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## A Phenomenological Study of Students' Advising Experiences in a Four-Year Centralized Advising Center

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A Phenomenological Study of Students' Advising Experiences in a  
Four-Year Centralized Advising Center

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Higher Education

by

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore how undergraduate students experienced and understood academic advising within the context of a four-year centralized, primary role advising center at a public research university in the mid-south. This qualitative study included 13 undergraduate juniors or seniors from the liberal arts college of a large research university. Using phenomenological methods, I explored the lived experience of these students' advising experiences through a series of focus groups and one-on-one interviews with the goal of understanding how academic advising impacted the students' sense of connectedness to the university. Five themes emerged from these interviews: access to advisors, consistency of advisor, depth of advisor knowledge, the advisor's impact of student connectedness, and ideal advising. Participants expressed that quick access to a trusted advisor who could provide them accurate information was the most important aspect they were looking for in their advising experiences. Most participants expressed that they wanted an advisor who seemed to care about them and know a few details about their life. While participants did express that their advisors helped them feel supported at the university, they did not describe their relationship with their academic advisor as a key element that gave them a sense of connectedness to the university. Participants described wanting an advisor they trusted who they could come to for assurance that they were making good academic choices. The data collected in this study can influence our understanding of the experiences of undergraduate students engaged in academic advising in a centralized model as one part of a whole student experience aimed at increasing student connectedness to their institution.

## **Acknowledgements**

All graduate students should be proud when they reach the stage of defending their dissertations and thesis. However, all accomplishments of this magnitude are accomplished through partnership and community. I wish to thank the students who took the time to share their experiences and trusted me with their stories. This study is as much their work as mine.

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I am especially grateful to my dissertation director, Dr. Ketevan Mamiseishvili, whose mentorship encouraged me to push myself and grow as a writer. She was both patient and persistent in her mentorship through this process.

Last, I want to thank my wife, Rae Rowan, who is the single person who cares about this accomplishment as much as I do. Without their support, their listening ear, and their skill for reminding me how to break a problem down in to manageable parts, I would not have persisted. I love you, Rae. Yay, we get our weekends and evenings back.

**Dedication**

This study is dedicated to all practitioner-researchers who are working full-time jobs while completing their degrees.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Context of the Problem**

Research over the years has demonstrated that academic advising within the context of student success is an important field of study (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014; Bitz, 2010; Cuseo, 2002; Lowe & Toney, 200; Mottarella, Fritzsche, & Cerabino, 2004; Habley, 1981; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Previous scholars have focused on issues such as the delivery of academic advising at various institutions, the effect of academic advising on student success, and student perceptions of academic advising (Bitz, 2010; Cook, 2009; Cuseo, 2002; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Kuhn, 2008; Thelin, 2004).

While academic advising is a long-documented phenomenon in United States (U.S.) higher education, formal study of the field, including how it is done, what its purpose is, and who does it, is relatively new (Kuhn, 2008; Rudolph, 1962; Thelin, 2004). This is partly because the phenomenon of academic advising as it exists today did not exist in early U.S. higher education. However, changes in curriculum in the late 1800s and early 1900s led to a need for more complex advising relationships (Frost, 2000; Kuhn, 2004; Thelin, 2004; Thelin & Hirschy, 2009). Additionally, the large student growth that followed the end of the World War II and the creation of the GI Bill further increased the demand for advising services (Cook, 2009). During the mid-twentieth century, the rise of college student personnel corresponded with increased research expectations and teaching load for faculty who had historically served the role of the academic advisor (Grites, 1979). This led to the introduction of advising centers staffed by primary role advisors rather than faculty advisors, though initially these centers were designed primarily to deal with growing student populations rather than in response to students' advising needs (Cook, 2009). Primary role advisors are staff members whose job responsibilities are

primarily dedicated to academic advising (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016). Also, during that time, the Carnegie Commission of Higher Education (1972) wrote a report, which recommended that “enhanced emphasis should be placed on advising as an increasingly important aspect of higher education” (p. 57). These changes inspired a need in the early 1970s for more research and examination of academic advising’s role in higher education.

As primary role advisors grew a more established role in U.S. higher education, a field of research and theory evolved around the phenomenon of academic advising (Cook, 2009). An increased focus on student development and student retention caused a shift in the focus of academic advising from purely course selection to a more holistic approach to student education (Cook, 2009; Glennon, 1975). Many researchers have highlighted the importance of the relationship between advisor and advisee (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014; Cook, 2009; Crookston, 1972; Cuseo, 2002; O’Bannon, 1972; Tinto, 1993). While historically most academic advisors have been faculty advisors, data indicate that the number of institutions using primary role advisors has grown significantly. In 1987, 46 % of advisors at four-year public institutions were primary role advisors (Habley, 2004, pp. 63-65). In 2003, 74% of advisors at four-year public institutions were primary role advisors (Habley, 2004, pp. 63-65). In 2011, 83.3% of advisors in public bachelor institutions were primary role advisors (Carlstrom, 2013a, p. 6). Yet, very little research has been done to explore student perceptions of an advising experience that relies primarily on primary role academic advising (Habley, 2004, pp. 63-65).

A quick look into research about student success reveals a wealth of scholars who write that academic advisors are a key tool for student success and persistence (Astin, 1977; Habley, 1994; Noel, 1985; Tinto, 1993). There is a large body of research to indicate that students with high levels of connectedness to the university have been found to be more likely to complete

their college degree than are students with low level of university connectedness (Goodenow, 1993; Hagerty, Williams, & Oe, 2002; Hausmann, Scholfield, & Woods, 2007; Hoffman, Richmond, Murrow, & Salomone, 2002; Wilson & Gore, 2013). Connectedness is the overall fit of a student with the university and specifically with the students' perception that they have a supportive environment where they are accepted, included, and supported (Wilson & Gore, 2013). A number of researchers have found that positive interactions between students and faculty or staff have a positive effect on how connected the student feels to the institution (Astin, 1975; Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014; Chickering, 1969; Kuh & Hu, 2008; Tinto, 1993; Wilson & Gore, 2013). Additionally, strong sense of belonging or connectedness has been linked to increased persistence (Astin, 1984; Bank, Slavings, & Biddle; 1990; Berger & Milem, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini; 2005; Hausmann et al., 2007; Tinto, 1993).

The number of institutions using centralized advising models has grown substantially in the last forty years. Centralized advising models are modes of advising delivery where all academic advisors are housed in one central location (Pardee, 2004). In 1979, only 14% of colleges or universities had some kind of advising center, but most centers only served students who were undeclared, transferring, or academically at risk (Habley, 2004, p. 56). In 2011, 28.6% of colleges and universities used some kind of self-contained central advising where all students are served by a single advising office (Carlstrom, 2013b, p. 4) However, little research has been done on the student perspective of centralized advising models. By examining the perceptions of their relationship to their academic advisor and connectedness to the institution, this study adds to the body of knowledge about a growing mode of academic advising and contributes to the knowledge about how students experience academic advising.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore how undergraduate students experienced and understood their academic advising experience within the context of a four-year centralized, primary role advising center at a public research university in the mid-south.

One of the reasons it was important to study students' experiences in a four-year centralized advising context is that there is substantial research that shows that students' perceptions of connectedness can directly correlate to their persistence or success at an institution (Astin, 1975; Chickering, 1969; Kuh & Hu, 2008; Tinto, 1993; Wilson & Gore, 2013). If students feel connected to a school, a department, their faculty, and/or their advisors, they may be more likely to be academically successful.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions this study explored were:

- a. How did students ascribe meaning to their lived experience of academic advising within a four-year centralized, primary role advising model?
- b. How did students' relationships with their advisors affect their sense of connectedness to the university?

## **Definitions**

Academic Advising: The process of creating a partnership between advisor and advisee with the goal of teaching students to maximize the benefit of their college experiences (Miller, 2012; O'Banion, 1972).

Centralized Advising Model: There are three major delivery modes of advising, centralized, decentralized, and shared (Pardee, 2004). Centralized advising is a delivery mode of

advising in which all primary role and faculty advisors are housed in a central academic or administrative unit (Pardee, 2004, para. 3).

Connectedness: Connectedness involves the overall fit of the students with the university and specifically with the students' perception that they have a supportive environment where they are accepted, included, and supported (Wilson & Gore, 2013, p. 178). There are several studies that indicate that students' perceptions of connectedness can directly correlate to their persistence or success at an institution (Astin, 1975; Chickering, 1969; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Wilson & Gore, 2013).

Decentralized Advising Model: Decentralized advising involves primary role or faculty advisors who are housed in individual departments or units (Pardee, 2004).

Faculty advisor: An academic advisor whose primary responsibility to the institution involves teaching and research (Self, 2014). While they are the original type of advisors, for faculty, advising may constitute only a small part of their job duties (Hemwell, 2008).

Primary Role Advisor: Staff members who have been hired and trained with the primary focus of academic advising are considered primary role advisors. This term, which became popular in the early twenty-first century, replaced the term professional advisor, which was the most common term used during the twentieth century (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016). Their exact workload can vary and include teaching, assessment, or other administrative duties, but the majority of their time would involve advising related work (Self, 2008).

Shared Advising Model: The most common delivery mode for academic advising models, shared advising, involves some students meeting with advisors in a central unit and other students meeting in decentralized academic units (Pardee, 2004). For example, undecided

students might meet in a central unit before declaring a major and working with an advisor in their department.

