

CAUGHT BY CARING:
ACADEMIC ADVISORS IN THE
'NEW' UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This research project examines the experiences of women working as Academic Advisors in universities in southern Ontario. Uniquely positioned at the interface between individual students and institutional systems, Advisors are often the first persons struggling students turn to for assistance. Along with these students, faculty, and other staff, Advisors have been caught up in the market-driven changes to post-secondary education that have occurred over the past 30 years. This reconstitution of universities as corporate cultures has negatively impacted Advisors' ability to provide this critical support to students, and it is this narrowing of the opportunity to provide caring work in this changing educational environment that is the focus of this study.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Academic Advisors revealed that their one-on-one work with students is seen by Advisors as a critical support. However, the individualizing imperative of the neoliberal discourse restricts such access, leaving Advisors feeling 'caught' between the needs of students and the managerialist push toward measurable efficiencies that seek to limit those connections. As ever greater numbers of students bring forward increasingly complex issues, Academic Advisors are left trying to 'fill the gaps' in these under-resourced institutions. Despite the complexity of the work they do, Advisors have internalized the negative images the dominant discourse associates with caring work, and therefore both argue for the importance of the work they do, and dismiss the level of skill involved – thus participating in the devaluation of that work.

In parallel to the experiences of those in other human services organizations, the work that Academic Advisors do is frequently at odds with the institutional cultures in which they are employed, resulting in a tension between what they see as important and what the university is

willing to support. This study sheds light on these little-studied workers, and gives voice to the concerns of those involved in it. By naming the tension they describe as feeling ‘caught’, it provides an opportunity for developing strategies for change both through daily acts of micro-resistance, and by encouraging the development of a community of like-minded individuals who can support one another in seeking change on a grander scale.

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On a more personal note, being an adult learner, and struggling to balance work and school for almost two decades, means having many people to thank. First and foremost, I am grateful to Dr. Jane Aronson who offered her time, direction, support and encouragement, and allowed me an educational experience that has been life-changing.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1995, a process of transformation began in the Canadian social welfare state. With the passage of the Canada Health and Social Transfer, the federal government relinquished its role in leading and setting standards for national social programs and opened the way for social policies at all levels of government to be driven by the fear of an economic deficit. This pervasive unease and the introduction of a neoliberal agenda driven by a market discourse has led to the privatization, decentralization and individualization of public services of all kinds (Brodie, 1999:39). The subsequent and ongoing restructuring of institutions providing social, health, educational and other public services is driven by what Stein (2001) describes as the ‘cult of efficiency’ and by what other analysts term managerialism or new public management (Tsui & Cheng, 2004). This importation of principles of market management into the organization and delivery of social programs has the ability to undermine values and beliefs previously associated with public service (e.g., the collective good, social justice) and significantly change institutional relationships and definitions of institutional success (Lawler, 2000:39).

The imperative to cut public spending and the drive toward efficiency has had a negative impact on the structuring of jobs in areas of the human services like social work, nursing and teaching. More intense and rapidly paced due to increasing demands that must be met with few resources, work becomes an increasingly isolated activity (Aronson & Sammon, 2000). These greater workloads have been accompanied by reductions in staffing, resulting in lost networks of relationships that have been built up over time. This in turn makes “goals of mutual obligation and care” optional extras that end up being sacrificed (Baines, 2006:23).

These pressures are also being experienced in higher education, which has itself been redefined as a commodity (Thompson & Watson, 2006:124). Although governing bodies within

universities still direct academic activities such as curriculum, grading, and standards of scholarship, the real power to influence institutional direction resides in budgetary control (Friedson, 1986:149). This financial authority enables management to shape the professional work of faculty and staff by determining where money will be spent and, therefore, what resources will be provided. The restructuring of post-secondary education parallels changes observed in social and health services: direct service work is increasingly standardized and deskilled; definitions of legitimate need are increasingly narrowed; and increasing effort is made to download the responsibility for meeting needs to the private market, families, or individuals themselves (Steck, 2003).

As an Academic Advisor in a Canadian university for seven years, I interact directly with students on a daily basis and have seen evidence of the effects of these changes. Students in increasing numbers express concerns about academic problems and ever more complex lives both in and out of school. Yet my ability to assist them by ‘making room’ within ever more restrictive policies and procedures is itself being restricted by downloaded work from other areas and less time to even allow students the chance to articulate their concerns. My sense that the ability to spend time with individual students is problematic has been reinforced by informal conversations with other Advisors. A feeling of disquiet about the way this engagement is being squeezed out by other tasks and a general feeling of being pressured to limit these contacts led me to believe that others are also troubled by these changes.

There is a growing literature on comparably troubling changes in social work, nursing and teaching (Ball, 2003; Bone, 2002, Munro, 2004). These studies give voice to the experiences of front-line professionals whose work is at odds with the organizational cultures in which they are employed, and explore both the sources of the tensions they experience at work,

and the various ways they find to negotiate, evade or resist them (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Baines, 2006; Heimer & Stevens, 1997). There has, however, been little study of Academic Advisors and their changing work. By inviting Advisors to speak for themselves through this small qualitative study, I hope to contribute to an understanding of how the changing conditions of their work are experienced and to offer some commentary on the challenges of this generally 'backstage' element of post-secondary education.

Restructuring and the Context of Academic Advising

To set the context for my research, a review of the literature follows on: neoliberalism and public service restructuring; and the market-modeled restructuring of universities and its implications for the work and identities of those within them (e.g., faculty, students, and staff).

Neoliberal Ideology and Public Service Restructuring

“‘What counts is what works’” (Tony Blair, 1998, cited in Clarke, 2004:38)

And what works is what can be counted. Over the last 30 years, the rise of the neoliberal agenda has negatively impacted those working within human service agencies in their ability to meet the needs of those they are attempting to serve. In social work, nursing, and teaching, the pressures brought on by the intensification, casualisation, and modularization of work have made caring work especially difficult (Aronson & Sammon, 2006; Ball, 2003; Bone, 2002). Within the realm of post-secondary education, this is especially felt by those whose work involves direct one-on-one contact with students (Davies, et al, 2005).

The particular strand of neoliberalism that arose in the 1980s saw citizens redefined as consumers and welfare rights commodified as consumer rights. Modeled on the private sector, “commercialization, corporitization and incremental privatization” were brought into the public sector, along with managerialist principles and an increased concentration of executive power at the centre of organizations. “Nowhere was this shift more evident than in the related areas of education and social policy” (Peters & McDonough, 2007:157). As early as the mid-90s, changes in British higher education saw huge increases in student numbers, changes in funding formulas, greater managerial control, an increased emphasis on marketing and a business-like

approach, and faculty's "less personalized relationships with students" (Parker & Jary, 1995:320).

This shift to the mass provision of education was soon to follow in Canada (Parker & Jary, 1995:323). With the institution of the Canada Health and Social Transfer in 1995, changes to national standards for welfare, education and health care were accompanied by a generalized belief in an economic deficit that began to permeate the nation's consciousness, an economic apprehension that resulted in a lowering of public expectations (Brodie, 1999:39). Government initiatives shifted from a focus on public sector needs to a "market-driven response to the debt-crisis" (Brodie, 1999:37).

As the belief in an economic deficit solidified, public policies began to shift. Changes in the provision of publicly provided services were implemented through the market-based ideology of managerialism. With its emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness achieved through surveillance and enforcement of measurable outcomes, the goals of public organizations intended to meet social needs shift to meet the aims of a managerialist culture (Lawler, 2000:34). Although clients are allegedly valued, there is a push to standardize services and to reduce the impact of complicated lives on their provision (Morley & Rassool, 2000). In post-secondary education, students are positioned as consumers and education as a commodity; degrees become passports to employment rather than preparation "for life, citizenship, or the continuation and enrichment of a cultural heritage" (Willmott, 1995:1002).

Neoliberalism and Post-secondary Education: Education as Business

Within Canada, similar changes to post-secondary education are in evidence. Students, in their positioning as consumers free to make their own educational choices, take on sole responsibility for their academic success or failure (Brule, 2004:249). Social relations within

universities are objectified and transformed into skill sets that can be standardized and quantified (Brule, 2004:253). The market discourse determines not only what comes to constitute knowledge, but also affects “individual subjectivities and professional identities ...” as it damages “professional autonomy, academic freedom and established processes of academic collegiality” (Eyre, 2004:79-80). As the goal of education becomes the delivery of a quantifiable product and the satisfaction of consumers, the development of citizenship is no longer its primary intent (Brule, 2004:248).

Higher education is transformed under this market discourse into a commodity. Scholarship and critical inquiry for their own sake are de-emphasized with the shift to training job-ready graduates and developing marketable products (Thompson & Watson, 2006:124). This restructuring is also evident in the way management directs and controls the professional work of faculty and staff by controlling resources. Although governing bodies within universities have the power to direct academic activities such as curriculum, grading and standards of scholarship, the “real power in academic institutions is the power over budget”. This financial control determines hiring decisions, salary levels, program funding, and what services will, or will not, be supported (McGee, cited in Friedson, 1986:149).

Transforming teaching and teachers

In response to the perceived deficit and to rising student numbers, universities are engaging in the modularization of education and the casualization of the academic work force. Modularization allegedly offers students greater choice in courses and degrees, making it hard to argue against within a market discourse. However, as a “rhetorical device that contains within it liberal assumptions about the ‘freely acting’ individual selecting goods from a marketplace”, it is flawed (Parker & Jary, 1995:326). In reality, by letting consumers determine academic choices,

it acts to limit the availability of courses that students find intellectually uncomfortable, and leaves them unaware of options that are no longer on offer - “difficult courses, small seminars, well-equipped accommodation, motivated staff” (Parker & Jary, 1995:326). It also threatens students’ ability to develop the intellectual tools needed to challenge the status quo, producing instead an instrumental subjectivity that sees higher education as a means to an end – that is, to the next “module, course or job” (Parker & Jary, 1995:334). In essence, this alters the nature of what higher education has traditionally meant.

By developing programs that can process ever larger numbers of students at less cost, modularization also results in decreasing levels of contact with faculty and staff. As educational policies are increasingly driven by the market discourse, quantitative measures of performance begin to limit the time faculty have for such non-measurable activities. As the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake falls to a research agenda set by government and corporate interests, changes result that are “not necessarily in the interest of students” (OCUFA, 2009:3).

