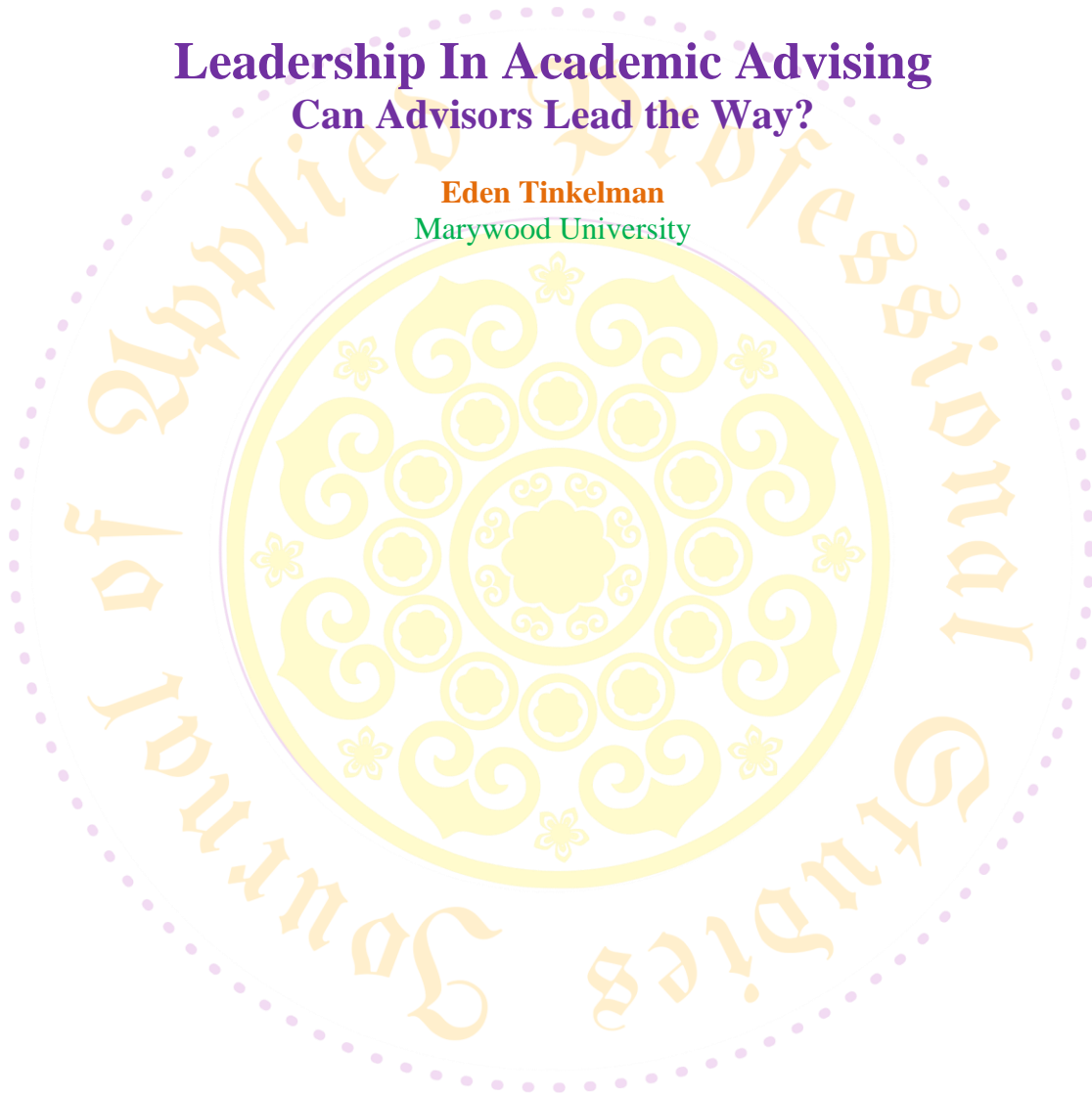


# Leadership In Academic Advising Can Advisors Lead the Way?

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## Abstract

Academic advisors hold a crucial leadership role on campus, embodying servant and transformational leadership styles in their interactions with students. Through their selfless commitment, they prioritize students' success by offering guidance, support, and resources tailored to individual needs. They serve as mentors, advocates, and motivators, helping students navigate challenges, set goals, and realize their academic and personal potential.

