

# Reframing Academic Advising for Student Success: From Advisor to Cultural Navigator

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Good morning! I want to thank you, NACADA, for giving me the opportunity to talk with you today about a subject that I think is critically important and central to all constituents in higher education: college student success. Everyone is talking about student success nowadays. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) released the report titled, “America’s Unmet Need: The Imperative of Equity in Higher Education,” which among other things is fundamentally about college student success (Witham, Malcom-Piqueux, Dowd, & Bensimon, 2015). Several years ago, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) partnered with several other agencies, such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and released *Learning Reconsidered* and *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2004, 2006), both of which identified major learning outcomes of higher education and argued for integrated learning as a measure of student success. Indeed, there’s much ado about college student success.

The new or renewed focus on college student success is justified. The weight of empirical evidence to date suggests that the educational benefits of college attendance flow most fully to individuals who find success in higher education. For instance, the economic or monetary benefits of college are best realized by those who graduate from college not those who attend a few weeks, several months, or one year and then drop out. Recall that the College Board for a number of years has published data indicating that the average bachelor’s degree recipient can expect to earn 66% more than the average high school graduate over a 40-year work life—that is estimated to be \$1 million more earned by degree recipients (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Graduation pays. That’s why I like to remind provosts, deans, enrollment services staff, and retention specialists that retention can never be the primary aim. If student retention is the primary goal, then there is never a motivation to graduate them. Graduation or degree completion carries many more benefits to the individual and

society than does mere college attendance or “early arrival with premature departure” (i.e., before degree completion), as I’ve said on occasion.

For these and other important reasons, I think of college student success as a critical goal in higher education, a near-boundless research topic in our field, and a major policy issue with significant implications for students and families, colleges and universities, as well as the larger society. Currently, I serve as professor of Higher Education at The Ohio State University where I also direct the Center for Higher Education Enterprise, affectionately known as “CHEE,” which is a new research and policy center that aims to increase and ensure student success for all. CHEE’s work on student success falls within four key priority areas: college access, affordability, engagement, and excellence.

In terms of access, college must be accessible for all: period. To be accessible, college must remain affordable; for too many reasons and too many years, the rising costs of college have fallen on the shoulders of students and families. CHEE advocates that the costs of higher education should be shared by all those who benefit from it, including students and families, but also state and local governments, industry, and the larger society. In terms of engagement, research (some undertaken by CHEE) shows that students who are engaged in their educational experience perform better, exhibit greater learning gains, and achieve higher levels of success. So like others in initiatives across the nation, CHEE uses that information to promote student engagement in high-impact practices in college.

As a research center, CHEE works to engage its partners both on and off campus in efforts around student success. Finally, CHEE’s ultimate goal is to ensure excellence in the higher education enterprise, and those dedicated to CHEE pay close attention to #WhatWorks—the name of the Center’s most recent report series—not what does not work. CHEE is driven to change lives by changing education and ensuring student success. After all, what’s the point of attending college and even

graduating from it, if you learn nothing and can do nothing with it in the end?

### Student Success

*Student success*—two simple words that, when taken together, become a critical goal in higher education, a very large topic, and a serious assignment for any single keynote. Student success has been the focus of my scholarly research since I started my career as a new assistant professor at my former institution, the University of Tennessee–Knoxville (UTK) (Go Vols!), where I met and worked closely with a former President of NACADA, Dr. Ruth Darling, who is here in the audience. Ruth and I accomplished much together at UTK in terms of increasing first-year student retention rates, establishing a new 5-week summer bridge program—UT LEAD—for historically underrepresented students and redesigning freshman orientation and other pre-enrollment activities that were offered to ensure new students’ success on campus. Ruth and I were not alone in our endeavors; we were supported by the then-Provost, Dr. Bob Holub, and joined by our colleagues in student affairs, academic affairs, faculty in the colleges, and, yes, even students who acted as peer advisors and mentors to their fellow entering classmates. A major take-away from our work at UTK was this: Increasing student success rates takes hard work, but hard work is no excuse for retreat; working together we can do it.

I’ve conducted a number of studies on the work we did at UTK (e.g., Strayhorn, 2009, 2011) and even more studies on programs at other institutions, large national survey samples, and qualitative interview-based investigations into vulnerable student populations, including former foster youth, some who were wards of the court or formerly incarcerated males, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer (GLBQ) youth, to name a few. I found that there is not a single student in all of higher education who does not want to be successful. I am not just talking about large, public land-grant institutions like UTK or my current institution, The Ohio State University. I am referring to the entire higher education enterprise: large publics, small privates, minority-serving, community colleges, technical and trade, even online and for-profit institutions. I’ve never met a student who said to me: “Doc, I’m striving each day to fail, to learn how to quit, to be unsuccessful.” Every student wants to succeed, but unfortunately far too many enroll without the academic preparation required to succeed or they enroll and struggle to access the resources, information, and advice that enables their success at our institutions.

