel him to greater self-awareness. His advisor could capitalize on Taylor's dissonance to prompt further research and expand the realm of possibilities before jumping to a new major. The advisor might ask questions that encourage Taylor to reflect on his motivations and past experiences: "What did you learn from your experience in engineering?" "How can you use that information to help you make your next decision?" Through reflective conversation, the advisor could help him separate the influence of adult authorities and his own motivations, and thereby help Taylor develop a more future-focused orientation (Pizzolato, 2006). Advisors can help students anticipate possible obstacles and make plans to overcome them; for example, Taylor is inclined to make decisions without reflection on his own interests.

In an alternative scenario, in which customer-service impulses overshadow the opportunity to use the crossroads moment, the advisor could simply switch Taylor's major and thus ameliorate Taylor's discomfort without requiring significant reflection from him. However, according to self-authorship theory, the advisor best helps Taylor by having him pause and reflect on his past and present decisions, evaluate them critically, and carefully plan with self-awareness the transition from one discipline to another.

*Candace performs poorly in the math and science courses needed for medical school, and she begins to doubt her choice of major and career path as well as her future in college. Distracted at not being a doctor, Candace does not know how else to help people, and she places little value on a nonscience education.* Helping students deal with failure is an important role for academic advisors, and Candace's advisor helps her recognize the skills, knowledge, and growth she can acquire from higher education generally and the liberal arts and professional fields specifically. Employing self-authorship theory, the advisor understands the challenge to Candace's sense of self and pays particular attention to being good company as Candace grapples with an ambiguous future. The advisor engages Candace in a series of conversations that focus on her evolving understanding of her own intellectual identity and the role higher education plays in her plans. Using appreciative and motivational techniques in the reflective conversation, the advisor specifically helps Candace identify her strengths, interests, and personal values, thereby validating her as a knower and a learner (see, for example, chapter 5 on motivational interviewing and chapter 6 on appreciative advising). The advisor could ask Candace to describe situations in which she helped people: Perhaps she is often a sounding board for friends as they talk out problems or wrote articles that highlight social problems for her high school newspaper. The advisor can help Candace recognize these as significant experiences worthy of her attention and develop a plan that would help her connect them to potential alternative majors.

*Rachael is failing both chemistry and algebra, and seeks help from an advisor to change her course sections because she thinks the ways these classes are taught is causing her difficulty.* Through self-authorship theory, the advisor recognizes that Rachael is seeking external answers in reaction to a challenge to her preexisting notions of her academic strengths. Rachael blames the teaching methods instead of facing the dissonance created because she is studying subjects in which she has no intrinsic interest. An academic advisor might challenge Rachael to see alternative explanations for her current struggle, including her own actions and interests as relevant factors. By asking how she is interacting with course material out of class, the advisor can help Rachael undertake a shift in learning style and emphasize the out-of-class, independent study needed for collegiate success.

While the advisor can recognize the discord between Rachael's lack of interest in math and science and her goal to become a dentist, Rachael cannot see it. Rachael identified a career goal on the basis of one criterion—financial expectations—and then used it to make an equally one-dimensional academic goal—biology. The advisor

can challenge Rachael to recognize the dissonance between her goals and her interests by engaging her in goal reflection (as per Pizzolato, 2006), specifically charging her to examine multiple dimensions of the complex problem she has encountered. For example, the advisor can ask Rachael to describe her motivations for this particular course of study and examine the relationship between her responses and the curriculum she is pursuing: “Are you learning things you find rewarding and important?”

The advisor might suggest that Rachael research the prerequisite courses and GPA requirements for dental school admission so they can discuss her interests in completing those classes at the level expected. The advisor may also encourage Rachael to reflect more thoroughly on her career aspirations by shadowing a dentist and specifically inquiring about realistic expectations for life in dentistry school. The advisor might further prompt Rachael to reflect on her motivations to earn a high salary and research the related salaries of careers outside of dentistry. Through these self-authorship-inspired strategies, Rachael can develop a more nuanced understanding of her goal. If Rachel completes her assignments and feels the increased dissonance characteristic of the crossroads, she may experience a provocative moment in which she grapples with the newly acquired learning about herself and undertakes more complex decisions than she had previously considered.

