
A Place for Academic Advising Scholars: Dr. Eric White at the Division of Undergraduate Studies

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Abstract: Penn State University created the Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) in 1973 as the University's exploratory advising unit. The creation of DUS followed patterns across the United States in which an increasing number of people were hired to serve in full-time academic advising positions. During these formative years, Dr. Eric White, the second director of DUS and, later, the executive director, provided leadership rooted in a philosophy that academic advisers were like faculty members, with similar expectations and responsibilities. This vision led to intentional practices in hiring academic advisers and supporting professional activities that promoted academic advising scholarship. White's legacy shows the important role advising administrators can have in supporting academic advising scholarship and developing future advising scholars.

Keywords: advising scholarship, scholar practitioner, professionalization, philosophy of advising

The Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) at Penn State University celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2023. This milestone provides an opportunity to reflect on the history and influence of DUS, which this article does through the lens of one of its leaders. Dr. Eric White was appointed director of DUS in 1986 and led the unit until his retirement in 2012. Before his appointment as director, White served as a psychological counselor at Penn State in the unit preceding DUS, then as a DUS academic adviser. As counselor, adviser, director, and executive director, White navigated the early history of formalized academic advising and the growth of NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising. During White's tenure as director and executive director of DUS, he influenced academic advising at Penn State and around the world. Drawing on interviews I conducted with White on October 3, 2022, September 27, 2022, and October 16, 2023, this article builds on

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DOI: 10.26209/MJ2563329

The Mentor: Innovative Scholarship on Academic Advising Volume 25 (2023), 16-22

ISSN: 1521-2211

journals.psu.edu/mentor

previous DUS histories (Wall, 1987, 1988) to examine White's legacy in creating an identity for DUS and growing academic advising as a field of study and practice. White's leadership approach provides a foundation for all current and future leaders and administrators to advance advising scholarship.

THE EARLY YEARS OF DUS

In the late 1940s, Penn State, along with many other institutions at the time, was adding departments and units to address the needs of a rapidly growing body of diverse students. In 1948, Penn State created the Division of Intermediate Registration (DIR) to work with students who had poor study habits, academic deficiencies, and uncertain future goals (Wall, 1987). Many of these offices were staffed by people with educational backgrounds in psychology (Wall, 1987). At Penn State, the DIR was later changed to the Division of Counseling (DOC) to further support mental health counseling and challenges around the transition to college, as well as to advise on academic information (Wall, 1987). However, the conflation of mental health counseling with academic choices and educational planning had a negative connotation to students. Furthermore, there was a growing recognition that exploration of academic major was normal. Uncertainty was no longer seen as a weakness and instead considered part of normal growth and development ("DUS: New in Almost Every Respect," 1974).

As a result of the growing awareness of curricular complexity and students' diverse educational needs, Penn State's Faculty Senate created DUS in 1973 to meet the advising needs of first- and second-year students, create an academic communication network, and evaluate academic advising ("Project Inform IV: Undergraduate Studies," 1974). The creation of DUS "symbolized the growing importance that the University gave to the entire process of academic advising" (Wall, 1988, p. 91). The DOC was divided into DUS, a psychological counseling center, and career services. DUS was positioned in academic affairs and reported to the vice president for Undergraduate Studies ("Project Inform IV: Undergraduate Studies," 1974).

White joined the Penn State Delaware County campus (now Penn State Brandywine) in 1970. At that time, he served as a psychological counselor within the DOC. White recollected, "My first day on the job and I'm sitting at the desk sort of just getting myself assembled... the dean of students came to me with a pile of folders, and he dumped them on the desk, and he said, 'Here, these are students that need to make a decision about their major by the end of the term.'" White replied to the dean of students, "What is this all about?" and the dean said, "You're their academic adviser." As a psychological counselor at the time, White recalled, "That is the first time I really heard the term academic advising per se" (personal communication, October 16, 2023).

