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Advising Across Race: Providing Culturally-Sensitive Academic Advising at Predominantly White Institutions

Eric G. Carnaje

The system of academic advising is used across institutions of higher education to promote the holistic development of students as they work towards their academic, personal, and social endeavors (Hunter & White, 2004). Academic advisors can therefore play a key role in ensuring the academic success and overall well-being of the students they work with (Drake, 2011). More specifically, culturally competent academic advisors serve as a pivotal resource and support service for students of Color. This literature review explores the various characteristics of, approaches to, and perspectives of academic advising, and provides implications for using culturally-sensitive academic advising practices when working with students of Color at predominantly White institutions.

As institutions increase their attempts to diversify and expand the undergraduate college student population, there is a need to increase the academic resources and support services for their students, particularly for students of Color. Because of this, academic advisors play an integral role in the academic success and degree completion of their students. The ways in which they advise and perceive their students can impact the way their students navigate and make sense of the college environment. This relationship between faculty advisor and student is just one aspect of the academic advising experience. In addition to establishing a relationship with a faculty advisor, students of Color must also learn how their ethnic and racial identities influence these interactions and their larger college experiences.

Drawing upon previous research and studies, this literature review seeks to explore the (a) various characteristics of, (b) approaches to, and (c) perspectives on academic advising. Although not all of the following literature specifically examines the experiences of students of Color regarding academic advising, it is important to

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still highlight the more recent endeavors taken to understand such narratives, to recognize the dearth of literature that exists on this specific student population, and to bring forth a call to action to conduct additional research on the academic advising experiences for students of Color, particularly at predominantly White institutions.

Academic Advising: What Is It and How Can It Help?

Various scholars and institutions have defined academic advising in a myriad of ways and have recognized the importance and value of these services. According to Trombley and Holmes (1981), academic advising is defined as “the provision of educationally-related information and guidance to students confronted with choices and alternative paths in their education” (p. 2). Grites (1981) describes academic advising as a continuous and multifaceted process in which both student and advisor are responsible for the exchange of information. The role of faculty as advisors and the impact of student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom are integral components of the academic advising experience (Drake, 2011; Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2011; Habley, 2003). Linked to supportive academic advising are positive student outcomes around graduation and student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Institutions must continue to provide positive academic advising programs in order to demonstrate their commitment to student retention and academic success (Drake, 2011; Tinto, 1999, 2007).

Based on the work of the National Academic Advising Association (2003), and for the purpose of this literature review, academic advising is defined as the following:

- a set of purposeful interactions guided by pedagogy, curriculum, and student learning outcomes;
- a shared responsibility and relationship between faculty and student as advisor and advisee, respectively;
- a process that allows the student to put his or her college experience into perspective, based on personal interests, talents, values, and priorities; and
- a practice that promotes self-authorship and encourages the student to explore various college opportunities, to reflect and make meaning out of those experiences, and to recognize his or her identity as both learner and knower (Baxter Magolda, 2003).

Related Literature: Characteristics of, Approaches to, and Perspectives on Advising

Characteristics of Academic Advising

Museum and Ravello (2010) looked at the characteristics of academic advising that contributed to the success of racial and ethnic minority students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The researchers specifically examined PWIs that were effective in generating ethnic minority success (GEMS), also known as the GEMS institutions. In the study, “racial and ethnic minority students” referred to undergraduate students who had self-identified with socially constructed racial categories of Asian American, Black, Latina/o, and Native American (p. 40). Similar to the language used by the authors, the phrase “racial and ethnic minority students” is used interchangeably with “students of Color” in the following sections. Museum and Ravello (2010) highlighted the need for student affairs professionals to have a better understanding of the academic advising styles, behaviors, and characteristics that influence the persistence and perseverance of undergraduate students of Color.

