

---

INVITED COMMENTARY

## Leadership in Higher Education: Insights from Academic Advisers

George Steele\*  
*The Ohio State University (retired)*

Eric R. White\*  
*The Pennsylvania State University (retired)*

*Abstract:* Higher education is facing significant structural challenges that must be addressed through changes in educational policy and practice. Higher education leadership often relies on corporate logics that ultimately exacerbate these problems. Academic advisers offer a unique perspective and expertise working on the front lines with students. Advisers must examine, debate, and study educational policies, practices, and issues at the organizational, institutional, and societal levels. Higher education leadership should seek advisers' guidance on these matters. A clarified educational purpose of academic advising is a necessary foundation in this endeavor. Foremost, academic advising must not be misconceived as a customer service.

*Keywords:* higher education, policy, neoliberalism, academic capitalism, educational outcomes, assessment, academic advising

### THE CURRENT HIGHER EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

Higher education leaders would benefit from more feedback and guidance from professionals working on the front lines when thinking about the future of their institutions and the policies and practices that they should implement. Indeed, colleges and universities in the United States have recently faced serious criticisms and challenges that should compel leadership to consider new perspectives.

Some critics have questioned the very usefulness of a college education, suggesting that many who look forward to four-year college educations will not benefit from the experience and should not, in fact, attend (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Saad, 2013). Another assertion is that higher education is seriously adrift and

---

\*Contributed equally to this work with: Eric R. White, George Steele  
Direct correspondence to George Steele and Eric R. White. E-mail: [gsteele1220@gmail.com](mailto:gsteele1220@gmail.com), [erw2@psu.edu](mailto:erw2@psu.edu)



DOI: 10.18113/P8MJ2161110

The Mentor: Innovative Scholarship on Academic Advising Volume 21 (2019), 1-10

ISSN: 1521-2211

[journals.psu.edu/mentor](http://journals.psu.edu/mentor)

perhaps on the edge of collapse, signaling that the very existence of civilization in the United States is at risk (Harris, 2018). Such dire claims can either be ignored as overly Cassandra-like or acknowledged as having the insights of the canary in the mineshaft. Adding to such harsh critiques are accounts of a fragmented and incoherent curriculum, a mass production and impersonal approach to moving students through an institution, graduation rates that represent a waste of individual potential and institutional resources, and a frenetic pursuit of prestige that requires a substantial public relations effort (Smith, 2018).

Economic issues also plague colleges and universities. The disparity between a faculty with guaranteed lifetime employment and adjunct instructors who are often overworked and underpaid with few benefits has not gone unnoticed (Flaherty, 2017). The disconnect between states touting their great public flagship schools or systems of regional colleges and universities and then failing to adequately fund them is all too obvious (Cole, 2016). All of this turmoil exists at the same time as major universities are maintaining extensive (and expensive) intercollegiate sports programs—some of which drain the resources of the institution—while claiming that this is justified because sports programs add to the prestige and public recognition of the institution (Berkowitz & Schnaars, 2017). Operating such elaborate sports programs with so many dollars at stake can call into question just what really are the ultimate purposes and missions of higher education.

Moreover, colleges continue to have difficulty protecting vulnerable populations and promoting diversity, civil rights, and social justice (Tate, 2017). How to adjudicate sexual assault cases on campus has caused much consternation (Brown & Mangan, 2018). As of yet there is no seemingly satisfactory resolution that provides support for the survivor and due process for the accused. Also, higher education now faces issues related to freedom of speech, especially since some speech has led to violence on campus (Park & Lah, 2017). Some institutions are trying to define which speech is and is not acceptable, who has the right to such speech, and in what forums it is acceptable (Foley, 2018). Oozing to the surface is the fact that many prestigious colleges and universities were involved in the slave trade and other ignoble aspects of the American narrative. This has threatened to tarnish the reputations of these institutions as they grapple with their pasts. Even the naming of buildings and the maintenance of statues of individuals whose positions on issues and events do not ring as especially valid to 21<sup>st</sup> century sentiments has been challenged. In some cases, building names have been changed and statues removed from prominence on campus (Stancill, 2018). Yet, there appears to be no easy solution to these issues, nor does there seem to be a particularly productive dialog.

## **CORPORATE TAKEOVER: THE RESPONSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS**

While institutions struggle with these conditions, there is little acknowledgment from higher education leadership that such conditions represent a crisis and that to

continue to do things as usual is ill-advised. Stymied by a lack of support from state legislatures, the threat of taxing large university endowments, and an erosion of public confidence (why support public education if it is a private good?), the response is often to equate higher education to the aircraft carrier that cannot turn on a dime. It has been easier to lament the supposed forces that are impeding change than to implement real change. When institutions do address real issues, they rarely amount to more than displays of a meager commitment to making change, good for a few press releases. When much of the criticism is discounted—or worse ignored or dismissed as inconsequential or invalid—serious change cannot occur.