A second major thrust of these supposedly deficit-driven changes to education is the casualization of the labour force (Robinson, 2006). The expanding use of sessionals, graduate students and teaching assistants, is another just-in-time mechanism based on the model of new flexible firms. As more staff are moved from the core of the institution to the periphery, workloads for those faculty at the core increase as they are given responsibility for administering and monitoring the courses taught by these lower status individuals. Part-time workers themselves labour for lower pay and in intense and difficult conditions in the hope that better employment will follow; but even if this never materializes, any employment is usually seen as better than unemployment (Parker & Jary, 1995). The shift from full-time to casual academic labour, in concert with increasing student numbers, results in a decreasing ability for students to

connect with faculty both in and outside the classroom. As measurable activities become more central to management scrutiny, "... traditional responsibilities – such as counseling students or just 'being available' ... have little institutional value..." Indeed, these increasing workloads are made possible by the disappearance of this "invisible" work (Willmott, 1995:1013).

Ever greater pressures to publish, teach, and take on more of these administrative tasks, have exacerbated this loss of relationship (Parker and Jary, 1995:328). This has not, however, meant a decrease in the number of contacts with students; more student bodies, being processed with less funding and fewer resources, has instead resulted in individual instructors experiencing greater exposure to students. While the frequency of such brief contacts has increased, their quality has not; as a participant in a study of lecturers in the UK observed, "It is impossible for you to have a personal relationship with 400 people" (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004:1196).

Transforming Studying and Students

In addition to these changes to interpersonal access, the restructuring of Canadian universities has also resulted in a new layering of student subject positions. Students, long pushed into the role of the 'good', non-problematic student (Grant, 2003), now find themselves positioned as autonomous consumers of commodified educational products (Brule, 2004:247). As the 'good' student, they are expected to make few demands on the institution and to meet their own educational needs; as consumers, they are expected to view education as a private good to be purchased, with all of the assumptions about free market choice that go along with it. Both positions reinforce the perception that students are ultimately responsible for their own success or failure.

The 'good' student : the autonomous consumer

Higher education has traditionally seen itself as providing the means for individuals to achieve their own potential by disciplining individuals into “the ... ‘good’, or docile and useful, student subject”, a disembodied and decontextualized being (Grant, 2003:102). “De-sexed, de-raced, de-classed, and able-bodied” (Brule, 2004:255), these are the generic individuals for whom university education is designed and for whom the process works most easily. This cultural construction of the ‘good’ student however, is almost impossible for some individuals to achieve (Grant, 1997). Those who understand the need to aggressively pursue their own success while simultaneously working within the prescribed limits of the system, are able to conform without imposing a burden on resources. The students who find this an easier fit are those most closely aligned with the model of the universal subject valued by the dominant discourse, the “young, white, middle-class male” (Grant, 1997:102).

In a university culture that values such autonomy and individualism, positioning themselves as ‘good’ student subjects means trying to meet all their own needs independently. Those unable to do so without assistance are left feeling that the failure is their own, a belief that meets the needs of the university to produce graduates efficiently and cost-effectively. When problems arise either with the education being offered or with the individual student, the dominant perception is that the fault lies with the student rather than with the institution (Grant, 2003).

This conception of the ‘good’ student as the desired student subjectivity is now being overlaid with that of the student as consumer, or purchaser, of educational goods and services. Framed within the market discourse, this idea presumes that students are free to make their own educational choices, and just as in the ‘good’ student discourse, the result is that the student,

rather than the university, is made responsible for successfully completing their degree (Brule, 2004:249). Positioning the student as a consumer is “consistent with neo-liberal thinking that a college degree represents a private good not a public good.” Viewed in this way, it then becomes the responsibility of the student to invest in higher education (Steck, 2003:76), and as much as possible, to meet their own needs while doing so.

Underlying this market model of individual responsibility for success or failure, is a sense that students are competing for limited resources. They experience this in attempting to gain admission to desired programs, in trying to get a seat in a preferred course, or even in competing for a share of the ‘good’ marks. Gaining access to in-person assistance is also becoming a scarce commodity. Just as connecting in any meaningful way with faculty, whether full or part-time, has become more problematic, meeting with an Academic Advisor may also prove to be a challenge (Willmott, 1995).

An increasing impediment to that one-on-one access is the way that students are being pushed toward the use of on-line resources. Developed under the auspices of the ‘efficiency and effectiveness’ argument, the intent is to have one centralized source of information and services that would reduce the number of different points of contact and therefore lower costs (Lawler, 2000). Although allegedly intended to facilitate student access, their increasingly complex academic and personal lives make it difficult to apply this generic information to individual situations. When combined with reduced opportunities for contact with faculty and staff and the tight timeframes of an academic term, students may make decisions that result in significant academic or administrative penalties. The difficulty students experience in getting the one-on-one help they need also restricts their ability to discover and connect with other critical supports, something more likely to happen when they are left to navigate these systems alone.

“Information technologies have ... failed to serve students well (Nobel, 2001, cited in Steck, 2003:69).

This shift to a market-driven discourse that positions service users as consumers can be seen in other human services areas, as well. The provision of home care, for example has been individualized. Privatized and marketized, it leaves recipients struggling with insufficient and unstable care. Just as with students, their identities are disrupted, and their rights as citizens reduced when requests are met with a “kind of diminishment at revealing need” (Aronson, 2006:547). These changes are also reflected in health care settings when patients and their families become clients whose level of satisfaction must be managed to reduce the threat of legal action (Heimer and Stevens, 1997). Health care, thus seen as a “profitable product”, brings with it the need to work toward “customer contentment” (Bolton, 2000:582), a concern mirrored in universities’ rising concern with ‘customer satisfaction’.

Academic Advisors

The purpose of academic advising has been described as, ideally, “providing students with an accepting and challenging environment in which they can learn and grow to their full potential” (Gordon, et al., 2000:381). Advisors provide a link to the academic institution, helping to support students as they integrate into this new context. They also provide critical information about academic policies and procedures and the possibilities for exceptions to such rules.

Although I have been unable to find literature documenting a breakdown by gender, my own experience leads me to believe that, as with other caring labour, Advising done by non-faculty members is work done mostly by women. This is based on the number of Academic Advisors with whom I have had personal interactions, through searches of university websites,

and from attendance at the Ontario Academic Advisors Annual Conference in 2007 at which approximately 90 percent of the attendees were women. As in other areas traditionally considered to be “feminine” (Heimer & Mitchell, 1997:156), Advisors humanize educational institutions while clearing away the social complications that might impact the core activity of teaching, and are among the “lowest status professionals ...” (Theodosius, 2008:23).

Universities as a whole, and their individual Faculties, Departments and Programs, handle students’ requests for exceptions to formal policies and procedures in a variety of ways. These requests may be further divided by the type of issue in question – for accommodations due to on-going health and disability issues, or for special consideration resulting either from short-term illness or specific situations on, or off, campus that impact their ability to do their academic work. The mechanisms for presenting such requests, and who holds the decision-making authority, differ by institution and by Faculty, Department, or Program.

The institutional positioning of Academic Advisors varies according to whether their services are offered within a specific academic area, in a setting covering many academic areas, or in a format that combines the two (National Academic Advising Association pocketguide; National Academic Advising Association, n.d.a). Within any of these variations, Advisors may be located together in a group of offices, or may be in individual offices in locations across a campus. Front-line support may or may not be provided to answer general questions and book appointments with the Advisors; if such support staff are not available, students are left to book their own appointment in a variety of ways.

There is little literature specifically on academic advising outside that available through the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) based in the United States, an organization that has begun to be embraced in Canada. What has been written about advising

focuses primarily on its functional aspects – some of the various types of advising (e.g., ‘intrusive’, ‘appreciative’, ‘developmental’), advising for specific groups (First Year students, Aboriginal and Tribal students, or students in Fine Arts programs), or issues related to student retention (NACADA Interest Groups; National Academic Advising Association, n.d.b). Although academic advising has existed in some form since the inception of higher education in America, it has been recognized as a “defined region within education” only since the late 1970s, a point in time that coincides with the inception of NACADA as an organization (Gillispie, 2003).

There is even less literature available specifically about Academic Advisors in Canada. The title of a recent article posted on-line through the NACADA website asks the question, “Is the Canadian Advising System Really Different from the American Advising System?” Although the author cites some differences in terminology, she stresses the similarities between the two and states that “... academic advisors from the US and Canada often assist students who experience a wide variety of challenges ... some students hit bumps on their educational roads and need the help of academic advisors to stay on track” (Stewart, 2010). In addition to administrative issues related to registering, declaring or switching majors, or applying to graduate, students may “experience some distress (either related to their educational or personal lives) ... or experience any number of other difficulties. Academic advisors in both Canada and the US are often the first people students seek when they are struggling ... what academic advisors from the two countries actually do with the students is very similar – academic advisors from both the US and Canada aim for student success ...” (Stewart, 2010).

The statement that “academic advisors in both Canada and the US are often the first people students seek when they are struggling” is particularly significant because it is the ability

to directly access advisors that has felt at risk to me in my work. Other Advisors have expressed this same concern in informal conversations. It is this worry about what we feel is important work being squeezed out that has led me to look at the context of that work and to the changes in the way university education is structured, and how that is in turn shaping our ability to meet the student needs we see.

Tensions and Questions: Some Conceptual Frames

Changes experienced in the conditions of work in other public service contexts have been explored using conceptual frameworks emerging in the literature, and have suggested possible avenues for exploration in this research. These ideas and debates, which have guided the development of the study, are introduced briefly below.

First, literature that examines the tensions workers feel between their own sense of purpose and those driven by the managerialist practices of the organization in which they work, illuminate the complex interplay between performance and identity (Casey, 1999). Ball's study of teachers, for example, draws attention to the struggles they face in trying to adhere to the professional and personal values they bring to their teaching, while simultaneously being compelled to meet organizational outcome measures. Performativity in the public sector is about managing at a distance, and is accomplished by getting individuals to self-govern in response to "targets, indicators and evaluations" (Ball, 2003:215). By adhering to prescribed ways of performing work and letting its success or failure be determined by these imposed measures, there is the risk that these performance indicators will come to represent individual worth and will override the value workers themselves assign to their own work (Ball, 2003:216). Ball argues that success as defined by such organizations requires acceptance of the goals defined by

management, and that resisting those goals not only threatens individual success, but also leaves workers struggling with “inner conflicts, inauthenticity and resistance” (Ball, 2003:215).

When measurable results are demanded, it becomes increasingly difficult for those doing any sort of direct one-on-one work to defend its value. Greater managerial control of the content of work, and the difficulty of quantifying such interpersonal work, can make it hard to argue in favour of its importance – a challenge noted in other arenas of caring labour where relational work is crucial but erased (Aronson, 2006). It seems likely that Academic Advisors face the same tension between accomplishing measured tasks and engaging in the relationship-building necessary for the accomplishment of their work with students.