My research reveals that all want to succeed, but too many do not, and the causes are not all their own. Factors contributing to success in college and those associated with dropout are also not the same. Some students leave for the very same reasons why others stay. For example, some students find it rewarding to establish meaningful supportive relationships with university faculty and staff (Strayhorn, 2008a), while others find frequent and personal interactions with faculty and staff intrusive, stifling, and even overwhelming. College student success is a function of many factors, and academic preparation prior to college is just a relatively small part of the explanatory models used in research (Strayhorn, 2013a).

### Diversity

College student success begins with access. College, in my opinion, should be accessible to all who want it. And I believe that several efforts to expand access to postsecondary education in the United States have generally worked. Today, there are approximately 21 million college students enrolled in North American higher education, and those students are enrolled across more than 4,300 colleges and universities (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Just over one half of those institutions are 2-year community colleges and the rest of the enterprise consists of 4-year public and private research universities, comprehensive institutions, liberal arts colleges, minority-serving institutions, and technical and trade centers.

Women now outnumber men on most college campuses. Approximately one third of all college students are first generation; that is, they are the first in their immediate family to attend college. (By a show of hands, how many in the audience today consider themselves first-generation college students—first in your family to attend and complete college?)

Racial and ethnic minorities now make up a significant proportion of the undergraduate student population, a much larger share than was ever possible in bygone eras marked by laws that prohibited education of Blacks in the U.S., de jure segregation, and even anti-affirmative action or immigration decisions. Despite all of that history, access has expanded for first-generation students, low-income students, women, students of color, veterans, GLBQ students, and the list goes on.

Those of us in higher education have built bridges for many to access higher education (Strayhorn, 2011), and that’s a good thing. We’ve done a good job. We must continue these efforts and maintain all

gains. Yet there's much more to do. Bringing students to higher education means nothing if they're not successful. Access without success is useless, but access with success is everything.

If the maximum benefits of college flow to those who successfully complete their degrees, then we must strive to ensure student success. Our efforts are incomplete until we connect students with the resources they need to be successful in higher education, and that's where I think we can do a better job. Our access bridges make college accessible, possible, a potential reality for so many students who never thought college was within their reach: students who are first in their family to attend college, students who have never been encouraged to think of themselves as college material, quite honestly, students who we, in higher education, never thought of as college bound, college ready, or college able. Our bridges connect new and different students to our campuses—students whose cultural backgrounds are qualitatively different from the majority or from the dominant codes and values that operate on campus. These codes, values, and beliefs shape the character of our campuses, whether we are aware of it or not.

For instance, some students come to higher education who were born in communities and lived in neighborhoods amongst families and friends who value cooperation, community, and collaboration, which is part of NACADA's theme this year: Collaboration is key. These students were raised in environments where collaboration is the order of the day, where they strive to get along with or support one another. The collective is always far more important than the individual in such contexts. It's "us" or "we" and never "I" since "I" wouldn't be without "us" and "I" and "she" is always looking out for "we." This tongue-twister, in all actuality, best represents the cultural context in which I was born, and many students share this mind-set.

The cultural system of higher education often operates on a very different set of cultural beliefs and values than those to which some students are accustomed. By and large, higher education is set up to reward the individual over the collective or group—think about how rewards such as grades, scholarships, even merit pay are structured and distributed in college. Higher education courses, majors, clubs, and organizations are designed to push students to make decisions based on individual values or preferences without consideration of the collective, although there are some attempts at changing this with the renewed focus on civic

outcomes, democratic education, service learning, sustainability, and the like (Checkoway, 2002; Einfeld & Collins, 2008). Without connection to resources, information, and people who can help supply strategies for negotiating these different cultures, these students are at risk for failure, for dropping out, and may be unsuccessful in college, not due to academic underpreparedness, but rather due to cultural incongruity or their unreadiness to negotiate or straddle multiple cultures, to acclimate to a new cultural orientation, or to develop the skills necessary for cultural navigation. Before diving too deeply into my thoughts about cultural navigation, let's talk about culture and higher education as a cultural site.