What kinds of fixes are available? First, the leadership in higher education must admit that the critiques are valid for both their particular institutions and the entire enterprise. Leaders of higher education appear reluctant to be too critical lest their own institutions get caught up in these criticisms and reflect negatively on their leadership. Leaders seem to be willing to admit that there are challenges elsewhere, but their own institutions either have it under control or have a task force (with a report forthcoming with recommendations for change). Rather than deal with specifics, they resort to the usual complaints: higher education has become increasingly costly and to contain these costs has become difficult without additional revenue streams (Salovey, 2018). The relentless critiques from those who do not see the higher education endeavor in the United States working as it should be erodes public confidence and distracts focus from real issues (Spellings, 2018). For example, many students enter higher education poorly prepared in the first place and the supports to help these unprepared students in higher education institutions are exorbitantly costly (Butrymowicz, 2017).

Those that offer up solutions provide little specificity: meet student needs, revamp the curriculum to focus on outcomes, be more flexible (Bok, 2017). The challenges are, of course, formidable, but ducking the difficult discussions by not admitting to some of the basic realities of the collegiate experience and offering up solutions based upon misconceptions and myths about the undergraduate experience have hampered any significant movement forward.

An overreliance on corporate budgeting models using quantitative measures to assess effectiveness may assure that the bills get paid. Branding initiatives may produce good press and increase institutional recognition. All of this, however, has seemingly little bearing on the desired outcomes for higher education: better critical thinking, effective writing skills, sophisticated reading comprehension, and the ability to make cogent arguments using valid evidence (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007).

A corporate model which mimics a company producing a product—where students are the customer of a service and satisfaction with the experience takes precedence—has become the norm (Wong, 2017). The higher education model has become so ossified that those in power have stressed making sure they can compete successfully for students by offering the latest amenities, mounting the most “popular” majors, and creating a dual class of instructors—those with tenure and those without (Lapovsky, 2018).

Long term visionary solutions may make for good press, but rarely are they ever implemented and are long forgotten as the next challenge, often unanticipated, confronts higher education. Consequently most action is reaction. The leaders of higher education need to offer more than bromides based upon their own collegiate experiences, which do not reflect the realities experienced by students at their very own institutions. Such a casual approach for change is doomed to failure.

## THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC ADVISERS IN RETHINKING EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

Unfortunately, many suggestions for change, while claiming to be focused on students and their experiences, appear to be institution-centric. Where then can university leadership look to better understand their students and to structure their institutions to meet the needs of these students? How can higher education leadership find an alternative to treating their students as customers of a service?

We argue that academic advisers and academic advising can offer valuable insights to university leadership. The validity of the *academic advising perspective* rests with the fact that advising is one of the very few enterprises in higher education that can reach all students and that advisers, like first responders and bellwethers, know how students are negotiating their institutions. Academic advisers know where the trouble spots are (classes too large, courses disproportionately demanding, an overly complex curriculum, programs which may be unreachable for many students because of enrollment controls, insufficient or inappropriate support technologies). Advisers know why students have come to the institution and why they leave. Advisers know when they are first thinking about leaving and what might be prompting this desire to leave. Academic advisers know what other issues are facing students (troubles at home, difficulties with adjustment to college, relationships, addictions, mental health concerns, financial challenges) because academic advisers are the ones most readily available to talk without judgment.

The perspectives of academic advisers can provide insights often not readily available to the leadership in higher education. Academic advisers can provide solutions to some of the vexing issues facing higher education. The leadership that continues to ignore the criticisms or chooses to implement trendy, yet unproven, strategies—instead of relying on the firsthand knowledge of those who work directly with all students—will be destined to continually face the onslaught of these devastating critiques.

While we hope academic advisers may eventually take on a more prominent role in addressing university policy and practice broadly, it would make sense to begin by addressing those policies and practices that impact academic advising itself. Many leaders in higher education do not implement appropriate policies because of their misconceptions of what academic advising is all about. Many misguided suggestions for “improving” academic advising focus not on what might help students the most, but rather focus on what is most efficient for the institution.

