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Keeping the *Academic* in Advising: Where Academic Advising Belongs in the Collegiate Structure

Eric R. White, The Pennsylvania State University

Where should academic advising be housed within a college or university organizational structure? To assure that the academic is emphasized in academic advising, the most logical and appropriate location is within the academic structure of the institution, which means being placed as close as possible to the faculty and the curriculum. This approach allows academic advisors to engage in teaching, research, and community service just as their faculty colleagues do. Having academic advisors teach (in their offices and in classrooms), engage in research advancing the literature of academic advising, work with faculty to enhance curriculum when necessary, and develop policies and procedures that might enhance student success will move forward the professionalization of the field.

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The colleges and universities that make up the higher education scene in the United States are an elaborate kaleidoscope of configurations. From mega universities with six-digit enrollments to the smallest colleges sometimes struggling to meet an enrollment goal, these institutions are structured in response to their histories, cultures, and current and future needs. Such influences over time have resulted in these institutions possessing some common elements but at the same time diverging widely. This wide array of configurations represents both a hallmark of ideal practice, but also a barrier to implementing, when necessary, nationwide change.

Configurations such as departments within institutions are widespread in large schools. Most colleges and universities offer their curricula in the form of majors, housed in these departments. Majors are composed of courses offered by the departments, along with other departmental courses, to supplement the major and a combination of restricted and free electives chosen from other departments. Despite this basic structure, a major at one college will not be exactly like the same major at another college. Furthermore, no student will experience any major exactly as any other student might.

This highly individualized approach to the structuring of higher education in the U.S. has been touted as one of its most successful features. Allowing each institution to fulfill its mission in a structure that is the most appropriate for that institution so far has outweighed a standardized approach to how the U.S. delivers higher education. The other functions of higher education that support the academic structure are both the myriad entities designed to enhance a student's education and those that make sure that the "chalk is on the blackboard ledge" each morning. The necessary functions keeping higher education institutions running as smoothly as possible include, but are not necessarily limited to, departments traditionally called student affairs, finances, security, athletics, multicultural affairs, alumni relations, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The history and culture of an institution, expediency, and presidential or trustee inclinations determine how all these functions fit onto an organizational chart. No doubt, parts of an organizational chart appear where they appear simply because no one knew where else to place them.

It might seem obvious that an endeavor called academic advising should naturally be embedded in the academic part of the institution. In this case, *academic* can be defined as where faculty and curriculum are housed, but this placement is not always the case. The debate continues as various areas within institutions lay claim to academic advising. Rather than make the determination as to where to house academic advising based upon what area within the institution can flex the most muscle to get what they want, institutions should use a more reasoned approach to make this determination.

To many, academic advising is a valued prize. Academic advising, if structured properly, can reach all students in an institution. This is a claim

that few other programs or services can make. With such a potential for widespread influence, having academic advising in any unit's portfolio can certainly bolster the influence and reputation of that unit. While this organization may set up a situation where the placement of academic advising merely goes to that unit with the most clout to claim it, institutions should avoid such a haphazard and cynical approach.

Origins of Academic Advising

The history of academic advising begins with the faculty and with the very origins of higher education in the American colonies (Cook, 2009). When academic advising was more formalized on college campuses in the 1800s, it was faculty who became the main source of academic advising for students. This selection made perfect sense since academic advising was driven by a need to assure that the curriculum and the individual sequencing of courses were coherent.

With the introduction of elective credits into the curriculum, institutions determined that without advice from faculty, students would not make appropriate selections and thus would squander their education with a hodgepodge of courses selected without any rationale beyond that of expediency. This link between faculty-developed curriculum and academic advising is crucial to understanding where academic advising should fit within the structure of higher education institutions (Cook, 2009).

Universities and colleges are always revising their curricula, responding to national needs, trends in society and education, and interpretations of their own institutional mission. The curricula facilitate the advancement of knowledge and ensure, as much as possible, that students leaving formal higher education are prepared to be not only productive citizens in their communities, but also meaningful contributors to that society. Students, on the other hand, often do not see beyond what is laid out for them as the requirements to graduate. They are rarely aware of why certain requirements—second languages, math or physics, internships or community service opportunities—are even needed. When faced with such uncertainty, most college students are not prepared to make these decisions independently. A curriculum may take weeks, months, or even years to complete, but if students view it as no more than a chart or pathway to graduation, it will be of minimal value. If students do not understand why they are asked to take certain courses in a particular order, or why the curriculum is constructed the way it is, then students may reduce education to simply an accumulation of credits to earn a degree and no more.