### **Limitations**

This study's goal was to explore the experiences of students at one university within a single college system. This focus limits its applicability to other situations. The results of this study are transferrable only to students with similar experiences within schools that share similar advising modes. However, this is consistent with typical limitations in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Also, participants in this study were students who persisted through college to the junior or senior level. So, the results may not be representative of the experiences of students who did not persist at the university through junior year or who transferred to other institutions. Additionally, as the primary investigator, I am a primary role academic advisor in the advising center that was the research site. My role as an advisor may have shaped my view of the questions being studied and my expectations for student perceptions.

### **Significance of the Study**

Academic advising is an essential part of the college student experience and can have a large effect on student satisfaction (Mottarella et al., 2004). Light (2001) concluded that, "good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. 81). For example, according to the *2015-16 National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report*, satisfaction with an advisor's knowledge, approachability, and concern for student success were all rated as highly important factors for satisfaction to participants (Noel-Levitz, 2016). Additionally, academic advising outcomes have been linked to student retention and persistence for decades (Cuseo, 2002; Habley, 1981; Hamwell, 2008; Lowe & Toney, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). It is especially important for students to build

relationships with their academic advisors through frequent contact (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014; Bitz, 2010; Mottarella et al., 2004).

There is a great deal of research exploring students' experiences and perceptions of academic advising (Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010; Fielstein, Scoles, & Webb, 1992; Hus & Bailey, 2007; Lowe & Toney, 2000; Mottarella et al., 2004; Propp & Rhodes, 2006; Saving & Keim, 1998). However, little of this research focuses on students who have had a primary role advisor within a centralized system. Therefore, studying the student experience of a centralized primary role advising center is important. So, it is important to add to the body of research of the student experience within this model. Additionally, studying a centralized advising model from the perspective of the students is essential in understanding how the students contextualize their advising experiences within the whole of their academic experience.

Additionally, studying advising in this context is important, because there is a large body of research that supports the importance of out of class contact between faculty and students (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1985; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Lamport, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1976; Tinto, 1993). Since a fully-centralized, orientation to graduation model places academic advising fully in the hands of primary role advisors, it is important to address if students perceive a gap or lack of opportunity to develop mentor/mentee relationships across campus.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Connectedness is the overall fit of a student with the university and specifically the students' perception that they have a supportive environment where they are accepted, included, and supported (Wilson & Gore, 2013). There is a large body of research to indicate that students who have a high sense of belonging or fit with their school are more likely to persist (Goodenow,

1993; Hagerty et al., 2002; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Tinto, 1992; Wilson & Gore, 2013).

A number of researchers have found that positive interactions between students and faculty or staff have a positive effect on how connected the student feels to the institution (Astin, 1975; Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014; Chickering, 1969; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Wilson & Gore, 2013). Additionally, strong sense of belonging or connectedness has been linked to increased persistence and satisfaction (Astin, 1984; Bank et al., 1990; Berger & Milem, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Hausmann et al., 2007; Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's exploration of why students leave college points out that students need to feel integrated both socially and academically to the culture of their campus in order to be successful (1993). His updated theory (2006) identifies university staff, including academic advisors, as essential keys in helping students integrate in to their campus cultures. Astin's (1984) IEO (Inputs, Environment, Outputs) theory of Student Involvement also maintains that there is a direct relationship between student involvement and student learning, and that involvement is "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (1984, p. 134). Both Astin (1984) and Tinto (1993) point out that integration, belonging, and connectedness are key aspects of student success and retention. Astin's theory focuses on three aspects of the college experience: inputs (individual student characteristics), environment (campus characteristics), and outputs (academic achievement, retention, and student growth) and posits that the relationship between student characteristics and campus environment are the most important predictors of academic achievement (Astin, 1993). This theory of Student Involvement is important when examining connectedness in advising, because academic advising is a major point of connection between student inputs and institutional environments

(Ender, Winston, & Miller, 1982). Therefore, studying how students experience academic advising gives opportunity to see how students view their campus environment in relation to their connectedness on campus.

Another useful theory when examining student connectedness is Padilla's (1999) conceptualization of expertise. While acknowledging the importance of student integration in campus culture, Padilla also agrees with Rendon (1994) who calls for the validation of students' previous experiential knowledge (Padilla, 1999, p. 132). Padilla's conceptual model points out that there is a "geography of barriers" in place that students must learn to navigate in order to be successful (p. 135). Examples of these barriers might be understanding financial aid regulations or knowing how to navigate a syllabus. Padilla's theory highlights the importance of the theoretical and heuristic knowledge that students come in to school already possessing, but also points out that when students do not have the previous knowledge they need to overcome barriers and have to learn "on the spot" (p. 136). Padilla's theory is based on the qualitative experiences of students who were successful in navigating the geography of barriers and highlights the importance students' experiences of their institutional surroundings (Padilla, 1994). This theory is also important when exploring students' relationships with their advisors and student connectedness, because it places focus on what students know and their perceptions' of their experiences.

Belonging and connectedness are largely measures of how successful institutions are at making students feel welcome as individuals and are at the heart of the research questions for this study. The broad conceptual framework of this study is that the relationship between advisor and advisee is important because advisors can serve as a hub of connection for students (Ender et

al., 1982). This connection served as the building block for research questions and interview protocols.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I defined the purpose of this study which examined the experiences of students in a centralized advising model where they had the opportunity to work with one advising office for their entire university experience. Due to the historic rarity of this model but its growing popularity, this study filled a gap in current research and provided data of the perceptions of students in this model. Additionally, I defined terms that were important to the context of the study and articulated the study's limitations.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

The research focusing on academic advising as an important field of study in higher education is extensive (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014; Bitz, 2010; Cuseo, 2002; Lowe & Toney, 200; Mottarella et al., 2004; Habley, 1981; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). In this chapter, I briefly review the history of academic advising in U.S. higher education, examine the phenomenon of academic advising and its delivery methods, and explore the body of research related to student perceptions of academic advising.

I used several databases to identify major sources. I searched *EBSCO Academic Search Complete*, *ProQuest Central*, and *JSTOR* for the following search terms: academic advisor, academic adviser, academic advising, connectedness, student experiences and academic advising, and student perceptions and academic advising. I limited each search to peer-reviewed academic journals written in English. There were a substantial number of results in each search (over 1,000), so I limited the search to articles and books published in the last 20 years. This created a manageable number of results to begin reading. However, knowing that some foundational research had been written outside my twenty-year timeframe, I read any additional articles or books that were referenced by multiple studies. Additionally, I reviewed the last fifteen years of journals published by the Global Community for Academic Advising, formerly the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) for all articles addressing student perceptions of advising or specifically centralized advising models. I also used the NACADA book review to identify relevant books on the topic. Lastly, I reviewed the last five years of the *Journal of College Student Development*, *Research in Higher Education*, and the *Journal of Higher Education* for advising related articles focusing on student perceptions or experiences.

## **History of Academic Advising Evolution**

Academic advising has been a part of the U.S. higher education for as long as higher education has existed. However, how it was defined, how it was done, and who did it have evolved as the nature of higher education has evolved. Himes and Schulenberg (2016) outlined four major eras of academic advising development in the U.S..

### **The First Era**

The first era was identified as, higher education before academic advising was defined (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016). This period covered the evolution of early U.S. higher education, 1636 through around 1870 (Kuhn, 2004, p. 3). In early U.S. higher education, the role of academic advisor as academics view it today did not exist, because curriculum was largely standardized (Kuhn, 2008; Rudolph, 1962; Thelin, 2004). The major role that faculty had in the lives of their students during this period was to act in loco parentis, assuming legal responsibility of the student in place of a parent (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976; Cook, 2009).

However, most students were unlikely to have mentor/mentee relationships with the faculty, tutors, or staff at the institution (Kuhn, 2004). In fact, relations between faculty and students during the latter part of this era were often documented as contemptuous and caustic (Kuhn, 2004; Thelin & Hirschy, 2009). Yet, towards the end of this period, some schools began to create official adviser/advisee relationships by pairing students with a faculty member as a general adviser (Cook, 2009). This role began to change and evolve in the mid-1800s as the population of students and role of the institutions changed (Cook, 2009). The advent of coeducation prompted the role of Deans of Women who were intended to serve as moral advisors for female students (Nidiffer, 2000).

## **The Second Era**

The transition to the second era of academic advising history was marked in the late 1800s when many institutions began allowing students to make some choices about their curriculum (Frost, 2000; Kuhn, 2004; Thelin, 2004; Thelin & Hirschy, 2009). This era of advising, identified as academic advising as a defined and unexamined activity, lasted from approximately 1870 to 1970 (Grites et al., 2016). During the beginning of the period, Charles Eliot, newly elected president of Harvard, promoted an evolution of the current curriculum, which would rely on an elective system for selecting classes (Cook, 2009). In his inaugural speech, Eliot (1905) stated that “education is a vital process, not a mechanical one” (Eliot, 1905, p. 126). This change in curriculum also led to a change in the relationship between faculty and students (Kuhn, 2004). The changing curriculum led to academic advising taking root as a defined activity in response to many who were concerned that the rise of the elective curriculum would lead to students having a less structured or focused education (Kuhn, 2004).

