
Panopticon Advising: Surveillance Capitalism in Service of the Completion Agenda

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Abstract: As academic advising has been subsumed under the banner of institutional retention and the completion agenda, advising technologies have created new opportunities for tracking and sorting students. This has resulted in what we call panopticon advising, a philosophy and approach to advising characterized by intensive surveillance, intrusive outreach, and pursuit of retention above all other goals. We define and critique panopticon advising through the lens of Michel Foucault's disciplinary society and Byung-Chul Han's notion of psychopolitics, considering how surveillance technologies and friendly power lead to increasingly extractive and prescriptive relationships between students and advisers. We conclude without easy solutions, but rather questions that advisers must grapple with to determine if a future of panopticon advising is one they can live with.

Keywords: academic advising, advising theory, completion, retention, higher education, surveillance, technology, critical university studies

In modern higher education, academic advising has moved from a transactional service to a teaching and learning activity and, further, to a function of institutional retention (Cate & Miller, 2015). This shift mirrors larger trends in higher education including the student learning and student success movements (ACPA, 1996; Kuh, 2008). These changes have also been shaped by the meteoric rise of technology,

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beyond student information and learning management systems (LMS) into integrated retention platforms and predictive analytics (Bryant, Claise, & Roopchand, 2015). Technology has become a key focus in conversations about academic advising (Shaw et al., 2022). As practitioner-scholars, the move to ever more intrusive and data-driven advising practices in service of the completion agenda raises numerous questions. Mechanisms for surveilling and sorting students are becoming ever more sophisticated as many institutions feel pressure to use predictive analytics as a retention strategy (Bryant et al., 2016). Customer relationship management (CRM) tools make student and adviser tracking easier than ever, while metrics like appointments per day, email response times, and student satisfaction scores shape what advisers and administrators understand as “good practice.” Advisers are increasingly positioned as the solution to the growing financial and existential problems institutions face as demographic changes strain some institutions while starving others and demands for equity and social justice threaten the status quo.

To understand these pressures and trends, we employ a humanities-oriented approach to think deeply about advising in higher education in the United States. Our analysis turns on work from two philosophers: Michel Foucault (1978/1995, 1988) and Byung-Chul Han (2017). Ideas from these thinkers offer tools for understanding how surveillance, discipline, capitalism, and technology are deeply intertwined in our past and present. These concepts inform our definition of panopticon advising and shape our analysis. We begin by examining modern neoliberal capitalism and the completion agenda, two essential sociohistorical forces that shape higher education today. Then we begin our analysis by considering Foucauldian disciplinary societies and the role of the panopticon in producing particular effects in those subject to it. Panopticon advising is dependent upon the rise of new technologies that turn students into data for evaluation. We attempt to understand these technologies as more than neutral tools through Han’s extension of Foucault’s work to the present, technocapitalist society.

These changes have resulted in what we call panopticon advising, a paradigm produced by unspoken assumptions about the purpose of advising in the student success era. Panopticon advising embraces Foucauldian disciplinary techniques like constant surveillance, sorting and managing of students, and behavioral correction through insistent student outreach. Panopticon advising obscures systemic barriers by turning retention into an individual problem advisers must solve. Above all, panopticon advising is presented as the inevitable outcome of the student success movement, rather than a deliberate choice of priorities, values, and methods. With this paper, we critically examine panopticon advising and its implications for the first time.

Panopticon advising, we argue, turns advisers into *retention machines*, dutiful institutional agents that are expected to meet persistence and graduation quotas above all else. As a result, advisers must perform care to ameliorate the oppressive functions of the institution for individual students, exacerbating burnout and adviser departure, with few opportunities to challenge the status quo of

surveillance, intrusive outreach, and unaddressed systemic barriers. While these pressures are uneven across the higher education landscape, few advisers can escape them entirely. We conclude by critically examining the future of advising if we do nothing—a bleak prospect, in our estimation—and offer several possible strategies for resisting the turn to panopticon advising.

CONTEXTS FOR MODERN ACADEMIC ADVISING

To begin, it is important to understand two forces that shape higher education today, namely the impact of neoliberal capitalism and the rise of the completion agenda. Education is always a culturally-situated practice, influenced by social pressures and shaped by political will (Apple, 1995). In the United States, the rise of neoliberal capitalism has had a significant impact on the trajectory of higher education. While a full explanation of neoliberalism is beyond the scope of this paper, we point to several dimensions that help explain how higher education has changed, both practically and rhetorically, since the 1980s. Then we examine an important trend specific to higher education, namely, the completion agenda, before moving to the philosophers that inform our analysis.

NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Neoliberalism is a complex and contested idea, referring to a constellation of changes occurring “since the 1970s ... due largely to technological change and its effects upon productivity” (Blacker, 2013, pp. 23-24). As Blacker (2013) notes, these changes are extensive but include economic features like the expansion of consumer credit to prop up demand for goods and services, deregulation of financial industries, marketization of all aspects of life including social programs previously seen as the purview of the state, and a move from tangible goods and services to speculative profits through financial schemes like hedging (p. 26). In addition, technological advances create new revenue streams through Big Data, including the collection and sale of data to fuel targeted advertising (Zuboff, 2019). The collection of behavioral data and subsequent profit from behavioral predictions is known as “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff, 2019, p. 14). Socially, neoliberalism has led to a shift where the individual is the sole determinant of economic success or failure, rather than relying on a collective responsibility of society to uplift its citizens through state-sponsored social programs. Clearly, this rugged individualism permeates modern American society, from the consumption economy to privatized education to the political sphere. Above all, the individual is the essential social unit.

In higher education, one can understand declining state support and increasing debt burdens on students, alongside increased focus on curriculum for employability, as a manifestation of neoliberal capitalism (see, e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The entire scheme of federal financial aid in the United States funds the student rather than the institution, prioritizing ideas of

mobility and choice. Paired with significant disinvestment in higher education by the states (Flannery, 2022), this means that students have been asked to shoulder increasing amounts of debt in order to finance their education. In a nation where higher education is viewed as a social equalizer and solution to poverty, this debt is presented as an investment in one's future when the state cannot be relied upon to ensure social mobility, despite growing evidence that the investment may no longer be worth it (Blacker, 2013; Tough, 2023). Advising operates in this context where students are told to accept increasing levels of educational debt to ensure a prosperous future and a lack of timely degree completion means even more debt for most students.

THE COMPLETION AGENDA AND THE STUDENT SUCCESS MOVEMENT

In his February 2009 address to a joint session of Congress, then-President Barack Obama invited Americans to achieve a new goal through the pursuit of additional training and education beyond high school, so that, “by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world” (Obama, 2009, para. 66). The Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation for Higher Education set additional ambitious goals toward this pursuit of a more credentialed, more educated American workforce (Kelly & Schneider, 2012). This shift of agenda from *access* to *completion* forced changes in federal, state, and institutional policies and, in many cases, required new strategies for ensuring that students were successfully completing their degrees. What is now known as the student success movement “is a manifestation of the social, policy, and organizational problems associated with high levels of participation in higher education,” low levels of completion and equity, complex multi-level governance, and available reform strategies (Cantwell, 2018, p. 7).

The foundations of student success literature, particularly from researchers like Vincent Tinto and Alexander Astin, originally explored characteristics or antecedents to an individual student's departure or retention within the collegiate setting, but regarding institutional characteristics or policies that might help retention and completion, “we know little about ‘what works’ when it comes to significantly raising degree completion” (Kelly & Schneider, 2012, p. 5). Yet, based upon this early scholarship, predictive models were developed to forecast student success metrics, which began to include academic performance, retention, and graduation. While criticisms arose, they were particularly centered around the applicability of such conclusions and predictive measures with more diverse populations and across different institutional settings (Rossman et al., 2023). This shifted the discourse ever more toward conceptions of student success factors as less primarily a student dynamic and more so an institutional imperative to be monitored for and resourced toward. Collier and Ross (2020) argue that surveillance has long been a part of higher education institutions, but Welsh et al. (2010) demonstrate how “the restructuring of public higher education systems” in

the late 1990s and early 2000s was primarily designed to increase “surveillance of the behaviours and attitudes of the constituents within colleges and universities by the state” and “to use both surveillance and spectacle to discipline individuals and enforce state policy as forms of direct and ideological control” (p. 25). The neoliberal completion priorities set during the Obama administration, coupled with the economic challenges presented during the recession of the late 2000s, served as an accelerant for emerging surveillance states on campuses everywhere and led to definitions of student success becoming indistinguishable from the policy and reform efforts of the completion agenda (Cantwell, 2018, p. 15).

As the student success movement evolved at the end of the 20th century and was subsumed by the completion agenda into the 21st, academic advising was searching for the terms of an academic social contract that would provide legitimacy. One might conclude from histories of academic advising that the practice arose as a result of natural progress to meet changes in student, institutional, and governmental needs. Yet academic advising was but awakening as a field of scholarly inquiry and professional practice in the 1970s and 1980s, when the foundations of surveillance capitalism were settling into place and the early roots of the surveillance state began to take shape in higher education. By the early 2000s, most aspects of higher education, including academic advising, were behind the curve and playing catch-up. Even from the earliest scholarly writings concerned with academic advising, though, a pattern exists of tying the work—and, thus, those doing advising work—to institutional and governmental definitions of success. From student development in the 1970s and 1980s, to teaching and learning in the 1990s and early 2000s, to explorations of professionalization in the years around the rise of the completion agenda, academic advising has consistently sought legitimacy within the power structures of higher education by demonstrating its affinity for the ever-changing definitions of student success. The term “student success” appears in *The NACADA Journal* nearly twice as often after 2009 as it did prior to, highlighting its growing prominence within the field. Further, endorsements of approaches exist in early advising scholarship that translate directly to panopticon advising strategies (e.g., “intrusive” advising: Glennen, 1976; Glennen & Baxely, 1985). Questions about the efficacy of such a strategy have gone largely unconsidered, as academic advising searches instead for ways to “vouchsafe its rightful place among teaching, research, and service” (Hagen & Jordan, 2008, p.17).