Since faculty design curriculum, it seemed like faculty should take on the task of advising students as to the rationale for the curriculum they have constructed, including the sequence of these courses. When actual choice is allowed, advisors should consider what choices might make the most sense for the individual student. This approach was how U.S. institutions of higher education originally conceived formal academic advising. At the same time, the notion of *in loco parentis* became the prevailing philosophy that defined the relationship between institution and students. Thus, when the idea that the faculty who put together the curriculum was combined with their role as substitute parents, it was relatively easy to implement a model for academic advising delivered by the faculty who resided in the academic affairs side of the institution (White & Khakpour, 2006).

The Evolution of Academic Advising

Over time the role of faculty and the nature of many U.S. higher education institutions changed. In addition to teaching, faculty now engaged in research and community service. As institutions started to admit more students in response to concerns that higher education should be more open to meet the needs of society, and with a special push from the World War II GI Bill, being a "parent" now meant more than communicating the rationale of curriculum to students. Students now needed to discuss such issues as their financial needs, their mental health, and family responsibilities. As demands on faculty continued, other positions arose to respond to these student needs. Some of these positions came from the student affairs sector, while others originated in academic deans' offices. Creating new personnel to do the work originally assigned to faculty significantly altered who was added to institutional work force as well as how these individuals were to be prepared to do this work (Thelin, 2004).

A burgeoning array of student affairs professionals arrived on campus, many of them now educated in degree programs committed to supplying U.S. campuses with personnel working in such areas as student activities, residential life, financial aid, admissions, and counseling. It was

from the ranks of these professionals that many of the newly hired academic advisors came to replace or supplement the academic advising provided by faculty. Many of these staff academic advisors came from counseling backgrounds. Having once worked in counseling centers and in other capacities as counselors on campus, some gravitated toward academic advising as a viable alternative to traditional counseling positions.

In 1973, the publication of an article in the *Personal and Guidance Journal* (Crookston, 1972/2009) reinforced the notion that academic advising was about the developmental aspects of student experiences in higher education and was juxtaposed (perhaps deliberately) against the notion that academic advising had been only prescriptive in nature. The prescriptive approach, most often delivered by the faculty who did not have either student affairs or counseling backgrounds, relied on telling students what to take—a bare minimum approach to helping students select the most appropriate courses for them at the most appropriate time in their undergraduate educations. A developmental approach to academic advising, as espoused by Crookston (1972/2009), appealed to many who worked as staff academic advisors. These advisors had degrees in counseling and student affairs and felt that the developmental approach was the way forward. As the need for more academic advisors took hold on U.S. college campuses, the logical place to look for more advisors was in the ranks of the graduates of these programs.

Thus, a tension developed as to not only who should be designated as an academic advisor, but where to house this particular function within an institution. As many faculty stepped away from formal academic advising responsibilities (most often at large research and doctoral degree granting universities), and as staff advisors took their place, campus leaders had to decide how to accommodate these new advisors in their institutions. Seeing that those who practiced academic advising often had counseling and student affairs backgrounds, a seemingly logical location was within student affairs. At first glance, this approach appears reasonable; yet the unintended consequence of this approach was to place an artificial, yet palpable, wedge between the faculty advisor and the staff advisor. This unnecessary friction, the result of a long-standing gulf between academic affairs and student affairs on U.S. campuses, did little to bring together these two groups—the two groups who actually performed the same roles under the rubric of academic advising. The struggle to find common ground has been ongoing and often unresolved.

Other areas of higher education have also laid claim to the academic advising function. With the advent of enrollment planning and management as an expansion of the traditional admission process, and mandates that retention and graduation figures need to rise, academic advising became the place to raise retention figures and lower attrition figures. To increase retention rates, often the responsibility of enrollment planners, the need to keep academic advising close at hand surfaced. And quite naturally, U.S. higher education, institutions decided what made the most sense for them.

To date, there has been neither a common understanding nor a nationally recognized rationale for where academic advising should be housed to assist in this determination. Allowing each institution to structure itself as it wishes continues to be the *modus operandi.* To establish a national standard is alien to how U.S. higher education has developed and how organizational structure has been determined. By not examining the question of where to place academic advising, the educational background of the advising staff combined with the investment of student affairs preparation programs tilted the placement decision toward the student affairs side.

