

[Dr. Sharon Fries-Britt was a keynote speaker at the 2007 NACADA Conference held in Baltimore, Maryland, October 18–21.]

Advising Though a Wave of Change

Sharon Fries-Britt, University of Maryland

I was delighted to be invited as a keynote speaker for the 2007 NACADA conference in Baltimore Maryland. The conference theme, Advisors as Navigators: From Orientation to Graduation and Beyond, was very inspiring. I was stimulated by the deep commitment conveyed by it and I found myself delighted with the task of preparing my speech. I recap the themes and issues (and some stories) that I shared during my conference speech and the follow-up session. Because I rarely use a completely written text, I am somewhat disadvantaged in trying to recapture the speech verbatim. Nevertheless, I offer my observations in hopes that advisors will continue to find them useful in enhancing their lives and those of others in 2008.

As I studied the NACADA membership, I was delighted to see the strong mix of expertise in the membership. There are a lot of very smart and important people in your organization. Any time I speak before an audience of very *smart* people I am reminded of one of my favorite stories about a priest, a boy scout, and a college professor: They were the only passengers on a small plane. The pilot came back to the cabin and said that the plane was going down, but there were only three parachutes and four people. The pilot added, “I should have one of the parachutes because I have a wife and three small children.” So he took one and jumped.

The college professor said, “I should have one of the parachutes because I am the smartest man in the world and I serve as an ADVISOR to presidents and kings.” So he took another parachute and jumped.

The priest turned to the boy scout and said forlornly, “You are young and I am old. I have lived a rich life. You take the remaining parachute, and I’ll go down with the plane.” The boy scout smiled back and said, “Relax, Father, the smartest man in the world—the college professor and advisor to presidents and kings—just jumped out with my backpack.”

In higher education we have the privilege of working within a talented community, a community with a lot of capable individuals. Those of us who

serve in these educational contexts clearly have an opportunity to make an enormous difference in the lives of students as well as professional colleagues. Our moments of interaction with each other bring significant opportunities and responsibilities. However, if we think we are the most important person, we miss significant opportunities to learn and grow. As advisors, we have a wonderful opportunity to benefit from reciprocal relationships if we are open to the value of all people.

I want to offer a few perspectives and insights that push you to think broadly about your role as an advisor. I want you to think about the broader conditions that have an impact on you and your students. I am moved in this direction because I was struck by two words in your conference theme: *navigators* and *beyond*. I see both of these as very powerful words with enormous potential. To prepare students for the “beyond” is challenging because it also means that we must stay current and cutting edge not only in our fields of study but as citizens of an increasingly global world! The landscape that we operate in has changed dramatically and it will continue to do so.

In the field of oceanography there is a superstition that every now and then a significant wave comes along like no other. It is referred to as “the ninth wave.” It is believed that there is no force greater than the ninth wave. This ninth wave occurs when the power of the sea and the wind work together to create an incredible force. To catch the ninth wave at the right time requires a special skill of timing. Those who navigate the sea know that once you experience the ninth wave you understand the real power of the sea.

In higher education we see a powerful wave of change that is shaping the entire landscape. It will have an impact on who gets access to college, how we teach, how students learn, what advice we give students, and who will be retained and ultimately employed in our society.

I address four key areas that I think will influence the work we do in higher education to help students navigate their collegiate experiences and beyond. First, I look at several of the trends shaping higher education. Second, I examine briefly

how the national labor pool and college trends will impact the students we are preparing to lead and work in this nation and across the globe. Third, I turn to lessons we can learn from the research on racially and ethnically diverse students. These students will increasingly represent a large percentage of the students we will be serving in community colleges and 4-year institutions. I close with a less conventional, yet significant, theme of inspiration in which I ask, “How do we inspire ourselves and others for the ‘Beyond?’”

Trends Shaping Higher Education

Changing Demographics

One of the most cited trends shaping higher education is the changing demographics of the student body—for example, racial, economic, gender, age, and ability levels. We are currently experiencing how the diversity of the student body is creating new advising challenges. Like all students, diverse students bring their own lived experiences. It is important for advisors to do more than simply embrace their diversity. We must respect each student’s humanity, self-identity, and self-expression. The diversity of the higher education community is re-norming our college campuses in research, practice, and teaching. We should intentionally seek to engage diversity, for in so doing we improve each person’s competency and capacity to be effective in human relations.

Finally, as we acknowledge diversity, we must be willing to acknowledge race and racism. There is no question that the social fabric of our nation has shifted in the last 50 years. If, however, excellence is our call, then no less should be expected in our efforts to heal as a nation around race. I do believe that our best days are before us. But I have seen too many situations where people are afraid to take an accounting of race and racism because they feel that it has been addressed under efforts to be more diverse. As we navigate these inevitably rising waters we must be willing to be truthful about our own limitations and struggles. We must enlarge our capacity to grow and learn. Then we will make whole our interactions with one another.