Through the use of qualitative methods, the following themes around advising characteristics emerged from the study: (a) the importance of advisors who employed a humanistic approach to advising, (b) the impact that a multifaceted or holistic model of academic advising had on student success, and (c) the emphasis on a proactive style of advising. Museum and Ravello (2010) selected three GEMS institutions based on a variety of factors, one of them being institutions that had graduation rates amongst racial and ethnic minority students higher than the national average and whose rates were close to or greater than those of their White peers. The study had a sample of 45 individuals – 14 academic advisors and 31 students of Color across the three institutions – who participated in individual face-to-face interviews. These interviews highlighted three specific characteristics of academic advising that the participants felt were most significant to the success of students of Color at PWIs: humanistic, multifaceted, and proactive advising.

Advisors providing a humanistic approach to advising were seen as helpful, caring, and accessible (Museum & Ravello, 2010). This form of advising is comprised of two central ideologies: (a) advisors were seen as human beings by the students they were advising and (b) these advisors were dedicated to the students’ success and well-being. In this sense, students of Color viewed their advisors as friends or mentors who had a positive impact on their college experience. Multifaceted, or holistic academic advising meant that academic advisors were aware of the various challenges and complex dynamics experienced by their students of Color. Advisors who utilized a holistic advising approach ensured that these students received the academic, financial, social, or personal support they needed. Lastly, participants

in this study highlighted the benefits of proactive advising in supporting students' academic success. Although proactive, or intrusive advising is not new to the literature, this method serves as a reminder for advisors to take initiative and check in with their students on a consistent basis. Such proactive practices have positive benefits for students of Color around retention, academic completion, and graduation rates (Museus & Ravello, 2010).

Based on the emerging themes and qualitative data, advisors and educators must continue to reflect upon their interactions with their students of Color and incorporate such characteristics in their approaches towards academic advising. Museus and Ravello (2010) addressed certain limitations to their findings, one being that this level of advising cannot be done efficiently or effectively if done alone. Institutions must recognize the importance of academic advising services and invest the time, energy, and resources needed for advisors to provide students of Color with a humanistic, holistic, and proactive academic advising experience. The authors also mentioned the need to examine how the racial identities of students of Color intersect with their other identities (e.g., gender, sexual identity, religion, etc.) to then influence their experiences with and perceptions of academic advising. Because the study specifically examined the participants' perspectives of quality academic advising, there was not an analysis of the individual differences between subgroups within the racial and ethnic minority participant group. Thus, in addition to the research on the intersection of identities and academic advising services, a study on the impact of academic advising on specific communities within the student of Color diaspora would prove insightful and allow for more culturally-specific recommendations to be made. Lastly, while the study did not specify the racial and ethnic identities of the participating advisors as it did with the the student participants, a further study on the experiences, perceptions, and advising characteristics between advisors of Color and students of Color may yield relevant findings to improving the academic success of students of Colors at PWIs.

Approaches to Academic Advising

Several approaches to academic advising exist. Traditional models of prescriptive and developmental advising have been extensively researched (Grites & Gordon, 2000; Smith, 2002). Additional approaches to academic advising have since come into existence: intrusive advising, appreciative (inquiry) advising, full range advising, and more (Barbuto, Story, Fritz, & Schinstock, 2011; Hurt & McLaughlin, 2012). However, because of the lack of research that focuses on the academic experiences of students of Color, newer models of advising have been introduced into the literature. One particular approach, culturally responsive advising, takes into consideration the student's culture, history, and experiences and requires the advisor to use their comprehensive knowledge to engage with their students across cultural differences (Mitchell & Rosiek, 2005; Mitchell, Wood, & Witherspoon, 2010).

Students of Color may find value in having an advisor who not only provides academic support, but one who also understands the ethnic and racial implications of being a student of Color at a predominately White institution. A main tenet of culturally responsive advising, acknowledging and addressing issues of race and racism, is important in establishing rapport between the faculty advisor and the student of Color. Advisors who engage in this style of advising may see positive student outcomes that result in higher levels of student satisfaction, trust, and feelings of empowerment.