Perhaps the pressures of resisting others’ definitions of success have to date proved too great. Yeado et al. (2014) spelled out the stakes clearly:

[I]nstitutions that don’t make the shift—from focusing on access alone to focusing on access and success—aren’t likely to fare well in the new environment of performance-based funding and increasingly hard-edged accountability. More importantly, neither will their students. In this economy, “some college” won’t get young adults very far; we need to help more of them get the degrees that will. (p. 2)

Additionally, Cantwell (2018) notes there is nothing inherently objectionable about the goal of completion, and the typical motivators of social efficiency and mobility are often cited in today's student success movement. However, Labaree (1997) argues these two common purposes of education in the United States typically stand alongside democratic equity. The pendulum has certainly swung toward efficiency and only to a lesser extent mobility. However, as Rhoades (2012) argues, without a focus on equity and learning, these definitions of success are incomplete. This focus stands in contrast to the learning-centered paradigm for academic advising that gained prominence in the late 1990s and the 2000s.

Over the past decade, scholars from a range of disciplines and settings have begun to articulate the threats of surveillance capitalism, noting "the subjugating effect of stringent control technologies on the lived experience of the higher education pedagogue" (Maistry, 2015, p. 25) act as "a psychological instrument of control to eliminate potential dissent" (Hyslop-Margison & Rochester, 2016, p. 102) and highlight "the many ways in which it directs our energies towards processes of compliance" (Skene et al, 2020, p. 160). They argue "surveillance technologies and automated decision-making systems ... threaten students' privacy, access to important life opportunities, and intellectual freedom" (Barrett, 2022, p. 676); yet, "if faculty and academic decision-makers are not intentional about equitable and ethical use of digital platforms within higher education, students' privacy and data is at risk" (Szczyrek & Stewart, 2022, p. 1). This brings further "risks to learning relationships, academic and work practices, as well as reinforcing economic models of extraction and inequalities in education and society (Beetham et al, 2022, p. 16). These dangers are often shrouded by "fantasies of human transcendence in higher education and ... extensions of human intellectual and embodied capacity ... form[ing] part of a web of highly contradictory notions ... [and] sit alongside increasingly prevalent digitally mediated regimes of surveillance and control in university settings" (Gourlay, 2022, n.p.). In authoring this paper, we add our voices to those raising concern about the unquestioned use of surveillance technologies within higher education at large and academic advising more specifically.

Despite the rise of increasingly panopticon-like strategies for student success, the scholarship of academic advising has left the influences of the completion agenda and the student success movement unexamined for the field, for practitioners, and for students. Yet, as Taylor (2022) cautions, "as discipline and field-determined standards of quality become secondary to institutional measures, the work and roles of educators are reshaped in service to unit compliance with institutional goals and expectations" (p. 627). This concern is voiced in the scholarship of advising via Lowenstein's (2021) exploration of the "token fallacy" taking root in higher education:

1. The completion agenda risks committing the token fallacy by conflating the timely acquisition of credits and diplomas with achieving an education, which is not the same thing.
2. The completion agenda presupposes a narrow and dubious definition of student success.
3. For these reasons, the completion agenda can create ethical dilemmas for advisers and for institutions.

Specifically, these considerations should be of interest to academic advisers who are asked to prioritize the completion agenda on behalf of their institutions. (pp. 49-50)

Further, as we have seen at various institutions in our collective experience of nearly 60 years in the advising field, senior leadership is rarely concerned with the learning-focused outcomes of academic advising, yet institutional measures like retention rates are constantly scrutinized.

FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF DISCIPLINE AND THE PANOPTICON

In seeking to make sense of the effects of the student success movement on both students and advisers, we turn first to Michel Foucault's (1978/1995) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Foucault's social theory explores productive power, that is, the power to produce particular effects, rather than simply to repress. This parallels modern advising where advisers aim not to prevent students from taking particular actions, but rather aim to produce positive behaviors like thoughtful and orderly course selection or proactive help-seeking. While these outcomes can be viewed positively, this practice turns on a particular social mechanism: what Foucault called the disciplinary society.

The Disciplinary Society

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault details an epochal shift from a society defined by control through physical violence, torture, and death to one defined by control through mental, emotional, and spiritual disciplining. In the era of absolute monarchs, the state was embodied in a singular figure (most often, the king) who had total power over life and death. While life was often "nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1651/2021, p. 102), there also existed spaces outside the direct observation of the State-King. In Foucault's view, this meant that individuals had opportunities to live unseen by the state apparatus of life and death, even though it might loom large through the spectacle of, for example, public executions. That kind of society has largely been eliminated in favor of a society of control, order, and discipline, where one is constantly under scrutiny. In a disciplinary society, individuals are controlled through processes that encourage the formation of docile bodies, which Foucault (1978/1995) says are ones "that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (p. 136). Individuals become a bundle of potential that can be shaped

toward particular ends decided by someone else (especially the state). That shaping is an expression of power, formed through discipline. Discipline corrects and reinforces a particular behavior or worldview (Foucault, 1978/1995, p. 179), rather than simply enacting violence as punishment. Punishments in a disciplinary society are made to feel natural, as logical corrections to behavior everyone already knows diverges from the norm.

