# NACADA Module Transcript

Generating Scholarship from Theory and Previous Research

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**Introduction**

Contemporary scholars of academic advising often base their work on previous research both within the field and from related areas. Their work not only informs practice and substantiates (or not) the theory or prior research on which it is based, but it often leads to the development of new theory. I will describe how existing theory and research in academic advising and related fields can be used to develop and justify new scholarly inquiry as well as lead to the development of new theory specific to academic advising.

Whichever methodology (the way research is conducted; for example, descriptive, observational, case-study, survey. correlational, quasi-experimental, or experimental to name a few), or mixed methodologies (combining forms of qualitative and quantitative research) employed, researchers may base inquiry on previous research in the field, relevant work from work from another field, an existing advising theory per se, or an existing theory from a relevant area. Serlin suggested in 1987 that a specific hypothesis should only be tested on the basis of theory because an investigator can only choose the appropriate method of statistical analyses and determine generalizability of the results through theory. As Glaser and Strauss explained in 1967, when based on previous research, theory ties to existing data and thus reduces the applicability of other available theories to explain the data.

Oftentimes, research results in revision of an original theory or development of an entirely new theory, which leads to further testing of testing of the theory. For example, in 2005 Ryser and Alden used a mixed-method approach to study advisor perceptions of the social and emotional needs of students with students with learning disabilities and those with attention

deficit/hyperactivity disorder as well as advisor responses to these students' needs. They suggested a revision and expansion of the classic developmental advising model for these specific cohorts of students, presenting a revised model that included more emphasis on social and emotional challenges, a call for enhanced advising support, clarification of state and federal laws, and creation of a protocol for monitoring medication needs.

**Theory Building**

When no existing research or theory is applicable to the phenomenon or idea at hand, the scholar must develop a theory on which to base inquiry. The resulting theory is considered emergent, as explained by Eisenhardt and Graebner in 2007; Glaser and Strauss in 1967, and Yin in 1994, because it emanates from the observed case(s). The cases form the basis from which scholars develop theory qualitatively and inductively. Glaser and Strauss further emphasized that theory generation does not require many observed cases; one is sufficient to generate initial conceptual categories, while a few more may be utilized to confirm new ideas. These emergent categories will form identifiable patterns and interrelations that that will in turn produce the crux of the emerging theory. At that point, the researcher develops a theory that may be used as a plausible and testable explanation for the observed phenomena.

Grounded theory, a qualitative and inductive emergent method of theory building, describes the process of theory development from existing conceptualization of data. As Serlin explained in 1987, grounded theory allows investigators to transform conclusions from specifics to generalizations. They derive interpretations inductively from raw data collected in real-world settings with continual interplay between the existing data and emerging interpretations of that data. While often perceived as a technique that that separates theory and data, grounded theory combines the two. Data collection, analysis, and theory formulation are reciprocally connected via expansion upon the existing explanation of a phenomenon by an increasingly precise identification of the components of that phenomenon. The investigator then delineates the relationships of those specific components to the actual and exact context and process of the

experiment. Therefore, while inductive, the resulting theories are grounded in (or based on) the existing data as opposed to emergent theories, which are based on empirical observation.

Using grounded theory, researchers purposely combine data collection and analysis, and they subsequently use the initial data analysis to shape continuing data collection. For example, in their 2007 study of graduate students' perceptions of outstanding graduate advisor characteristics, Bloom, Cuevas, Hall, and Evans performed a grounded theory inquiry involving the qualitative textual analysis of nominations from graduate students for an outstanding-graduate-advisor-of-the-year award. Five major themes emerged: Students found accessibility, serving as a role model, individualized guidance, and assistance integrating the students into their respective professions as characteristics that make advisors most helpful. Based on these data, the authors suggested that the graduate advisor is often the most influential role model in the academic lives of graduate students, and they provided recommendations for graduate advisors based on their findings.

Comparative analysis is also a grounded theory method. Using this approach, investigators compare different groups of observed individual cases and use their similarities and differences to create a theory. They then examine, revise, and refine a specific theory via some form of evaluation against other comparison groups. The resulting data allow for the identification of resulting patterns and relationships that that can lead to general concepts about the overall phenomenon of interest. With the goal of making the theoretical propositions more generalizable, scholars take the ideas and generate broader theoretical propositions that are subsequently evaluated against other comparison groups.