Second, research that focuses on the complications of doing supportive or human service work in an institution aimed primarily at another purpose provides interesting parallels to the ways in which Academic Advisors are positioned. Heimer and Stevens’ study of hospital social workers, for examples, found that they were required to ‘clean up’ the messy complexity of patients’ lives and make them neutral objects for treatment by the technical core, thus meeting the needs of the institution. Social workers were thus uncomfortably positioned to meet the hospital’s goals rather than serving the patients’ best interests. Facilitating the processing of patients, and working to minimize the institution’s legal risks resulted in different, and inequitable, treatment for different groups of patients (Heimer & Stevens, 1997). In much the same way, Advisors may find themselves in the position of clearing away the complexities of students’ lives when processing student requests and defusing difficult behaviour, thus allowing faculty to focus on teaching.

Third, the conceptual literature that examines the ways in which neoliberal ideology and its associated technologies of managerialism actually unfold in local, organizational life and are

taken up by individuals, offered useful guidance for this research. Critics caution against seeing these ideologies as all-determining and urge attention to the ways in which people engage with them and variously, rework, resist or negotiate them by understanding and acting on the ‘cracks’ inherent in such ideologies. Neo-liberalism “tells stories about the world, the future and how they will develop – and tries to make them come true” (Clarke, 2004:30). Viewing this neoliberal discourse as a strategy opens it up to exploring the spaces between what it intends and what it actually achieves. By being aware that other discourses are infiltrating those spaces, we are able to envision the possibility of other social constructions (Clarke, 2004).

Clarke’s argument that “dominant strategies do not occupy an empty landscape” but must contend with the “grit” of resistance from the public realms (Clarke, 2004:44), is mirrored in work by Prichard and Willmott (1997). They describe *stations* as discourses and techniques that attempt to take over and control *locales*, the practices and identities that already exist in a given space and time. These interactions, much like Clarke’s constantly interpenetrating discourses, are described as fluid exchanges between groups and individuals, and encompass the use of “local tactics to evade and subvert as well as accommodate and appease” – of particular importance when overt resistance is not possible (Prichard & Willmott, 1997:313).

These, then, are the possibilities I sought to explore in Academic Advisors’ work in the current post-secondary context. In the next section, I discuss the epistemological underpinnings to my approach and the methodology used.

METHODOLOGY

“The capacity to measure has a seductive appeal because, in the natural sciences, “numbers are commonly taken as an indication of precision and truth” (Hatcher, 2008:157)

Unlike positivist research, which aims to prove a predetermined endpoint through observable, objective data, qualitative research allows “... the generation of theory from the shared meanings and interpretations that come about through interaction” (Swanson & Chapman, 1994:77). An exercise in bricolage, it uses bits and pieces of a variety of techniques to achieve research goals. This allows an openness to the new ideas that develop out of the research process itself (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006:159), and is driven by the recognition that “participants are the experts in the field of their own experiences and views” (Williams, 1998, cited in Hewitt, 2007:1157). The intent of such research then is to open that expertise up to examination. My intent to draw forward and learn from the experiences and expertise of Academic Advisors was ideally suited to just such a qualitative approach.

Epistemologically, the study draws on feminist understandings of social research. Feminist critiques recognize that dominant conceptions of social reality and the theories explaining that reality have been limited to the experiences of a specific subset of men, and have excluded others. In response to that narrow world view, the nature of knowledge itself is examined critically – how it is recognized, who society deems expert and how that status is acquired, and the ways in which competing claims are judged and either accepted or rejected (Stanley & Wise, 1993:188, cited in Neysmith, 1995:101). Feminist analyses of knowledge development also examine the central issue of what research is considered to be worth doing: what is studied and how it is studied are themselves objects of investigation. The aim is to make

women's voices active in defining social reality, thereby making women's experiences an integral part of theory and practice, not an addendum to it. "Our accepted explanations, theories and common sense understandings of the world around us are shaped by persons who are in positions to get their voices heard (and) ... reflect the social understandings of elite groups." A feminist analysis of power therefore looks at the ways in which the dominant discourse attempts to define the world by excluding others' versions of that world (Neysmith, 1995:114).

Within such an approach to knowledge building, caring labour in all its aspects is considered worthy of this sort of attention. Work that involves "caring about," the invisible emotional and mental work that is primarily women's work, is one such issue (Neysmith, 1995:112). For Academic Advisors, the great majority of whom are women, the caring work they do may disappear in discussions about efficiency and effectiveness within the university environment. Qualitative research through a feminist lens allows this work to be brought into focus.

Geertz (cited in Kreuger & Neuman, 2006:360) emphasizes the need for "thick description, accounts rich enough in specific detail for the readers to understand the cultural meaning of events." It is this kind of thick description that can give life to the stories Academic Advisors have to share and which need to be heard so that the opportunities for providing students with this caring work will not be lost. Voices often muted by the dominant discourse can be amplified and more fully understood from such rich accounts.

The qualitative openness to a variety of data-gathering techniques, and to acknowledging and benefiting from the researchers' place in the research, allows the inclusion in this project of my own experiences as an Advisor over the six years preceding these interviews. This ongoing involvement has informed my questions and my approach to the study. That I was situated in

this research as an ‘insider’ (Lasala, 2003) enriched my understanding. It also required self awareness of the ways in which insider knowledge can shape listening and understanding.

Barbara Kamler says, “stories do not tell single truths, but rather represent a truth, a perspective, a particular way of seeing experience and naming it. Stories are partial, they are located rather than universal, they are a representation of experience rather than the same thing as experience itself” (cited in Eyre, 2004:69). While acknowledging the familiarity with the context of Academic Advisors’ experiences that my own work has given me, and the ways in which that enriches my understanding, I have been conscious while doing this study of the need to let their voices and experiences tell the story.

Mindful of these considerations, I planned a small, qualitative study of Academic Advisors, using semi-structured interviews to gather data that would draw forward their own accounts of their work. With the approval of the McMaster Research Ethics Board, the design was implemented as described below.

Sample

Keeping within the scope of thesis requirements for the Masters of Social Work, my intent was to recruit a small sample of Academic Advisors for this study. I approached possible participants at four university campuses in southern Ontario. I was able to find lists of Advisors by doing an on-line search of institutional websites, and in this way generated a list of 61 Advisors to whom invitations might be sent. Universities varied as to the ease with which it was possible to locate Advisors. At one institution, this required searching through individual Faculty or Program sites and led to combined lists of faculty and staff which included the Advisors for each area. At another, direct links were provided to an Advisor-only list which was then broken down by Faculty or Program. The 18 Advisors at one university were all women,

none of whom were faculty members. The 43 Advisors at another university included 22 faculty members, of whom 16 were men; all of the non-faculty Advisors were women.

It was possible that I might be acquainted with these Advisors through the annual meeting of Ontario Academic Advisors, or through professional exchanges. In order that such acquaintance affect neither my recruitment strategy, nor participants' decisions to take part, I selected six names at random from the list I had generated. These six individuals were then sent email invitations to participate in my research. To offset any possibility that they might feel coerced into participating because of a chance acquaintance, I made it clear in the invitations that this was not the intention (see Letter of Invitation, Appendix I).

Three individuals, two from one university and one from another, expressed interest in participating in the research and were interviewed. As is described more fully in the next section, the variability among the three generated extremely rich data and potential for analytical comparisons and I therefore did not seek any additional participants.

In terms of demographics, the three participants were White women ranging in age from approximately 35 to about 60; were staff members rather than faculty, and had been in their current positions as Advisors for four to eight years. All were university educated, a prerequisite for these jobs, and had come into this work from other jobs within their universities, although two had a background in other fields before that. Their specific locations and further demographic details are not elaborated in order to protect their anonymity – an issue of concern to participants.

Data Gathering and Analysis

In each instance, interviews took place in the individual Advisor's office, and ranged from an hour and 15 minutes to two and one-half hours in length. I used an interview guide for

these semi-structured interviews to make sure that particular areas of interest were explored, although the interviews were not limited only to those areas (see Interview Guide, Appendix II). Participants were encouraged to talk about their day to day work, its complications, pressures and rewards. Since my interest was in understanding how the changing organization of their work affected their experience of it, I invited them to talk about the changes they had witnessed and, as much as possible, asked them to provide examples and detail.

With the consent of the participants, each interview was taped and transcribed. These transcriptions were analyzed for emergent themes in an effort to see the "... hidden reality ... described only by qualitative data" (Swanson & Chapman, 1994:76). These themes were then analyzed through the lens of the theories and concepts discussed earlier, in order to make sense of the complexities and complications of doing this sort of caring work in a university setting. In the analysis that follows, pseudonyms have been substituted for individual's names to protect identities and, in some instances, potentially identifying contextual details obscured.

FINDINGS

Although many of the basic functions an Academic Advisor performs are the same, the shape their work takes may differ with particular settings. This in turn leads to variations in the way students are able to engage with Advisors, in the supports Advisors themselves can access, in differing levels of autonomy and responsibility, and in the number and types of tasks they must perform that are not directly related to student contact. Despite these differences, the role functions as an information portal and bridge to the inner workings of the university. For many students, an Advisor represents the ‘human’ face of the institution and is the access point for acquiring nuanced explanations of the policies and procedures students must navigate as they work toward their degrees. This human connection also affords them a chance to be who they are outside the student subjectivities imposed on them.

The three Advisors who participated in this study were representative of the various settings referred to above. There were variations in the size of the academic areas in which they worked, in whether or not they had front-line support, in their degree of autonomy and authority, and in the manner in which students booked appointments. Two of the participants were located in Faculties with a large number of students and one was in a small, elite undergraduate program. These distinctions among the three permitted me to make comparisons on several dimensions of difference between the various sites.

A number of themes emerged in my reading of the participants’ accounts and are elaborated below. First, however, a brief description of the organizational structuring of their work is provided as a backdrop to the analysis that follows.

Organization of Academic Advisors' Work

Karyn, one of two Advisors in her Faculty who each monitor several different programs, works in an individual office separated from the main Faculty area. She sees students only by appointment and these are booked on-line by the students themselves; except in exceptional circumstances, appointments are limited to 15 minutes. She is not provided with any front-line support. Although she feels she has a great deal of autonomy as she has very little direct supervision, indirect monitoring is done by tracking the number of student appointments made, and by her Faculty's sensitivity to complaints if students feel they have not been seen quickly enough.

Depending on the particular issue of concern, students in Karyn's Faculty are usually instructed to approach instructors and faculty members directly with requests. If students go to Karyn for this type of assistance, she refers them back to the teaching staff or may forward the requests to her Associate Dean. She has no direct authority for making such decisions, but may advocate for particular students when she feels that is appropriate. She does very little administrative work and the vast majority of her day is spent in direct contact with students. There is academic record-keeping to attend to, and she will make notes about individual student meetings if she feels it is warranted; but she feels no sense of anxiety about having to keep extensive documentation.