During this time, students might have an assigned or self-selected faculty mentor or even a board of appointed advisors whose responsibility was to guide course selection (Cook, 2009; Hawkins, 1960; Kuhn, 2004; Rudolph, 1962). In 1886, President of Johns Hopkins University, Daniel Gilman, described the ideal relationship between a faculty mentor and a student mentee this way:

It is the adviser’s business to listen to difficulties which the student assigned to him may bring to his notice; to act as his representative if any collective action is necessary on the part of the board of instruction to see that every part of his course of studies has received proper attention. (Gilman, 1886, as cited in Kuhn, 2004, p. 5)

While the reality of the relationship between faculty and students may not have been this ideal, the idea of an assigned advisor who counseled not only regarding curriculum but

also on personal matters was a vestige of the notion that universities should stand in loco parentis for the student (Morison, 1946; Rudolph, 1962; Veysey, 1965). It is clear, though, that during this time the advisor-advisee relationship was primarily structured around curriculum and class choice (Kuhn, 2004).

However, this began to change in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is most clearly documented in the text of the *Student Personnel Point of View of 1949* (Kuhn, 2004). This document, written by the American Council on Education, articulated a view that “encompasses the student as a whole” where the purpose of higher education is “the student’s well-rounded development—physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually—as well as intellectually” (American Council on Education, 1949, pp. 17-18). It is during the end of the second era of academic advising that advising was legitimized as an integral role in U.S. higher education (Kuhn, 2004).

By this time, multiple universities and colleges began establishing formal mentorship or advising systems, which began to address more than the students’ class choice (Cook, 2009; Hansen, 1917; Nidiffer, 2000; Veysey, 1965). More and more institutions were looking for ways to connect with students and ensure smooth transitions into higher education:

Counselors of all varieties began to appear in large numbers after the [first world] war: deans of freshmen, junior deans, student counselors, deans of men, deans of women, directors of placement bureaus, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, religious counselors, deans of chapel, and any number of others. Some of these offices had existed before 1914, but the personal movement really began to become self-conscious in the American college and university after 1918 in this reaction against personalization. (Cowley, 1937, p. 224)

Additionally, the boom in student enrollment related to the end of World War II and the advent of the GI Bill, which increased access to higher education, also increased

the role of non-faculty personnel on campus (Crook, 2009). This change in the role of faculty and personnel on campus continued to evolve and grow through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Crook, 2009). The ever-increasing complexity of higher education institutional missions and curricula created a need for more specialization in counseling resources (Cook, 2009). Institutions began offering not just educational counseling (academic advising), but also vocational and psychological counseling services (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976, p. 343). During this time, U.S. higher education began to see rapid growth in the number of non-faculty personnel who were hired to serve these needs, though the role of academic advising was still primarily overseen by faculty (Cook, 2009).

### **The Third Era**

The third era of advising, identified as advising as a defined and examined activity, was characterized by the rise of formal research concerning how academic advising was conducted, the creation of academic advising theory, and the evolution of multiple models of academic advising, lasted from 1970 to 2003 (Grites et al., 2016). By the mid-1950s, the need for academic advising had grown significantly along with student enrollment, and the rewards for advising by faculty were nearly nonexistent: leading many institutions to begin employing non-faculty, primary role advisors (Cook, 2009). However, this trend was controversial and caused tension between these new staff and faculty who felt that the role of advisor was intrinsically linked to the role of faculty (MacIntosh, 1948; Roberston, 1958). This debate fostered one of the first formal reports on academic advising in the U.S. (Robertson, 1958), which examined 20 campuses across the nation and determined the following, “advising 1) should not be mandatory, b) is an extension of teaching and advisors should be teachers, c) needs a published, clear

philosophy on each campus, and d) is a college responsibility” (Cook, 2009, p. 22). The report also documented a growing trend of “mutual suspicion, mistrust, and hostility that existed between faculty and professional advisors” (Cook, 2009, p. 22).

During the 1960s, faculty advisors were still the primary form of advising, but new delivery models of advising began to be introduced, specifically, centralized advising centers and peer advising (Grites, 1979). The concern, however, was that advising centers were primarily created in order to deal with growing student enrollment and faculty disinterest in advising, rather than in response to the students’ best interests (Cook, 2009).

This increased demand for academic advising services only grew in the 1970s as the growth of community colleges, open admissions, and federal financial aid allowed increasingly more diverse student populations to have access to higher education (Cook, 2009). By this time, academic advising began to take on a wide range of variation based on types of institutions, models of delivery for advising, various theories for advising, and types of academic advisor (Kuhn, 2004). These phenomena contributed to the need for more specialization and the expansion of advising services across all campuses (Cook, 2009, p. 22). These changes inspired a need for more research and examination of the role of academic advising in higher education. At this time, the Carnegie Commission of Higher Education (1972) wrote a report, which recommended that “enhanced emphasis should be placed on advising as an increasingly important aspect of higher education” (p. 57). Additionally, in 1972, two major foundational theoretical pieces were written on the importance of academic advising in the student’s academic life (Crookston, 1972; O’Banion, 1972). Both articles articulated that academic decisions needed to be made in

the context of the bigger picture of the student's life and goals and that students should take a more active role in the decision-making process (Crookston, 1972; O'Banion, 1972).

By the late 1970s, academic advising was becoming a uniquely defined phenomenon apart from other aspects of higher education. In 1976, the first official gathering of academic advisors occurred in Fresno, CA, and later in 1979, NACADA was officially established with 429 charter members (Cook, 2009; Thurmond & Miller, 2006). From this point forward, the latter two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in a period of theory development and intense research within the field of academic advising (Cook, 2009). Several national surveys explored the phenomenon of academic advising, and in 1986, The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) published standards for a variety of student-centered programs and services within higher education, which included separate standards for academic advising (Cook, 2009, p. 24). Research in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century focused on several major aspects of academic advising, including the models and styles of academic advising, types of academic advisors, and its relationship to student achievement and retention (Cook, 2009, pp. 25-26).

Centralized advising systems were introduced to U.S. higher education in the 1960s (Cook, 2009). During the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the use of primary role advisors for pre-major or general advising grew substantially, but faculty advisors still served as the primary advisor for major related issues (Cook, 2009, p. 22). While the number of institutions using primary role advisors had grown significantly in the last thirty years (46% in 1987 to 74% in

2003), many four-year public schools (23%) that used mostly non-faculty advisors, still relied on faculty advisors in some way for advising services (Habley, 2004, pp. 63-65).

### **The Fourth Era**

The fourth era of academic advising was identified as the era when advising was actively examined as an educational phenomenon, taking place from 2003 to the present (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016). It was a time when practitioners of advising worked to identify the role of advising in higher education and demonstrate its value to external stakeholders (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016, p. 12). During this era of increased student enrollment and growing diversity of student demographics, increased focus was given to efforts to increase students' retention and completion (McPhail, 2011).

During this era, academic advising research expanded by utilizing methodologies of practice borrowed from a wide variety of disciplines such as education, sociology, and philosophy (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016). During this time, researchers attempted to clarify the role of advising by examining it using three distinct approaches: "clarification of the distinct purposes of academic advising, careful examination of advising practice using diverse theoretical perspectives, and intentional contributions to scholarship in academic advising" (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016, p. 12). Despite the growth of research on the practice of academic advising by borrowing theories from other fields, some researchers in the field began to argue that it was time for a distinctive theory of advising (Lowenstein, 2013; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008).

The growth of academic advising research in this era led to the creation of a formal concept of academic advising, identifying three components of the practice of advising: curriculum, pedagogy, and student learning outcomes (NACADA, 2006). This need for a unique theory of practice also led to the creation of formal advisor competencies, which have been

implemented as the foundation for subsequent research into advisor development practice (Cate & Miller, 2015).

This era of advising is also distinct from other eras in that the advisor practitioner-researcher evolved as a more common role in which primary role advisors began to engage actively in generating research (Aiken-Wisniewski, Smith, & Troxel, 2010). Additionally, increased focus on research driven practice became a large focus of professional development for academic advisors (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2010). This era was also known as a time when increased conversations regarding the professionalization of the field of advising led to conversations about how being an active researcher should be factored in to the job duties of a primary role advisor (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2010; Himes & Schulenberg, 2016; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010).

### **Types, Models, and Styles of Academic Advising**

Due to the wide variety of institutional types and student needs, modern-day academic advising experience varies widely from institution to institution (Crockett, 1982). However, Crockett (1982) identified several factors that should be considered when creating an advising model: students' needs, existing organizational structure, outcomes and goals, available resources, and advising load (pp. 40-43). Additionally, Winston, Miller, Ender, and Grites (1984) pointed out that most importantly, "academic advisers should want to advise, be trained to advise, and be evaluated for their work" (p. 24).

The major factors that distinguished advising within models included: who does the advising or the types of academic advisors, what organizational model is used, and what advising philosophies and practices are in place.

## **Types of Academic Advisors**

Until the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most institutions relied largely on faculty advising as the primary mode of delivery (Carstensen & Silberhorn, 1979; Crockett, 1982). However, as universities evolved and became more complex, the faculty/mentor relations changed and became more complex as well (Hemwell, 2008). Faculty were tasked with more responsibility and curriculum became increasingly more complex. Issues such as lack of general university knowledge, lack of information about job outlook related questions, and lack of reward for advising duties in faculty tenure are common considerations when examining the phenomenon of a primarily faculty-based model for advising (Crockett, 1982, pp. 43-44). Many of these issues are cited to explain the decrease in the number of programs that rely exclusively on faculty members for academic advising (Hemwell, 2008).

However, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, more universities began to adopt a split model of academic advising that included centralized or primary role advising. The 1998 ACT survey noted a general rise in popularity of primary role advisors in the late 1990s (King, 2008). According to the ACT national survey (2004) within two-year public, two-year private, four-year public, and four-year private institutions, 64% of all primary advisors were full-time primary role advisors, 20% of primary advisors were faculty who had advising duties in addition to teaching and research responsibilities, and 5% were part-time primary role advisors (p. 64). Within public four-year institutions such as the institution researched in this study, 74% of primary advisors were full-time primary role advisors, 16% of primary advisors were faculty who had advising duties in addition to teaching and research responsibilities, 6% were part-time primary role advisors, and 1% were para primary role advisors such as graduate students (Habley, 2004, p. 64).

The major advantages of primary role advisors were that they were free of departmental bias and more likely to have professional development and training in academic advising practices (Crocket, 1982). However, Crocket (1982) noted that primary role advisors may have a general lack of knowledge about departmental information, struggle with large advising loads, or have a lack of knowledge about graduate and career opportunities (p. 45).

Other types of advisors mentioned in the literature include peer advisors (other students) and para primary role advisors (Crocket, 1982). These types of advisors did not make up a significant percentage of academic advisors, and while they helped alleviate advising load, these types of advisors may have struggled to provide developmental advising and may not be trained to deal with complex problems (Crocket, 1982).

A 2011 National study of academic advising found that while full-time faculty and primary role advisors are still the most common types of advising personnel, most types of institutions listed at least five types of advisors utilized on their campus (Carlstrom, 2013a). These types of advisors included full-time faculty, adjunct (part-time) faculty, full-time primary role advisors (now commonly referred to as primary role advisors), adjunct (part-time primary role advisors), paraprofessional advisors, graduate students, and per advisors (Carlstrom, 2013a). Additionally, the results of this study indicated that 63% of participants listed belonging to multiple types of these roles (Carlstrom, 2013a). Data also indicated that primary role advisors were more common at medium and large public and private institutions; whereas, full-time faculty advisors were more common at small and private institutions (Carlstrom, 2013a).

### **Academic Advising Organizational Models**

Advising models are defined as the organizational structures of academic advising within an institution (King, 2008). There are seven structural models for academic advising that have

been identified (King, 2008). The seven models identified include: a) self-contained b) faculty only, c) satellite, d) supplementary, e) split f) dual, and g) total intake (Crook, 2009, p. 24). These seven models fall into three basic categories: centralized, decentralized, and shared (Pardee, 2004, para. 3).

Centralized models are those where one academic or administrative unit handles all academic advising, in one central location, and may be staffed by primary role or faculty advisors (Pardee, 2004, para. 3). Decentralized models are those models where primary role or faculty advisors are located “in their respective departments” (Pardee, 2004, para. 3). Finally, shared models are those where “some advisors meet with students in a central administrative unit (i.e. an advising center), while others advise students in the academic department of their major discipline (Pardee, 2004, para. 3).

The self-contained model is the only form of centralized advising. In this model, “all advising from orientation to departure takes place in a centralized unit” (King, 2008, p. 245). According to the 2011 NACADA national survey only 28.6% of schools use this model (Carlstrom, 2013b). There are two types of decentralized models, faculty-only and satellite models (King, 2008). The faculty-only model means that there are no primary role advisors, and all students are advised by faculty members, housed within their respective departments (King, 2008, p. 224). In 2011, 17.1% of institutions use a model like this (Carlstrom, 2013b). The other model of decentralized advising, the satellite model, involves advising offices that are maintained and overseen within subunits of an institution (i.e. individual colleges) (King, 2008). Within this model, advising responsibilities may shift from advising offices to faculty, or they may be centralized within smaller academic units (King, 2008). Seven percent of institutions use this model (Habley, 2004, p. 63).

There are four types of shared models: supplementary, split, dual, and total intake. Within the supplementary model, there are faculty advisors assigned for all students, but an office assists the faculty in some way, such as training or serving as a referral source (King, 2008). The supplementary model is the second most popular model (King, 2008). Seventeen percent of institutions reported using it (Habley, 2004).

In the split model, advising is divided between an office and other subunits (i.e. 1<sup>st</sup> year advising center that transitions students to major advising) (King, 2008). Thirty-nine percent of institutions use this model, which is the most popular (Carlstrom, 2013b).

In the dual model, students have two advisors, a faculty member who advises for their program and an advising office that advises on general education (King, 2008). Thirteen percent of institutions use this model (Carlstrom, 2013b).

Finally, in the total intake model, all initial advising takes place in one office. Students are then assigned to a more specific advisor after some specific criteria occur, such as declaring a major, earning 60 hours, or completing the first semester (King, 2008). Sixteen percent of institutions use this model (Carlstrom, 2013b).

### **Academic Advising Styles**

Within the last fifty years, the study of academic advising has included a large focus on advising styles, starting in the early 1970s with the creation of the concept of developmental advising. Crookston (1972) outlined a theory of developmental advising, which has largely shaped the style of academic advising for the last forty-five years. In his article, he defined most advising that he had observed to that point as prescriptive, using the metaphor of the doctor/patient relationship. He pointed out that most advising experiences were treated like an advisor stepping in to treat an immediate problem in the same way that a doctor might address a

patient's symptoms. However, he argued that this style created an unnecessary authoritarian relationship between advisors and advisees where the advisor advisees and the student does exactly what the advisor suggests. In his more developmental model, he offered a relationship where "the academic advisor and the student differently engage in a series of developmental tasks, the successful completion of which results in varying degrees of learning *by both parties*" (p. 13).

Similarly, O'Banion (1972) posited that the goal of academic advising was to, "help the student choose a program of study which will serve him in the development of his total potential" (p. 62). In order to do this, he outlined a process of advising which explored life goals, vocational goals, program choice, course choice, and scheduling choice in that order, the purpose of which was to contextualize program and course choice in the bigger picture of who and what the student wanted to be.

These two articles shaped the language of modern academic advising theory and served as the foundation for most of the later research on academic advising. After these seminal articles, much of the additional research on academic advising styles continued to focus on subsets of a broadly defined developmental perspective. For example, Glennen and Baxley (1985) outlined an advising style focused on the development of a positive relationship between an advisor and an advisee using an intrusive retention effort to reach out to students before they express the need for help. This style, called intrusive advising, became a widely utilized technique when working with at-risk students as it relies on aggressively reaching out to students to establish a connection (Earl, 1988; Smith, 2007). Additionally, a more recent advising style to evolve from a developmental view of advising is appreciative advising, which uses the technique of positive, open-ended questions to help students achieve their goals (Bloom & Martin, 2002).

This style's primary focus is shaping intentional, collaborative, and student-centered approach to advising and student development (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008).

Other researchers over the years have identified additional advising styles. However, most codify these styles in similar fashion, as a description of the relationship between advisor and advisee, grounding them solidly within the traditions outlined by Crookston (1972) and O'Banion (1972). For example, Daller, Creamer, and Creamer's (1997) qualitative study of a large, mid-Atlantic research university identified three unique styles of advising behaviors, which they labeled: counselor, scheduler, and teacher. The scheduler's style was informational, focused mainly on sharing information about policies in an effort to help students make decisions. The counselor's style was relational, focused primarily on building a relationship where the students felt comfortable enough to address their needs. The teacher's style was conceptual, focused primarily on developing self-reliance in advisees.

Yet many researchers in the field are looking for ways to expand beyond the lens of developmental advising using multiple theories for advising practice. For example, Puroway, (2016) argues for a critical advising approach based on the theories of Paolo Freire in which advisors use praxis to problematize the relationship between the student and the institution and view the relationship between advisor and advisee as an opportunity to break down the power dynamics in higher education that often leave students feeling powerless in their own educational experience (p. 8). A growing trend in advising research is to embrace multiple theories that lend themselves to advising in different contexts. This is largely because "a growing number of academic advising researchers and practitioners feel that developmental advising does not tell the whole story, that there can and should be not one lens, but many, through which to scrutinize academic advising" (Hagen & Jordan, 2008, p. 18).

## **Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Academic Advising**

Current research on students' perceptions and experiences of academic advising is well-documented. Research on student perceptions and experiences of advising is important in order to understand the value students place on academic advising in the context of their academic experience (Barnes et al, 2010; Fieldstein et al, 1992; Hsu & Bailey, 2007, Lowe & Toney, 2000; Mottarella et al., 2004; Propp & Rhodes, 2006; Saving & Keim, 1998). Perceptions of mentorship in relation to academic advising have even been positively linked to student persistence (Baier, Markman, & Pernice-Duca, 2016).

Many student perception studies focus on the students' perceptions of a specific style of advising such as intrusive, prescriptive, developmental, or appreciative advising (Donaldson et al., 2016; Hale, Graham, & Johnson, 2009; Lan & Williams, 2005; Smith, 2002; Weir, Dickman, & Fuqua, 2005) . For example, the student preference for developmental advising approach was documented for the first time in the Academic Advising Inventory created by Winston and Sandor (1984). However, a single campus survey of students found that non-traditional students placed less value on developmental advising approaches than did traditional students (Fielstein et al., 1992). Additionally, in a scenario-based survey, Braun and Mohammadali (2016) collected data from 89 undergraduates and found that the type of advising preferred by students could be linked to students' propensity to participate (p. 983). This meant that students who had a low propensity to participate may not have been as satisfied with developmental advising as students with a high propensity to participate. Findings from this study support the theory that advisors should be adaptable and able to modify their advising approach after getting to know students' needs (Braun & Mohammadali, 2016).