In 2007, Eisenhardt and Graebner suggested the use of case observation in theory building. They offered that, as opposed to laboratory experiments, case study allows for observation of the real-world context in which the observed phenomena occur. Theory building from case studies not only complements the mainstream deductive research methodologies but it connects rich qualitative findings to mainstream deductive research. Using observed cases to

construct theory, scholars typically produce theory that is not only accurate but also testable. Some of the biggest names in student development generated their theories based on case observation, such as Astin, Chickering, Perry, and Tinto.

While researchers use inductive theory building from cases to produce new theory from observed data, they complete the process by using deductive theory testing to verify it. For example, in 2004 Umbach and Milem applied Holland's 1997 theory of personality types and environments to first-year students' beliefs and attitudes about diversity. These researchers found that some of Holland's categories were more significant predictors of students' efforts to bridge differences than were others, suggesting the usefulness of Holland's types in predicting differences in students' attitudes and beliefs toward diversity.

**Mini and Grand Theories**

Once developed, a theory may focus on a small, specific aspect of a phenomenon or serve as comprehensive propositions to explain the entire phenomenon. The former, known as a *mini theory*, is used to explain fairly narrow behaviors and is often rooted in the ideas established by the latter, known as *grand theories*. Mini theories do not describe and explain the whole of the phenomenon, while grand theories are comprehensive, such as such as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Erik Erikson's social learning theory, and Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory. Later scholars have used the formerly generated grand theories as bases for exploration while considering more recently developed mini theories to explain specific aspects of a phenomenon.

**Diverse Theories Applied to Academic Advising Strengthens Advising Research**

As per Hagen and Jordan in 2008, while no unified theory of academic advising has been expounded, a multitude of theories are relevant to academic advising. Developmental theory, for example, has greatly influenced advising practice and scholarship, as have various forms of   learning theory and cognitive-based theories. It is unlikely that one single theory will ever fit the discipline of academic advising, and theorists and researchers of academic advising

should continue to use different theories depending on specific foci and needs related to the inquiry. Researchers of academic advising must continue utilize inquiry that that varies in topic and method to build a scholarly literature to inform the field.

**Generating Research from Previous Research**

Research in a different or related field or discipline also leads to inquiry in academic advising. Related research in human development, student development, psychology, sociology, and education, for example, is often applicable or at least relevant to academic advising. In 2005 Rawlins and Rawlins used theory and existing research in the areas of friendship and communication to offer a dialectical framework to view the academic advising relationship. To research the emerging advising needs of students in a discontinued academic program, Maher (2006) looked at theory and research concerning the process of organizational of organizational decline and death. Uhlik and Jones applied the highly researched concept of learning styles from the field of education to academic advising in 2008, studying the effects of both academic advisor and student and student learning styles on the advising interaction. In all three of these examples, researchers applied scholarship from another field to academic advising.

**The Research Question**

That brings us to the formal research question. The research question reflects the initial inquiry and therefore may indicate observation of a phenomenon or issue, or it may connote inquiry based on previous research or on theory. The research question should be succinct and identify the population or sample studied, the methodology used, and the variables involved in the research. Smith, Carmack, and Titsworth in 2006, for example, built upon previous research suggesting that college life causes tension between the states of independence and interdependence within first-year students who are who are becoming more independent while at the same time continuing to rely on others for academic and social support. They asked how first-year students navigate their transitional issues. The title of their study was a bit more

specific, but still reflective of their research question: "Managing the Tensions of In(ter)dependence: Communication and Socialization for First-Year College Students."

**Conclusion**

The lack of a single unifying theory of academic advising promotes scholarly inquiry in the field. By not relying on a single theory, the inquiry possibilities are limitless. The interdisciplinary nature of academic advising allows inquiry based on existing mini theories and prior research from numerous disciplines and fields as well as from the academic advising literature. The field of academic advising will benefit from increased scholarly inquiry, and the relevance of numerous theories and existing research on which to base inquiry only enhances this advantage.