Helena, on the other hand, works in a large Faculty as one of several Advisors situated together in a group of individual offices. There is a drop-in period set aside each day for students, and front-line staff are available to answer a range of basic questions and book appointments with the Advisors. She notes an increasing sense that students feel they are being discouraged from making appointments at the front desk, but says each Advisor will do so on

their own for the students they know. Advisors are also responsible for a significant number of tasks not related to direct student contact.

Students seeking special consideration do so through the Faculty Office rather than by approaching individual faculty members or instructors. This usually entails completing specific forms, usually available on the Faculty website, and leaving them with the front-line staff.

Students who hesitate to convey sensitive information on paper may request an appointment and ask that the Advisor take the issue forward verbally. In conjunction with the other advocating that Advisors do, this is being done with increasing frequency.

Although Helena is able to make decisions about some of the issues brought forward by students, most are made by the Associate Dean to whom she reports. In addition to the standard academic forms and paperwork that must be completed, she notes that the Advisors in her area feel an increasing need to keep extensive notes on problematic issues. She says this is driven both by the increasing complexity of the concerns with which students are dealing, and by feeling less supported by her Faculty regarding some advising decisions.

Christine is the sole advisor in a small, elite undergraduate Program. A front-line staff member is available to answer general questions, but Christine books her own appointments if students request them. Booking an appointment would be the exception, however, as she has a private office and maintains an unlimited open-door policy for students. In addition to a high volume of direct student contact, her role entails a number of other responsibilities.

Students seeking special consideration see Christine for that assistance, and she has the authority to decide how these will be handled. Students with on-going health or disabilities issues follow a university-wide procedure for such accommodations that ultimately directs them to individual faculty or instructors, but they will often seek her help with this as well. In

particularly complicated situations, she may refer issues to her Associate Dean but this is usually a consultative process in which she feels comfortable giving input. Although she reports to this individual, she has a great deal of autonomy in the way she organizes her work.

“There are huge needs ...”

All three Advisors mentioned seeing an increase in student numbers over time and each one alluded to the increasingly complex issues with which students are coping. Although one Advisor described them as “young and needing to learn to be grown-ups”, universities demand that students assume the primary responsibility for their own success by positioning them as either ‘good’ students or as autonomous consumers. This fails to take into account the complications inherent in navigating through university as an undergraduate or the power differentials under which they operate on a daily basis. Because of this, participants expressed concerns about the number of barriers being erected between students and one-on-one contact with those who work in these university systems.

Based on comments by her supervisor, one participant reported feeling a subtle pressure to reduce student waiting times. This places students in the double-bind of being positioned as “consumers” who can make demands (i.e., quick service), without being aware that their real needs may not be addressed due to the time pressures felt by staff. This push to limit time spent with individual students has been accompanied by an emphasis on ‘customer service’. Although she defines this as “the general respect for people that I think students don’t get everywhere”, she also recognizes that getting them in quickly, but limiting their access is “again just shutting them down and making them feel like they’re not going to be, that somebody doesn’t care about them, their individual circumstances, which is a really sad thing.”

One university solution to this has been increasing pressure to refer students quickly to other campus resources. Participants voiced concern, though, about the adequacy of these resources:

It's hard to gauge because the only way I would know is if they came back. I think where there's certainly a lack of resources in the 'student assistance office', and I've had students that are hesitant to go there just because other people will know that they've been. They don't want to approach the office at all. And I've had other students who don't want to register as a student with a disability because they feel that they're ... something less than themselves if they do that and they don't want to be asking for special consideration even though they're entitled to it.

Christine echoed this disquiet about referring students. "My experience with sending students off is that I'm pushing students away without giving them really sometimes what they need, because when they go somewhere else they have to start all over and explain. No, there aren't sufficient resources on campus."

Participants also saw the volume of information being put on-line as a deterrent to making human connections. According to Helena, the message to students is:

We're putting it on the web, you should be able to get what you need out of it – if you can't, too bad – that's exactly what it is. And it's this push towards, well, I think there's a push towards trying to force them to be more proactive than they really are and ... there are so many specific scenarios that have to be explained. How could you ever put it all in writing?

She notes that this 'volume' advising on-line is as much about reducing the need for one-on-one contact as it is about anticipating common challenges.

While acknowledging that web-based systems can be used to answer, "just the general everyday academic questions that they line up to ask", she continues to have concerns:

... but even that is blurry, because if somebody wants to just know what's the deadline to drop a course, is that really all they're asking you? Or is there a whole bunch of hidden stuff about why they're considering dropping? I feel better advising if I have a better grasp of what the entire situation is, but it's directed by the student and they decide how much they're willing to divulge. And that's a time consuming discussion, too.

One of the other Advisors also noted that, “most faculty members now are putting website information right in their course syllabus. They really want their students to stop talking to them”. This desire on the part of faculty to limit student contact time ties in to the casualization of academic labour at universities where the number of part-time instructors is another complication for both students and Advisors. Students are often caught between the published processes that should allow them accommodations and the reality of dealing with overworked and underpaid lecturers. Long-term faculty members who understood how the university functioned and who knew the policies and procedures and how they could be applied are, in many places, no longer the norm. One participant alluded skeptically to “plug and play CLAs” (instructors in contractually limited appointments), and an apparent belief on the part of the institution that almost any ‘body’ can be put in place and everything will be able to function.

The turnover and transience of teaching faculty was thought to produce a procedural drift due to a lack of training and loss of historical perspective; for example:

In the past, probably year or maybe two years, when I send out accommodation notices to faculty, they come to me and say, ‘What am I to do with this? I received this and I have no idea what to do with it’. Faculty are not being even trained on what appropriate accommodations are, or what is an ‘incomplete’, or how is that different from a ‘deferred’. They really, I don’t know if it’s because there’s more sessional instructors but even ... usually they’re happy to accommodate the student but they just don’t know how, and they don’t know what their guidelines are.

Driven by this growing sense of distrust and skepticism, some of these part-time instructors are insisting on seeing students’ documentation, although students are under no obligation to allow that. As one participant stated,

I always thought (vetting documentation) was up to us. I even had one instructor, I had a student with very serious medical illnesses who was told that the instructor could not give her an extension because he had another student who was ill and he told that student no, so he was telling my student no.

Another participant reported that an instructor who had failed to accommodate a disabled student, complained that her “‘contract was done and (the university) doesn’t pay me a living wage – how do you expect me to be grading work when my contract is done?’” The Advisor responded that the student was entitled to be accommodated whether her contract was expired or not. “The student ... felt disadvantaged and this probably exacerbated the disability issues that he was already struggling with. And even though there’s a process where he could pursue it, some of them aren’t in a position to feel that they can take it further”.

Despite their positioning as consumers within the university system, many students,

... are hesitant to even talk to a professor at all, especially accommodated students or students with mental health issues. If the very first time they approach an instructor it doesn’t go well, they don’t want to go back again. And I think that comes back to the faculty not being trained or not understanding what are appropriate accommodations ... yeah, students are definitely intimidated.

For Academic Advisors who also have significant administration tasks to complete, the undervaluing of their role has resulted in a downloading of additional tasks from other university areas. They expressed concern about this increasing volume of work:

It’s unbelievable all the tasks that have been dumped on us. I’d call it dumping because really, you can say whatever you want to say, calling it downloading, it was a really poor decision to have us doing some of the on-line stuff. My greatest source of pressure? You don’t have enough time to do everything. I really wish I could help them more, and there’s not enough time. I don’t know how to articulate it, you know, but there are needs, huge needs I think, everywhere we go.

Another participant echoed this concern:

... so many new things (downloaded tasks) are being presented to us which take time away from the students even though there’s more students; and those things seem to be with the goal of ... reducing student contact? I certainly agree that if students are better advised there’ll be less need for them to come in. But that’s again when you’re talking about a very simple question that can be put in the Calendar and the reality is most people have multiple things impacting school. And I think the ones that do show up here often need a one to one discussion. And even if they don’t need it, they appreciate it.

“You’ve kind of lost the whole ...”

The market discourse embraced by post-secondary education has resulted in changes for both Academic Advisors and the students with whom they work. Advisors noted that the caring work they see as essential is being pushed aside by institutional attempts to simplify processes and to eliminate the complexities that impinge on the core functions of teaching and research. They worried about the increasing use of on-line resources and the concomitant reduction in students’ ability to establish relationships with enough continuity to be seen as whole persons, which is particularly problematic for some groups of students and risks becoming an issue of social justice.

Without the possibility of exploring even simple questions, students’ real concerns may not be addressed. Karyn says,

An academic advisor is often a student’s, can be a student’s first point of contact. Generally their first reason for coming is because they’re having difficulty with their courses. Why they’re having difficulty can take them in any number of directions – my parents are breaking up, I’m really sick, I’m scared because I’m alone, I’m away from home for the first time, there was a death in my family. Some of them come because they’re doing phenomenally well and like to know what else can I do with my life. Some of them just come because they’re just that kind of student who likes to check in, likes to have someone to say, ‘Tell me I did it right, please.’

While believing that students are ultimately responsible for their own success, she acknowledges that they are also very young:

What they learn about human interactions is to me the most important thing because mostly what I think my job is at heart is teaching them how to be grown-ups. The academic stuff is taken care of in the academic setting, but in here you learn how to be a grown up. To me that is a key part of academic advising. They’re 17, what do they know?

Despite the fact that these Advisors see part of the student population as young and easily intimidated, there appear to be few other places within universities where this is acknowledged, or where steps can be taken to address the issues that result from it. As Karyn says, “I think big

institutions, by their nature, tend to depersonalize people simply because they have to. If they saw everyone as an individual they probably wouldn't get as much done as they need to get done on any given day. But I have the luxury of being able to give that to a student." Seeing this as a luxury is in fact the way it is viewed by the institution.

"They can't take it further ..."

The belief that this individual recognition is a luxury results in what Helena reports seeing:

I think we're the 'nice' face (of the university) cause a lot of other places on campus they're not treated very well and I think ... I don't think people would argue with that. I mean, if they're put off at the front desk right here, that's a big barrier – sometimes, if they're persistent or if they leave and call, they still get in. I think the students that are strong enough in themselves to be persistent will get in to see somebody whether it's here or elsewhere but it's the ones that are so intimidated ...

Such encounters can negatively impact students' perceptions of the Advisor's role.

According to this participant, front-line staff can have,

... almost an assumption that students must be trying to get away with something. But the majority of them I don't think are. It puts a different feel to their immediate experience when they show up at the front desk, or when they phone, and that's unfortunate. And I think that directs a lot of the thinking behind what the Advisor is trying to do is to catch somebody who's trying to pull one over on us versus trying ... assuming that you're trying to help somebody.