Beyond their direct support for students, advisors also contribute significantly to institutional development. Their expertise and insights inform the creation of student-centered policies and practices, fostering a campus environment that promotes inclusivity and success for all. By advocating for innovative solutions and collaborating with stakeholders across campus, advisors play a vital role in shaping the direction and sustainability of their institutions.

## Keywords

Academic advising - academic advising is the process between the student and an academic advisor of exploring the value of a general education, reviewing the services and policies of the institution, discussing educational and career plans, and making appropriate course selections (Academic Advising – Definition, n.d.).

Servant leadership - a non-traditional leadership philosophy, embedded in a set of behaviors and practices that place the primary emphasis on the well-being of those being served (Greenleaf Center, 2021).

Transformational leadership - influencing major change throughout an organization and its membership in order to push an organization toward common goals and objectives (Kelly, 2003).

Retention - the percentage of students who return to the same institution for their second year (Center, 2018).

Attrition – the percentage of students who drop-out of college (Schwebel, et al., 2012).

Student Success - “successful completion of personal academic goals and/or degree attainment” (Levitz, 2001 as cited in O’Connor, 2017, p. 6)

## Introduction

In "Escape from Cluelessness" (2000, p. 197-98), Bolman and Deal emphasize that effective leadership in higher education involves collaborative efforts to help individuals identify their goals, find paths to achieve them, and gain the courage to move forward. This leadership is not confined to formal titles but is exhibited by various campus members, including students, faculty, and administrators. Among these, advisors—both faculty and professional—are critical, serving as mentors and advocates for students. They prioritize students' needs, employing a servant

leadership style that focuses on well-being, growth, and development (Greenleaf, 1970; Hintz and Gomez, 2021).

In addition, institutions can leverage advisors' leadership to address factors influencing student retention and enrollment, as identified by Tinto's research (1993 as cited in Heisserer and Parette, 2002). Advisors play a crucial role in aiding students with adjustment issues, uncertainty, integration into the college community, and clarifying academic and career goals. Their proactive efforts in addressing these issues can contribute to student success and retention. Without strong retention and continued enrollment, institutions face financial challenges, as tuition revenue is vital for campus improvement and attracting students (Heisserer and Parette, 2002, p. 73). Therefore, understanding and harnessing advisors' leadership is essential for the sustainability and success of higher education institutions.

### **Background**

The notion of advising students has existed in some way since the inception of higher education in the United States of America (Gillispie, 2003). In 1636, the first American college, Harvard University was founded, and soon, several more colleges quickly appeared, such as William and Mary, Yale University, and St. John's College (*The History of Harvard*, 2023; Collier, 2023). The faculty of these institutions were clergymen and they oversaw the overall development and wellbeing of the young men attending these institutions. During this time period, the students and faculty were housed in the same residence, thus the faculty and students had a close relationship inside and outside of the classroom (Gillispie, 2003).

While this relationship was beneficial to the students, there was less concern with student discipline as the needs of the institution grew when the American Revolutionary War drew closer, thus pulling the faculty away from their students (Gillispie, 2003). While this left students to be more responsible for their choices, faculty would still act *in loco parentis* as needed by the students (Gillispie, 2003).

In the 1820's, Kenyon College presented the first formal academic advising system (Cook, 2019). Each student was paired with a faculty member for advising, a practice that proved beneficial as colleges proliferated throughout the nineteenth century, securing the place of academic advisement in higher education. Aiding in acquiring this place in higher education were several decrees.

Frank Parsons, who contributed to the vocational guidance movement at the time, created these three commands. The first was an understanding of oneself, including capabilities, inclinations, resources, interests, and limitations. Second, one should have an awareness of the demands and conditions of various professions. Lastly, one should know the opportunities and benefits of each profession (Zunker, 2002 in Gillispie, 2003). With these directives, higher education could advance its advising system in the future.

In the early 1900's, "the fad of the moment was to establish an adviser system for supervising the selection of classes and to help bridge the ever-widening gap in student/faculty relations" (Cook, 2019). World War I only strengthened the role of advisement. During this time, there was training for counselors so that they could complement faculty advising (Cook, 2019).

Coinciding with the end of WWI, was the Progressive Education Movement of the 1920s. During this time, educators, such as John Dewey, began to push for education to include student driven experiences that would be holistic, instead of just focusing on academics, especially the practice of memorization in learning (Spallino, 2022). The primary tenets of progressive education include assessment by evaluation of projects, learning content geared towards skills necessary for the future, and focusing on critical thinking and problem solving skills (Spallino, 2022). This movement further lended itself to students after World War II.