Discipline becomes a way for a society to view humans as a nearly limitless source of value. As Foucault (1978/1995) writes, “Discipline ... arranges a positive economy; it poses the principle of a theoretically ever-growing use of time: exhaustion rather than use; it is a question of extracting, from time, ever more available moments and, from each moment, ever more useful forces” (p. 154). Rather than a view of individuals as being in need of coercion so as not to waste time, discipline seeks to internalize “speed as a virtue” (Foucault, 1978/1995, p. 154), where individuals eventually come to police themselves by internalized pressures to be productive and useful. Over time, discipline moves one from a need for external control and coercion (a relic of the era of kings with absolute power to make violence and death) to an internal control that is self-reinforcing.

The Panopticon

One particular technology of discipline (a mechanism by which it is enacted) illustrates this shift from external to internal control: the Panopticon. Foucault analyzes Jeremy Bentham’s plans for the Panopticon, a more efficient kind of prison. In a traditional prison, prison guards must routinely patrol and observe prisoners in order to ensure compliance with the rules. This system creates openings whereby prisoners, when out of view, can escape the absolute control of the prison. In the Panopticon, the prison is designed such that a single guard, positioned in a central tower, can see every prisoner at once. Most essential, Bentham’s Panopticon also specified that the prisoners should not be able to see the guard. This setup creates a new disciplinary power: if prisoners know they are being watched and have no power to determine if they are under scrutiny or not, they can be disciplined into acting as though they are being watched even when no guard sits at the center of the Panopticon.

This kind of surveillance is ubiquitous in modern society and appears in a variety of settings. Security cameras are commonplace, used to greater or lesser degrees by the state directly, but other kinds of monitoring techniques pervade every aspect of life. Modern schooling, beginning at the youngest ages, uses disciplinary techniques and tracking to render learning—a complicated, internal cognitive process—fully visible, quantifiable, and directable. As we will discuss below, these features shape academic advising as well. However, it is important to take note of shifts created by technology, particularly in its relation to surveillance. For this reason, we consider the work of a neo-Foucauldian in conjunction with Foucault’s ideas to make sense of the full landscape of modern advising and its tools.

TECHNOLOGY, SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM, AND PSYCHOPOLITICS

In his text *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, Byung-Chul Han (2017) builds from Foucault's work on surveillance and regimes of power (what Foucault called biopolitics) to posit that modern capitalism demands not only power over life, but power over the psyche, culminating in what Han calls psychopolitics. This shift is necessary, Han argues, because of the shift from classical to neoliberal capitalism. As he writes, "neoliberalism ... has discovered the psyche as a productive force. This *psychic turn*—that is, the *turn to psychopolitics*—also connects with the mode of operation of contemporary capitalism" (Han, 2017, p. 25, emphasis in original). Psychopolitics highlights the attention placed upon the individual in a rapidly changing economic structure where ideas and ephemera (Tweets, TikToks, Reels) drive production rather than tangible goods.

Psychopolitics is a "friendly power" (Han, 2017, p. 15), a regime where individuals comply not simply because of coercive power but because of the psychological pleasure of compliance. Take, for example, the sharing of personal information on social media. Individuals are not coerced into sharing, but rather they derive pleasure from sharing details about their lives, hopes, and dreams:

Smart power cosies up to the psyche rather than disciplining it through coercion or prohibitions.... It is constantly calling on us to confide, share and participate: to communicate our opinions, needs, wishes and preferences—to tell all about our lives. (Han, 2017, pp. 14-15)

This desire to share and pleasure gained by the limited consumptive structure of today's neoliberal capitalism means that "free choice ... is eliminated to make way for a free selection ... from among the items on offer" (Han, 2017, p. 15). One can only "like" those ads, tweets, or pages served up, so limited choice becomes normalized. The "feeling of freedom" becomes more important than freedom itself (Han, 2017, p. 39). Emotions, once denigrated as irrational, now become the currency of psychopolitics, because it is through emotions that the modern information economy is advanced. As Han (2017) notes, "positive emotions provide the ferment that makes *motivation* grow" (p. 47, emphasis in original). Emotions drive the psychopolitical pressure to advance, to improve, to become more efficient while also becoming more emotionally intelligent. Unlike the era of early capitalism where efficiency was about mechanistic, nonemotional work done to an exacting standard (like through the assembly line), neoliberalism encourages another sort of discipline where one seeks to work in an exacting, efficient way because it feels good to do so.

Together, these forces help define the contours of modern American society. It is no wonder, then, that these would appear in academic advising as well. Next, we

examine how the power dynamic of surveillance, discipline, and psychopolitics interact to produce particular kinds of advisers and particular kinds of students, ones attuned to this friendly power. We call this dynamic panopticon advising.