This may leave students feeling pushed away on two fronts – by barriers at the desk and by the idea that the Advisor's primary affiliation is with the institution and not the student.

As Advisors are often responsible for vetting documentation and making or influencing decisions about special requests, there are aspects of the role that contribute to this perception.

In the same way that hospital social workers are to protect institutional processes directed toward the technical aspects of medicine, Advisors filter out the complexities of students' lives so that

the core function of teaching can go on efficiently and unhindered (Heimer & Stevens, 1997). At times, doing so requires acting as a gatekeeper and denying those requests.

In other cases, however, having direct contact with an Advisor can positively impact the way rules are implemented. Helena says,

I think it makes it human because the rules ... I don't think they're open to interpretation, but I think there are situations where there should be some discretion with how the rules are applied. But if you don't have that ... that human being who's assessing the request and you're just applying the rules you've kind of lost the whole, I think; you've lost what the Advisors see their role as, but maybe not the Faculty. Which is contradictory, for sure.

She goes on to question this contradiction between the way she sees her role and her sense that her Faculty views it differently. In this, she is arguing for the opportunity to give a nuanced interpretation of standardized guidelines rather than acting as a conduit for applying rules without factoring in the human complications that students bring with their requests.

Well, and it's the disturbing situations that make you have to, I don't want to say bend the rules, but really understand where the rules can be, how the rules can be applied. And if nobody looks further to hear the disturbing situations then the students are not really getting the advice they need.

That sort of nuanced understanding, and providing students with the opportunity to access it, can be important even for questions that may appear very clear-cut. Students are constantly directed to university calendars for information, but as Helena says,

I mean we look in the calendar but we interpret it because we know how it all merges together and they don't, they don't even know where to look sometimes and if they do read ... but the calendar's huge and often requires interpretation. So I don't think you can just refer people to resources.

Although Karyn is quick to agree in theory with universities' push to make students use on-line resources, she echoes Helena's earlier assertion that universities are 'trying to force (students) to be more proactive than they really are'. She notes that,

... for a computer literate generation they are frighteningly unable to use technology where it might be of assistance to them. They can spend hours plagiarizing a paper on the internet, but when they want to know what the deadline is for dropping a course, it's, 'can't you just tell me?' And it's all there, it's all over the calendar, it's all over their own student records. It's your responsibility to keep track of this, and sometimes they don't.

Her belief in the efficacy of computer-based information and student responsibility in accessing it, however, doesn't preclude her recognition of the value of the human contact she provides:

Given the nature of the universe that they're in, whether they're computer savvy or not, they live a lot of their lives in a very virtual context. And to have a place where, yes, I need to look up your academic record on the computer, but the majority of the contact happens face to face – they're being seen as an individual.

Being seen as an individual and establishing a relationship with one Advisor is particularly important when students face on-going stresses. As one participant stated:

I think in general it's the students with more challenging issues that feel they want to see the same person that they saw last time. And certainly there have been a few that have had consistent challenges throughout their time here and they are very, very aware of how difficult it would have been had they not had someone to walk them through the process and a consistent (she pauses here) ... I think especially students with disabilities or even just health challenges having to explain that again from the beginning, with lots of the documentations which are already here – I can see that that would be draining on anybody. So, I think just coming in to somebody that already knows the story and you can just start, 'Okay, right now ...,' as opposed to rehashing the whole thing.

This lack of continuity ties in, too, to the escalating demand for documentation from both students and Advisors. Students are sometimes hesitant to reveal sensitive information in writing, either because a situation is difficult to explain, or because they hesitate to have it go into a file somewhere. This can result in "very detailed one-on-one discussions" that enable the Advisor to advocate for students, or to question decisions that others have made.

Caught - “Who else would it ever be?”

The discrepancies these Advisors saw between the post-secondary educational environments in which they work, and the ways in which those environments impact the students they are trying to assist, resulted in tensions both in their work and in their senses of themselves. They are caught up in, and distressed by, the realization that they are at times the primary support available to individual students who lack sufficient resources elsewhere in the university system. This left them absorbing or holding this tension and the organizationally structured tension that surrounds it, and resulted in concerns about safety - both students and their own - in this tense space.

One participant feels that there is a move toward limiting student contact. Although there is no overt pressure to shorten appointments once a student has gained access to her, front-line staff are increasingly likely to refer students to on-line resources rather than to book time with an Advisor. Students who already have a connection with her are able to contact her directly, but the changing atmosphere in her office is making her “feel very caught ... because once you start advising them, you realize that it’s going into overlapping things and I feel negligent if you’re not giving them the whole picture of all the implications of this, whatever the decision is.”

Advisors’ offices are one of the few potentially safe spots where students can disclose personal information that will enable them to get the advice needed for making those informed decisions. There are few other places on campus where students are afforded the time and attention of someone who understands the institution’s rules and how they intertwine. Having access to that insider knowledge can be critical to understanding the implications of making certain decisions, from something relatively simple like canceling a course, to the possibly negative consequences of not connecting with the ‘student assistance office’. One participant,

when asked where else a student might have access to that sort of nuanced information, hesitated and replied, “I think ... because nobody else ... who else would it ever be?”

Helena speaks with great feeling about the lack of support she sees for students dealing with substantial difficulties:

I think the policies are very discouraging and sometimes hard to stomach. And being aware of all the pressures on students, especially the ones that have multiple competing things where it's ... sometimes, you feel like the university could just do a better job with understanding. They're very strict, and I think that almost always comes down to financial things, so there's a lot of contradictions, I think. And, I think there's a lot of opportunity to reconsider all of those types of things, but it's beyond the scope of here so then you're stuck with being frustrated with working within ... conflicting policies. And that's tough to take sometimes.

One of the inconsistencies that particularly troubled her is with regard to accommodations for disabilities:

I've also had conversations in the office where I've been told that the university's obligation is to accommodate students with a disability; (but) if they choose not to identify with a disability, the university then has no duty to accommodate. Which I find ... absurd. And it's not that the students don't have documentation, they have documentation from elsewhere and again that's often, that's often mental health issues.

She also finds that many of these already troubled students do not self-identify because they have had previous negative experiences with instructors when doing so.

She struggles, too, with a sense that,

... there's a bit of a disconnect with us trying to advise without fully understanding how the decision-making is happening. So, you're at a bit of a loss ... when people are put in a position without a grasp of historically this is what's been done. I think precedent is nice because you have an understanding of where things are likely to go; and when you don't have precedent, you're kind of grasping at what might happen ... it's like things have changed and you don't grasp exactly what the change is.

This reflects a sense of working within a shifting landscape where it is hard to discern how and why decisions are being made. As Pollitt states, there can be “... little respect for traditional bureaucratic attention to precedent, caution or balance. ... (when) one seeks lessons

... from last month's performance indicator data ... and not from the accumulated experience of the professionals who are actually delivering many of the public services..." (2007:11).

Helena's sense that her judgment is in question and her uncertainty about how and why decisions are being made are also aspects of performativity. As the intensity of work increases, determining what to do and the basis for doing it become obscured (Ball, 2003:220).

Disheartened by the push to limit student contact, which is to Helena the essential part of her work, she stated,

I feel like there is a ... a preference that we spend less time meeting students one-on-one. I think it discourages me to envision moving away from the students, and especially if that's a very conscious push which kind of seems to be where we're headed. I think the direction that they're moving towards in the Faculty makes me feel very caught.

Responses to Feeling "Caught"

This feeling of being caught in the tensions they experience in their work results in a variety of coping strategies. Struggling with a lack of time, with worries about the integrity of their work, and with concerns about safety – students' and their own – Academic Advisors attempt to compensate through the flexible application of rules, by doing unpaid and unrecognized overtime, or by engaging in acts of resistance. They alternately come to terms or make peace with these daily tensions, or critically examine the university structures that precipitate them and envision means of greater resistance.

"... you try to fill in the gaps"

Working in a large Faculty with many students, Helena is particularly attuned to the problems some students encounter in trying to access the help they need. In her experience, difficulties in connecting with faculty and staff and the way information is communicated can form significant barriers:

Certainly there's a lot of students that are hesitant to even talk to a professor at all – especially accommodated students or students with mental health issues. If the very first time they approach an instructor it doesn't go well, they don't want to go back again; yeah, students are definitely intimidated. I think they're even intimidated in a lot of cases to come (to Advising). It's hard even to come into an office. I think for a lot of them.

Commenting on the importance of teaching students to be responsible because that is the university's expectation, she noted that the manner in which this is communicated is critical to their understanding of those expectations: "I think you have to be supportive as you're doing it or they don't hear you". This applies to other essential information as well. When students feel rebuffed by faculty or Advisors, that lack of connection and supportive communication can impact their ability to access assistance over the entire time spent pursuing their degrees.

Karyn, who most strongly expressed the belief that students are responsible for themselves, nonetheless felt the connection she provided is important for them, in part due to its scarcity on campus. She asked, "Can we use the word authentic like they used to in the '70s? Because to me that's what matters and those are the days I find most satisfying - when I know I've been able to be authentic with my students, then that's been a good day. They don't always get that from everyone."

Christine, as the Advisor in the small, elite program, is better positioned to try and address more than just basic needs. She practices 'intrusive' advising (National Academic Advising Association pocketguide; National Academic Advising Association, n.d.a) which involves reaching out to students rather than waiting for them to contact her. Concerned about her students' whole university experience, including their emotional well-being as well as their academic success, she says:

My role as an academic advisor is to ensure that they're happy and they feel good about their education. When stress is affecting their ability to do their work, my goal is to build them back up. I want to make sure that when they leave my office, they still feel good

about themselves. I don't like to let them leave my office without feeling that personal connection; and I hope they sense that I do care.

She worries too about not having enough time to do everything she feels must be done, and laments the lack of available resources for assisting students. Despite her open-door policy, the exception in this sample and an anomaly among Advisors with whom I am familiar, she still expresses great concern about her students and their ability to cope with the stresses that university life entails.

Compensating

When restrictions imposed by the university system are detrimental to students, participants often make an extra effort to assist them. Helena says, "I think as you're more aware of where students might face challenges when they leave, like lack of resources and things like that – you try to fill in the gaps a bit." Despite the pressure of other tasks which limit the time available for meeting with students, one way she accomplished this is by being,

... willing to take appointments for the students that you have a relationship with. Most students are willing to see someone else, but some of them do come to the same Advisors. And I think that speaks again to ... having a face they can connect with on campus because sometimes you feel like you're the first person that's ever been nice to this student and they're not all first year students, either.