At a smaller Penn State campus, White was required to move into DUS; staff at Penn State University Park were able to select DUS, the counseling office, or career services (E. White, personal communication, September 27, 2022). As a

result, many of the initial academic advisers in DUS were trained clinical psychologists (E. White, personal communication, October 3, 2022). When the university created DUS, White's position shifted to academic affairs. "I learned about it [the creation of DUS] when a faculty member who was very active with the Faculty Senate ... came to me one day and he basically said, you have a new boss. He said they've created something called the Division of Undergraduate Studies and it's in academic affairs" (E. White, personal communication, October 16, 2023). Dr. Harvey Wall, who was the assistant director in the DOC, became the new director of DUS (E. White, personal communication, October 3, 2022).¹

In 1975, White moved to the University Park campus to coordinate orientation activities and to continue to advise students within DUS (E. White, personal communication, October 16, 2023). White was appointed director of DUS in 1986 when Wall retired. As director, White understood the important role of DUS in gathering data about students. It is important for advisers and the institution not only to "know who your students are, but also how your students are going to change over time and so the system has to be flexible enough that you can change it as the students might change. That means you have to do research, you have to collect data" (E. White, personal communication, October 16, 2023).

In 1982, DUS conducted an analysis of academic advising. As a result of this analysis, the number of full-time academic adviser positions grew, many hired and housed within DUS. White recalled, "We also discovered from the analysis that we probably had to rethink the structure, the advising structure" (E. White, personal communication, October 16, 2023). The DUS Academic Information Support Program was implemented in 1986 and positioned an academic adviser, within each academic college and at all campuses, who would provide accurate and timely information to students, faculty, and staff (Sebastianelli & Wade, 2004). These positions were hired and supported through DUS, a concerted effort by White. "We really tried to create centralization, let's put all the DUS coordinators onto the DUS budget" (E. White, personal communication, October 16, 2023). The role DUS played in hiring would have important future implications.

LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE OF ADVISING

The number of academic advisers did not increase at Penn State alone but also at many other institutions. NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, then called the National Academic Advising Association, was founded to "focus on academic advising and those who provide this service and expertise" (Grites & Gordon, 2009, p. 41). There was a growing focus on understanding academic advising as a distinct practice, and increasing its scholarly base was part of this mission. As White reflected, "NACADA was trying to start to get people out there to do research. You see some people starting to publish in the field" (personal communication, October 16, 2023).

¹ More of the early years of DUS practice has been related by Wall (1987, 1988).

White was not only thinking about his own institution but also the future of the field. Looking back on his concerns at the time, White said, “If we were just a delivery service and just an advising center for undecided [students] and that’s all our people did and nothing else—to me that wasn’t where the field needed to go... We’re not going to make it as a profession if we’re just clinicians, just practitioners. We’re not going to have a say in the institution. We’re not going to get much stance” (personal communication, October 16, 2023). White believed in academic advisers contributing to publishing, research, and service. He implemented policy within DUS to support these efforts, from hiring practices to professional development support.

White thought of DUS much like an academic department and expected academic advisers to be like faculty members in terms of contributing to teaching, research, and service. “Your advising was your teaching. Your research was your research... publications, maybe a grant” (E. White, personal communication, October 16, 2023). In terms of service, “I wanted as many people as possible to be on either college committees, department committees, university-wide committees, search committees, any committees.” Through White’s actions, academic advisers in DUS were hired with expectations for scholarship that led to significant contributions in writing and leadership.

White understood the importance of fostering advising scholars. This was apparent in his hiring considerations: “I was never looking for a psychological counselor. I was never looking for a degree in psychology. I was really looking more for the kind of experiences they [applicants] had. I was really trying to look for as much academic experience as I could possibly find. I wanted advisors who could write, who knew how to write, who liked to write, who were experienced in writing” (E. White, personal communication, October 16, 2023). Reflecting on his own job interview with DUS during this time, Dr. Peter Hagen remembered a DUS adviser asking, “Is advising an art or a science?” (Hagen et al., 2018, p. 12). Hagen reported giving an answer that was a compromise between art and science and was not expecting to get the position, yet he did. This example demonstrates how DUS sought to evaluate a candidate’s aptitude for contemplating difficult questions.