PANOPTICON ADVISING

Panopticon advising has features of both an approach and a philosophy of advising. As an approach, panopticon advising uses tools like CRM, LMS, and student success platforms to drive advising interactions, alongside strategies that encourage the pleasure of compliance. In this way, academic advising becomes predicated upon and subject to surveillance that disciplines both students and advisers. Limited choices become normalized and psychopolitics shape the advising relationship, promoting a philosophy of advising that values student disclosure, institutional desires, and increased productivity. Ultimately, this paradigm has developed through the confluence of changes across the higher education landscape, but without explicit choice on the part of most advisers. As such, its effects on both students and advisers demand close attention. Panopticon advising releases the institution from grappling with systemic and pervasive barriers that prevent all students, or specific groups of students, from being successful, because the surveillance mechanism still relies on outreach by an individual adviser to an individual student to address the undesired behaviors or outputs. In this surveillance state, individual student data is collected and acted upon individually. Efforts to improve institutional retention are valiant, but only if they are seeking to create an environment for all students where an equitable outcome is possible. Without intentional and sustainable institutional change, and aggregate data that allows for the identification of broader patterns of performance across multiple variables, the institution functions as a disciplinary structure for both students and advisers, neither of whom have the agency to influence large-scale change on their own.

DOCILE STUDENTS AND PANOPTICON ADVISING

Persistence and graduation are the primary measurable outcomes of interest for higher education institutions in the student success era (Kuh, 2008; Wallace & Wallace, 2016). Under panopticon advising, students are constantly watched and their data analyzed for trends that might suggest to the institution that a student is not sufficiently engaged or is at risk of not persisting. Data on clicks in an LMS can be analyzed to rank students compared to one another (Tellakat et al., 2019); those students falling below the average may be subject to adviser outreach. Monitoring clicks in an LMS has an entirely different surveillance philosophy than an early alert system which is based on learning performance assessment data. Email tracking and metadata allow advisers to know if a student has opened an email, what links they click, and, in some cases, how long they look at certain portions of the message. Some institutions track activity and movement around campus

through ID swipe tracking and facial recognition (Belkin, 2020), while others use Bluetooth and GPS to track students' phones "from dorm to desk" (Harwell, 2019). The student's intentions and desires, like an intentional plan to stop out, are often secondary considerations to these data points. Students may be encouraged to disclose their thinking or plans, but these may still fall away in favor of institutional desires for retention.

These techniques reinforce three things. First, this surveillance encourages the pastoral power of the institution in disciplining students toward certain behaviors and away from others. Despite the historical trend rejecting an institutional role *in loco parentis* (Lee, 2011; Thelin & Gasman, 2011), institutions (and advisers) have been positioned as experts who can and should determine what level of engagement, or library use, or online course clicks is best and correct students (through targeted, proactive outreach) when they deviate from those levels. Students come to expect that their advisers will surveil them and that the relationship between a student and an adviser is necessarily predicated upon a power imbalance, with advisers having significant access to data a student may not even know is being tracked and analyzed. As enterprise-wide student success systems become more ubiquitous (Bryant, Claise, & Roopchand, 2015), students may be surprised to learn many supportive staff members they encounter have access to records of myriad interactions they have had at the institution; this practice is often referred to under the guise of "coordinated care" (see e.g. Diaz, 2019), which is a term borrowed from the medical field. Limited choices, often presented as a nudge (Luth et al., 2017; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) or "structured paternalism" (Ben Porath, 2010), normalize the "free selection" rather than "free choice" that Han highlights as commonplace under psychopolitics. For example, advisers might offer course suggestions to students deemed "at-risk" from a list of options known to be less challenging for students. Advisers may feel they are supporting student success by focusing on courses where students are likely to do well, while students may fail to even realize they are being offered a narrower set of options than others based on some invisible institutional calculus to determine their risk level.

Second, these practices of surveillance teach students that they have no right to privacy, but that the lack of privacy is for their own good and, thus, justifiable on its face. Students have little to no right to opt out of data collection and analysis by institutions. This normalizes the practices of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), where detailed tracking is the norm and is routinely exploited for increased profit generation through strategies like targeted advertising. Students may even willingly provide their personal information and consent to tracking because they believe that doing so is a natural consequence of living in the technological age: no need to read the Terms and Conditions, just accept cookies and keep scrolling. As Jones (2019) notes, "historically, higher education institutions have *failed* to promote informed consent practices" around data and privacy, despite student desires to maintain control over their personal data (p. 8, emphasis in original).

