

# Revisiting the Role of Academic Advising in Equitably Serving Diverse College Students

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*It has been more than a decade since Museus and Ravello analyzed the roles that culturally engaging academic advisors play in producing equitable outcomes among racially diverse student populations. Their study highlighted the importance of humanized, holistic, and proactive advising in effectively serving students of color in particular. In this essay, one of the original authors discusses how a decade of research has built on this earlier analysis and summarizes evolving insights about the role of culturally engaging advising in supporting students of color. The article concludes with implications for future research, policy, and practice aimed at more equitably serving diverse populations.*

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Higher education in the United States serves some students more effectively than others. Data show that postsecondary institutions do a better job at retaining and graduating White students than students of color (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). Existing evidence reveals that several environmental factors might contribute to these racial inequities (Hurtado et al., 2008; Museus & Quaye, 2009). For example, the cultures from which students of color originate are more likely to be devalued on their respective campuses when compared to their White peers (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Students of color are also more likely to encounter hostile campus climates (Hurtado et al., 2008). In such environments, these students might find it harder to connect with educators who authentically care about them and to gain access to critical campus resources (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012).

Academic advisors can serve as powerful institutional agents who provide critical support to college students. The impact that academic advisors can—and do—have on the lives of students makes it critical for institutional leaders and advisors themselves to understand what constitutes high-quality academic advising. Those who are concerned with understanding how

advising can fuel positive outcomes underscore the value of several approaches to advising (Alvarado & Olson, 2020; Lowenstein, 2009; Mu & Fosnacht, 2019), but empirical evidence regarding what constitutes optimal academic advising remains relatively sparse.

More than a decade ago, Joanna Ravello and I examined the role of academic advisors at three postsecondary institutions with high and equitable success rates among students of color. The findings were published in the *NACADA Journal*, and they highlight the crucial role academic advising played in fostering success among students of color on these campuses (Museus & Ravello, 2010). The findings underscored that *humanized* advising involves cultivating meaningful relationships that allow students to view advisors as real human beings or even friends who care about and are committed to their success; *proactive* advising involves assuming responsibility to actively connect students with resources that can help them thrive in college and their future lives; and *holistic* advising entails understanding the complex interconnected nature of various aspects of the lives of students and serving as a conduit to the larger support network on campus to ensure students can access the support that they need to address a wide range of problems that may affect their academic progress. The term *culturally engaging advising* is used to refer to advising characterized by humanized, proactive, and holistic approaches—as well as common ground, which is discussed in the following sections. These approaches to academic advising acknowledge the unique challenges that historically disenfranchised students face and incorporate this knowledge into efforts to serve them.

The study that generated the aforementioned findings was one component of a larger collective research agenda focused on comprehending how college educators can and do cultivate environments in which diverse student populations can thrive. Since 2010, my research team at the National Institute for Transformation and Equity (NITE) and I have advanced this agenda through a wide range of studies that include data collected from more than 1,000 interviewees and 20,000

survey respondents at postsecondary institutions across the United States. The *NACADA Journal* invited me to write this essay to revisit the concept of culturally engaging advising and discuss these new insights. Therefore, the following discussion heavily focuses on synthesizing lessons from NITE's decade of research and engages other relevant scholarship on culturally engaging advising and students of color, where appropriate. So, what does the mounting evidence show about how academic advisors might be able to maximize the positive impact they have on the experiences and lives of college students of color?

### **Evolving Insights from a Decade of Research**

NITE's research has generated several important insights beyond the Museus and Ravello (2010) study that might inform efforts to maximize the impact of college advising on students of color. An overview of three of the most salient themes is provided herein. Specifically discussed is how the research has generated evidence of the broad impact of culturally engaging advising approaches, how culturally engaging advising can serve as a conduit to culturally relevant learning opportunities, and the important role of common ground in culturally engaging advising. Also included are some recommendations for scholarly research on academic advising, institutional policy related to college advising, and academic advising practice.

### **The Broad Impact of Culturally Engaging Advising Approaches**

While the Museus and Ravello (2010) study provided some indication that culturally engaging advising contributes to the success of students, research conducted over the last decade has shed light on how such types of advising might affect success among college students of color. Both qualitative and quantitative empirical studies suggest that culturally engaging support might increase success among students of color through increasing students' academic motivation, connections to their campuses, and sense of belonging (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017, 2018; Museus & Mueller, 2018; Museus & Neville, 2012; Museus & Smith, 2014). These findings are consistent with the results of a wide range of recent empirical inquiries conducted by other scholars (Blake et al., 2020; Castro Samayoa, 2018; Druery & Brooms, 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Henslee et al., 2017; Muñoz & Espino, 2017). It should not be surprising that culturally

responsive support might motivate students or make them feel more connected to their campuses (Museus, 2010, 2011, 2014; Museus & Harris, 2010).