For example, some of the most misguided approaches to improving advising include the following:

- Do away with assigned advisers for students, causing every encounter between an adviser and student to be an episodic event with no continuity or observable growth.
- Make registration for the next semester's courses the focus for academic advising, rather than the development of students' educational and career plans or the development of their intellectual identities.
- Believe technology, like degree audits, can perform basic cognitive functions and guide students to making the "right choices."
- Focus adviser training on customer service, rather than on multiple pedagogical models.
- Keep the salary structure for advisers low, ensuring it is always an entry level position with high turnover.
- Insist that students want a "one stop shop" by combining academic advising with service functions, resulting in giving students what they supposedly "want," rather than what they need.
- Drive the organization of academic advising on campus through cycles of centralization and decentralization every five to ten years, promoting each cycle as a dramatic improvement.
- As an upper level administrator, thank advisers for the "wonderful job they are doing," but fail to listen to their concerns about operational issues and what they are learning from their advisees.
- Use only retention and completion data to measure the effectiveness of academic advising, rather than student learning related to the development of their educational and career plans or intellectual identities.
- Be sure students are required to physically "see" an adviser, rather than using technologies that allow for synchronous and asynchronous interactions.
- Demand that all students declare their majors when they enter the institution, claiming this helps retention.
- Insist that referring to students as exploratory or undecided creates a category of student that doesn't really exist, suggesting that without this category such types of students would not exist and there would be no need to provide an academic home with sufficient academic advising for them.

A core problem with these "improvement strategies" is that many of them rely on the misconception that students are customers and academic advising is a transactional service, rather than an educational relationship. If academic advisers are to inform higher education leadership about policies and practices, they should have a consistent understanding about what academic advising entails. So, we now assert why academic advising should not be considered a service.

## ACADEMIC ADVISING IS NOT A SERVICE

No doubt one of the most unfortunate outcomes of the movement to define students as customers has been that interactions with students are described in terms of a business interchange. Educating a student is reduced to a transaction no more momentous than buying a household appliance. Of further consequence is the prevailing notion, especially among those who fund public education, that higher education is no longer a public good, but rather is for private benefit—something to be consumed. This idea of student as customer has spilled over into the academic advising community.

On first blush, the student as customer can be quite compelling for those who are part of the academic advising profession. Academic advisers typically understand that their work depends on a successful relationship with students, which means that students are treated with respect, their opinions honored, and their decisions—while not necessarily endorsed—at least are not demeaned. Such a relationship with students makes assessment a relatively easy endeavor. Asking students if they are satisfied with their interactions with their advisers or, in fact, the entire advising program of the institution is simple enough and can yield useful data, *if satisfaction is designated as the most desirable outcome of academic advising.*

Identifying the student as customer in the academic advising relationship ultimately leads to viewing advising as a service, which then leads to the wrong expectations and the wrong assessments, and finally to a truncated view of academic advising and its place in the higher education enterprise. While there is nothing wrong necessarily with providing services to students (housing, food, and counseling come to mind) academic advising is as much a part of the educational mission of the institution as disciplinary instruction.

Maintaining that academic advising is a service leads to focusing on satisfaction as the primary assessment outcome. This often deflects university administrators away from the true nature of academic advising. Learning outcomes often are obscured or totally neglected in the assessment process. No one would reasonably argue that students should not be treated well. But measuring how well students feel they have been treated simply is not the most significant outcome of academic advising.

If we persist on the service paradigm, we might theoretically end up with more satisfied students. But what are they satisfied with and does this satisfaction have anything to do with learning? What, indeed, will these students have learned? What does one learn as a customer within the service paradigm? On the other hand, what can a student learn as an equal participant in an educational relationship?

Language is important, and it often shapes our impressions. It is thus imperative that academic advising not be referred to as a service. When one thinks of a service, it might be the quality of the interaction that one gets at a hotel or restaurant. There was a time when we got our gas from *service* stations. The services typically were filling our gas tanks, cleaning our car windows, checking tire air pressure, and

seeing if we needed more engine oil. It is not all that hard to assess hotel, restaurant, or gas station service because basically the provider wants to know if the customers were satisfied with the service. For example: Was the desk clerk courteous? Was the room clean? Was the meal on time? Was the food tasty? Did the station attendant thoroughly clean the car windows? While this is important to know when you are in a service industry, it does not address the question of what an individual might have learned from the experience. And this is simply because learning is not what service is all about. We doubt that one would ever find on a restaurant survey a question about whether or not the customer learned how to prepare a leg of lamb to serve a family of five.

The other thing about the word *service* as it might be applied to academic advising is that *service* is received from a *servant*. As academic advising continues to place itself at the core of the educational mission of colleges and universities, it seems prudent to not present advising as a service staffed with servants. Academic advising is educational in nature and students learn from their interactions with advisers. It is far more vital to know what students learn, how long they retain what they learn, and how they use what they learn than to know that they were satisfied (as the only outcome of their interactions) with their advisers and the advising process.