Some research on student perceptions focused on specific characteristics that students looked for in their advisor. For example, using exploratory factor analysis, Propp and Rhodes (2006) identified four advising constructs that their participants used to understand advising: informing, mentoring, guiding, and apprising. The results of their study found that students preferred advisors that used informing, guiding, and apprising behaviors over those that used mentoring behaviors (Propp & Rhodes, 2006, p. 46). In a qualitative exploration of doctoral students' perceptions of their academic advisors, Barnes et al. (2010) found that students identified the traits of accessible, helpful, socializing, and caring as the most often expressed positive traits of their academic advisors. In the same study, students identified the traits of inaccessible, unhelpful, and uninterested as the most common negative aspects of academic advisors. Examples of ways advisors exhibited positive traits were offering flexible times to meet and prompt answers to emails (Barnes et al., 2010, p. 39). This study overall found that students valued advisors who demonstrated holistic interest in their students and who assisted students in extending their professional networks (Barnes et al., 2010). Additionally, a study of nine adult learners found that "complex and holistic advising" was most valued and was reflected in five themes: having strong program guidance, having trust in the advisor, feeling like an individual, feeling important, and getting immediate/electronic communication (Schroeder & Terras, 2015, p. 47).

A qualitative study of first-year community college students found that while students may have initially balked at being required to participate in academic advising, many participants ended up valuing being assigned an advisor who they had to meet with (Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016). Participants expressed that they ended up feeling as if it helped them form connections with someone who had something in common with them and that their advisor truly

understood where they were coming from (Donaldson et al., 2016, p. 34). Similar perceptions were found through a multiple regression method that asked participants to examine multiple advising scenarios (Mottarella et al., 2004). This study found that that participants most valued “being known to their advisor; having a primary role advisor; and receiving warmth and support from the advisor” (p. 48). Mottarella et al.’s study found that the participants’ perceived relationship with their advisor was more likely to lead to advising satisfaction than the specific advising approach or the tasks to be addressed (p. 57).

In a multi-campus study using critical incident technique, Vianden (2016) found that positive advising experiences increased satisfaction for students and affected the way participants felt about their institution (p. 25). This study highlighted the importance of training advisors in relationship building skills.

In a satisfaction survey, Sheldon, Garton, Orr, and Smith (2015) found that advisor autonomy supportiveness was “the strongest predictor of global advisor satisfaction” (p. 271). This study used self-determination theory to create a three-part survey to assess students’ satisfaction with their advisor. Their survey assessed students’ perceptions of their advisor’s knowledge, availability, and autonomy supportiveness (how much an advisor supported student self-determination and internal agency (Sheldon et al., 2015, p. 262). The results of the survey found that not only is advisor autonomy support the strongest predictor of satisfaction, it was also the strongest predictor of student performance as measured by GPA (p. 271).

Many student experience studies explored types of students such as first-year undecided students, online students, business students, or graduate students (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2014; Alexander, Kukowski, & Dexter, 2003; Auguste, Wai-Ling, & Keep, 2018; Barnes et al., 2010; Bloom, Cuevas, Hall, & Evans, 2007; Donaldson et al., 2016; Ellis, 2014; Fielstein et al.,

1992; Hsu & Bailey, 2007; Iaccino, 1991; Karokolidis, 2018; Lan & Williams, 2005; Lowe & Toney, 2000; Propp & Rhodes, 2006; Smith, 2002; Workman, 2015). For example, in one phenomenological study of nontraditional women students' experiences of advising at private schools (Auguste et al., 2018), researchers identified 6 themes of students' experiences. Three of these themes were negative (indifference, identify marginalization, and gatekeeping), and 3 of these themes were positive (guidance, identity recognition, and advocacy). Within this study, 76% of participants discussed experiences of marginalization that they experienced from individuals they felt represented the institution (p. 53).

A single-campus qualitative study of first-year students' experiences of advising (Walker et al., 2017) identified four major themes: student difficulty making the distinction between roles of high school guidance counselors and postsecondary academic advisors, advisor communication, student desire for a relationship, and advisor accessibility. The results of this study affirm that students desire "individual attention and personal experiences with their advisors" (p. 52). Additionally, the results of this study also suggest that that students' perceptions of their advisor's informational knowledge (trusting that they are giving accurate information) are influenced by their advisor's relational skills (accessibility and communication skills) (p. 52). This study included students working with both primary role advisors working in advising centers as well as non-academic support advisors (such as veteran and athletic support centers).

In a quantitative study of graduate student experiences with online advising (Karakolidis, 2018) participants expressed that they wanted academic advisors (whether they were faculty or primary role advisors) to be both knowledgeable and accessible (p. 79). Advisors in this study

who were rated most highly demonstrated high levels of timely communication, approachability, and availability (p. 79).

Very few studies have been done on students' experiences with specific advising models. Barker and Mamiseishvili (2014) explored student experiences with a shared advising model using phenomenological methods. The results of this study highlighted the importance of building personalized relationships, establishing advisor trustworthiness, and apprehension of the unknown when changing advisors. To date, no one has published a study of student perceptions of a centralized advising model. Previous research indicates that out of class contact with faculty or staff is an important aspect of student success (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1985; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Lamport, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1976; Tinto, 1993). Since a centralized advising model creates potential for substantial out of class interaction between students and their primary role advisors, it was important to examine how students experienced those relationships and how those relationships impacted students' sense of connectedness to their institution.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I outlined a brief history of the four eras of academic advising: higher education before academic advising was defined, academic advising as a defined and unexamined activity, advising as a defined and examined activity, and academic advising as an actively examined as an educational phenomenon. I defined the types of academic advisors, types of organizational models for academic advising, and types of styles of academic advising. I also reviewed the literature relevant to students' perceptions and experiences of academic advising. Most research revolves around student satisfaction and there is little research on students' experiences of specific models. For this reason, the current study is highly relevant and fills a gap in the literature.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore how undergraduate students experienced and understood their academic advising experiences within the context of a four-year centralized, primary role advising center at a public research university in the mid-south. This chapter outlines why I chose phenomenology as the research design, describes participant identification techniques, discusses the procedures for data collection and analysis, and describes the establishment of trustworthiness in this study.

The research questions that were explored were:

- a. How did students ascribe meaning to their lived experience of academic advising within a four-year centralized, primary role advising model?
- b. How did students' relationships with their advisors affect their sense of connectedness to the university?

### Research Design

“Human life is storied life” (Bockner, 2002, p. 73). Humans understand the world around them through the way they talk about it. Language is constitutive; it does not just reflect meaning but creates it (Richardson, 2002). Qualitative research techniques acknowledge the power of words and allow researchers to explore the “lived experience” of their participants (Van Manen, 1984). They involve studying the wholeness of human experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21). They look for “meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21). The purpose of my study was not to describe a specific kind of academic advising or to measure its effectiveness. It was to explore the experience through the eyes of my participants; it was to get at the meaning of how they experience

academic advising. To accomplish this, I used a transcendental phenomenological research methodology (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology was an appropriate method in this context as it allowed me to examine “the world as we immediately experience it rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or theorize about it” (Van Manen, 1984, p. 37).

**Phenomenology.** The method of phenomenology involves a return to the philosophical understandings of scientific knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). It is a “philosophy without presuppositions” (Creswell, 2014, Loc. 1687). Rather than coming to a study with a pre-determined hypothesis, the purpose is to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 177). The methodology relies heavily on Husserl’s philosophies on the nature of knowledge (Husserl, 1931, 1967, 1970, and, 1977). Husserl (1970) believed that “all genuine, and, in particular, all scientific knowledge, rests on inner evidence: as far as such evidence extends, the concept of knowledge extends also” (p. 61). So, to study a person’s perceptions of a phenomenon is to study the phenomenon itself, and “phenomena are the building blocks of human science and the basis for all human knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Moustakas (1994) points out that by being intentionally reflective while examining a phenomenon is to be aware of the noema and noesis of one’s perception.

Noema is the experience or perception of the phenomenon; it is the textural, what can be seen or described (Moustakas, 1994, p. 31). Whereas, the noesis is the reason behind the evidence; it is the structural experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 31). Noema is the meaning we as individuals make, and noesis is the context in which we make the meaning. Moustakas (1994) gave a personal example that helped me understand this relationship. He described a situation where he had a negative reaction to his doctor’s suggestion that he take a prescription drug (p. 30). The reaction itself was his noemic understanding of the situation. The

reason he had the negative reaction, or the context behind his reaction, is the noetic. In his example, he spoke about how a previous experience with a doctor prescribed drug that caused an allergic reaction shaped his reaction to the current situation. His noetic experiences with doctors in the past shaped his noemic understanding of the doctor/patient relationship.

Moustakas (1994) argues that an understanding of the relationship between noemic and noetic knowledge is essential in order to be intentionally reflective as a researcher. When researching a phenomenon, such as academic advising, the researcher will speak with participants about their experience with advising (the noema) and through in-depth interviews try to understand the context through which they experience the phenomenon (the noesis). By doing this, Moustakas argues that the researcher begins to form a universal understanding of the phenomenon by identifying patterns within multiple participants' experiences.