Making more time available for appointments increases the time needed for individual record-keeping which is then pushed into unrecognized overtime. Helena noted that she finds herself writing more descriptive notes, "than we probably would have in the past and it's because the issues are just more ... more involved than they used to be."

Christine, with her open-door policy for students, admits work is very busy, but acknowledges that,

I am in an ideal situation compared to most, although I do end up with a lot of overtime. I start in the morning first thing with students, and I end my day with students. Anybody

can pop by. I've told them from day one that the door's always open. If a student needs something, I find the time.

Although all three Advisors acknowledged students' need for one-on-one contact, there are different philosophical and practical approaches in how they see this. Karyn, who has the fewest administrative responsibilities, says she would not be able to see students if appointment times were not limited. "If your problem is too big for me to solve in 15 minutes, you don't need to talk to me, you need to be referred to another student resource," a view supported in part by her faith in the sufficiency of referral resources, something not shared by all participants. Despite this seemingly rigid stance however, she is also willing to see students multiple times if it is productive and she says, "I'm pretty flexible on that definition of productive because productive can be just, 'I need someone.' Some of these kids don't have anybody else. They don't have anybody that has that connection with them."

Helena and her co-workers practice a subtle form of resistance in seeking support from each other for bending the rules, even if only slightly. She said,

... I do feel very supported by the other Advisors because we're very open door (with one another). We all consistently throw scenarios at each other and try and get a feel for, if you want to do something that seems a little bit of an exception, what do the other people think and are they of a similar understanding; and if so, then that'll do it. So that's nice because we all are very similar thinking in that way.

Tolerating risk and lack of safety

Participants expressed concerns about their own well-being and safety, and that of the students they assist. When asked what worried her in her work, Helena replied, "Actual worry about things? I think individual students where there's some that you worry about their safety and what they're going to do when they leave." Another replied more forcefully that her worries were about:

My students. Sometimes, I'm afraid for them. I just want to make sure that they'll be coming back here tomorrow. What worries me the most is wishing I had more skills so I could help these students more, be more intuitive, be more able to recognize their needs. I really wish I could help them more.

Advisors also talked about interactions with students and/or parents that were highly charged emotionally and resulted in a need to defuse those tensions, one of the risk-management functions they are called on to perform.

I had a parent call up who was just vibrating with anger and frustration on the phone, so I talked to him for a little while. I said, well as it happens I don't have a student appointment booked for the next half hour so I'm just going to put my feet up and why don't you just let me have it. I just got lucky because I had the time to talk to him. And then it just sets a different tone and then you just ... he wasn't angry any more; he had nothing to be angry about. All he wanted was somebody to listen. All he wanted was a human connection with some attention behind it.

Those working in isolated offices were particularly concerned about having to deal with stressed and angry students. Karyn described one especially challenging experience:

I work very hard at diffusing (aggressive behaviour) because it's just me and the student. I did have one student come in once, the stress was vibrating off this guy. He was angry with the world, he was angry with anybody he could look at. I called him on it. I said you know you came here because you need my help, I'm very happy to help you but right now you've got such a big chip on your shoulder that we're not going to get anywhere. So if you want to come and sit down in that chair, we can talk; but if you don't think that's a good thing to do right now, I think we're done. He came and sat down, did what he was told. But I got lucky, because he could have gone off the deep end.

My own experience working in an isolated location echoes this concern with personal safety. Although meetings with upset or agitated individuals are not unusual, after one particularly tense after-hours meeting with an angry student, I requested that a panic button be installed in my office and have had the wisdom of that decision confirmed on more than one occasion since.

Coming to terms

According to Casey, the most pervasive and manifest effect of the experience of working in the new culture is a “condition of ambivalence ... a manifestation of an incomplete internalization, or incomplete rejection, of the new cultural values and behaviours” (Casey, 1999:169). In listening to Advisors speak, there is evidence of this sense of not being fully in, or fully out, when it comes to identifying with universities and their goals. There is a sense of being caught between students’ needs and an increasing organizational rigidity, with little power or authority to make changes. Again, this leaves Advisors trying to ‘fill the gaps’ for students navigating their way through a complex, and sometimes bewildering, system.

At times, in order to manage our own stress in working in what can feel like an untenable situation, we ‘go along to get along’ and express acceptance of the dominant ideology. Whether this is in fact only an apparent acquiescence can be difficult to discern. Karyn, who said it is the students’ responsibility to seek help, is averse to the American model of ‘intrusive’ advising and its ‘we’ll help you’ approach. She said, “it’s just not a Canadian thing ... we don’t have the stomach for it, and we don’t have the money. We’re there to give them a shove in the right direction, but push comes to shove it’s not my job to make them do it right, it’s their job to do it right”. Yet, as noted above, she also acknowledges, “they’re 17, what do they know?”

The difficulty Advisors had in expressing overt criticisms of their own universities is evident in Karyn’s comments about resources on her campus. Although she felt they were adequate, she also noted, “their appointments are limited and they only see a certain number of students. But generally speaking now, I don’t know (how well students are served) because I don’t test the level of student satisfaction with that service.” When asked about training offered to staff, she mentioned a recent suicide prevention workshop but said, “I couldn’t go ‘cause I

found out about it too late. In terms of what to look for, probably not specifically except for this workshop that I didn't go to. Which I'm assuming they'll run at least one more time."

Helena's expression of concern about a lack of support to students was stronger than Karyn's, yet she, too, expressed her criticism with some ambiguity:

I mean, students are playing for their degrees and there's value in it and it should be ... they should have access to making the decisions in an informed way and I think the university is very negligent in ... not negligent – I don't think it's intentional – but they don't do a good job in helping students understand how the system works. And therefore we compensate for that by trying to get them to grasp all the implications.

Echoing research in other arenas of caring work and its gendered dynamics, even when participants acknowledged the importance and complexity of what they do, they articulated it somewhat dismissively, attributing it to ordinary common sense or their 'natural' abilities as women, rather than to particular skill or knowledge (Neysmith & Aronson, 1996). As one participant noted,

In terms of teaching them how to be grown ups ... part of that comes from being one. Some of it comes from being a mom. What you see as caring work, I see as being a human being because this is just, this is what I am, this is who I am, it's not what I know, it's just who I am. You call it caring work, I just call it being a human being.

She was also quick to dismiss her skilled diffusing of a student's challenging behaviour by saying, "I got lucky".

Christine, too, argued that,

I'm not trained. I just use my bit of common sense strategies that have worked. Things that I've picked up in my own life that I share with them. But they're looking for something right now, when they look at everything and it's so overwhelming - all you have to do is say to someone, calm down, do one thing at a time. It's okay, I can help.

In doing so, she discounts the connections fostered with her students, the trust they have developed in her, and the level of skill involved in being able to do that all that.

Articulating a critical analysis

Despite all the complexities that students face in attempting to navigate university systems that make the one-on-one assistance Advisors can provide so essential, the role remains undervalued. One participant stated:

I don't think there's an acknowledgement that if students were better advised they would have better academic results. I don't think there's even an awareness of that. Which seems very obvious to me, like it seems clear that if somebody is better aware of how the system works, they're likely to have better academic results, they're more likely to be in an Honours program which results in more funding and better retention, but the connection just doesn't seem to be there.

Christine, in the elite program, felt that the importance of academic advising is recognized and acknowledged by her director. To some extent, she is able to push for that recognition and to shape her work in ways that enable her to meet the student needs she sees. Hers is the most truly proactive approach; not through the medium of mass communication that this idea conjures up institutionally, but through the 'intrusive' advising she uses to reach out into individual students academic lives. Yet, she noted,

I know my program values me. My director definitely does. When I mentioned advising should go in a big report, she added it. Does she care? In a way she does. But I haven't seen her call me for a meeting. She says, 'you come and I'll arrange a meeting.' Why isn't she asking me for a meeting?

She also expressed doubt that, institutionally, her university recognizes the role of Advisors as being primarily about supporting students. She argued for the importance of the work Academic Advisors do, and the need to integrate it into university planning:

We need to get a voice. We need to work with (administration) because right now it's a very poor system and it's got to change, or there needs to be more support and putting more people in place is just not the answer. Putting in more Advisors isn't enough unless they have open door policies or make themselves more accessible. I think that (the one-on-one support we give students) is what's undervalued. The complexity of what we do, our responses, all the skills that are required for us to listen to our students and to inquire and to connect in a way that's positive or productive, so that the situation is healing for the student.

The Academic Advisors studied here all spoke about the critical nature of providing students an opportunity to be seen as individuals in their own unique and complex situations. But in hearing these needs expressed and trying to provide supports, Advisors are left trying to ‘fill the gaps’ left by the market-driven streamlining of contemporary post-secondary education. Finding a ‘voice’ is an important element in dealing with the external and internal tensions that result from being caught between students and the system.

DISCUSSION

More Tasks, Less Time – Caring Work Curtailed

The Academic Advisors in this study spoke of seeing greater numbers of students dealing with more complex issues. Yet they also indicated that they feel an increasing pressure to process students quickly – to give bare-bones information and quickly refer problems to resources often seen as inadequate. Given the short time frames imposed by academic terms, and the stresses experienced by students, Advisors often find themselves ‘filling the gaps’.

As increasingly regulated environments, organizations such as universities are changing so that work processes are increasingly quantified, with management surveillance increasing into a “regime of accountability” (Brule, 2004:249). Academic Advisors experience this in both expressed and unspoken pressures to limit the time spent meeting with students. Whether this limiting of access is done by the on-line booking of 15 minute appointments, or by the gatekeeping that students experience with front-line staff, connecting with an Advisor becomes more difficult for students. This in turn limits the Advisors’ ability to engage in the face-to-face interactions with students encountering difficulties that these study participants considered essential to students’ academic success – and that I, similarly, experience as crucial in my own work..

The market-driven discourse restructuring post-secondary education restricts Advisors’ ability to meet the expressed needs of individual students by allowing only certain predetermined possibilities and responses. What is ‘real’ ceases to be defined by the human being in front of us and is instead to be seen through a series of filters from which responses can be selected (Davies, et al, 2005). This makes it difficult to take students’ stories into account when applying rules and regulations, and means that even taking the time to let them tell those stories becomes

problematic. When accountability drives what work can be done, then “...personal and relational skills ... are squeezed out in favour of mechanistic skills. There is no recognition of the professional importance of the personal” (Theodosius, 2008:1).