Mitchell et al. (2010) further noted that providing culturally responsive advising is more than just increasing “the number of advisors of color” or improving an advisor’s understanding of a student’s racial and ethnic background (p. 305). It is also about understanding the way in which institutions and academic advising offices become racialized spaces, spaces that are historically and politically charged in concept and physicality. For example, academic advising sessions that occur in an open, non-private room or area may suggest to the student of Color that it is unsafe or unwise to discuss personal matters or challenges related to his or her racial identity. In this situation, the student may not feel as if there is any safe or comfortable space on campus, particularly if the institution is a PWI. Thus, educators must apply a critical lens in how they think and understand race and space in a college academic setting, and continue to effectively work towards creating an inclusive environment for students of Color.

Perspectives of Academic Advising

Allen and Smith (2008) aimed to better understand the level of student satisfaction with academic advising by examining the perspectives of both the faculty advisor and the student advisee. Allen and Smith (2008) chose an institution in which faculty provided a large portion of academic advising services, and where student dissatisfaction in regards to this advising was a salient problem. Thus, by looking at how faculty advisors thought about and approached academic advising, the researchers could explore potential reasons regarding the high levels of student dissatisfaction with advising services.

A total of 733 undergraduate students and 171 instructional faculty at a doctoral-level research-based university were emailed by the university’s provost to participate in an electronic web-based survey. Details of the email outlined the purpose of the study and emphasized the hope in improving the academic advising services at the university. A chance to win monetary compensation was provided for both student and faculty participants upon completing the survey. Students and faculty each received a version of the *Inventory of Academic Advising Functions* through parallel survey methods. The student version of the survey asked students to rate the importance of and their satisfaction with the 12 advising functions outlined

in the study. The faculty version of the survey asked faculty to rate each of the 12 advising functions on the following: its importance, their satisfaction with the advising they are providing, and their level of agreement that it is their responsibility to provide that functional area of advising. The demographic information of the student participants was representative of the larger student population, primarily on age and ethnicity, “although Whites were slightly overrepresented” and male students were underrepresented (Allen & Smith, 2008, p. 613). The sample population of instructional faculty mirrored the larger pool of university faculty in terms of age and years of service teaching, while males and some ethnic minorities were somewhat underrepresented in the faculty sampled.

Findings from the study revealed that the faculty had higher ratings of satisfaction on all aspects of the 12 advising functions they provided compared to the students’ ratings of satisfaction (Allen & Smith, 2008). Faculty appeared to be satisfied with the kinds of advising services they were providing their students whereas the students thought otherwise. Both faculty and students agreed on the overall importance of the different advising characteristics. However, of the 12 advising functions studied, students believed that the “How Things Work” category of advising was the most important to their academic performance and success. This function helped students make sense of the institution and their position within it. Notably, the students responded saying they were least satisfied with this aspect of advising. Faculty also assumed the least responsibility in approaching the “How Things Work” advising function. Students attempting to understand how their institution works and what their exact role and purpose is within that academic setting can be a complex and dynamic process. As student affairs professionals, it is important to understand why the “How Things Work” advising function was so important to students at this particular institution and to help faculty advisors consider this perspective when advising their students.

Allen and Smith (2008) did not specifically look at the advising experiences of students of Color. More research is therefore needed to better understand what specific advising services and functions may be most useful for these ethnic and racial minority students who are attending predominantly White institutions. Thus, for students of Color, finding and establishing a sense of belonging while making meaning out of their college experiences and identities can be a crucial factor in their overall success. Another limitation to this study that warrants additional research is that the authors did not look at the individualized differences for academic units and students’ majors. Would students in a social sciences or liberal arts academic program need or expect different advising services from their faculty advisor compared to students in a more business-oriented or core science field? Which of the 12 advising functions would be most important to these students and students of Color at PWIs? Lastly, the study does not explicitly address how the identities of either faculty and student participants could impact the importance

and satisfaction of the advising experiences. The authors provide the respective demographic information for both faculty and students in a table noting specific percentages for each ethnic identity listed, with White faculty and students as a large majority of the sample population (Allen & Smith, 2008). By integrating the work and methodologies of Museus and Ravello (2010) with the data presented by Allen and Smith (2008), a new study could further explore and illuminate the levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction that students of Color experience with academic advising services at PWIs.