In all these cases, self-authorship theory helps advisors recognize particular learning opportunities and suppress their instincts to solve problems quickly for students. It is particularly important in high-pressure settings such as those in which advisors have large case loads, at points in the semester where students make last-minute decisions, or when a student makes a decision while experiencing tense relations with parents. Academic advisors have unique and powerful opportunities to encourage self-authored habits by engaging students in a series of reflective conversations, but they must recognize the opportunity and allow students to feel discomfort. Students, of course, will ultimately choose whether to take advantage of opportunities for self-authorship development, but as educators, advisors must provide the challenge and support students need to engage increasingly complex ways of thinking.

## Self-authorship Advising Scenarios

Advising Scenarios I and II illustrate ways that advisors can implement self-authorship theory in select cases. These cases represent a small set of the crossroads advisors will help students negotiate as they discover themselves along the road to adulthood.

### Scenario I

*A first-generation college sophomore, Riley, comes to an advisor, Skylar, and says “I’m having trouble in two of my classes. I don’t understand what the professor is talking about in one of them, but it’s a required course in my major. The other is only a gen ed course, but I keep getting low grades on the writing assignments. I was always good in writing in high school. If I do poorly, this will lower my GPA, and I just got*

*off academic probation last term. I want to stay in my major, but I don't know if I can pass this one course and that would really disappoint my family. What do you suggest I do?"*

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Self-authorship theory helps Skylar recognize that Riley is dealing with dissonance. Rather than jumping into the conversation with solutions, such as suggestions to visit office hours and tutoring centers or take advantage of course-drop policies, Skylar allows Riley to experience discomfort, consistent with practices that foster self-authorship development. Awareness of Riley's dissonance as an opportunity for growth allows Skylar to help Riley practice complex thinking and construct interpretations of the situation, apply personal beliefs and values, and reflect on relationships.

After recognizing the importance of not fixing the problem for the student, Skylar, informed by self-authorship theory, initiates a reflective conversation, asking Riley to identify the causes of present troubles, develop goals, and create action plans that help to meet those goals. First, guided by practices derived from self-authorship theory such as LPM—validating the student as a knower, situating learning in the student's experience, and defining learning as mutually constructing meaning—Skylar prompts Riley to reflect on past challenges and successes through the following questions:

- o What created the situation that got you into academic probation?
- o What changes did you make that helped you recover?
- o What major courses have you really enjoyed? What about those courses made them such good experiences for you?

Through this reflective conversation, Skylar can help Riley recognize the importance of interpreting situations and taking actions that affect outcomes.

Second, Skylar can use this multifaceted challenge as an opportunity to help Riley practice complex problem solving that directly draws on past personal experience. Initially Riley must separate the multiple aspects of the situation by focusing on one challenge at a time. The following conversation prompts may help Riley move in a new direction:

- o Let's talk about the course in your major first. Describe that course to me.
- o What should you be learning in that class and how does it relate to the rest of the major?
- o What about the class is making sense to you?
- o What do you mean by "not understanding the professor"?

Skylar may suggest that Riley list particular reasons for struggling in class and then brainstorm ways to overcome those challenges. As a collaborative partner, Skylar should offer suggestions and alternative explanations as warranted:

- o Let's see if we can figure out why this class is included in the major. . . . Let's look at the syllabus together to see what you're supposed to take away from it.
- o What did the instructor say to you when you inquired about this?

Third, after co-examining the situation with Riley, Skylar could shift focus to the next issue:

- Let's talk about your gen ed class. What's going well for you in that class?
- You say the writing assignments are the cause of your current challenge. What made you good at writing in the past? How is what's being asked of you now different from what was expected in high school?

Again, Skylar can use reflective conversation to help Riley identify the particular reasons for struggling and brainstorm ways to overcome the challenges.