### Culture of Higher Education

Culture is defined as shared attitudes or patterns of behaviors characteristic of a particular social group or collective that distinguishes it from another. Culture refers to aspects of a particular group as well—its beliefs, arts, music, cuisine, institutions, and customs to name a few. Culture can be transmitted, and this is often done through language, arts, rituals, and other acts of socialization such as rites of passage, orientation, and purposeful ceremonies.

Higher education is a culture. It has clear markers of its cultural character. For example, higher education has its own codified language, chock-full of acronyms like NASPA, ACPA, ASHE, NACA, and yes, NACADA. In higher education, it is not a *dorm* but rather a what? *Residence hall*. That shared understanding is germane only to higher education. Try asking a medical professional to define the term, and he or she will explain that a *dormitory* is a room for people in a hospital or institution. And in higher education, terms like *exploratory* or *undeclared* refer to students' decisions regarding their academic major not deep sea diving or a type of warfare. A common attribute of cultures is that words and phrases take on endogenous meaning—that is, the meaning and essence of the word or phrase originates from within the group. This is true of many terms and phrases in higher education.

There are commonly held beliefs that also define higher education as a culture. For instance, as advisors and educators, we have a strong collective ethos around "students first" and an abiding belief in the important role that faculty-student interactions play in students' success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008a). Our traditions are many: from freshman orientation

to convocation, from tenure and promotion to graduation. Some of us have celebrated campus traditions like “streaking the lawn” at the University of Virginia, my alma mater, or jumping in Mirror Lake at The Ohio State University. And no matter how crazy or obscene such acts may appear to those outside, these traditions are precious, time-honored cultural artifacts best understood by those who consider themselves insiders or members of the campus. Indeed, higher education is a culture.

### Cultural Navigators

To apprehend this culture, one must be part of it, socialized to it, or (aided by a member who acts as a cultural navigator) learn the implicit and explicit aspects of it. Individuals who strive to help students move successfully through education and life, I refer to as *cultural navigators*. These might be parents, educators, mentors (both formal and informal), pastors, experienced peers, coaches, and most important for today’s conversation, academic advisors. Cultural navigators are those who know something about the new culture. They know the codes of conduct, customs, dominant values, language, requirements, rules, and traditions. Their knowledge is born of experience, mostly firsthand, which gives them the acumen and understanding to help others. Like a high-tech global positioning system or “GPS,” cultural navigators do more than merely tell someone where to go; they show them via demonstration, illustration, or simulation of possible paths. Cultural navigators in higher education help guide students until they arrive at their academic destination or at least until they are comfortable steering while their cultural navigators act as guides on the side and keep them on their path (Strayhorn, 2015).

How does this relate to college student success? As I mentioned earlier, students need more than basic academic skills to be college ready or successful in higher education (Strayhorn, 2014). Remember, the weight of research evidence, to date, suggests that only 25% of the variance in traditional college outcome measures is attributed to academic factors such as high school grade-point average (GPA), college entrance exam score, and pre-college assessments of students’ academic aptitude (Strayhorn, 2013a). That leaves almost three fourths of the variance in college student success outcomes unexplained by such factors and likely attributable to those over which we, in the education community, have some control: finances, engagement, major, belonging, campus climate, and yes, advising, to name a few. Students also

need to be able to move to and through higher education to succeed. This is particularly true for those for whom the distance between their culture of origin and higher education is greatest.

We, then, must see our roles as cultural navigators who help students negotiate higher education successfully. We must see students as actors, agents of their own destiny in this cultural space. Students bring cultural wealth—not deficits—with them. Our job as cultural navigators is to see them as glasses or vessels partly full, not empty. We must help them with a cultural excavation of sorts by working together with them to dig deep into their cultural repertoires and identify the wealth they bring to campus and the ways to deploy it in this setting that may be decidedly new to them. That is what cultural navigators do.

### Belonging and Mattering

Cultural navigators help students belong and recognize that all students matter. For instance, I met a student who spent most of her life helping her mom raise younger siblings in the family. Once in college, she really struggled with the academic demands of college course work and balancing such demands with other commitments such as work, church, friends, clubs, and, as she said, four to five hours she “wastes” each night sleeping. Through several conversations, we talked about how she managed time prior to college, how she prioritized school and family life, and how she organized her day to accomplish so much. After identifying what worked before (e.g., keeping a schedule, task lists, accountability partner), we devised ways for her to use similar strategies to succeed in college. I also helped her convert a professor’s syllabus into a set of tasks for her master to-do list, several entries for her calendar, and a self-assessment of what she learned by reframing the course objectives as questions.