**Steps in Phenomenological Research.** The process of transcendental phenomenological research involves four steps. The first step in the process referred to as Epoche is to acknowledge the role of the researcher in the research and their experiences with the phenomenon. While some methods of research require the researcher to be neutral or unbiased when approaching their study, qualitative research acknowledges that researchers are shaped by their understanding of the world:

Subject and object are integrated—what I see is interwoven with how I see it, with whom I see it, and with whom I am. My perception, the thing I perceive, and the experience or act integrate to make the objective subjective and the subjective objective. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59)

What this means is that the subject (whether that be the researcher or the participant) and the object (that which is being researched) are woven together. The object's meaning is only understood through the lens of the subject, the viewer. Therefore, objectivity or

neutrality is nonexistent in this methodology. Rather, the goal is to acknowledge bias or preconception and “suspend all judgments about what is real—the ‘natural attitude’—until they are founded on a more certain basis. This suspension is called ‘epoche’ by Husserl” (Cresswell, 2014, Loc. 1687). The goal of this approach is to move beyond bias by taking a fresh look:

I can intend an open and fresh approach to my knowledge of something but the problem of language and habit still exist; my own rooted ways of perceiving and knowing still enter in. The value of the epoche principle is that it inspires one to examine biases and enhances one’s openness even if a perfect and pure state is not achieved. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 61)

This process is recursive and may need to happen, not just at the beginning of the research process, but throughout as well.

Once the researcher has engaged in the Epoche process, they theoretically are “free of prejudgments and preconceptions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). At this time, the researcher begins to engage in Phenomenological Reduction (Moustakas, 19954). This is the process of creating “textural descriptions” of what is seen (p. 90). According to Moustakas (1994), this process involves first bracketing, which is the process of identifying what is part of the phenomenon in question and bracketing it away from anything that is not on topic (p. 97). Next, the researcher horizontalizes each statement (p. 97). At this stage, each piece of data has equal value. This allows the researcher to remove duplication and to weed out data that are not relevant to the topic. This process leaves the researcher with the Horizons or the essential “textural meanings” which can then be clustered into themes and organized into a “coherent textural description of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97).

After Phenomenological Reduction, the next step is Imaginative Variation (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). This stage is where the researcher uses their imagination to engage all the potential

meanings of the data. By looking at the data in this way, “the world disappears, existence no longer is central, anything whatever becomes possible” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). Through this process, the researcher is able to understand that “there is not a single inroad to truth, but that countless possibilities emerge that are intimately connected with the essences and meanings of an experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99). Moustakas (1994) outlines a four-step process for Imaginative Variation:

- 1) Systematic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings;
- 2) Recognizing the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon;
- 3) Considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, or relation to self or relation to others;
- 4) Searching for exemplifications that vividly illustrate the invariant structural themes and facilitate the development of a structural description of the phenomenon.

(Moustakas, 1994, p. 99)

The last step in the process is synthesizing the meanings and essences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). In this step, all the data are integrated into a “fundamental textural and structural description” and are unified for an understanding of the “essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100).

### **Research Site**

The research was conducted at a centralized advising office within a liberal arts college of a large public research institution in the mid-south. The total enrollment of students at the

university was just over 27,000 in Spring 2018, when the study took place. According to Carnegie classification (2018), the undergraduate setting is described as: four-year, full-time, more selective, and higher transfer-in. This study was limited to the college of arts and sciences, which houses 19 departments and offered 56 undergraduate majors.

At the campus level, the advising model employed was a satellite model (Habley, 2008). In other words, each college had its own advising system. Within the college of arts and sciences, advising transitioned from a split model to a centralized model in the fall of 2012. In the previous model, students received academic advising from six primary role advisors in an advising center until they earned 60 credit hours. After they had earned 60 hours, students were then assigned a faculty advisor based on their major.

In the fall of 2012, the advising center hired four additional full-time advisors. Beginning in fall 2012, all students were assigned a primary role academic advisor who was housed in the advising center. Advisor assignments were based on major. Most advisors had advanced degrees in fields such as higher education, counseling, or in a field related to the majors they advise. Through the course of the first year as a full-year center, advisors were trained to work with students in all grade levels, students on academic probation, and students pursuing honors research. Advisors were encouraged to develop strong working relationships with faculty in the departments for which they advised, and some departments even still continued to assign students formal faculty mentors in addition to their academic advisor.

In addition to ten primary role academic advisors, the center had a graduate assistant, two administrative specialists, two transfer advising specialists, and occasional interns. In the spring of 2016, the center also created a first-year program for students new to the university. Two full-time advisors managed the program. Because of this, some of the juniors and seniors who

participated in the study were assigned a major based advisor when they started their freshman year, and others went through the first-year program before being assigned a major based advisor.

### **Identifying Participants**

When selecting the undergraduate students, the goal in finding participants was to identify a group who all had a similar experience with the phenomenon being researched (Cresswell, 2014, p. 206). For this study, the participants needed to be juniors or seniors from the college of arts and sciences who had multiple contacts with an advisor from the advising center while a student. Creswell (2014) suggests a heterogeneous group anywhere from 10-15 individuals. To do this, I reached out to several faculty members teaching junior and senior level classes in the college of arts and sciences who let me speak with their class. I briefly explained the study and asked students to complete and return an interest form (included in appendix A). After getting initial feedback about students who were interested in participating, I used demographic data to confirm that students met the criteria of being juniors or seniors and were assigned to an academic advisor in the center. At this time, I also confirmed that all participants had never met with me for academic advising. After this, I sent out an online poll to anyone who expressed interest in participating to scheduled group and individual meetings. Through this process, I identified 13 participants who were juniors or seniors and had worked with one or more advisor in the center during their time as a student. This number allowed me to provide sufficiency and saturation of sample (Seidman, 2006, p. 66). By interviewing multiple participants who have shared similar advising experiences, I was able to see the many angles that emerged of the phenomenon of academic advising in this context.

## **Data Collection**

The in-depth, intensive interview was a good technique for exploring a student's experience of academic advising as it "centers on the meanings that life experiences hold for the individuals being interviewed" (Warren & Karner, 2010, p. 127). With the initial eight participants, I used a combination of small focus groups of students and followed up with participants with in-depth interviews. Focus groups can be advantageous when interviewing participants with similar experiences who are likely to be cooperative as they may help participants feel comfortable to share when they might be more hesitant to share information in one-on-one interviews (Creswell, 2014, Loc. 3206). There were two initial focus groups of three and five participants. These groups allowed participants to build rapport with me as the interviewer while giving participants the opportunity to speak in a group of people and generate conversation (Warren & Karner, 2010, p. 161). However, scheduling participant groups that worked for everyone and that students actually showed up for became challenging. In consultation with my advisor, I adjusted my protocol to allow the remaining five participants participate in only one-on-one interviews where I asked both the group and one-on-one protocol questions.

Focus groups and interviews were good techniques for this study because, "people's behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them" (Seidman, 2006, p. 16). My goal was to explore how students experience academic advising and what it means to them, and intensive interviews are good methods for this because they can allow participants to piece together fragmented understandings (Charmaz, 2014, p. 85). In a perfect setting, I would have preferred to have both groups and one-

on-one interviews with each participant, but gaining sufficiency and saturation of sample became more important to the process (Seidman, 2006, p. 66).

To begin the process, I followed a semi-structured focus group protocol (see appendix B). In addition, I used probing questions to clarify participants' responses when necessary. A flexible interview protocol was important to the research process:

The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions. Although the primary researcher may in advance develop a series of questions aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person's experience of the phenomenon, these are varied, altered or not used at all when the co-researcher shares the full story of his or her experience of the bracketed question. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114)

Both focus groups were conducted in person and audio recorded and transcribed. Follow up interviews were conducted face-to-face with every participant using a semi-structured interview protocol and were also recorded and transcribed (see appendix C). Interviews were scheduled within one week of the initial focus groups in order to allow participants the chance to "mull over the preceding interview" but not give them enough time to lose connection between the interviews (Seidman, 2006, p. 21). All participants were compensated \$40 for participating in the study.

During this process, I also engaged in reflexive journaling for the purposes of tracking my own experience as the researcher. This journal included a record of the research schedule and logistics as well as a record of the methodological decision-making process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 143). Reflexive journaling was also valuable as an additional source of data triangulation and became a part of the data trail for the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Informed Consent and Institutional Review**

Each participant signed an informed consent form. Eight participants signed the consent form before the focus group, and five participants signed the consent form before their one-on-

one interview (Appendix D). The study was approved through institutional review board process (IRB #17-01-399). The informed consent form and protocols for both the focus group and one-on-one interviews are attached as appendices.

### **Data Analysis**

Between each focus group and one-on-one interview, I reviewed transcripts from previous interviews. This allowed me to stay close to the data from the focus groups while engaging in the interview process (Charmaz, 2014).

The phenomenological data analysis method involved the recursive process of working through Phenomenological Reduction and Imaginative Variation by horizontalizing the data into statements of equal value, organizing those data into meaning units, clustering common categories or themes, removing duplicated statements, and using those clustered themes to create “textural descriptions of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118). Those textural descriptions were used to create structural descriptions and integrated into a synthesized and unified statement of the experience or phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, 119).

To accomplish this process, I used the modified Van Kamm method as outlined by Moustakas (1994, pp. 120-121):

1. After reading through the transcribed interviews, for each participant, I created a list of “every statement of relevant experience”—horizontalization (p. 121).
2. I tested each statement with the following two questions:
  - i. Is this a necessary statement for the experience and is it sufficiently constituent for my understanding?
  - ii. Am I able to label this statement?

- b. If both questions were answered positively, it was a horizon. All horizons were compared to remove repetitive and vague statements. The remaining horizons made up the essence and were the “invariant constituents of the experience” (p. 121).
3. I then clustered the horizons or invariant constituents into thematically linked groups.
4. I compared the thematically grouped horizon statements to the participant’s full transcript to see if each horizon and theme group accurately reflected what the participant said in their interview.
5. Using the horizon statements in their theme groups, I wrote textural description of the participant’s experience. This involved using direct quotes from the horizons to summarize the participant’s experience.
6. I then used the textural description and the horizon statements in their theme groups to create a structural description of the participant’s experience.
7. I then constructed a textural-structural description of the participant’s experience
8. From each participant’s textural-structural description, I developed a “composite description” for the entire participant group (p. 121).