Academic Advisors have also been impacted by the loss of institutional memory experienced in post-bureaucratic organizations due to repeated restructuring (Pollitt, 2007). Shifting norms and values, accompanied by changes in administrative staff, result in a sense of uncertainty about how and why decisions are made, leaving Advisors feeling unsupported and self-defensive about keeping adequate documentation. This is exacerbated by the casualization of academic staff and resultant increase in part-time faculty which leads to confusion and skepticism about student requests, and adds to Advisors’ work and students’ anxiety. As Sennett says, “It is the time dimension of the new capitalism which most directly affects people’s emotional lives ...” (1998:26), and it is in part the sense of discontinuity resulting from this truncated time that complicates the work Academic Advisors do.

The devaluing of the relational skills that Advisors bring to their work, and its lack of recognition in the accounting measures of managerialism, mean that the defusing of tensions that they accomplish with both students and parents goes unnoticed unless complaints are lodged. Like the emotion work carried out in other human services fields, it becomes visible only in its absence; and at that point, becomes something for which Advisors are judged for not doing (Bone, 2002). This type of increasing scrutiny and control by managers, accompanied by more rigidly applied policies and procedures, are intended to produce “the right kind of workers, experts and citizens” (Brule, 2004:250). In adhering to such rigid controls and acting as the ‘right’ type of employee, Advisors risk becoming complicit in the production of the ‘right’, that is, ‘good’, student.

Seeing the Stresses: Students in the 'New' University

Academic Advisors are uniquely positioned within universities at the interface between individual students and institutional systems, faculty and other staff. Although their focus is primarily on students' academic work, limiting interactions solely to the basics of selecting particular courses, or explaining the rules and regulations of the institution in which they are enrolled is frequently difficult. This direct one-on-one contact is sometimes the first real opportunity that students have had to meet with someone 'in' the system who can help them navigate the complexities of university life when issues outside school threaten to derail their progress toward the completion of their degrees.

New public management operates on the principle that it is "up to families to look after their own" (Brodie, 1999:43). When coupled with an emphasis on the countable and the cost-effective, "relationships (become) an irrelevant intrusion, or at best an optional extra" (Skerrett, 2000:69). The result is that, as a point in time when needs are expanding and opportunities to meet those needs are contracting, students' access to Advisors is increasingly restricted.

Universities operate on a model of who students are presumed to be – the just from high school, well-supported individual from a stable nuclear family home (Clarke, 2004:33) – that brings with it assumptions about their resources and capabilities, assumptions often at odds with the students who seek help in our offices. Students dealing with significant academic and life stressors are unlikely to have the time or resources to foster connections either with the school itself or with fellow students – and are therefore most likely to need the assistance of an Advisor. This is further complicated by a reluctance to share their stories, either due to an innate sense of privacy or because they fear being labeled as problematic students. Individuals from less privileged backgrounds are expected to seek out and use available resources on their own despite

the fact that they are often working many hours or have family responsibilities. Telling these students that 'it's on the web' is seldom sufficient.

Students with disabilities are particularly impacted by the way in which they are required to access available assistance. Having to pursue accommodations separately with each faculty member "constitutes an exercise of power and preserves the existing social organization of the university," and denies the development of greater accessibility and inclusivity (Jung, 2003:91). By individualizing this process and downloading the 'work' of accommodation onto each student, the university aims to meet legal requirements while maintaining the status quo (Jung, 2003).

There are, however, exceptions and resistance to the push away from the opportunities for interpersonal connections at universities. For example, the Advisor in the elite program in this study is able to include these broader concerns in her advising more openly than her counterparts felt free to do. "Elite institutions are the best places to evade the judgments of the 'technicians of transformation' because they retain the possibility of a 'commitment to non-performative values and practices (Peters & McDonough, 2007:162)." Programs that are similarly categorized also manage to side-step some of the market-driven assumptions about education as a private good, and can more easily provide educational 'extras' like easy access to an Advisor. This availability of support and ease of access enhances the possibility that students will be successful. For many others in the 'new' university, however, only issues from which wider cultural and social issues have been removed – and can therefore be 'efficiently' solved – are considered important. When "the role of values is skirted and there is an emphasis on what works rather than whose interests are being served," questions about equity and power are ignored (Morley & Rassool, 2000:174).

Feeling ‘Caught’; Committed to What?

“Without commitment, nothing gets done.” This is an Italian parable that speaks to one of the current dilemmas in the way work is being organized under the new regime of managerialism. For Academic Advisors, it can sometimes be hard to determine precisely where that commitment lies. Like those working in other human services fields like social work, nursing and teaching, we are expected to be both advocates and gatekeepers, educators and enforcers (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Baines, 2006; Bone, 2002; Ball, 2003).

Participants spoke about the pressure to reduce one-on-one contact with students by ‘pushing’ access to on-line information and attempting to meet student needs ‘in bulk’. In discussing the impact of performativity, Ball states that teachers worry the “metrics of accountability” will not capture or value what they do, that what they do will be distorted by these metric measures, and that the “authentic and purposeful relationships ... (that go) to the heart of what it means to teach” will be lost (Ball, 2003:223). This is a dilemma shared by the Advisors studied here, who spoke about the ways in which the increasing pressure to make time ‘count’ causes the time ‘spent’ on individual student encounters to feel both more necessary, and less valued.

Performativity results in an internal colonization of self that leads to a “kind of *values schizophrenia* ... where commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance” (Ball, 2003:221). There is a risk that the performance metrics on which performativity is based will override professional judgments about the needs of students, and what constitutes good practice (Ball, 2003). Academic Advisors voiced concerns that limiting students’ access makes it difficult to provide them with the help they require. The increasing discourse about ‘customer service’ implies that universities value every student when,

in reality, needed assistance is often inaccessible – leaving Advisors caught between the implied promise and what is actually available.

These conflicting values discourses result in ambiguity for workers who find themselves unable to fully express whatever criticisms they have. Participants in this study all expressed concerns about their universities, but simultaneously softened and qualified those expressions. As Casey states, such contradictory statements about an organization are a reflection of positive views at odds with “ambiguous and contradictory outcomes” (Casey, 1999:165). Managing these contradictory feelings are “daily, unspoken, privatized problems for each individual employee (and) the anxieties generated, although again often silenced, can be considerable” (Casey, 1999:166).

These feelings of “uncertainty and instability” leave workers uncertain that they are doing either the right thing, or enough (Ball, 2003:220). Participants spoke of feeling a great deal of tension in trying to balance the conflicting demands of their work. They found themselves caught between the student needs they encountered and the pressure they felt to limit the time spent with those students; between dealing with students as ‘good’ docile bodies who should do as they are told and students positioned as autonomous consumers who frequently do not; between trying to maintain the relationships essential to their work and the individualizing imperatives of the institution (Ball, 2003:223). When “the primacy of caring relations in work with pupils and colleagues has not place in the hard world of performativity”, the risk is that we will become “simply responsive to external requirements and specified targets” and alienated from ourselves (Ball, 2003:222).

In fostering practices that meet performance requirements but are in themselves either “unhelpful or indeed damaging” (Ball, 2003:220), the ‘real’ work with students that participants

described becomes a secret, hidden thing within the larger visible framework of justifying their work. This can be seen in breaking the unspoken '10-minute rule' for appointments, or in the flexible definition of 'productive' that one participant used to allow students repeated access to an Advisor. As Aronson and Sammon found in their study of social workers, however, the ability to meet needs in this way can only be expressed ambivalently, not "described wholeheartedly or with complete satisfaction as they came either with feelings of insufficiency and fraudulence or with the knowledge that they often had to be hidden and kept unofficial to be done at all" (Aronson & Sammon, 2000:178).

This sense of feeling 'caught' in trying to accomplish the work participants feel is important is further complicated by their lower status within the university setting. When attempting to express their disquiet with the organizational structuring of that work, they run the risk of having those expressions dismissed as emotional complaints, where similar concerns from those with higher status might be received differently. This discrepancy "depends on who is in a position to write the rules as to what counts as a legitimate appraisal of unfairness" (Shields & Warner, 2008:177) and limits their ability to express their worry about their work.

Resistance Through 'Filling the Gaps'

Participants resisted the structural changes that push students away from the support Advisors are able to provide. All three emphasized the importance of allowing students the opportunity to be seen as individuals, something participants said students "don't get everywhere". In enabling students to present themselves in all their complexity and to be seen as 'whole' persons, Advisors resisted positioning them solely as 'good' students responsible for their own success or failure (Grant, 1997).

However, just as in other sites of caring work (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Baines, 2006; Bone, 2002), how Advisors were able to respond to the pressure they felt to limit student access was based in part on their particular circumstances. The Advisor whose students booked their own appointments in 15 minute increments spoke about their need to take responsibility, but also stressed their youth and inexperience. What looked initially like an extremely rigid and limiting system was instead something that she made quite elastic, allowing students to continue coming as long as sessions were productive – something she defined quite flexibly and which could include quite simply, ‘I need someone’.

The resistance practiced by the other participants often resulted in on-going and unrecognized overtime which came from allowing students all the time as they needed once they were able to see an Advisor. Both were concerned about referring students elsewhere and had doubts about the adequacy of resources, which drove them to try and ‘fill the gaps’ whenever possible. Both worried that students struggling with significant academic, personal or health issues were unable to connect with the same Advisor over time – and both were willing to over-extend themselves in trying to meet that need.

The Advisor in the larger Faculty office also spoke of resisting the individualizing imperatives placed on her work by ‘bending’ rules when particular students’ circumstances warranted it, and of seeking the support of her fellow Advisors in doing so. She was concerned about the gatekeeping of front-line staff, and was willing to book appointments for students she knew in order to circumvent that. She allowed students’ concerns to drive the process when they were hesitant to put sensitive issues in writing, and was willing to take those issues forward verbally. She was willing to question decisions made by others and to advocate for students,

resisting the growing sense of skepticism toward students that she sensed from some faculty and other staff.

Working in the small, elite Program enabled the third participant to structure her own work somewhat differently. Students were encouraged by an open-door policy to come by at any time, an approach quite different from that in other areas, and her practice of ‘intrusive’ advising resisted the individualizing imperatives of the neoliberal discourse. She was able to express, more openly than the other participants, the anger she felt about both the ‘dumping’ of tasks that interfered with her ability to support students, and expressed, with greater ambiguity, the lack of support she saw from her director and from the university as a whole.

As with other caring labour, Academic Advising is predominantly an occupation of women. Just as social workers act as absorbers of uncertainty and do work “conventionally regarded as feminine and carried out in other settings by women” (Heimer & Stevens, 1997:156), Advisors humanize the organization for those who experience it while protecting the technical core. Like social workers and nurses, they are one of the “lowest status professionals ... who deal with problems from which the human complexities cannot be removed” (Theodosius, 2008:23).