However, other forces were influential as well. Ties to the academic community are vital for academic advisors to do their work. Information that advisors need flows from academic colleges within universities, from departments, and from curriculum committees of faculty senates. Advisors could not successfully work without having confidence in the sources of the information they conveyed; advisors would be hard-pressed to respond to many of the questions which their advisees have without this informational flow. Further, academic advising programs coordinated from departmental offices or from the disciplinary colleges within institutions espouse an academic orientation even though some of the hired staff advisors may have counseling or student affairs degrees and perhaps previously worked in offices housed within the student affairs division.

While tensions still exist between student affairs and academic affairs, the lines are often blurred. Additional units created on colleges campuses to meet various institutional needs only add to the complexity of the organizational structure. These new units can also claim academic advising within their purview.

The questions of who is actually an academic advisor, or what it means to be an academic advisor, further muddies the situation. The titles of *counselor* and *advisor* proliferate on college campuses and are often interchangeable. There are advisors/counselors to assist with student aid, admissions, career development, student athletes, underrepresented and underprepared students, and honor students. Much of this work is traditionally associated with academic advising.

In addition, students may be assigned an academic advisor in their department of enrollment or perhaps with a unit that works with exploratory/undeclared students. While this might appear to be a potential embarrassment of riches for students (so many people to help them), it often ends in confusion with students turning to the individual who provides them with the answers that make the most sense or the one who seems to be most readily available to them. In other delivery models, students do not have assigned academic advisors, but are assigned to a center where students meet with whoever might be on duty at that time. This approach, while seemingly student-centered, means that students rarely develop meaningful relationships with any one individual within the advising community, thus undermining relational quality, one of the major aspects of academic advising (King, 2008).

A New U.S. Paradigm for Academic Advising

This unsystematic approach to delivering academic advising has hindered the acceptance of a nation-wide approach to providing the best possible academic advising to students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. To achieve the most appropriate outcomes for academic advising, a new paradigm is needed that all institutions can adopt regardless of their history, their mission, or whom they educate. Adopting a new paradigm means abandoning the old one, which currently focuses on academic advising as a service provided to students. The service paradigm—which coincides with the student-as-customer movement—also fits in comfortably with many student affairs functions defined as services, such as mental health and financial aid offices. Given that many of the personnel working in student affairs offices have been educated in counseling and student development programs, academic advising could easily fit into this part of an institution's structure. However, the service paradigm leaves advising in a precarious position, as the ideas of what academic advising encompasses have advanced far beyond what Crookston (1972/2009) originally envisioned as either developmental or prescriptive advising, and certainly what experts espoused when developmental advising became the prevailing theory (Winston et al., 1984).

Academic advising in the twenty-first century has become much more nuanced, as it has moved away from a service orientation to a teaching paradigm (with its concomitant learning outcomes) as the primary purpose for academic advising. While many functional areas of what is traditionally thought of as student affairs have adopted learning outcomes, it is academic advising that has promoted this approach to a greater extent in its efforts to carve out its role in the U.S. higher education community. The problems with seeing advising as a service paradigm are many; most notably, they all work against seeing academic advising as an *academic* activity (Lowenstein, 2005).

While there is certainly nothing wrong with providing services to students in higher education, such an approach invariably leads to seeing students more as consumers of a particular product than as individuals to gain an education. In a new paradigm for academic advising, students would not be viewed, first and foremost, as either consumers or customers who are buying nothing more significant than a refrigerator. In the classroom, this model actually pits students against instructors; the students pay for classes worth credits and the instructors deliver a series of lectures and class experiences. Whether the students learn anything from this interaction may actually be irrelevant. If the student is satisfied with the experience (i.e., likes the product), then the student walks away happy and hopefully the instructor is assessed at such a level that will keep a department head or dean happy and might even keep the instructor employed.

The same is true for academic advising. If the interaction between student and advisor is based on student satisfaction with the interaction and nothing more, then the goals of the academic advising profession will not be realized. Furthermore, any substantive definition of academic advising will be rendered meaningless. Measuring satisfaction with the advisor/advisee interaction puts the practice in the same situation as it does when asking students about the behaviors of their instructors and whether or not they were satisfied with them. This approach severely limits what the field can glean from the advisor/advisee interaction and tells us nothing about what students actually learn.