It should be noted that qualitative research such as this is not intended to be generalizable in the same manner as quantitative research is since, “there is no absolute or final reality in experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 55). Interview research is meant to explore the in-depth experiences of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). However, no matter how hard researchers work to remove bias or remain objective, interviewers shape the data they receive through the questions they ask and the manner in which they interpret it (Seidman, 2006).

## **Establishing Trustworthiness**

In addition to being the researcher for this study, I am also a primary role academic advisor. I have been working as a primary role academic advisor for a large research institution since 2012. As a student, the relationships I built with my advisors in college were extremely important to the decisions I made about my life. I felt very connected to my campus and supported in my academic decisions. After college, I worked briefly as an adjunct instructor at a small research institution in the south and later as a high school teacher in a large urban setting in the south. In each of these roles, my experiences working one on one with students to achieve their goals were the most gratifying. These past experiences shape my views on academic advising.

For me, as the researcher on this project, I was inevitably be influenced by the fact that I am a primary role academic advisor and work at the research site where I conducted the research. Therefore, it was especially important for me to engage in the epoche process outlined in Cresswell (2014) to, “suspend all judgments about what is real” (Loc. 1687). Some of the ways I did this were through peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexive journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301).

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, I relied on Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (p. 300). These are the qualitative counterparts to the more quantitatively focused: internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300).

Credibility is defined as an accurate representation of the “truth” as defined by the participants (p. 296). This form of trustworthiness requires recognizing that qualitative researchers are not looking for a singular truth (or Truth with a capitol “T”) but are striving to

accurately reflect the truths (or truth with a little “t”) as expressed by the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 295). I ensured credibility by using triangulation (reviewing transcripts of the focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and my reflexive journaling for consistency), peer debriefing (talking with colleagues in the field throughout the research process), and member checking (sharing transcripts with participants) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301).

Transferability is defined as creating a study that includes “sufficient descriptive data” to allow other researchers to conduct similar studies in order to test transferability with different participant groups (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 298). The primary means of ensuring that “transferability judgments” are possible was by providing “thick description” in the findings section of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316).

Dependability is defined as stability of method design and data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 299). Dependability was ensured using triangulation (collecting multiple forms of data) and a confirmability audit (review of the step-by step research process by the dissertation director) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 217-318).

Confirmability is defined as ensuring that the data accurately reflect the experience as shared by the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300). Confirmability was ensured through the confirmability audit, triangulation, and through reflexive journaling by myself, the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 318-319).

Despite these safeguards, it is important to remember that this research is not intended to provide meaning making that will be broadly applied to all undergraduate students.

Phenomenological research is not about broad applicability but an in-depth exploration of the lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). However, I believe the data collected in this study can

influence the advising community's understanding of the experiences of undergraduate students engaged in academic advising in a centralized model.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I identified that phenomenology was a good research design to get in-depth interviews with students to understand their experiences with the phenomenon of advising within a centralized system. I outlined the principles of phenomenology and how the research was conducted. Additionally, I explained how I ensured the trustworthiness of the data through variety of methods, such as peer debriefing, journaling, and member checking.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I reintroduce the purpose and methodology of the study. I then present an overview of each participant's experience and identify and discuss five themes, which emerged from the study.

### Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how undergraduate students experienced and understood academic advising within the context of a four-year centralized, primary role advising center at a public research university in the mid-south. In the study, I examined the following questions:

- a. How did students ascribe meaning to their lived experience of academic advising within a four-year centralized, primary role advising model?
- b. How did students' relationships with their advisors affect their sense of connectedness to the university?

This qualitative study used the method of phenomenology to explore its research questions. Phenomenology involves using an interview-based approach to explore the relationship between the noema, the experience or perception of the phenomenon, and the noesis, the reason behind the experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 31). I collected data through a series of focus groups and one-on-one interviews with 13 participants who were junior or senior students within a single college. Participants were asked to self-identify their age, gender, and race/ethnicity (Table 1). Because students were able to write in their own demographic characteristics, participants used a variety of words to describe themselves. For example, some participants used the word white and others used the word caucasian when describing their race/ethnicity. Eight participants participated in two focus groups, which lasted from 30 to 45 minutes. Each of these eight

participants also participated in one-on-one interviews. Due to low turnout for focus groups, I interviewed an additional five participants in solely one-on-one interviews. One-on-one interviews lasted from 15 to 35 minutes.

To maintain the trustworthiness of the data, I used triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. When identifying initial themes, I triangulated by comparing transcripts of the focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and my reflexive journaling. I member checked the data with participants by emailing each participant transcripts of their interviews and asking if they had any feedback and if they felt the interview accurately represented their views. Two participants responded. Both stated that they felt the interview was an accurate representation of their experience. Additionally, throughout data analysis and initial theme development, I reviewed initial themes with other academic advisors and my dissertation chair to ensure that the emerging themes matched the data presented.

I used the modified Van Kamm method as outlined by Moustakas (1994, pp. 120-121) to analyze the data. Using this process, I created structural descriptions for each participant by summarizing the participant's main experiences as they shared them. I then created textural descriptions for each participant by removing duplicated statements and clustering common themes into a concise summary of the participant's experiences. I used these structural and textural descriptions to identify common experiences and created a composite description for the entire participant group (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). From these descriptions, five themes emerged: access to advisor, consistency of advisor, depth of advisor knowledge, the advisor's impact of student connectedness, and ideal advising. In this chapter, I will share structural descriptions of each participant's experiences and explore the five themes that emerged.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Data*

Participant #	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Major	Level
Alex	21	Male	White	English and History	Junior
Brice	22	Female	Caucasian	Earth Science	Senior
Carmen	21	Female	White	Anthropology	Senior
Daron	21	Female	Caucasian	Psychology	Senior
Darrel	22	Female	White	Chemistry	Senior
Denver	29	Male	White/Caucasian	Geology	Senior
Jess	22	Female	Hispanic/Caucasian	History	Senior
Jo	20	Female	White	English	Senior
Kory	22	Male	White	History	Junior
Kris	20	Male	White	History	Junior
Lee	21	Female	White	History	Junior
Palmer	21	Female	White	Art History	Senior
Petra	23	Female	White	Criminal Justice and Sociology	Junior

*Note.* Participants were asked to self-identify their demographic information using any terms

### **Participants**

**Alex** was a 21-year-old senior White male honors double major in English and history. He worked with three different advisors in his time as a student. He expressed having a really good experience with his first-year advisor, who seemed to know a great deal about the specific classes she was talking about and helped him start a four-year plan. He expressed frustration multiple times when working with his two major specific advisors. He expressed that he wished they both would, “try to get to know the students a little bit better, and following up and asking more in depth questions about the student. Not just about the semester.” He also said he felt like they did not know details about their degrees and could not share information about what the classes or faculty would be like. He said he also never felt like his advisor helped him know how to best balance his schedule. He shared that most of his meetings were 5-10 minutes long and were only focused on how many total hours he had left. He felt his semester specific planning questions were never answered. In his ideal advising scenario, he expressed that he wanted an advisor who seemed to know his goals and helped him make choices based on those goals. He said he wanted someone who cared about how he was doing. He shared that he would like more

of a relationship but that an advisor knowing in-depth knowledge about his department was more important than his advisor having a small student population.

**Brice** was a 22-year-old senior Caucasian female earth science major. She was a student who transferred from another university and then changed majors within the college of arts and sciences after being at the university. Due to an advisor leaving the office, she experienced an advisor change while a student. She described overall very positive experiences with the two main advisors she worked with despite having one negative experience with a short-term “replacement advisor” and a transfer advisor who she felt mis-advised her. She described her frustration with transfer advising by stating that, “I wanted to meet with an actual advisor but they wouldn’t let me because I was a transfer student” Those two experiences did not seem to shape how she felt about working with her “real” advisors. She described both as helpful in planning course sequencing and suggesting classes to help her explore her career. She talked with her most recent main advisor a lot about sub-fields of study and planning for the future, specifically graduate school.

**Carmen** was a 21-year-old senior White female anthropology major. She was a transfer student to the university about halfway through her undergraduate major. She first declared a psychology major but decided to change after her first semester. She met with an advisor who helped her explore two paths and chose anthropology and were then assigned to an anthropology advisor. From then, she met with one advisor. In her conversations about advising, she highlighted the importance of the advisor being informative and having good communication and listening skills. She mentioned wanting her advisor to be able to talk about specific faculty’s teaching interests and knowing a little more about the courses than what is in the course description. A self-described introvert, she really liked all the email communication and ease of

scheduling software. She described feeling connected to the university through the kinds of emails she got about specific events and other emails that helped her document her progress as a student. However, her focus group interview comments focused much more on the negative experiences she had with advising, specifically regarding advisor knowledge. She talked mostly in the focus group about how she wished her advisor could have talked in more detail about the structure of classes and how faculty teach. She expressed this frustration when she mentioned that, “sometimes I don't think it's emphasized enough that a class is only offered once a semester throughout the school year and how important it is. You can't graduate without this class, so it holds you back, which is really frustrating.”