However, some ways these forms of support exhibit an impact on students of color might be less intuitive. For example, several student participants across the research projects have shared that faculty members and staff who cared about them and were committed to their success led the students to develop a deep sense of responsibility to succeed for those educators who had invested so much in supporting them. A student from one study encapsulated this sentiment when he said that his academic advisor "has invested so much in me—How can I fail them?" In this way, humanized advising can serve as a powerful motivator that is often not well-understood or focused on in campus conversations about equity.

The impact of culturally engaging advising might also transcend its influence on college success and impact other important developmental outcomes. While much remains to be learned about whether and how culturally engaging advising influences various outcomes, one recent analysis explored how culturally engaging support is linked to increased student commitments and the ability of students to have a positive impact on their communities and the world (Museus & Kim, 2021). These findings suggest that culturally engaging academic advising might prepare students to tackle the real social and political problems in their communities and the world after graduation. In doing so, these findings contradict any assumptions that providing undergraduates with proactive and holistic support might be detrimental handholding or make them less resilient (Allen et al., 2014). One way culturally engaging advisors might foster civic commitments and capacities is through proactively connecting students to culturally relevant learning opportunities that allow them to understand social and political problems in their communities and empower them to take action to address these issues.

### **Culturally Engaging Advising as a Channel to Culturally Relevant Learning**

Culturally relevant learning functions to connect students of color with members of their own cultural communities; it allows them to learn about issues impacting these communities; and it centers on activities that enable them to

understand and solve real problems affecting the lives of people within these communities (Museus, 2014). Research suggests one critical way culturally engaging advisors provide holistic support to students is by linking the latter to culturally relevant learning environments (Museus et al., 2018). This observation is consistent with other studies highlighting the value of academic advisors linking the academic interests of students to their personal lives (Lowenstein, 2009; Dyarbrough, 2002). Academic advisors who have strong connections to culturally relevant curricular and cocurricular programs might be more equipped to ensure students have access to them, but advisors can also be key institutional agents who play an essential role in constructing and sustaining such learning environments (Museus et al., 2018).

Culturally relevant learning opportunities can have a transformative impact on the lives of students of color. Empirical evidence across several qualitative and quantitative studies consistently indicates that helping students of color access culturally relevant learning opportunities—such as those in ethnic studies programs—is related to enhanced engagement, learning, validation, empowerment, leadership development, civic engagement, and ultimately success (Museus et al., 2012; Museus et al., 2016; Quayle et al., 2015). Unfortunately, many students of color have historically been denied access to learning opportunities that are relevant to their communities and identities, so they might not seek out such activities on their own or know that such possibilities exist on their campuses (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012). When academic advisors help construct or connect students of color with such opportunities, advisors increase the likelihood of success. Common ground enhances academic advisors' ability to link students to such opportunities.

### **Critical Role of Common Ground in Culturally Engaging Advising**

All academic advisors can develop the capacity to provide students with culturally engaging support and connect them with culturally relevant learning opportunities. However, research shows that students of color often identify academic advisors and other educators of color as the institutional agents who provided them with culturally engaging support and access to culturally relevant learning opportunities (Museus et al., 2016). It is possible that academic advisors of

color are more likely to serve students in these ways because they have more intimate knowledge of the racial realities students of color face. Moreover, scholars argue that it is vital for advisors to acknowledge and help address these challenges (Carnaje, 2016; Lee, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2010). Academic advisors and educators of color highlighted their past struggles navigating the often dehumanizing and overly complex system of higher education as catalysts to their dedication to supporting undergraduates and as a critical source of experiential knowledge that allowed them to understand the challenges that students from historically marginalized communities and identities must navigate (Museus & Neville, 2012; Museus & Mueller, 2018). Thus, this scholarship suggests that academic advisors of color might hold especially important insights into how campuses can construct advising in ways that more effectively support students at the margins.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that White academic advisors and other educators can—and sometimes do—prioritize such culturally engaging support and help students of color access culturally relevant learning environments (Museus & Neville, 2012). White advisors can center such approaches in their work with students of color by investing energy in understanding the struggles these students face, committing to continuously learning about these experiences, and reflexively working to understand their own privilege and how they can use it to empower students from marginalized communities and help them thrive. Therefore, while it might be easy to assume that advising does not require such knowledge and skills, scholarly research consistently indicates that these skills are necessary for all educators to maximize their potential positive impact on students' passion for learning, sense of belonging, or motivation to excel.

### **Lessons for Future Research**

If colleges and universities are to support academic advisors in maximizing success among students of color, they must foster cultures and structures that are conducive to such aims. Unfortunately, many campuses house systems that impede the abilities of academic advisors to utilize culturally engaging philosophies and approaches in their work (Museus & Ravello, 2010). Campus cultures that reward high-volume and transactional interactions to maximize efficiency and productivity are likely to devalue more authentic humanized

relationships or proactive and holistic approaches to support (Museus & LePeau, 2019). These cultures fuel the creation of systems in which many advisors have massive caseloads. Such systems limit the abilities of advisors to understand the many complex and interconnected issues students face, to provide the culturally engaging support they need, and to maintain relationships with culturally relevant programs across their campuses so that the advisors can serve as a conduit to these possibilities for students. These larger systemic realities might be why culturally engaging advising is more often found in federally and state funded targeted support programs with missions to serve marginalized and undeserved student populations (Museus, 2010; Museus et al., 2018).