Similarly, some students may not question increasingly detailed data collection by institutions because of the convenience it brings, like not having to repeat a

personal situation to every adviser or student support staff member. Personalized recommendations have become the norm in other avenues where surveillance capitalism predominates, so the student-as-consumer comes to expect the same from their education. As Han (2017) notes, “such emptying-out of persons does not occur by violent means. Instead, it occurs as voluntary self-exposure” (p. 9). Advisers exploit this self-exposure by expecting students to share their stories without the promise of a therapeutic relationship (as with mental health clinicians) or a reciprocal one (as with a friendship). Advisers are encouraged to feel entitled to intimate details of students’ lives, from their home lives to their ID swipes. This is not to say that all voluntary disclosure of personal details in advising meetings is always bad or that advisers intend to be exploitative. Rather, when advisers assume that they should have access to all the information about a student that they desire, that desire has the potential to be extractive when it is primarily in service of institutional goals, rather than a meaningful advising relationship. Students are given few or no opportunities to opt-out from self-disclosure and advisers may feel as though they have failed at their work of “creat[ing] rapport and build[ing] academic advising relationships” (Smith & Cunningham, 2022, p. 27) if they fail to extract sufficient detail from students.

Third and finally, surveillance of this kind allows ever more sophisticated tracking, sorting, and ranking of students. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1978/1995) notes that the rise of the modern school is grounded in disciplinary power and surveillance. As discipline and punishment replace extrajudicial violence, behavior is controlled by norm-setting, including in schools. He writes that “the distribution according to ranks or grade has a double role: it marks the gaps, hierarchizes qualities, skills and aptitudes; but it also punishes and rewards” (Foucault, 1978/1995, p. 181). Foucault (1978/1995) continues: “This hierarchizing penalty had, therefore, a double effect: it distributed pupils according to their aptitudes and their conduct...[and] it exercised over them a constant pressure to conform to the same model...so that they might all be like one another” (p. 182). For Foucault, the disciplinary power of the school culminates in the examination, a way of externalizing the internal norms demanded by the system of disciplinary power and operationalizing them. Examinations created documentation of success or failure, something tangible to allow sorting and ranking by bureaucrats. This continues to this day, despite the fact that grades are not a great proxy for learning (Strauss, 2023).

Advisers certainly interact with this tangible documentation regularly, from math placement exams to standardized test scores, and have done so for much of the history of the profession. What is new, however, is the precision and granularity with which ranking becomes possible with new surveillance tools in education. Students can be ranked by milliseconds spent looking at emails. Students can be sorted by factors previously unknown to advisers, like frequency of library visits or clicks in an LMS. Student risk profiles force advisers to group students into categories with new names like ‘at risk’ or ‘at promise’ that actually hold the same students previously discussed as ‘underperforming’ or ‘underprepared.’ Often these

risk profiles turn on proprietary algorithms from vendors, fed with years of student data, but how arrays of grades and majors and demographic information become color-coded risk scores is unknown to anyone at the institution (Ekowo & Palmer, 2016). The bias built into these kinds of algorithms continues to be scrutinized (Barshay & Aslanian, 2019; Bird et al., 2024). While strengths-based and appreciative approaches to advising remain nominally popular in the field, even asset-focused advisers are expected to use deficit-oriented models to guide their attention and outreach to students with the aim of meeting institutional retention and graduation goals.

There is little support, however, for the argument that broad access to additional student data and predictive analytics changes the retention and graduation rates of students. In a longitudinal, experimental study comprised of eleven large public institutions, the use of technology to identify and support students, who were either Pell-eligible and/or first-generation college students, with additional advising interventions showed no significant difference in retention or graduation outcomes (Rossman et al., 2023). In fact, the study by Rossman et al. (2023) reported that the unintended impact of this technology-aided intervention was an increased ability to understand and navigate complex situations, like academic degree planning at a large institution, which is not a numerically reportable outcome. While this is only one empirical study examining the effectiveness of data sorting and technology-led advising interventions, the scope and scale of the MAAPS advising experiment have neither been replicated nor refuted. Campus-based retention programs, in general, have limited empirical evidence supporting their effectiveness (Patton et al., 2006). Although some institutions have found success in a data-informed approach toward increasing retention and graduation rates (The Education Trust, 2016), the increases have only resulted when the institution has devoted resources to focus on targeting systemic barriers and applying an equity mindset (Arnold et al., 2019). At most institutions, the current state of panopticon advising is neither well-resourced nor part of a strategic approach for achieving equity.

PANOPTICON ADVISING AND ADVISERS AS RETENTION MACHINES

Just as students are surveilled and sorted by panopticon advising, so too are advisers. Advising technologies are just as efficient at tracking adviser metrics as those about students; details like average appointment time, email count, and number of appointments per adviser are easily measured. Just as the examination is a proxy measure of learning and LMS clicks are a proxy measure of course engagement, these metrics are an incomplete measure of the quality of advising that is occurring. As metrics become increasingly important for their capacity to validate the impact of various campus initiatives, disciplinary pressure to improve those things that are measured (potentially at the expense of those unmeasured but espoused values of advising) increases in turn.