You see, cultural navigators also act as translators, coaches, and guides. Cultural navigators know something about the culture—how it operates, how to get things done, how to be part of it and feel a sense of belonging. They share that information with students, help them adjust to college life, and make themselves available as trusted go-to resources whenever possible.

In 2012, I published a book on college students’ sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). That book features findings from several studies, one of which focused on Latino student sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008b). Sense of belonging is

fundamentally felt by individuals who believe they are cared about, respected, and part of a campus community. It is about social relations, connections, and supportive interactions. Everyone wants to belong—it is a fundamental need of all people and offers a compelling motive sufficient to drive human behavior.

Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, for certain people, and during certain moments. Sense of belonging is critically important the moment someone feels alone and isolated. In unfamiliar or foreign places, individuals are prone to feel isolated, alone, and unsupported, but sights of familiar faces, hints of familiar scents, or support from cultural navigators can reduce, if not remove, feelings of loneliness. Decades of social psychological research has shown that it is virtually impossible for people to excel or strive in places where they feel threatened, vulnerable, or lonely.

Sense of belonging is related to mattering (Strayhorn, 2012). I have written that social identities play a role in one's belonging because social identities matter and they intersect and affect belonging. Who students are relates to what it takes for them to belong. First-generation college students, often assumed to know relatively little about college, the informal rules of campus life, or how to navigate higher education, may need considerable support from others to feel a sense of belonging in college. First-generation college students of color may need even more support because their sense of belonging is likely influenced by issues of race and racism on campus (Strayhorn, 2013b).

Sense of belonging engenders achievement and student success. My research has shown that students who feel a positive sense of belonging earn better grades, are retained at higher rates, and adjust to college more easily than their peers who do not feel as if they belong. However, the need to belong must be satisfied continually as the context or culture changes, time changes, and people change.

Remember, one part of our job as cultural navigators is to help students build supportive connections with others on campus so they can find that sense of belonging that means so much. We know that students who feel a sense of belonging feel stuck to campus and, thus, find it very difficult to leave or drop out because doing so would require completely undoing or severing social bonds with so many others on campus. Newcomers to the culture of higher education need

cultural navigators to belong. And, students who belong succeed.

### Navigating a New Generation

In the belonging book, I highlight results from several studies including a few on Latino students. I met a young woman named Alejandra (a pseudonym) who was a first-generation Latina in her first year of college when I met her. Her story is interesting because she reveals how she applied to college despite her parents' wishes.

Not all students apply to college with their parents support, endorsement, or knowledge. In fact, in a paper where I write about "Alejandra's story," I shared how she talked at length about her father "enabling [her] to quit" college easily. Consider the following paraphrased excerpt from her interview:

It was difficult to talk to him [her father]. Every time we talked he would ask me how I'm doing in college. If I said that I had a long day or a hard test, then he would say things like "Don't beat yourself up. . . . You don't have to stay there, you can come home." But I didn't want to come home. I wanted to do better and succeed. I really felt like I should be in college. . . . It made sense to me. So eventually I had to just stop talking to my dad for awhile, which made me feel bad as his daughter.

Is Alejandra's dad a bad guy? No. Is it that he doesn't love his daughter? No. In fact, he loves her so much that he's driven to protect her from difficulty, challenge, and failure, like most parents regardless of race, gender, or social class.

I learned from the interview that Alejandra's parents also depended on her greatly in the home: to answer the phone as the only fluent English speaker in their immediate family, to translate conversations with neighbors, to pick up and sort mail and call attention to any communication related to bills or family emergencies. All of this shapes how her dad responded and why he tried to keep her from applying to college in the first place.

One day Alejandra met a college recruiter who came to her school and said: "Alejandra, I see something in you. You have potential. You can be successful in college. Apply." With initial interest but many reservations, Alejandra replied: "I wouldn't even know where to get started." The recruiter, acting as a cultural navigator, said: "No problem. I'll help you. I can tell you where to get

started and how to get the application done” (because cultural navigators know something about the journey). Interested but afraid, Alejandra agrees. The college recruiter helps her through the application process and helps her apply for financial aid. Although new to Alejandra, these aspects of college life are known, familiar, secondhand to the recruiter. Alejandra gets admitted.

