**Breaking It Down: Performing Academic Advising across the Color Line**

*Cornelius K. Gilbert, University of Wisconsin*

In the year 2003, the resonance of a century-old observation by W. E. B. DuBois remains acute. DuBois wrote in 1903 that “the problem of the twentieth century is the color-line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races” (p. 54). Plausibly, writing one hundred years ago, DuBois was unaware that his definition of the twentieth century would still hold true in the new millennium. This paper investigates that problem in the context of American higher education and, more specifically, services such as academic advising. However, the primary focus is not simply discussion (nor exploration). Rather, the intent of this paper is to offer suggestions to student affairs professionals, specifically academic advisers, who desire to establish effective and authentic connections with historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.

To improve relations, it is of utmost importance to understand the dichotomies that exist. First and foremost, many, if not all, institutions of higher learning, except for Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the like, were designed specifically for White students. With racial diversity absent from the original tapestry of such institutions, academic advisers must recognize the social climate that exists on predominantly White campuses. Having an understanding of this environment will allow advisers to appreciate the “fish out of water” feeling that many students of color experience on campus. The unique surroundings of a predominantly White school can be shocking to students of color whose previous surroundings included reservations, urban settings, or environments not cultivating formal education. Such knowledge can help to improve the services the adviser provides.

With this in mind, it should become clearer as to why the collegiate experiences of many students of color are, for the most part, drastically and radically different than those of their White counterparts. When arriving on the campus of a predominantly White institution of higher learning, many students of color experience feelings of isolation, alienation, and incompatibility, as well as a perceived (or, in many cases, experienced) hostility from others. The most paramount of the feelings that students of color experience is probably that of being “the only.”

“The only” can be defined as the sole person of one's ethnic/racial group in a setting where another race is predominant. When a student of color enters a lecture auditorium that seats hundreds of undergraduates only to realize that he or she is “the only,” the encounter can be very intimidating. This feeling of being “the only” is also applicable on a smaller scale. Consider a student of color who enters a regular classroom: although this room is probably not as intimidating as a huge hall, the feeling of being “the only” can nevertheless create very uncomfortable feelings, which may be, for some students, a new phenomenon, in which they feel like an intruder or feel as though a spotlight is shining on them because they “stick out.”

As students of color constantly experience this racial consciousness, they may begin to feel extremely awkward. DuBois (1903/1969) asserted that racial minorities, Black Americans specifically, experience a “peculiar sensation” in which they feel a “twoness” of self. This “double consciousness,” as DuBois termed it, allows racial minorities to view themselves through their own racial lens and, at the same time, to be keenly aware of other racial lenses, particularly those of their White counterparts.

Double consciousness can be of great emotional consequence to a first-year student of color. More often than not, his or her White counterparts look to this young and inexperienced student of color not only as a classmate but also as a “race person,” someone who is “the voice” of his or her people, an educator of his or her race and culture. Students of color might also feel unnecessary pressure to satisfy the roles that are expected of them by their White classmates or professors.

When a student of color experiences such a galvanizing mix of chilly and sometimes thorny racial acuteness, imparting such information to a person who is not a member of his or her racial/ethnic group can be extraordinarily difficult. Similarly, providing academic services across the color line can be difficult and may result in a disconnect: White academic advisers and students of color not communicating to one another. This inability to connect and identify with one another is indeed a dilemma and a contribution to high levels of attrition at predominantly White institutions of higher education. Consequently, services such as academic advising must be approached and executed sensitively.

In many cases, students of color can receive academic services in cultural centers or from student service coordinators who are members of their own racial/ethnic groups. However, there are occasions when students of color who are not familiar with their student service coordinators or who are unaware of the services available to students of color go instead to a general academic advising office or to an office relating to a particular academic program. The advisers who then work with these students may happen to have minimal or no experience interacting with historically underrepresented racial groups, may be insensitive to the issues that affect students of color in higher education, and therefore may treat them as typical students.

The following are some suggestions to assist in the advising of students of color:

It is paramount for academic advisers' offices to represent a warm, personal, and authentic ambiance. Offices should be equipped with personal touches as well as positive messages, particularly to students of color. Such displays should include pieces that illustrate that the adviser is aware of different cultures, internationally as well as domestically. For example, the adviser should have pictures or posters of important historical figures, books that are of importance to respective cultures, and positive memorabilia from places that the adviser might have traveled. The purpose of having such cultural items affixed in the advisers' office is important because it subliminally communicates to the student that the adviser is not culturally clueless, nor uninformed, but is warm, inviting, and “hip.” Through this impression, the adviser can implicitly gain personal stock with the student.

Cultivating trust with a student of color is of dire importance and will take time. Students of color may feel somewhat skeptical toward the institution, as a result of their experiences. Therefore, it is the job of the adviser to initiate the groundwork in establishing an effective rapport. A first step might be to sincerely communicate to the student of color that advisers are there to help. While establishing the groundwork, the adviser should not convey a strictly “professional” attitude, which can be perceived as impersonal and ordinary, but rather should proceed with a more personal touch, sending a clear message that he or she can offer more than simply information about university guidelines or degree information. The extension of honest, heartfelt, and individualized attention can be well-received. When extending the right hand of support, however, the adviser must be careful not to overdo the amicability and be perceived as ridiculous, “way past cool,” parental, or overly benevolent. If the adviser behaves with authentic sincerity and affability, then the behavior will not only be well-received but will also have deeper and longer lasting meaning to the student. When done correctly, this interaction will convince the student that he or she has an ally.