Finally, the distinction between a student and a customer must be made clear so that advising programs can align their programmatic goals and focus on implementing practices to achieve them. As Steele (2014) noted, the difference between a student and a customer can be described as follows:

A key element of learning is that students are expected to show they have mastered some content, developed a skill, produced a project, created a plan, or demonstrated reflection on a topic or issue. And, that student learning will be assessed. This assessment of learning is what distinguishes students from customers, as customers are not held to this level of accountability (para. 11).

If the academic advising community strives to make learning outcome assessments the foundation of the practice, significant data will be realized and the entire higher education endeavor will be enhanced.

## CONCLUSION

Higher education is facing deep, structural challenges, which can't be solved by tinkering on the margins. Academic advising professionals have insight into how and why students come, stay, and succeed. Higher education leaders need to seek guidance from professionals working on the front lines when thinking about the future of their institutions and the policies and practices that might make a real difference for student success.

One of the goals we have in writing this article is to generate discussion among advisers. We offer the following discussion questions as a first step advisers can take in beginning this dialog:

- Where do front line advisers have opportunity for influence in educational policy and priorities? How can students be included as voices with influence, and how can advisers help them gain that voice?
- In its ideal, how could academic advising address some of the challenges outlined above? What are small steps that could be taken to move you closer to meeting that ideal?
- In what ways do your current practices reinforce the corporate logic of higher education and advising as a transaction? What changes could you make in everyday practice to disrupt this pattern? How can your everyday experiences inform a different model?

We also challenge advising administrators to engage more purposefully with academic leadership and to advocate for a place at the table when decisions are made. Advisers should stop waiting for an invitation to contribute solutions. Rather, we urge advising professionals to be proactive in generating viable solutions and finding ways to influence academic leaders.

## REFERENCES

- Arum, R., & Roksa, J. (2011). *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2007). *College learning for the new global century*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Berkowitz, S., & Schnaars, C. (2017, July 6). Colleges are spending more on their athletes because they can. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com>
- Bok, D. (2017, September 21). Improving the quality of education. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com>
- Brown, S., & Mangan, K. (2018, November 16). What you need to know about the proposed Title IX regulations. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com>
- Butrymowicz, S. (2017, January 31). Why this community college is getting rid of remedial classes. *PBS News Hour*. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/>
- Cole, J. R. (2016, April 10). The pillaging of America's state universities. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com>
- Flaherty, C. (2017, April 11). The more things change. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com>
- Foley, N. F. (2018, June 3). Why debates over campus free speech miss the point. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.huffingtonpost.com>



- Harris, A. (2018, June 5). Here's how higher education dies. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com>
- Lapovsky, L. (2018, February 6). The changing business model for colleges and universities. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com>
- Park, M., & Lah, K. (2017, February 2). Berkeley protests of Yiannopoulos caused \$100,000 in damage. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com>
- Saad, L. (2013, September 9). Majority of U.S. workers say job doesn't require a degree. *Gallup*. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com>
- Salovey, P. (2018, February 27). How to sway higher ed's skeptics. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com>
- Smith, C. (2018, January 9). Higher education is drowning in BS. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com>
- Spellings, M. (2018, February 22). The perils of trashing the value of college. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com>
- Stancill, J. (2018, November 13). As silent sam deadline looms, UNC officials quietly debate a difficult decision. *News & Observer*. Retrieved from <https://www.newsobserver.com>
- Steele, G. (2014). Intentional use of technology for academic advising. *NACADA Clearinghouse Resource Web Site*: <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Intentional-use-of-technology-for-academic-advising.aspx>
- Tate, E. (2017, February 6). Digging deeper into campus diversity. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com>
- Thompson, D. (2018, December 11). Does it matter where you go to college? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com>
- Wong, K. (2017, July 31). Why we shouldn't think about college as a business. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com>

**George Steele** is currently a consultant for NACADA and The University of Alaska. Previously, he has served as the Executive Director of the Ohio Learning Network (OLN) and for the advising program at The Ohio State University for undecided and major-changing undergraduate students. In his professional work, George has written publications addressing academic and career advising, theory, use of technology in advising, and assessment of the use of technology. George has been a member of the NACADA for over 30 years and has held numerous leadership positions in that organization and has been recognized by it for his work and contributions. George holds a doctorate degree in education from Ohio State University.

**Eric R. White** was the executive director of the Division of Undergraduate Studies and the associate dean for advising at The Pennsylvania State University. He is the past president of NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising

(2004-2005) and the Association of Deans and Directors of University Colleges and Undergraduate Studies (1993). He was an affiliate assistant professor of education at Penn State and author of monograph chapters and journal articles. The 2002 recipient of NACADA's Virginia N Gordon Award for Excellence in the Field of Advising and Penn State's Administrative Excellence Award (2005), he retired in 2012 with emeritus status. His doctorate is in counseling psychology from the University of Pennsylvania.