By the time World War II was over, higher education was seeing another boost in enrollment. This was mainly due to the passing of the GI Bill that allowed veterans to attend school for a discounted price (Cook, 2019). At the same time, there were more courses and curricula were offered to students than ever before. Trained professionals - advisors - were needed more than ever to aid students in their academic journey.

Since WWII, higher education has seen growth, at least until recently. Today, less students are attending college, and many are progressing slower than before. Many students now take six years to complete a four-year degree (Tran-Johnson, 2018). This is where higher education should rely on advisors to help lead the way. With their ongoing commitment to assisting students in various ways, advisors possess knowledge of students retention and some of the best practices.

### ***Target Audience***

Leadership through academic advisement should matter to several main audiences, such as the advisors themselves (both professional and faculty), enrollment and retention offices, student success offices, and the institution as a whole. If advisors are to lead, it is imperative that they develop their leadership skills. Further, if they are to lead through advising, they must be capable of discussing best practices and ensuring they also implement them.

Advisors' leadership would be crucial to enrollment and retention offices. For enrollment offices, such as the admissions office, advisors would be able to speak to how often to reach out to students, including different populations of students, as well as what modes of communication work best. Further, they would be able to participate in speaking with incoming students about what the institution offers them and what is happening with the current students.

The retention office is tasked with retaining students by providing warnings to those at risk of dismissal, discussing options like taking a leave of absence, and directing them to additional resources. Advisors can help lead in this effort since they are crucial to retention. Advisors and retention officers can work together to discuss what retains students, which resources are beneficial to this particular population, and how to build an early alert system for 'at-risk' students.

Both enrollment and retention can be part of a student success department, as can professional advising. Depending on the institution, student success departments may include different departments, but many include a writing and tutoring center, career resource center, and disability services. Advisors also often work with students on these areas or point them in the direction of these resources. Faculty advisors may also be able to provide beneficial tips and tricks to these areas on what might work best for students in specific majors.

Academic advisors contribute significantly to the overall success of the institutions they serve. They can collaborate with other departments, such as athletics or financial aid, to effectively communicate with students about specific issues. In addition to this interdisciplinary work, advisors play a key role in student retention, thereby enhancing the institution's profitability. Sustained profitability ensures the institution's operational continuity, enabling it to support faculty and staff while helping students transition to the next stage of their lives.

## **Literature Review**

An academic advisor is an “institutional representative [who] gives insight or direction to a college student about an academic, social, or personal matter. The nature of this direction might be to inform, suggest, counsel, discipline, coach, mentor, or even teach” (NACADA, 2003). By interacting with students in this capacity, advisors learn how to advocate for their students. They know what the students need and want on a regular basis.

With this knowledge, advisors have an opportunity to be leaders for their institutions. Advisors are often found to have a servant leadership style. This lends itself to the opportunities that they have to be leaders on campus, whether with students or faculty and staff. Using the leadership opportunities available to them, they can gain leadership skills that they can utilize to be agents of change.

### ***Common Leadership Styles of Advisors***

When people think of leadership, they can have various ideas of what it looks like to them. Leadership comes in many forms. Researchers and experts on the topic have broken leadership into different styles or types. These styles include, but are not limited to, transactional, transformational, democratic, autocratic, bureaucratic, laissez-faire, charismatic, coaching, and servant leadership.

#### ***Servant Leadership***

Multiple studies have determined that many advisors have a servant leadership style. Someone who is a servant leader “focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong (Greenleaf Center, 2021).” Servant leaders often contain common traits: empathy, foresight, listening, awareness, and a commitment to the growth of others (Paul et al., 2012).

According to Paul et al. (2012), listening might be one of the most important aspects of servant leadership. Not just listening, but actively listening. This means that they are not just listening to the words that someone else is saying, but the whole message including the person's tone, body language, and context (Mind Tools, 2022). They are making a conscious effort to pay attention to the speaker and hear the complete message.

This ability to actively listen ties into empathy, which is another vital trait or skill of academic advisors. Empathy is not just merely feeling sorry for someone else, but rather “reflects a true understanding and experiencing of feeling the emotions of another person” (Paul et al., 2012)

Being able to reflect and understand students and their emotions gives advisors the ability to aid students in their personal growth.