Yet, even when they acknowledge the importance of their work and the complexity of doing it, Academic Advisors appear to have internalized the dismissive quality attached to activities associated with caring work. Participants spoke of what they do in terms of its being, “not what I know, it’s just who I am”, or “I just use my bit of common sense”, or even “I just got lucky”. In doing so, they discount the connections they have fostered with their students, the levels of trust they have developed with them, and the degree of skill involved in being able to do all of that. This also discounts the additional demands made when such complex work

pushes into personal time or requires the use of one's 'interpersonal economy' to secure flexibility within institutional systems. These are examples of the types of relational work not included in official job descriptions and represent a "kind of skilled commitment to sustaining relationships and continuity" (Aronson & Sammon, 2000:177) that frequently remains invisible and undervalued.

Possibilities for Change: 'Getting a Voice'

"I don't believe in holding on to notions that don't work, just because a majority of people prefer them. I learned that slipping into the cracks meant I had to learn to see the cracks first."
(Richardson, 2008).

At the point of intersection between existing context and current construction, between discursive practices and discourses-in-practice, the socially constructed world in play can change or *be* changed (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003:195). In understanding the ways in which discourses both constrain and construct, opportunities exist to reconceptualize the way power works. In recognizing that "interdepartmental, intradepartmental, and administration/departamental problems are all interwoven" (Russo, 1993:117), we can come to see that changing one thread can, over time, result in the reweaving of our social fabric.

This is an analysis that can be brought to bear when institutions attempt to limit the relationships and connections in our workplaces. Clarke states that dismantling the public realm is difficult because it is "the site of political-cultural investment, attachments, identifications as well as old and new solidarities" (Clarke, 2004: 44). By refusing to relinquish those 'investments, attachments and identification', it is possible to act as 'grit', and prevent the imagined neo-liberal world from functioning smoothly (Clarke, 2004:44). When the regulatory

practices of this dominant discourse aim for the creation of “docile bodies” in the workplace, we can look to other discourses (feminist, for example) as a way to contradict this attempted control. This “leakage of one discourse into another” is a way of valuing ourselves in terms outside that of the market (Davies, et al, 2005:348).

When we think only in terms of total change, it appears impossible. But in recognizing it as a process, we can value even small steps, knowing they will eventually result in change on a more macro level (Fook, 2000). By embracing what we do well – building relationships, telling stories, refusing to be silenced, we can work toward opening ‘cracks’ to the sort of ‘discourse leakage’ that amplifies silenced voices. In conceptualizing the day-to-day conversations through which we build our world of work as channels of resistance, we can begin to reconstitute our given ‘locales’ in ways that push back against the restrictions set on our work. By re-envisioning social networks as embodied exchanges of ideas and possibilities, we can name our areas of concern and formulate concerted responses that will expand the impact of individual actions. We can embrace the realization that through the use of “skill, careful planning, and good research, effective change will come in small quiet increments” (Russo, 1993:126).

Some of these silenced voices have been given a chance to speak in this small study, and have demonstrated how Academic Advisors strive to do ‘good work’ for their students by creatively resisting or evading local constraints. This sort of micro-resistance produces the ‘grit’ that Clarke argues for, and offers opportunities for interrupting the ‘university as business’ model imposed by the dominant discourse. In illuminating the silence and isolation of the Academic

Advisors studied here – experiences, similar to my own, that brought me to this research – opportunities for change become possible.

Encouraging Advisors to join Canadian chapters of the National Association of Academic Advisors, and fostering the development of campus-based groups would be important steps toward developing new approaches to this work. Change can come from the ground up, but we need the support of communities in which we can support each other and where we can reinforce our commitment to helping students. The educational, professional and personal assistance available through such groups is essential to maintaining that commitment. They would also provide forums for discussing solutions to improved access to Advisors, enhanced resources and referral sources for students, and ways we might amplify our voices so they will be better heard.

C. Wright Mills asked in 1961, “Whose problems do we try to solve through our work?” (cited in Maguire, 1989:33). This, then, is the heart of the dilemma Academic Advisors face when trying to do caring work in a commodified university setting. By continually refocusing our attention on this essential question, we can work toward fostering change on all levels.

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APPENDIX I

Letter of Invitation

Letter of Information

Student Advisors:

This is an invitation to participate in a research project on the work that Student Advisors do at universities. The project is entitled, "Opportunities for Caring: Student Advisors in the New University".

I am a social worker working as a Student Advisor, and am pursuing this project as part of a Master's program in the School of Social Work at McMaster University. I am very interested in speaking with persons who:

- have at least two to three years experience working as a Student Advisor and who are able to speak to some of the changes are occurring in their work settings
- view the supportive functions of counseling, advocating and facilitating that they do with individual students as an important part of their work

The literature suggests that in the fast-paced university environment, Advisors must balance increasing administrative demands with providing the support needed to meet the needs of particular students.

Participation in this research will involve one interview with me that will take approximately an hour. The interview can be scheduled at a location on or off-campus, and at a time that is convenient for you. This research is **not** being conducted on behalf of your employer. Should you choose to participate, your identity will be protected and any information you provide will be treated as confidential.

If you are a Student Advisor who would be interested in talking about the work that you do or would like more information about this project, please contact me either by reply email at mdavis@mcmaster.ca, or by phone at (905) 525-9140, ext. 26293.

Thank you for taking the time to both read this email, and to consider the invitation to participate. I look forward to hearing from you.

Martha Davis, BSW
Principal Investigator & MSW candidate
McMaster University School of Social Work
Hamilton, Ontario

Student Advisors:

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If you are a Student Advisor who would be interested in talking about the work that you do or would like more information about this project, please contact me either by reply email at mdavis@mcmaster.ca, or by phone at (905) 525-9140, ext. 26293.

The fact that I am a fellow Student Advisor, or that you may know me, should in no way make you feel pressured to agree to participate. I realize that you may be busy or that you might not feel comfortable sharing your views on this issue with me, or perhaps with anyone connected with the University. If you do decide to participate, I give you my assurance that I will both protect your identity and only use the views you express in the context of my MSW project.

Thank you for taking the time to both read this email, and to consider the invitation to participate. I look forward to hearing from you.

Martha Davis, BSW
Principal Investigator & MSW candidate
McMaster University School of Social Work

	School of Social Work	Kenneth Taylor Hall, 319 1280 Main Street West Hamilton, ON Canada L8S 4M4	Phone 905.525.9140 Ext. 23795 Fax 905.577.4667 Email socwork@mcmaster.ca http://www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/socwork
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LETTER OF INFORMATION

Opportunities for Caring: Student Advisors in the New University

PURPOSE:

Due to the changing university environment, with its increasing workloads and greater need to document and justify time spent on particular tasks, the focus of work for some Student Advisors has shifted increasingly toward administrative functions. This reduces the time available for the counseling, advocating and facilitating that is done with and for students, and can result in the loss of important sources of support for undergraduate students. These activities, which directly benefit students, can often be at odds with the regulatory functions that Student Advisors perform on behalf of their institutions, and can result in conflicting roles that must be resolved in the course of their work.

As a social worker working as a Student Advisor, I am interested in the ways in which these ongoing tensions affect this particular area of work. As a Master's student in a social work program, I have the opportunity to conduct my own research, and would like to speak with other Student Advisors to explore the ways in which they see their own work and its challenges given the demands of the current university environment.

PROCEDURE:

I am looking for research participants who:

- have at least two to three years experience working as a Student Advisor and who are able to speak to some of the changes are occurring in their work settings
- view the supportive functions of counseling, advocating and facilitating that they do with individual students as an important part of their work

Participation would consist of:

1) an interview with me that would:

- last approximately one hour
- include questions about the work you do as a Student Advisor that supports both students and the university
(for example, how do you balance the administrative aspects of your role with the emotionally supportive "caring" work you do with students?)
- be at a location on or off-campus, and at a time, that is convenient for you
- be audio-taped, with your permission, so that your comments and thoughts can be accurately recorded

2) the understanding that the information you provide will be treated as confidential

POTENTIAL HARMS AND DISCOMFORTS:

There is some small possibility that reflecting on the negative aspects of your work could be stressful or upsetting if the issues discussed are personally or emotionally charged. There is also the small possibility that you may worry about how others will react to what you say. You do not have to answer questions that you would prefer to skip. The steps that I am taking to protect your identity are discussed below.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS:

Your participation will contribute to a better understanding of how Student Advisors are reacting to increased pressures to perform administrative tasks while at the same time providing counseling to students. You may benefit from the opportunity to talk about worrisome issues related to your work.

PARTICIPATION:

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you will have the right at any time to withdraw from this research, and the right to refuse to answer any or all questions without consequence. If you should choose to withdraw, all the information you have provided will be either returned to you or destroyed, unless you indicate otherwise.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

This research is **not** being conducted on behalf of, or for, your place of employment. No one but me will know who participated and who did not. Your participation will not be disclosed to your employer or to any co-workers. I am recruiting research participants at two universities and they will be referred to in any reports of the results simply as "two universities in southern Ontario".

Throughout the research process, every care will be taken to respect your privacy: Your name will not be used, nor will any identifying information appear in any written reports. All information provided will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home office.

INFORMATION ABOUT STUDY RESULTS:

I expect to complete the study by the end of June 2009. At that time a copy of the thesis will be available at the School of Social Work at McMaster University. If you are interested in obtaining a brief summary of the results, please feel free to get in touch with me after that date.

This project has been reviewed and has received clearance from the McMaster Research Ethics Board. Should you have any questions about your participation in this study, you may contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
Telephone: 905-525-9140, ext. 23142
c/o Office of Research Services
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca
McMaster University

This research is being supervised by Dr. Jane Aronson, McMaster School of Social Work. Dr. Aronson may be contacted at aronsonj@mcmaster.ca or by telephone at 905-525-9140, ext. 23783.

If you are interested in participating, or if you have any questions regarding participation in this research, please contact me at mdavis@mcmaster.ca, or leave me a telephone message at 905-525-9140, ext. 26293.

Martha Davis, BSW
Principle Investigator & MSW candidate
McMaster School of Social Work

APPENDIX II

Interview Guide

Interview Guide

1. How do you see your role as a Student Advisor? What are its primary functions or tasks?
2. Where do you see “caring work” (emotionally supportive functions) with students fitting into your job as a Student Advisor? Can you give any examples?
3. How much autonomy do you have in making decisions regarding students? Are limits set on the counseling, advocating, or facilitating that you do with or for them?
4. What resources can you refer students to, either on or off-campus? How available are they?
5. What resources are available to assist you in doing your work (ombuds, registrar’s, faculty offices)?
6. How do you balance the administrative aspects of your work with the “caring work” that you do?
7. What are the greatest sources of pressure in your work? What worries you most?
8. How do you think this role is seen by the university? Who supports you, knows what you do, and how is it valued?