Another metric at the center of the student success movement deeply impacts advisers: retention. The National Center for Education Statistics uses retention as a year-to-year measure of student continuation of enrollment, in contrast with student departure from an institution (Tinto, 1993). While national measures of retention may focus on yearly progression, we use retention here to refer to continued enrollment on any time scale, including semester-to-semester, as efforts to encourage students to continue in college occur regularly throughout the year and not just between academic years. Today, retention is not merely a measure of student success but serves as an indicator of the financial health of an institution. As performance-based funding models proliferate and even publicly-supported institutions become increasingly tuition-driven, retention directly and profoundly affects the bottom line. It is here that the forces of panopticon advising come into full view. Success becomes defined by retention, regardless of the needs of any particular student or the interventions of any particular adviser. While we will discuss later how this focus is not wholly meritless, Lowenstein (2021) notes that “the conceptual error in the completion agenda’s account of student success lies in failing to distinguish between institutional success and individual student success” (p. 51). Advisers are pressed to improve retention through their outreach and care for individual students, facilitated in increasingly sophisticated ways by surveillance technologies and the use of data analytics. Yet institutional success measures such as retention become the primary purpose and value of academic advising. It is no wonder then that advisers become retention machines.

The retention machine has a single purpose: to retain students. The methods of the retention machine often involve care, providing the psychological security of forced choice and emotional comfort of a care worker. This is a psychopolitical advance: while literal machines might be able to produce schedules and degree plans according to graduation maps, retention machines can leverage emotions for even greater productivity. In this way, the caring relationship is a means to an end. Advisers are pushed to perform care in increasingly tiny interactions as caseloads make lengthy appointments impossible, contributing to burnout and demoralization seen in advising and higher education more broadly (McClure, 2021). Trusting relationships are used as a mechanism for identifying barriers to retention for individual students, but often advisers are unable to effect meaningful change regarding those barriers. For example, outreach to students who are not registered for a subsequent term after the primary registration period has passed often falls to academic advisers. Advisers may contact students repeatedly about why they have not registered; students who respond that they do not intend to return are often interrogated and told they should provide a reason before outreach will stop. Advisers are encouraged to press students to register “just in case” even when departure might actually be in the student’s best interest. Individual student development, academic integration, or achievement of student-directed goals all fall away in favor of the faceless institutional priority of retention. Advisers are made to feel responsible for the retention of their advisees, another metric that could be used to sort and rank advisers.

These forces drive advisers toward increasingly prescriptive, dominating relationships with their students. In some ways, the focus on metrics is a kind of gamification of advising, where tracking becomes a normal, even pleasurable, way to understand the work of advisers. But as Han (2017) notes, “what matures over time cannot be gamified” (p. 49). There is little room in an advising session dedicated to boosting retention for the kinds of power-sharing that Drew Puroway (2016) envisions in a Freirean-inspired approach to advising. This is a time-intensive, longitudinal approach to advising that encourages much more than registration for the subsequent term. In some ways, Puroway’s (2016) question “how is your education making you less free” (p. 7) becomes nonsensical under the psychopolitics of neoliberal capitalism: of course it makes one less free, but one accepts it happily in exchange for the validation and (economic or social) recognition that degree attainment provides. Exactly how education might limit one’s freedom is made irrelevant and invisible to students, so considering this becomes a waste of time that might be used instead to proactively reach out to another student at risk of not being retained. Rather than a tool to help students make informed decisions, technology becomes a means to pursue retention relentlessly.

WHY PANOPTICON ADVISING?

Some will argue that the picture we paint here of panopticon advising is pessimistic, even grim. Indeed, we acknowledge that there are several tangible benefits to this kind of advising. Proactive outreach to students can positively influence persistence and graduation. In an environment where students take on increasingly crushing levels of debt in order to access higher education, ensuring that they are not left with debt and no degree is an important consideration for institutions and advisers. However, to say that the only outcome that matters is degree attainment, rather than the development, learning, and humanistic formation that higher education has historically aspired to, is to wholly accept the neoliberal framing of higher education as simply a means to an economic end. Structured choice and nudging results in decisions administrators or advisers have decided are preferable, like registration for a certain number of credits or enrollment in low-risk majors based on a predictive analytics profile. We do not doubt that in the aggregate, for example, students who register for 15 credits are more likely to graduate (Complete College America, 2013). For institutions, retention, or lack thereof, is an existential threat, and increased attention to it is likely inevitable. Our aim then is not to say that retention should be ignored entirely, nor that it is impossible to use technology in ethical and student-centered ways.

However, as we began the thinking that forms this paper, a striking absence stood out to us: at no point has the advising profession writ large announced an explicit shift to supporting retention as the primary goal of the advising relationship. The impact of academic advising on student success metrics like retention and persistence has been discussed for decades, but always in the context of the

potential of the advising relationship to support a student's academic goals and aspirations. The few normative visions of what academic advising should be, such as Marc Lowenstein's (2014) integrative advising and Peter Hagen's (2018) academic advising informed by narrative theory, foreground students' meaning-making of their curriculum and educational experiences rather than a singular focus on achieving the goal of graduation. Panopticon advising has replaced the student, their needs and desires, as the heart of advising with the institution and its needs and desires instead. At times, these desires converge, but when they diverge, the desires of the institution have become paramount. The notion of using surveillance technologies to direct advising is presented as being a student-centered practice, when it is in fact institution-centered. Students are not subjects with agency at the center of this model; students are merely objects about whom data can be extracted and used to further the aims of the institution in maintaining itself. There can be benefits to the student, like earning a degree, but to say that these strategies are centered on the student misrepresents how these technologies have been implemented and used.