There is a paucity of systematic empirical evidence that can be leveraged to foster a collective understanding about how existing campus cultures and structures constrain the work of academic advisors. This is arguably one of the most critical areas of future research on the advising of college students of color—and arguably college students in general. Researchers can and should document how institutional cultures and structures inhibit the ability of academic advisors to develop the capacities or allocate the time and energy to provide culturally engaging support to diverse populations, as well as whether and how campuses have critically analyzed, re-envisioned, and changed systems to be more amenable to such advising. This knowledge would be invaluable to institutional efforts to create more equitable systems within academic advising spheres and other vital areas of student support.

### **Lessons for Future Policy and Practice**

Nevertheless, the research offers several implications for institutional policy and practice aimed at cultivating advising systems that maximize positive outcomes among students of color. Colleges and universities that are serious about addressing systemic racial inequities in student outcomes should allocate sufficient resources to ensure that academic advisors can offer students of color critical culturally engaging support. Allocating sufficient resources requires providing professional development opportunities and ensuring that academic advisors have manageable caseloads to spend a significant amount of their time learning about the realities of students of color, reflecting on their own practice and grappling with questions

about how it can be more culturally engaging, and cultivating relationships with educators in culturally relevant curricular and cocurricular programs on their campuses.

In addition, institutions of higher education should ensure that advisors are evaluated and rewarded for having commitments and investing substantial energy in cultivating the ability to provide culturally engaging advising. Doing so might mean the prioritization of supporting activities that enhance culturally engaging academic advising skills through the allocation of professional development funding, annual performance reviews, and recognition awards.

Colleges and universities should also consider the importance of providing culturally engaging academic advising in hiring practices. While it is increasingly common for institutions of higher education to ask about and consider a candidate's experience with diversity and difference, the attention given to these factors can be superficial. For example, a shallow consideration of diversity and equity might be employed when all candidates who report some type of experience working with communities to which they do not belong are viewed as equally meeting a minimum diversity requirement. The focus of conversations about the preparedness, quality, or fit of those candidates is diverted to other factors. Alternatively, academic advisor search-and-hiring processes can more meaningfully center on a candidate's capacity to provide culturally engaging support to their students and advocate equity on their campuses. Such processes might involve including explicit language about prioritizing abilities to provide humanized, proactive, and holistic support to advisees. Such approaches might also warrant explicit interview questions and search committee conversations about a candidate's knowledge of diverse communities, their commitment to providing culturally engaging support, and evidence of their providing such support in the past or alternatively their capacity to do so.

On the ground, academic advisors should engage in continuous reflection on their own practice and how they might more effectively integrate humanized, proactive, and holistic approaches into the ways in which they support students. They can ask themselves questions that require self-reflection, such as:

- How can I approach interactions with students to cultivate more meaningful relationships with them?



- How do my students know I really care about them?
- What opportunities do I need to deepen my knowledge about so I can proactively encourage students to take advantage of them?
- What relationships do I need to strengthen on campus to ensure that I am able to be an effective conduit to the larger support network?

The many demands most academic advisors face and the reality that they might not have been socialized into prioritizing these types of support means such reflection will likely be difficult for many people. Over time and with practice, however, such continuous reflection can become easier and even normalized.

Academic advisors should also make efforts to cultivate relationships with ethnic studies programs and other curricular and cocurricular units that provide culturally relevant learning opportunities across their institutions. Such connections are vital to academic advisors developing the capacity to provide holistic support and serve as a conduit to transformative learning environments for students of color on their campuses. Cultivating these networks can also break down organizational silos and maximize the likelihood that educators in such culturally relevant learning environments are more equipped to reach out to advisors for support when it is necessary to proactively, holistically, and effectively serve their students.

Finally, academic advisors should invest time and energy in understanding the unique issues their students of color often face. Higher education scholars have generated a plethora of research on the experiences of students of color, which can serve as an ample resource for academic advisors. However, advisors have a much broader range of resources available to them, such as culturally relevant literature from ethnic studies, diversity and equity programming on their respective campuses, and the wide range of digital resources (e.g., digital stories, blogs and vlogs, and online communities) college students of color create themselves and are now available online. These forms of knowledge can be critical tools for advisors who seek to enhance their capacity to find common ground with their students.

If campuses ensure that academic advisors are able to nurture the knowledge, and commitments, and capacities to provide culturally engaging support, then advisors will be more likely to

develop powerful connections that can ignite students' drive to excel in college and beyond. If and when campuses approach academic advising in this way, they might empower their advisors to be leaders in cultivating more equitable cultures that are supportive, validating, and empowering for all students across their campuses as well.

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