Another important trait for advisors is awareness, both of him- or herself and in general. This awareness allows them to better serve others and know their needs. The information and knowledge that comes with this awareness benefits the advisor as they can then link classes and curriculars to students' goals (Paul et al., 2012). It also enhances the advisor's knowledge about academic policies and procedures that affect them and their students.

Further, many advisors have foresight. This enables them to understand past lessons, the reality of the present, and the potential consequences of future actions (Paul et al., 2012). Being able to envision the future means that advisors can create a strategic plan for reaching outcomes of goals, especially when working with their students. This also aids in students' planning for classes, major and minor, internships choices, and professional pathways (Paul et al., 2012).

### *Transformational Leadership*

Transformational leadership has been credited to James MacGregor Burns in the 1970s, and has since been expanded upon to what it is today (Kelly, 2003). Transformational leaders often focus more on organizational collaboration that can move the organization and vision forward, and less on making decisions and developing strategic plans (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020). These leaders often are able to motivate followers to go beyond expectations without reward, usually by expressing the purpose and value behind the organization's goals (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020). Transformational leadership is said to have several primary elements, such as individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, idealized influence, and intellectual stimulation (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020).

While there is little literature on transformational leadership in academic advising, several studies have hinted at it. In their article, *Full Range Advising*, Barbuto et al. (2011), found that common elements in transformational leadership led to a positive correlation with advisees' ratings of their advisors. They found that idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration shared a positive significant relationship with extra effort, satisfaction, and advisor effectiveness (Barbuto et al., 2011). By finding these positive correlations, the authors of the study were able to focus on the initial instance of transformational leadership behaviors in advising.

In the same study, they also found that when advisors showed these behaviors, advisees often exerted extra effort in relation to their education, were satisfied with their advisors, and perceived advising to be more effective (Barbuto, et al., 2011). Barbuto et al. (2011) also discovered that advisors utilized certain behaviors more frequently than others. In particular, intellectual stimulation was used substantially less than the other three behaviors (Barbuto et al., 2011). More research is necessary for determining how transformational leadership can be utilized by academic advisors.

## *Opportunities for Leadership in Advising*

Although many advisors may not hold a formal leadership title, they frequently exhibit leadership qualities and take on leadership roles, both on and off campus. They have numerous opportunities to lead among students, faculty, and staff, as well as within their communities. Whether in formal or informal capacities, they can cultivate their leadership skills to enrich their advisees' experiences.

### *On-Campus Opportunities*

Due to their consistent and continuous engagement with students, advisors often become the voice of their students. They are able to advocate for the student population in various situations, such as campus committees. While the prospect of adding extra work may seem daunting for advisors, it can also be rewarding and contribute to forging strong bonds between multiple departments (Hintz and Gomez, 2021).

For faculty advisors, taking on committee work may be more manageable as it's often expected given their role on campus. However, for professional or primary role advisors, integrating this task may pose challenges in balancing it with their student priorities. For both types of advisors, having a voice in the campus community is crucial as it helps them in becoming a leader (Hintz and Gomez, 2021). By being a leader, they can support the students' voice and success.

Advisors, especially faculty, can find other on-campus opportunities to be leaders. This may be as a department chair, program director, or student club supervisor. These roles offer advisors the opportunity to cultivate various leadership skills, including time management and organization, communication, relationship building, active listening, and creativity.

### *Off-Campus Opportunities*

Another way that advisors can develop their leadership skills and style is through off-campus opportunities. These include professional development organizations, volunteer centers, and executive boards (Hintz and Gomez, 2021). Even something as simple as reading the latest conference proposals or most recent professional articles can broaden an advisor's perspective on the profession.

Professional development organizations, such as NACADA, are greatly beneficial to advisors. Many of these organizations have websites that allow members to share blogs, present research, and engage in discussions. Moreover, many of these organizations hold state, national, and global conferences that members can attend and present at (Hintz and Gomex, 2021). In this manner, advisors can work with likeminded people to learn more in their profession and become leaders in their field. More seasoned professionals can also encourage new professionals to become more involved in their community.

Community involvement can also be utilized to develop and enhance leadership skills. Being involved in clubs, charity organizations, and other events allows academic advisors to integrate their personal passions and interests with opportunities to lead (Hintz and Gomex, 2021). With

this additional experience, and thus more self-confidence, advisors are likely to perform better in their roles.