Implications for Higher Education

Student affairs professionals and academic advisors can have a profound impact on the ways undergraduate students of Color perceive and make sense of their academic experiences. Similarly, by looking at student development and academic achievement through the lens of self-authorship, students of Color can become authors of and advocates for their own college experiences and academic needs, allowing them to reflect and make meaning out of every interaction (Baxter Magolda, 2003). Institutions must then change the way they think about, engage with, and reflect upon academic advising; the academic advising experience is not a single-sided interaction or conversation, but rather, it is a co-constructed process by both the faculty advisor and the student of Color. The responsibility for faculty advisors at PWIs is to reflect upon their advising styles and the environments in which they provide advising services, and then address the racial disparity within academic progress and degree completion. Students of Color must also be proactive and self-empowered to take ownership of their academic experiences and of the resources provided for them to succeed at PWIs. Mutual commitment and collaboration from both the faculty advisor and advisee is essential to the student's academic success and well-being in higher education.

Some undergraduate students, however, may still be transitioning and adjusting to their new social and academic environment and will continue to look towards faculty advisors or student affairs professionals for guidance (Larose, Bernier, & Tarabulsky, 2005). According to Allen and Smith (2008), students believed that their academic success and satisfaction were related to understanding how things worked at the university level. Faculty advisors can therefore serve as institutional liaisons for students of Color, often encouraging them to seek academic services when needed and to participate in co-curricular activities. Students of Color at large research-oriented PWIs may experience the pressure of rigorous academic environments, in addition to the challenges in finding a sense of community. Providing these students with holistic and humanistic interactions (Barbuto et al., 2011; Museus & Ravello, 2010) while helping them learn the academic and institutional landscape (Allen & Smith, 2008) can improve the academic success and retention of students of Color at PWIs.

It is important for faculty advisors and student affairs professionals to recognize how influential the academic advising experience is for students to become academically, socially, and personally successful while at college. These advisors and professionals must then examine their own behaviors and attitudes when working with students of Color, and adjust them to ensure that they provide a culturally responsive, holistic, and humanistic approach to advising. Academic departments and units may want to consider creating and implementing a series of advisor trainings that promote multicultural competencies and inclusive advising practices. In doing so, faculty and staff advisors can further expand their awareness, knowledge, and skills when advising and mentoring students of Color (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). Additionally, these academic departments and units cannot operate in isolation from the rest of the college campus in order to improve academic success and retention of students of Color. Institutional funds and efforts must be coordinated and prioritized, in conjunction with these academic offices, to promote humanistic and holistic environments for students of Color at predominantly White institutions.

Concluding Thoughts

Academic advisors can have a significant impact on a student's academic success and perseverance. This article provided a working definition for academic advising and then highlighted some of the various characteristics of, approaches to, and perspectives on academic advising. Museus and Ravello (2010) looked at the forms of academic advising that contributed to the success of students of Color at predominantly White institutions and found that humanistic, holistic, and proactive advising styles led to positive student outcomes. Barbuto et al. (2005) offered a new approach to advising, culturally responsive advising, which integrated concepts of race, racism, and identity into the academic advising framework. Allen and Smith (2008) examined levels of satisfaction with regards to academic advising from perspectives of both the faculty advisor and the student advisee. They found that faculty and students agreed that the overall functions of advising were important to academic success, but there seemed to be a disconnect as to what function appeared to be most needed by students and most provided by faculty. Although the literature reviewed in this essay did not always examine the academic advising experiences of students of Color, it highlighted attempts made to understand these interactions between advisor and student and the need for further research that specifically looks at culturally-competent advising behaviors and the advising experiences of these ethnic and racial minorities at predominantly White institutions. By understanding the characteristics of, approaches to, and perspectives on academic advising, predominantly White institutions can provide more inclusive academic environments, create positive advising relationships and experiences, and increase the overall success and retention of their students of Color.

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