Employment Shifts

Increasingly, we see larger numbers of part-time versus full-time faculty, staff, and administrators. The degree to which part-time versus full-time faculty feel supported and connected to the campus will have a direct effect on their sense of commitment. Contractual and part-time faculty are being asked to take on roles and responsibilities with students as

well as administrative and academic units that may go beyond the scope of their contract and the time that they have available to be on campus. Many part-time individuals work in a virtual space or they share physical space with other part-time workers or graduate students. This is not necessarily negative. However, meeting with students and/or staying on campus to be involved in governance processes can be less attractive under these circumstances.

Increasingly we call on their commitment to serve and to help students without a full appreciation of the challenges they face. As we continue to ask people to do more with less, we must show genuine appreciation and recognition of their service. Even more important, we must find meaningful ways to reward them.

Economic Instability and Illiteracy

I am certainly not an economist and I do not pretend to know the competing economic theories that inform fiscal policy or labor markets. I am, however, an avid reader of economic trends, finances, money, and markets. I believe that we have significant fiscal problems in the United States that limit access for many individuals to social, cultural, and economic capital. We could debate as to the source of the problem—for example, ill-constructed public policy, structural inequality, and even personal consumption and habits. Regardless of the source, what I know for sure is that the resulting effect of our economic instability and illiteracy is costly. More and more families cannot afford to send their children to college. The increasing educational costs and limited federal funding is creating a real divide. Added to this, the average American saves less than 2% of his or her salary for retirement. In fact, recently *Time* magazine reported that for the first time Americans have a negative savings rate. I could go on listing a number of indicators, like the most-recent mortgage crisis and default rate facing the nation, but I think you get my point.

We are woefully undereducated about finances and seemingly comfortable living paycheck to paycheck. A college education is critical to the advancement and access of individuals to higher salaries and professional positions. The earning power of individuals increases substantially with each degree. This fact is important for everyone, but it is particularly important for minority populations who earn far less than Whites and have far less wealth accumulated (even when you account for education and earnings).

If we do not educate ourselves about fiscal responsibility we will fall short of our capacity to

achieve at the highest level. The kind of achievement that I am referring to has to do with the freedoms that we can have when we understand how to use money. It is not simply a race to see who can make the most. A lot of people earn a good income but they have very little to show for it. To help students succeed beyond college, we must not only help to retain them to degree completion, we must also encourage their growth toward learning about life skills that can enhance their social, cultural, economic, and human capital; this is what ultimately increases their choices and prepares them for the beyond.

Technology

The impact of technology has been significant. Everyday we witness the impact technology has on our lives and how it is shaping our campuses. It has literally changed how we relate to each other, how we access information, and how we learn. Whether we are talking about distance education, E-mail, text messaging, blogging, or Utube, it has opened up an entire new world of communication with opportunities and challenges. College campuses are multi-generational environments where the age spectrum is likely to span 18 to 80. The expectations and norms around the use of technology are complex and comprise a relatively new terrain. As we work with students we are likely to find ourselves challenged in our abilities to relate to their technological expertise and expectations. We must use this as an opportunity for learning and collaboration.

These four themes represent just a few of the changes that are shaping our landscape in higher education. The success of students will require us to look holistically at students' lives and to think differently about what it means to advise them and to help them be successful as adults. There are a number of other broad trends that we need to be aware of as advisors because they will have an impact on who is in the pipeline for higher education and the workforce. As you review them think about what they suggest for how we prepare students to work, and live, in an increasingly diverse and complex world (Harvey & Anderson, 2005; Lockwood, 2005).

1. There will be greater diversity in the labor pool. By 2008 women and minorities will represent 70% of the new labor force, and by 2010, of the entire U.S. workforce, 34% will be non-Caucasian.
2. Educational achievements have shifted. Women have higher levels of college atten-

- dance and degree completion rates across all racial groups at the undergraduate level.
3. We have an aging workforce. In 2010 the U.S. workforce will have an increase of 29% in the 45 to 64 year age range; 14% in the 65 and over group, and a 1% decline in those 18 to 44. There will be increasing retirement in faculty positions that will need to be filled.
4. Globalization is shrinking the percentage of the Western workforce. In the next 10 years, 75% of the world's workforce will likely come from Asia. North America and Europe will have 3% of the world's new labor force.

What these trends suggest is that we cannot afford to waste our talent pool as a nation! Quite literally we need to invest in every person in this country. Women and minorities will play a significant role in the leadership of this nation in government, education, business, medicine, science, and entertainment. These themes also suggest that colleges and universities will need to prepare graduates who understand the domestic and global playing field. In other words, graduates will need to understand the problems of the United States as well as other parts of the world. The demands of the nation and the world will require skilled individuals who have the capacity to work in complex environments. I think it is an exciting time for our nation and higher education in particular.