Such an assessment approach might be compatible with the goals of a recreational sports program for students in higher education. Was the student satisfied with the facilities? Were these facilities provided at convenient hours? Were there multiple activities for students to choose from? Unfortunately, these are not the questions students should be asked about when assessing their academic advising experiences. The farther we get from focusing on learning and the outcomes of the advisor/advisee interaction, the farther we get from what makes academic advising the kind of profession that it purports to be.

Abandoning the service paradigm frees academic advising to adopt not only a new paradigm, but one that is at the core of higher education. It also allows for a rethinking of who should be doing academic advising on our campuses and how it should be structured to achieve its mission (White, 2015).

The traditional model for faculty in U.S. higher education is to teach courses, conduct research, disseminate the results of that research, and engage in community service. The percentage of time that a faculty member may be involved in these activities at any point in their career is dependent upon the nature of the institution where the faculty member works, the particular contract that the individual is on (e.g., tenure, non-tenure, year-to-year, or multi-year), and how advanced the individual might be in their career.

This model can work just as well for the academic advisor. In fact, this approach will help to significantly remove some of the seemingly apparent obstacles that can impede the professionalization of the staff academic advisor. The move to this new paradigm is not as difficult as it might appear. Accepting the simile that advising is teaching suggests that the primary duties of an academic advisor can substitute for the traditional instructional mode of faculty. Instead of teaching occurring in the classroom, it is occurring in the advising office. The responsibilities of staff academic advisors have expanded over the years; many now include formal classroom instruction, sometimes in the form of first-year seminars and "survival" courses. Already, some academic advisors have degrees qualifying them to teach in the departments of their disciplines.

Here is how it can work: a history department at a major U.S. university hired one of its newly minted PhDs. This individual will advise all of the history undergraduates in the department. The faculty member, for the most part, turned the bulk of their attention toward instruction, research, and the advising and mentoring of their graduate students. This advisor also teaches a limited number of history courses each year and, in fact, had already taught as part of their responsibilities as a PhD candidate. This advisor was so well regarded that they were assigned an honor's history class to teach as well. They attended all faculty meetings, engaged in policy decisions and curriculum revisions, and was treated no differently than any other faculty member. Thus, the divisions between faculty and staff, student affairs and faculty affairs, were at a minimum blurred and to a great extent eradicated. Perhaps as a secondary benefit to the department and to the institution as a whole, using this model to deliver academic advising and instruction meant that the need to hire adjunct instructors at lower wages and with little to no benefits, was eliminated, thus addressing one of the most severe criticisms of U.S. higher education.

The research and publication imperatives for faculty (at different levels of requirements for the multitude of institutions that encompasses U.S. higher education) can be expected of academic advisors as well. The opportunities to conduct research about academic advising are limitless. There is much that still needs to be learned about this endeavor. Since the subjects of this research exist right within the higher education community, the options available to any academic advisor to conduct research have an immediacy of significant order. In fact, their work is their laboratory. And opportunities for collaboration abound, such as: cross disciplinary studies with psychologists, higher education scholars, speech communication faculty, librarians, and information science faculty. While NACADA provides outlets for publications, such collaborations also can lead to publications outside the immediate advising community. The more frequently other disciplines can publish academic advising research, the greater the chances to better understand and appreciate this continuing and evolving field.

As faculty are called upon to engage in community service both inside and outside the academy, the same should be expected of academic advisors. Engaging in academic policies and curriculum development decisions are critical at both the departmental and institutional levels; therefore, academic advisors should be assigned to the relevant committees that handle these issues (Darling, 2015). In addition, community service outside of the academy, in such areas as local nonprofits, can be beneficial to all. This is a

good opportunity to inform the community at large as to the nature of academic advising and to demonstrate the expertise that academic advisors might bring to any situation.

Implementing this model benefits all: it brings the traditional faculty member closer to the staff academic advisor. This alliance is most easily affected since both staff advisor and faculty advisor engage in the same advising activity within the institution. This cannot be said for many other campus activities. With the same expectations and opportunities for both advancement and tenure built into the system, staff academic advisors can achieve the appropriate professional recognition that is often denied to them within an institution.