### *Academic Advisors as Agents of Change*

#### *Whole Institution Initiatives*

With higher education's collective emphasis on boosting retention rates, every institution now recognizes the importance of improving student outcomes and the quality of the learning experience. While in previous years curriculum design had been the prerogative of the individual lecturer or each department, with attrition rates climbing, it is more important than ever that the whole university works together to formulate the school's curriculum (Pourshafie & Brady, 2013). There are various methods institutions can undertake to promote the first-year experience and long-lasting initiatives.

Such initiatives include "coordinated and well developed plan for action; processes for identifying and recognizing good practice; funding to develop initiatives at the local level; and authentic support from a high level champion" (Pourshafie & Brady, 2013). While this may sound good, there are obstacles to achieving such outcomes. These include "the loss of front-line academic autonomy; conflicts between local practices and local cultures; and the imperative of the shift from teaching to learning" (Pourshafie & Brady, 2013). In this manner, collaboration between the university, the community, and the advisor can support a sustainable culture.

Such a culture can improve student learning; thus it is imperative that members of the institution, especially advisors, build areas for rumination and pedagogical revolution (Pourshafie & Brady, 2013). There are certain elements that typically go into this collaboration. Such elements include both formal and informal chances to catch up and connect, share and learn from each other, and brainstorm on future plans and reflection (Pourshafie & Brady, 2013).

To generate this growth, institutional members must support each other and participate in reaching a shared vision. Without a shared vision, members cannot work together through the necessary steps to reach it (Pourshafie & Brady, 2013). They must also accept different perspectives, as these differences can bring about great discussions and find new ways to reach the shared vision. Lastly, they must be unified in their diversity (Pourshafie & Brady, 2013). In all this, advisors often work with various groups and often work on goal setting, making them great leaders and unifiers.

#### *Diversity and Equality*

One of the greatest advantages advisors have in increasing retention rates is their work with a diverse range of people. Since advisors are student centered, they are able to use their experience and data from their interactions to uncover where barriers potentially exist on campus (Jones et al., 2021). They can also find where the gaps in the data are, such as where more information is needed in terms of the students' lived experiences on campus. The insights gained from advisors' regular interactions with students provide a unique understanding of why students leave the institution, the existing support networks, and where barriers exist (Jones et al., 2021). This understanding is invaluable for advising and retaining students.



However, it is crucial to recognize that many institutional policies, procedures, and structures are currently centered in Whiteness (Jones et al., 2021). Therefore, when discussing how to lead the institution in retaining students, it is imperative to include both leaders of color and academic advisors as part of the conversation. This ensures that non-White student experiences are considered when deciding on how to best design advising and other student services (Jones et al., 2021). “Understanding where equity gaps exist at the institution can guide the conversation about why they are happening and how advisors, and the advising system broadly, can help support and guide students at critical junctures in their undergraduate experience” (Jones et al., 2021).

### *Leadership Education in Academic Advising*

Advisors often act as leadership educators for students - our future leaders. To become a leadership educator, academic advisors must have a sense of the process of leadership development and leadership development models in higher education (McClellan, 2013). To define their role in leadership education, advisors must understand the interplay between leadership education, college student development, and the foundations of academic advising (McClellan, 2013). They must also know the qualities of a leader, which in turn can aid them in developing leadership education programs.

Since the literature on leadership education concurs that students partake in leadership practices both inside and outside of the classroom, it is crucial that advisors develop leadership outcomes (McClellan, 2013). This can then guide advisors on how to embed leadership efforts into their work with students and aid students in furthering their own leadership skills. It can also help advisors in working with other institution members to develop meaningful leadership education and experiences around campus for students (McClellan, 2013).

Further, It is important to note that even without such purposeful efforts, advisors may already be inadvertently contributing to the development of leadership skills among college students (McClellan, 2013). This is due to the nature of advising as advisors often push their advisees to continuously grow and develop. It is important that this role of developing student leaders is not confused with teaching students about leadership.

### **Analysis**

While there is some literature on academic advisors acting as leaders, more research and evaluation needs to be conducted to paint a larger picture on how advisors and their roles fit into leadership roles around campus. In this situation, advisors are the primary target audience. They are the most affected by being leaders on campus, whether it be for their students, other faculty and staff, or the whole institution.