Our concern is that panopticon advising—with its surveillance technologies, forced choice, and ranking and sorting of students—is presented as the natural, logical progression of the student success movement, rather than a deliberate choice of priorities, values, and methods. Scholars in other fields raising similar questions and concerns tend to conclude with calls to action, calls to understand “how disciplinary power works within its machinery ... to counteract what otherwise appears deceptively normal and intuitively acceptable” (Maistry, 2015, p. 34), “to resist the charade of assessment and accountability, and point out the real purpose of these practices” (Hyslop-Margison & Rochester, 2016, p. 108), to resist “through collective action from the ground” (Skene et al, 2020, p. 164), “to explore new avenues of learning about the risks and impacts of surveillance in the system” (Szczyrek & Stewart, 2022, p. 16), “to reject tech solutionism” (Barrett, 2022, p. 755), to “vigorously repudiate the notion that digital or automated alternatives to existing practices are inherently more effective, more creative, or otherwise preferable” (Barrett, 2022, p. 764), to “resist the logic of surveillance, to refuse the labour of constantly monitoring ... [to] reassert the values of solidarity, collegiality and trust” (Beetham et al, 2022, p. 31), and to “keep in check [that] which may ultimately undermine the richness, variety, complexity, and ephemerality of scholarship itself” (Gourlay, 2022, n.p.). Given the importance of reflective practice across the spectrum of competencies for advisers (Smith & Cunningham, 2022), examining and debating these priorities, values, and methods are essential to our present and future as a profession.

CONCLUSION: WHITHER ADVISING?

The forces that have led to the proliferation of panopticon advising continue to loom over higher education. Disinvestment in higher education remains predominant and the student debt-financed model remains the only option for many

students. Institutions are continually asked to do more with less, including in academic advising. Panopticon advising can be understood as one way to respond to these forces, where technology intensifies as the unsustainability of hiring and compensation practices becomes untenable. The full range of this intensification has yet to be seen, given new technologies like ChatGPT that make an artificially intelligent adviser a looming possibility. Clearly, there are no simple answers.

Ultimately, the field of academic advising and those who practice in it must grapple with deep, existential questions about both purpose and methods. Frank discussion of surveillance technologies is essentially nonexistent within the discourse of advising, even as advisers express doubts about the utility and ethics of these technologies (Jones, 2018). What kinds of surveillance are advisers willing to accept? When presenting an earlier version of this paper, we were reminded by an audience member that degree audits and transcripts are also a kind of surveillance. The convenience and accountability of a permanent written record of a student's academic activities is a form of tracking that advisers and students accept is necessary and useful. As such, not all surveillance is equal. The ethics of surveillance depends on the specific technologies and practices being used, and in many cases depends upon informed consent (Jones, 2019). Students know that their grades will be recorded. Perhaps students would consent to more intensive tracking that leads to adviser outreach as is common to panopticon advising; at this stage, the option to opt out simply does not exist.

Advisers must grapple with the tension between belonging to a field that espouses the importance of the advising relationship in empowering students while using methods that rely upon a largely unilateral elevation of the knowledge and authority of academic advisers. How might today's advising look different if advisers were not conditioned to expect that they should be able to access whatever information about a student's situation that they want? What would advising for a student's goals, including institutional departure, over the institution's definition of student success entail? This sort of shift does not easily comport with the existential threat of declining enrollment that many institutions face but highlights how the relationship between advisers and institutions is perhaps more complex than previously suggested. Clearly defining the role of academic advisers in relation to students and to institutions is more important for the field than ever.

We conclude with few answers or solutions for the problem of panopticon advising. Instead, we ask several questions that we believe the field of academic advising must contend with moving forward. Panopticon advising has become the norm, whether advisers intend this or not, as advising has been increasingly positioned as the solution to the problem of retention. This positioning has largely come from institutional leaders and others outside the profession. As these methods and technologies proliferate, learning, development, and integration all become secondary to the aim of increasing retention through proactive and intrusive outreach by advisers. Individual advisers may find ways to resist the increasingly transactional nature of this kind of advising, but the forces that encourage just enough human connection to ensure retention remain.

Thus, we find it essential to ask, is this actually what advisers want to be doing? Is engaging in increasingly intrusive outreach and tracking a means to enact the core values of academic advising (NACADA, 2017)? Is the completion agenda the single defining issue for advising? If the answers to these questions are in the affirmative, perhaps intensive tracking of students and advisers will become just another kind of surveillance that advisers accept as necessary for the basic functioning of the institution and the profession. However, if there is doubt that advisers as retention machines is the ideal vision for the profession, something must change. If it does not, these trends are only likely to intensify. Naming panopticon advising and beginning to subject it to critique is one way to begin. However, this is only a first step if the profession hopes to advance an agenda that is internally defined and debated, rather than imposed by external forces like institutional leaders and multimillion dollar educational technology companies.

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