Intrusive advising can be effective for students of color because many have been reared in environments in which experience with or knowledge of the functions of higher education are rare. As a result, many students of color and first-generation students have not established behavioral patterns that would motivate them to seek the assistance of academic services (Holmes, n.d.). When students of color recognize the legitimacy of someone who wants to assist them during this process of collegiate maturation, they will be exceptionally appreciative.

Being an intrusive adviser requires extra steps. If an adviser has had previous contact with a student—for example, during summer orientation—the adviser should make an effort to remember the student's situation and his or her name. As the beginning of the semester draws closer, the adviser should make the first contact with the student in the form of a telephone call, e-mail, or personal letter. This contact should make it clear to the student that an appointment has been (or needs to be) made. If the student misses the appointment, the adviser should follow up with a personal telephone call (Cruise, 2002).

Students of color have special needs on predominantly White campuses. In addition to the sensitivity that is needed to address these students' feelings, basic knowledge of the more concrete challenges is also required. Academic advisers should, at the very least, have a breadth of knowledge that pertains to campus and societal issues, such as the ever-present lack of role models of color at predominantly White institutions and the ramifications of this deficiency. Some financial aid knowledge is helpful, as well (Sutton, 2002). Advisers should know the location of the financial aid office, basic application procedures, and the most significant financial aid deadlines. Advisers should also be able to refer students to scholarship information and work-study job listings.

The primary concern of student academic affairs is to meet the academic needs of students—all students. No matter how unique the needs of some students may seem, these needs cannot be overlooked and must be addressed with a conscious and persistent effort. It is equally important that these services are provided during the students' first year, when the seeds of attrition are planted. A student's first year is the most crucial period in student retention (Center for Institutional Data Exchange and Analysis, 2001). In fact, according to a 2000–2001 report by the Center for Institutional Data Exchange and Analysis, retention rates after the first year are as follows: Blacks, 74 percent; Hispanics, 75 percent; and American Indians, 67 percent; compared with Asians, 87 percent; and Whites, 79 percent.

On a grand scale, predominantly White institutions of higher education must be committed to supporting students of color once they arrive on campus. However, on a smaller scale, student affairs units must recognize that many students need support. To this end, White student affairs professionals—including academic advisers—who are uncomfortable communicating across the color line must be informed that it is their duty to work effectively with students of color. Although not a cure-all prescription, these basic recommendations can help advisers to relax and therefore become more active with students of color. For a profoundly positive impact on retention rates, the hiring of more faculty and staff is key. Nevertheless, effectively improving communication across the color line could help to diminish, within academic advising in higher education, the “problem of the twentieth century” observed by DuBois one hundred years ago.

**References**

Center for Institutional Data Exchange and Analysis. (2001, May 11). *2000–01 Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange report: The retention and graduation rates in 344 colleges and universities.* Norman: University of Oklahoma, Author.

Cruise, C. A. (2002, October 28). Advising students on academic probation. *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal, 4*(4). Retrieved December 4, 2002, from http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/.

DuBois, W.E.B. (1969). *The souls of Black folk*. New York: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1903)

Holmes, S. (n.d.). Intrusive advising as a model for retention. Retrieved December 4, 2002, from http://www.diversityweb.org/diversity\_innovations/student\_development/ recruitment\_retention\_mentoring/intrusive\_advising.cfm

Sutton, W. L. (2002, November 28). Knowing the facts about financial aid: Basic overview of financial aid for academic advisers. *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal, 4*(4). Retrieved December 4, 2002, from http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/.

**Additional Resources**

Benton, M. A. (2001). Challenges African-American students face at predominantly white institutions. *Colorado State Journal of Student Affairs 10*(21). Retrieved December 4, 2002, from http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/DSA/SAHE/JOURNAL/2001/Challenges.htm

Jordan, P. (2000). Advising college students in the 21st century. *NACADA Journal, 20*(2).

Molina, A., & Abelman, R. (2000). Style over substance in interventions for at-risk students: The impact of intrusiveness. *NACADA Journal, 20*(2).

**About the Author**

*Cornelius K. Gilbert is an associate academic adviser for Cross College Advising Service at the University of Wisconsin. He can be contacted at 608-265-5460 or* *cgilbert@lssaa.wisc.edu**.*

Published in *The Mentor* on March 3, 2003, by Penn State's Division of Undergraduate Studies
Available online at [dus.psu.edu/mentor](http://dus.psu.edu/mentor%22%20%5Ct%20%22_top)
[Privacy and Legal Statements](http://www.psu.edu/ur/legal.html) | [Copyright](http://www.psu.edu/ur/copyright.html) | © The Pennsylvania State University | All rights reserved

http://dus.psu.edu/mentor/old/articles/030303cg.htm