Following advisors, faculty and other staff members also play a significant role. When they collaborate with advisors, they can adopt best practices for retaining students, whether through mentoring, guiding them to appropriate resources, or simply provisioning a supportive ear. The last audience is the institution and its departments as a whole. If advisors aid others in retention efforts, the intuition is likely to feel the effects of the increased revenue from students staying on campus.

To make this happen, advisors need to have the right leadership styles. The literature has revealed that many advisors often utilize a servant leadership style, meaning that they often serve others first. Advisors serve their advisees by presenting them with resources, assisting them in planning their paths, and offering guidance. They can do this with other members of the institution; serving others first by teaching them best practices for interacting with students, what obstacles students are facing, and how others can aid students. Serving other members aids them in doing better for their careers and providing the best possible service.

Advisors are also said to have a transformational leadership style. These leaders often know how to motivate others without reward. They are able to make the vision or mission have value to others, thus inciting them into action. This again can be done with both advisees but other members of the campus. This is beneficial because being geared towards the same vision brings a united front thus making efforts stronger.

With both of these styles, there are many opportunities for leadership both on and off campus. On-campus opportunities include participating in committees, staff meetings, and other campus activities. Off-campus opportunities include partaking in professional development organizations, whether it be forums, presentations, or conferences. They can also engage with volunteer organizations in their local community. These are great chances to develop leadership skills and gain confidence in their abilities.

With such abilities, advisors are able to act as agents of change. This can be accomplished in several ways. One chance to be an agent of change is to participate in campus-wide initiatives. This can include items such as New Student Orientation, First-Year Experience curriculum, and other long-lasting programs. The benefit of these initiatives is that they decrease attrition and increase student retention.

Advisors can also find ways to add diversity around campus and into such initiatives. Due to their frequent interactions with students, advisors often know what obstacles students face, especially non-White students. In collaboration with campus members who are People of Color, advisors can aid in directing how to eliminate obstacles for students and make them feel more comfortable around campus.

Lastly, advisors can provide leadership education. While their job is not to teach others about leadership, they are to help students in developing leadership skills that will lead them to be the next set of leaders. Such leadership education can focus on time management, organization, communication, empathy, and growth. While applicable to students, advisors can aid others on campus or within the profession on developing their leadership skills. Such workshops and advice would aid higher education as a whole in retaining students and leading them to graduation.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Recommendations for Professionals***

For professionals in the field of academic advising, there are several recommendations. First, it is recommended that they participate in training. This should be from various fields. In terms of leadership, advisors can take classes or workshops, and read the latest materials on leadership.

Leadership materials can include the different types of leadership, leadership skills, and how to fill in the gaps.

They should also partake in training geared towards academic advisement. The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) is one of the few professional organizations that is specifically for academic advising. They provide opportunities for advising professionals to discuss on forums, present at conferences, and publish their works. In this manner, advisors can build their skills that aid in their knowledge and student retention efforts.

Lastly, advisors should be trained in multiple areas. While faculty advisors may already have some knowledge on different areas of the school, it would be beneficial for both professional and faculty advisors to gain a better understanding of the other resources available on campus. Setting up training with athletic coaches, student success, and enrollment services can greatly benefit all parties. When working with students or other campus members, advisors would then be more well-rounded in their knowledge and be able to speak more about available services.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

Future research needs to fill in various gaps about academic advisors as leaders. One major item is to determine which leadership styles are most common and how they affect students, but other parties on campus. While several studies point to servant leadership, transformational leadership has also been mentioned within the literature. This research has typically focused on how advisors lead students, but knowledge on how they interact with other campus departments could also be beneficial to future advising professionals.

Further, a comparison on how well each leadership style works with certain populations. For example, minority students or first generation students have often favored a different advising style than the “typical” student. This might also be true for leadership style. If this is true, it would be important that advisors learn which styles of leadership and how to develop such a style. This is also true of working with other members of higher education.

While the literature does state what opportunities are available both on and off campus to advisors as leaders, it would be beneficial to see how those opportunities improved advisors’ leadership. Further, if advisors are the leaders of those groups or initiatives, determining the results and if they are successful would be beneficial to higher education. Such results could also be compared to other institutions who often have other campus members lead such efforts.

Lastly, more studies on how advisors help students grow as leaders would be important. What actions and personalities best motivate students to grow and develop would be crucial to future advising meetings. Knowing what would work best would allow advisors in higher education to not only further their own skills, but also their students, the future leaders.

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