After reading her acceptance letter, she’s overcome with fear, anxiety, and shame—not the usual response of students to such good news as gaining admission to their first choice of college. She feared what her parents would say about her decision to apply behind their backs. She feared what her community might think once they learned that she had applied and gained admission to college against her father’s wishes. She worried that what would be good news in higher education would become a point of shame in her family and community. This sort of cultural clash (i.e., cultural incongruence) occurs daily in this country on all campuses for many students who are new to or unfamiliar with the culture of higher education.

I see lots of heads nodding indicating that this story resonates with many of you in the audience. And it should. It reflects an experience, a moment, indeed, a cross-cultural exchange that many of us who work in academic advising have shared with students. Academic advising is arguably one of the most critical functional areas in all of higher education. It is the primary touch point where students access information, resources, and tools to navigate successfully through college. It is where students learn the rules of this culture—what a credit hour is, how many credits each course carries, the number of credits required for a major, minor, or (ultimately) graduation. Academic advising is where students go for advice about their futures, their paths to purposeful lives, and their progress through college. Alejandra’s story is filled with many, many lessons about culture, cultural navigation, and our role as cultural navigators in higher education.

### **Cultural Navigating: Sharing the Knowledge**

Being a cultural navigator begins with a few admissions. We must admit that higher education is a culture and we know something about this culture. There are things we know about the journey that we’re asking students to take, things that we know from experience, from others’ experiences, from our training, from research.

For instance, we know that most students take 5 to 6 years to complete their bachelor’s degree

nowadays; it is not the 4-year trek of yesteryear. There are other things that we know about college. For example, we know that most students will change their major at least once during their undergraduate careers, and many will change it two or three more times. We also know that there are consequences associated with changing one’s major excessively. For instance, we know from research that, on average, changing one’s major once adds approximately 0.50 years to the time-to-degree. Change it twice? The major-changer will need nearly 1.75 times longer than a student who stays with his or her initial major.

So is the moral of my story to keep students from changing their major? No, not at all. There are good reasons for changing majors sometimes. As students learn more about themselves, their interests, and the world around them, their academic interests shift, change, or converge on a new focus. But without careful advising, access to accurate and timely information about sequencing of courses, class offerings, degree requirements, and so forth, students may unknowingly extend their time-to-degree, pick up additional years or semesters of college that they must pay for, and switch to a major that actually does not align with their interests or vocational path after all.

There are other things that we know about this culture that make us effective cultural navigators in our academic advising roles. For instance, a meta-analysis of existing knowledge yields important conclusions about what we know. I’ll name just a few more:

1. College takes time and how students use their time influences their success. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) indicate that college students spend 8.0 to 10.0 hours a day on their cell phone (i.e., texting, talking, using social media) but only 3.3 hours per day engaged in educational activities. It is recommended that college students devote at least 2.0 hours of study time for every hour spent in class. Cultural navigators know (or now know) these general rules and share them with students as a way of enabling their success in college.
2. Speaking of time spent studying, years of research have shown that cramming is an ineffective strategy for true learning to occur. While cramming the night before might permit immediate recall of facts

and figures on a test or quiz the very next day, it is unlikely to lead to long-term memory of information or higher order cognitive processes such as analysis, synthesis, or evaluation. Cultural navigators know (or now know) this information and encourage students to devote adequate time to studying, effective note taking, and proven techniques for mastery in learning.

3. What students bring *to college* is far less important than what they do *in college*. Higher education affords students many opportunities for involvement, deep engagement, and purposeful activity: Clubs and organizations, courses and seminars, workshops and trainings, sports and leisure, faculty research and music groups—the opportunities are endless. Academic advisors, acting as cultural navigators, play a critical role in student success by helping students choose which activities or experiences will help them arrive at their desired destination—that is, the right major, the right minor, the right GPA, the right class, the right internship, and ultimately graduation.

In closing, let's remember that effective academic advisors, as cultural navigators, recognize higher education as a culture and know something about this journey called *college*. They hold high, but attainable, expectations for all students, who often rise to the expectations set for them. Effective academic advisors, as cultural navigators, care about their students and they signal in meaningful ways that students matter. They know their students—their names, where they are from, what they bring with them, their strengths and weaknesses. They do not see this as coddling but rather advising in its truest form. They help make the implicit explicit, the hidden known, and the unfamiliar commonplace. They help students navigate college by making clear what students need to know and do to be successful. They help students find a sense of belonging on campus.

As I said before, this is hard work and it requires a good deal of time, energy, and attention. But hard work is no excuse for retreat. Indeed, collaboration is key. NACADA, my fellow cultural navigators, we have the key to student success. Let's use it.

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