Now more than ever before in the history of higher education we have opened the pathway to college for many more minority students. We still have a long way to go to increase access, affordability, and degree completion rates. Notwithstanding these challenges, we have made significant progress, and we have been able to learn invaluable lessons from these students through research and practice. I offer a few of these lessons from my own research and that of others.

First, not all minority students have compromised academic needs. Many do; however, we must not assume that this is the case with every student who we are advising. In my years of conducting research on high-achieving minority students I have learned how they face stereotypes about their academic ability until they prove themselves to the faculty and their peers.

Second, many of these students are first-generation and they may need additional help navigating the academy. They likely have an incomplete understanding of the socialization process and traditions of the academy. Genuinely connecting with these students so that they can feel comfortable asking

questions is important. Advisors who are willing to share their own shortcomings and lack of understanding are likely to create an environment where students feel it is okay to be vulnerable.

Third, we know that many of these students are balancing many competing demands in their lives such as work, extended family, parenthood, and finances. It is important that we help them to think critically about how they will manage their time and responsibilities so that they can ensure their success.

Finally, on traditionally White campuses, minority students may encounter a hostile racial climate or one in which the social interactions and norms are different from their own cultural backgrounds. Students need a place to land when they are encountering difficulty. They need to vent and express their concerns without fear of reprisal and judgment. No single person can be there for every student. However, if each of us does her or his part, we can collectively be there for all students. Minority students need to know that they matter and that they have the potential to succeed. We must affirm their abilities and work to support their success.

I am reminded of the story of the African American girl who stood watching the balloon man at the county fair. Suddenly, a red balloon broke loose and soared upward until it could scarcely be seen. So many people were attracted to the incident that the vendor thought it might be good business to let another go, so he snipped the string of a bright yellow balloon, and later, a white one. The little girl stood there, as if waiting for something. Finally she asked, "Mister, if you sent the black one up, would it go as high as the others?" The balloon man, with an understanding smile, released the black balloon as he said, "Young lady it isn't the color. It's the stuff inside that makes it rise."

As I near the end of my observations and push this speech from the shore of my own experiences I want to offer a few insights that I value and that I think are useful in getting students to think about how they make choices and navigate beyond college. I offer them as insights that I have used in my own life and my work with students. Even when I fall short of reaching them, I try to keep them in front of me, to remind me to seek excellence in what I do and to inspire myself to be prepared for the beyond.

1. Live your life above the line. Set a standard that you will not go below and don't allow others to take you below the line. If you are willing to learn instead of blame, life will go more smoothly. It is important to take responsibility.

2. Encourage the development of self-efficacy in students. Help students to understand what they are good at so that they will continue to expand their abilities and feel confident in mastering new challenges. Even more important work on your own sense of self-efficacy so that you are also learning and growing. You will build confidence and expand your own skills and you will understand the vulnerability of students who are often outside of their comfort zone.
3. Remember the six freedoms: time freedom, relationship freedom, spiritual freedom, physical freedom, money freedom, and freedom to pursue your dreams. The more freedoms we can establish in our lives the more we are willing to give and share with others. Encourage yourself and others to be free so that your best work can come forth.

A national conference such as this is a time to catch up on new developments in the field, to learn about new research and practice, to renew friendships, and to recharge. No doubt over the past few days you have gained new insights and ideas to take back to your home campus. Conferences can seem like a crazy time as you rush around attending sessions and gaining new insight.

The energy of a conference is not unlike that of a group of U.S. citizens who traveled to a remote island. They only had a few days to visit the island and to learn all that they could, so they employed a group of locals at the seaport and informed them that they were pressed for time.

The first day they moved quickly through the countryside. The second day they continued their relentless pace.

The third morning, when they were frantically preparing for another day of rapid travel, they found the natives squatting under the trees refusing to move. When the bewildered and helpless travelers asked them why they were not ready to start, they simply said, "We shall rest today to let our souls catch up with our bodies."

Take the time to seriously let your soul catch up with your body. Reflect on who you are as an advisor. How are you keeping yourself recharged and renewed so that you can successfully navigate this increasingly demanding and complex environment we call education?

References

- Harvey, W. B., & Anderson, E. L. (2005). *Minorities in higher education twenty-first annual status*

report. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

Lockwood, N. R. (2005). Workplace diversity: Leveraging the power of difference for competitive advantage. *HR Magazine*, 50, 6.

Author's Note

Dr. Fries-Britt currently serves as an associate

professor in the College of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research focuses on the experiences of high achieving Black collegians and their academic, social, and psychological experiences. She is a consultant on issues of race, equity, and diversity; prior to her academic appointment, she served for 12 years as an administrator in higher education.