

My Experience as an Educator Managing Customer Service: Response to Steele and White

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Due to the corporatization of higher education, advisers must constantly be aware of the balance they are striking between the roles of educator and service provider. Given trends towards increasing corporatization, it is more important than ever for advisers to share personal narratives about such challenges. With this in mind, I share my own story.

At the 2019 NACADA annual conference in Louisville, Kentucky, the common reading discussion focused on Steele and White's (2019) article "Leadership in Higher Education: Insights from Academic Advisors." This discussion really hit home for me. I had experienced internal struggle and eventual reaffirmation in my advising practice. Having only worked at smaller institutions previously, I was not used to the more rigid advising structures my new job prescribed. I came to my new school with an open mind regarding structure and established processes.

However, a couple of months in, I was not feeling like myself. I was "protected" from the students by my receptionists, strict scheduling guidelines, and all the other pressing administrative tasks assigned to me. I was not getting the same satisfaction as I was used to from advising because the work did not feel student-centered. I kept going back and forth about how I should structure my advising availability and could not decide on anything that made sense. I took a much-needed day off and had an epiphany— If all this structure does not feel right, then why am I doing it? Am I here to provide a service or to educate?

So, I went in the next day and blasted the doors open (figuratively). I decided students could schedule appointments with me of any length at any time I was available. I wrote "Don't be a corporation!" in huge letters in the middle of my white board. I do still have a lot of administrative duties and a receptionist with whom students check in, but I avoid rules like "no same day appointments," "no same day rescheduling for missed appointments," and I no longer switch up my scheduling procedures based on the season. I created a flexible schedule that was easy for students to navigate. But the struggle continued.

After returning from the NACADA Conference this year, I came back to anywhere from eight to eleven advising appointments per day. Yes, I was available to my students, but I became a transactional advising factory, cranking out one prescriptive advising interaction after the next. Forget meaningful connections and

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thorough follow-up—students need to get into their next quarter classes. This did not make me feel a whole lot better than my receptionists protecting me from too much advising. I would end the day and be so tired that I would have no idea what I had done all day. Sure, most or hopefully all of my students were satisfied that they got in for advising, but I was beyond spent. I would get to my last couple of appointments and start getting students mixed up and even have trouble finishing thoughts and sentences.

I vented these feelings to a colleague with a role very similar to my own, and when she learned that I had been doing eight to eleven appointments in a day on top of my administrative and registration duties, she let me know right away that she herself only does four or five appointments each day. She told me that other advisers similarly met with fewer students because this was the only way to satisfy their roles as both adviser and administrator. I felt immediate relief. I did not need to become a transactional advising factory, jamming as many students into my schedule as I could. So, I decided to set a maximum of six appointments per day, which still allowed me to focus on students but also to provide myself with the necessary balance to become an efficient administrator. It is good to be available to my students, but I have to ensure that each interaction also satisfies both student and adviser. I am starting to feel more like an educator again, rather than a service provider.

The fatigue and ultimate compromise I faced is ongoing and experienced by advisers around the globe. Each day presents new challenges associated with being an educator while also being forced to act like a customer service provider. The former role seeks to grow knowledge and reflection, while the latter role must value efficiency and customer satisfaction. The former role is patient and enjoys getting to know students and their experiences in college, while the latter role is painfully and urgently aware that there are hundreds more students to see as well as administrative duties that must be satisfied. How do you focus on helping students to learn and grow when you have 500-some students on your roster? Upper-level administration would say that a program needs more students before another adviser can be hired. But where is the cut-off? How does program promotion and recruitment fit in with all of my other existing responsibilities? And do I really want to grow the program if that means that, for a while, I will have even more students than I currently feel I am able to manage?

Staff a program with enough advisers, invest in their professional development, and make sure their focus is on student learning. The impression that a program is understaffed and under-resourced will spread and ultimately—to use the language of our corporate counterparts—reduce the program's and the institution's "earning potential."

REFERENCES

- Steele, G., & White, E. R. (2019). Leadership in higher education: Insights from academic advisers. *The Mentor: Innovative Scholarship on Academic Advising*, 21, 1-10.