During White’s tenure as executive director, many DUS academic advisers contributed to the growing scholarship in academic advising. White noted, “We’ve had people out there writing things and getting national recognition for it” (personal communication, October 16, 2023). With this support, DUS advisers were writing. Michael Leonard, coordinator of operations and adviser, published “A Commonplace Book for Advisors” on the web in 1996. Dr. Judith Goetz, senior associate director of DUS, published a book chapter in a NACADA collection in 2003. In 2007, Wes Lipschultz, senior undergraduate studies adviser, and Michael Leonard published a book chapter in a collection by the National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and NACADA. Dr. Janet Schulenberg and Dr. Marie Lindhorst wrote a book chapter for the NACADA collection, *Scholarly Inquiry in Academic Advising* in 2010 (Division of Undergraduate Studies, n.d.). This is but a selection of the writings produced by DUS advisers during White’s leadership.

In addition to supporting his own staff in contributing to the scholarship of academic advising, White advocated for more voices to be heard. DUS created *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal* in 1999 (Division of Undergraduate Studies, n.d.). The creation of *The Mentor* was designed “to provide something different” and to be “a little bit more flexible” because “we’ve got to give our people outlets” (E. White, personal communication, October 16, 2023). *The Mentor* was open to all writers, with all experience levels, designed to “encourage readers to become writers” (Leonard, 1999). *The Mentor* published several groundbreaking works by Dr. Marc Lowenstein, including his 1999 article, “An Alternative to the Developmental Theory of Advising,” which challenged much of the prior advising literature and inspired future work in the field (Hagen & Voller, 2021). Rebranded in 2018 as *The Mentor: Innovative Scholarship on Academic Advising*, the journal’s focus shifted to encouraging new and experimental ideas and forms of writing (Wei, 2018).

White capitalized on the growth of NACADA by encouraging his team to become leaders. As White shared, “When NACADA came to being, it hit me. We’ve got to take advantage of it. I said, we will fund everybody to [attend] a national conference if you get on the program, or if you get involved in the organization, you get on a committee, you become an officer, you’re in charge of the regional, or something like that” (personal communication, October 16, 2023). As a result, many academic advisers in DUS held leadership positions within NACADA, received recognition through the NACADA awards program, and presented multiple sessions at NACADA conferences. For example, DUS adviser, Dr. Ed Danis, became the editor of the NACADA Journal in 1985 (Division of Undergraduate Studies, n.d.). In 1993, Linda Campitelli, DUS programs coordinator at Penn State Delaware County (now Penn State Brandywine), chaired the NACADA Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference. Joyce Buck, DUS programs coordinator in the College of Arts and Architecture, was elected chair of the NACADA Research Committee in 2004. Judith Goetz, senior associate director of DUS, received the NACADA Service to Commission award from the Advising Graduate and Professional Students Commission in 2007. Even White himself was involved, serving as NACADA president in 2004. Many academic advisers in DUS had a role in supporting NACADA’s efforts to elevate academic advising practice.

LEADERSHIP FOR SCHOLARSHIP

White’s focus on hiring people to promote the field of academic advising was critical in developing academic advising at Penn State and contributing to efforts that would further the field across the globe. In his position as director and executive director of DUS, White focused on the broader experience and philosophy of applicants instead of emphasizing experience with college students or in academic advising. By supporting and hiring people who were open to contributing to the scholarship of academic advising, White’s efforts led to the advancement of many thought leaders in the field of advising. In a time when many

advising offices are focused on supporting high numbers of students on shrinking budgets, it is easy to focus on the day-to-day details of scheduling and registration and to neglect the broader view of supporting academic advising through scholarship. Advising administrators should incorporate hiring practices to attract applicants who can work with students as well as show interest in engaging with scholarship.

Beyond hiring practices, it is also important to establish a professional culture that expects advisers to engage with scholarship. Advising leaders should support time for reading, writing, and research beyond normal daily advising operations. As White emphasized, framing academic advising within similar parameters as traditional faculty roles, with responsibilities in teaching/advising, research, and service, furthers this effort. While these considerations may change advising loads and responsibilities, they ultimately benefit individual advisers and advising more broadly. As White observed, “If academic advisors were to see their roles in this light [through teaching, research, and service] and take on these responsibilities, the benefits to them within the institution would easily accrue and ultimately spread to the entire field” (White, 2020, p. 9).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Dr. Eric White, for creating a supportive environment that fostered her interests in academic advising and for sharing his history. This piece would not have been possible without Dr. White’s generosity with his time and experiences.

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