Finally, throughout the discussions, Skylar needs to help Riley reflect on decisions, construct internally meaningful interpretations, and find empowerment to set goals and take action. As self-authorship theory suggests, many college-aged individuals give priority to external authorities. Particularly, students need to practice paying attention to their internal voices and give their own values and beliefs a prominent position in driving decision making. By providing good company, Skylar helps Riley examine motivations and separate inner and outside voices, thus increasing Riley's ability to mediate external pressures while focusing on the tasks that can be affected by action.

## Scenario II

*A second-year student, Ali, comes to Drew to discuss withdrawing from school: "I'm really not doing well this term. It's not the courses or the professors—I just don't feel like I fit in. A few of my friends left after last year, and I haven't really found any new ones. My new roommates are not really like me, so they kind of stick together by themselves. I'm not in any clubs or anything like that, although I do work off campus. Also, I feel my parents and I have spent lots of money, but I'm not sure it's worth spending more if I'm not that interested. Do you have any suggestions? What do you think I should do?"*

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Self-authorship theory helps Drew recognize that Ali is dealing with a potential crossroads moment. While grappling with identity and commitment to goals, Ali has started to experience dissonance. Drew understands the importance of giving Ali the driver's seat in negotiating the college journey.

Drew can use self-authorship principles to engage in reflective conversation that helps Ali examine expectations and motivations. Drew could ask the following questions:

- When you were deciding what to do after high school, what made you choose college?
- How did you come to choose this institution?
- What would you do if you left?

Drew and Ali can collaborate to identify Ali's voice in coming to past decisions and separate internal motivation from external influences. Was Ali following formulas in choosing to attend college? What does Ali hope to gain from the collegiate experience?

By applying techniques derived from self-authorship theory, Drew can help Ali identify motivations more clearly and work to identify actions that will lead to satisfying outcomes.

## Summary

Self-authored decision making is consistent with the higher-level learning outcomes expected of postsecondary education. In particular, the characteristics of self-authored decision making are the same as those that characterize intentional learning and integrative thinking (AAC&U, 2002). However, most students do not make substantial progress in self-authorship until well after graduation (Baxter Magolda, 2009b). Therefore, Baxter Magolda (2009b), alone and with King (2004), emphasized the role of college educators in promoting self-authorship development during college, and suggested that students require both challenge and support from educators:

Promoting self-authorship during college requires finding the delicate balance between guiding learners and enabling them to be responsible. Too much guidance affirms reliance on external formulas. Yet enabling responsibility must be balanced with guidance until learners develop the internal mechanisms to act responsibly. (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, p. xxiii)

Academic advisors, often in a strategic position to offer that challenge and support by applying principles from LPM, can help students attain greater levels of self-authorship in their college years. They encourage students to see themselves as active constructors of knowledge and push them to practice their critical-thinking skills by examining challenges in their lives. Such practice promotes habitual use of complex decision-making skills needed in an educated citizenry.

Like other psychosocial developmental theories, self-authorship theory helps advisors understand student decision-making patterns. In particular, it provides a model for illustrating ways individuals develop habits of making increasingly complex interpretations of experience and internally meaningful plans of action through balancing information, personal beliefs, and relationships with others. As important, it points to specific actions educators can take to promote student engagement in the developmental process. Particularly for academic advisors, this theory highlights the developmental necessity of discomfort and helps practitioners realize that sometimes promoting dissonance, rather than diffusing it, proves most helpful to college students. It aligns with the contemporary perspective of academic advising as an educational endeavor, but runs counter to customer service-oriented, satisfaction-based measures of advising quality. Enacting self-authorship principles in academic advising settings requires discipline from the academic advisor to suspend the impulse to quickly resolve students' situations and assuage their anxieties. It also requires administrative structures that provide the time needed to develop collaborative relationships and assessment methods based on the recognition that immediate student satisfaction is not a sufficient measure of quality advising (Nutt, 2003).

Academic advisors can offer good company to students practicing complex thinking and decision-making skills. Through reflective conversation, they support students working through challenges and encourage them to pause and engage with the pro-

vocative moments they encounter. As students and advisors relate through conversations founded on a trusting, collaborative relationship, academic advising provides a critical venue in which students can partake in the iterative, cyclical, back-and-forth process of habitual self-authorship.

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