This model also enables an institution to identify who are the primary academic advisors. When there is such a proliferation of personnel with titles such as *advisor* and *counselor,* a student can often "select" as their advisor the one who might be most convenient or gives them the answers that they seek (which may or may not always be accurate or appropriate). If the primary academic advisor for each student is housed either in the department or college of enrollment or in a unit that might be set aside for students who have not officially declared a major, such an assignment makes it clear to all that advising is an activity that belongs in the academic homes of the institution. By providing each student with a *named* academic advisor (be it a faculty or staff member), an institution sends a positive message to students; just as there are faculty assigned to teach specific courses within the institution, advisors are assigned to students to engage them in their educational planning. While this approach guarantees each student at least one dedicated advisor, students are always free to contact other personnel in the institution who may also have a vested interest in their success. But these individuals do not have the authority, in most cases, to approve or deny certain actions of students related to their enrollment and progression through the institution. It is important to communicate this boundary clearly to students.

The rapidly changing and challenging landscape of U.S. higher education can make it difficult to implement new paradigms. Assuring that all academic advising is under the purview of a clearly designated academic side of the house should not be too difficult. U.S. institutions of higher education have built a model to meet virtually most needs of their enrolled students: physical, psychological, spiritual, developmental, and most of all, academic. Academic advising does not have to be all things to all students, but without their academic needs being addressed, then the proposed goals and missions of our institutions will fail. We simply need to remind ourselves that the adjective in front of advising is *academic.* This description is not random nor frivolous; it clearly explains what academic advising is all about and where in the institution it should be firmly rooted.

The trend is in this direction, but there have been and continue to be forces within and outside of academia that demand or suggest alternatives to this model. The pull toward student affairs is palpable given the influence of student affairs preparation programs as the source of academic advising staff and some of the prevailing theories that have been expounded to inform the practice. A prevailing idea is that academic advising plays perhaps the most significant role in student retention. This idea has led some institutions to connect academic advising administratively with an institution's enrollment management function. While both influences are present on U.S. college campuses, the academic affairs side of the house has an undeniable currency (Drake, 2011).

It does not take any major shifts in theory or practice to align academic advising with faculty efforts; in fact, the two roles can easily be welded. In reality, there is no difference between the behaviors of faculty and staff advisors. They both have access to the same advising literature and have a common responsibility to students. While the faculty advisor may have advising as part of their responsibilities and the staff advisor may take on a much larger case roster, they are both acting as academic advisors with the same goals: student learning and student success.

One of the most unique characteristics of academic advising is its ability to reach all students within the institution. Assigning each student a designated primary academic advisor assures that each student has a significant contact within the university—a practice that much literature on students retention endorses. What better person to fulfill this function than the academic advisor? The claim that advising can reach all students is hard to refute. Students certainly do not take all courses offered by an institution. Indeed, students can graduate without courses in American history or perhaps have no exposure to the geological sciences or fine arts. Not all students manage to visit the library in person, and there are students who

do not engage in any type of athletic or recreational sport, club, or religious or spiritual event.

Higher education administrators should take advantage of this unique characteristic to reach all students with the message that a collegiate education is centered on the student's chosen major and that students should understand why that major was chosen and how it was constructed. The source of this information comes primarily from the faculty and the decisions that they make about the nature of the institution's curricular offerings. This is as *academic* as it gets.

As the field of academic advising continues to advance, one of its primary goals must be to remove obstacles that hinder its continual professionalization. The instances in which the role of faculty (as instructors, researchers, masters of their disciplines) is questioned as a profession are extremely rare. Having academic advisors who act as instructors, both within their own offices and in the classroom, and engage in research which adds to the literature of academic advising as a discipline, can surely bring down any barriers to professionalization, or perhaps even eliminate these barriers altogether.

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Author's Note

Eric R. White earned his B.A. in history from Rutgers University and his master's and doctorate in counseling psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. He served as the Executive Director of the Division of Undergraduate Studies and Associate Dean for Advising at The Pennsylvania State University. He retired in 2012 with emeritus status. White was the president of NACADA in 2004-2005, president of the Deans and Directors of University Colleges and Undergraduate Studies in 1993, and an affiliate assistant professor of education at Penn State.

He was the 2002 recipient of NACADA's Virginia N. Gordon Award for Excellence in the Field of Advising, Penn State's Administrative Excellence Award in 2005, and the Leigh S. Shaffer Award for scholarly contributions published in the NACADA Journal that significantly advance the field of academic advising in 2022. White can be reached at erw2@psu.edu.