**Daron** was a 21-year-old senior Caucasian female psychology major. She was a self-described hard worker who pushed herself and found a career/academic path in her third year of school. She started off working with the honors freshman advisor and then worked with one primary advisor for the last three years. She was a psychology major who initially thought she would go on to study counseling, but eventually decided to apply to medical school. Once she made that decision, she expressed feeling more connected academically. She expressed feeling very supported and included by her academic advisor, and really appreciated the fact that her advisor always made a point of asking her about her life and contextualizing her academic conversations in the rest of the world. She said she really liked that she felt like her advisor always remembered her. When talking about their relationship, she said, “We're kind of like friends, I guess, so we talk about personal life, but we also talk about school.” She described the conversations as informal and reassuring and her advisor as genuine and wise. She talked about her other mentorship relationships more formally, using the word professional to distinguish them from the more personal conversations she had with her advisor. While describing other

mentors as people she trusted, she expressed that her main support and feelings of inclusion came from her academic advisor.

**Darrel** was a 22-year-old senior White female biochemistry major. She felt good about her overall advising experiences. She had one person she thought of as her main advisor, though she met with someone different at orientation and in her first semester. She experienced an advisor change in her senior year and did not develop a close relationship with her new advisor. However, she described her relationship with her main advisor as great. She said she always left feeling confident and described him as uplifting. She liked when he confirmed she was on track, and said that he seemed very accessible via appointment and via email.

What she most valued about her advising experience was developing a four-year plan that ensured she could complete her major, honors requirements, and requirements in preparation for medical school on time while still maintaining balance with her science load. While she described one stressful experience where she could not get an answer about her business minor without talking to more than one advisor (and having to go back and forth between advisors several times over several days), it did not seem to impact her overall positive feelings about advising. She said that while the situation frustrated her at first, “It was just a fluke and once it was fixed it was fine.”

She said that she felt accepted, included, and supported by the university and that her involvement with Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) and department research were the main contributions to that connectedness but that in times of stress, advising could serve to reinforce her feelings of connectedness with support.

**Denver** was a 29-year-old Senior White/Caucasian male geology major. He was a transfer student to the Geosciences department who met with a couple of advisors before starting

to work with the person he thinks of as his permanent advisor. He described one advisor as very mechanical and one as being too focused on their own personal work issues. However, he said that he really liked the person that he currently worked with. He described his advisor as friendly, welcoming, and knowledgeable. He stated that, “he was very friendly and really knowledgeable of the department and faculty and with coordinating.”

He highlighted that his advisor always asked how he was doing and that he really liked the humanity his advisor brought to their conversations. He said they talk a lot about coursework and planning. He said his advisor asked about his research, but that they do not really talk a lot about the future. He said that while he knows how busy advisors are he wished that advisors did talk a little more about future career planning in the meetings.

**Jess** was a 22-year-old senior female Hispanic/Caucasian history major. She was applying to the masters and teaching program and changed her major to history early in her academic career. She described her experiences as good. She described her advisor as friendly, sociable, and supportive. She said that she liked that her advisor always helped her with her long-term goals by connecting her to other mentors. She stated that advisors, “have a lot of knowledge about other people on campus and other programs. If you're interested in other programs, they can help you to get that connection.” She also liked that her advisor talked about specific classes each semester and always emailed a summary of her meeting. She said that her advising experience helped her feel very supported and, in some ways, helped her feel more connected to the university. However, she said that academic advising did not impact how connected she felt to her department. She mentioned that while unsure if it should be part of academic advising, she felt that students would benefit from more structured career exploration early in their academic career.

**Jo** was a 20-year-old Senior White female English major. She was planning to graduate a year early and go on to graduate school. In addition to working with her academic advisor, she described a very robust mentor network of multiple faculty members. She described very much enjoying her relationship with her advisor. She said her advisor always makes her feel supported, even in the short amount of time they have together. She described her advising relationship by stating that her advisor, “wants to engage and listen like that, so that's how I feel connected, at least how she's made me connected with the university. She's interested in my classes going forward, but she's also interested in my experience with the classes that I've taken and we've set up and talked about, so it's nice.” She described not feeling like she could accomplish her goals without her advisor. She talked about wishing that her advising sessions did not have to happen in a cubicle but that her advisor made the space feel big and welcoming. When talking about ideal advising, she placed a lot of the responsibility of what it should look like on herself, talking about how she approaches the session.

**Kory** was a 22-year-old senior White male history major. He has worked with the same advisor for all his time as a student. He expressed strongly negative feelings about advising that were mostly focused on the very short meetings, long wait time to schedule, lack of actual course enrollment during the session, and lack of focus on his long-term goals. He said that most of his meetings felt pointless because, “they draw up a plan for you, like tentative schedule, but by the time you get out of the meeting and go home and you know you've actually get the classes in your cart, that information's already kind of outdated.” He also expressed dissatisfaction for how inconvenient he found the center’s location to the rest of his academic life. He expressed not feeling connected to the university and stated that his advising experiences negatively impacted how accepted, included, and supported he felt. He wished that advising face-to-face was not

necessary and would have preferred some type of email advising or online interface to use for degree planning.

**Kris** was a 20-year-old junior White male history major. He planned to go to seminary after graduating. He expressed having pretty positive advising experiences. The only negative experience he described was leaving feeling like he thought advising was a place to plan his whole semester schedule and feeling like his advisor was telling him that they would not be doing that in their meetings. He placed a lot of responsibility on himself in advising, to learn its purpose. He described advising as being about learning how the university works and how to navigate planning. He stated that, "I've been greatly helped by the services offered by the advising department. And I'm glad that I had the opportunity to get to know my adviser in regards to how he's helped me with learning how the system works and how I'm supposed to choose classes and understanding the ins and outs of the University." He expressed that advising did contribute to how supported and connected he felt at the university. He did not talk much about future planning with his advisor, other than financial planning.

**Lee** was a 21-year-old junior White female honors history major. She had an honors advisor in freshman year and a history advisor assigned to her in sophomore year. She expressed that the first time she called to make an appointment that she was treated rudely and was also treated rudely when she checked in for her first meeting. This experience made her feel very negatively and said that, "it's made me more hesitant to want to come in for advising just because it was an annoying kind of red tape." She additionally expressed that the center's location was inconvenient and made her not want to come in. She said she prefers office hours where she can just pop in rather than schedule a meeting at awkward time. For these reasons, she has only met her advisor once and has worked with him solely via email for about two years. She described

ideal advising as mostly transactional, asking questions and getting correct information that she felt she could trust. She expressed concern about getting good information about the honors aspects of her program, including changes to her curriculum and how to go about the thesis.

**Palmer** was a 21-year-old senior White female art history major. When she started at the university, she also had a second major in business that she later dropped because she said it felt too hard to plan for both. When she talked about dropping the major, she said, “I know double majoring across the arts and business school is pretty common. I've talked to a lot of people about it. So I'm not sure why there's such a struggle there.” She expressed that advising was a major part of what contributed to her feeling supported at this campus. She talked about how large (and busy) the campus felt. However, she said that having one person here to connect to felt really important for her. The tone of her advising was really important for her. She said that it needed to feel individual for her. She talked a lot about feeling comfortable in her sessions. The biggest challenges in advising came from having two majors in two colleges and no one person who could help her make sense of it all. She most liked that her advisor seemed genuinely excited to work with her and seemed to 1) remember her and her goals, 2) know the field and be able to talk about how her classes fit into her career, and 3) be able to give advising about balanced schedules (focusing on the way faculty structure their classes).

She mentioned several times how busy she knew her advisor was and that she was aware of how structured the meetings were and that they could feel like a whirlwind. She always highlighted that she still felt valued by her advisor and that the meetings were very important. In her group interview, she talked about not liking how sudden her advisor change seemed and equated having to get to know a new advisor to having to switch doctors in the middle of medical treatment. She described ideal advising as someone who knew her, cared about how things were

going in her life, who could help her plan her classes to be balanced, and could chat for a bit about future career stuff. Outside of having two colleges, her main difficulty with advising was scheduling online.

**Petra** was a 23-year-old junior White female double major in sociology and criminal justice. She described herself as independent. She liked her first advising experiences, because they set her at ease and gave her resources. However, she felt like advising as a sophomore, junior, and senior could feel unhelpful if advisors did not have experience in her field. She said her advisor did not know much about faculty in her department, did not know much about classes, and could not help her plan for the future. She described her advising experiences as friendly and welcoming, but often pointless. She expressed that, “I feel like it could be a helpful resource to incoming freshmen who want to go over the plan that they're looking at because they're probably lost. But I feel like once you get older, you know what classes to take.” She had met with several different advisors and was not sure who her main advisor was or what their name was.

## **Themes**

From conversations with the participants, five themes emerged: access to advisor, consistency of advisor, depth of advisor knowledge, the advisor’s impact of student connectedness, and ideal advising. In this section, I will share what participants said about each theme.

### **Access**

One of the major themes discussed by participants was access to their advisors. Participants discussed this theme in a variety of ways, and several sub-themes emerged through their discussion: ease of scheduling, length of wait time for an appointment, length of actual

appointment, use of email in advising, and the ways physical space and location impacted advisor access. In this section, I will discuss each sub-theme.

**Ease of scheduling.** The ways students schedule their appointments was an important discussion point for participants. It was clear through the discussions that participants felt that how easy they perceived the scheduling process impacted how much access they felt they had to their advisor.

Within the advising center that was the site of the study, students were encouraged to schedule their own appointments using online scheduling software. Participants had a variety of reactions to the online system. Carmen found this system very easy and felt it increased her sense of access to her advisors. She stated that she appreciated that, “you don't have to email back and forth with your advisor trying to figure out what time they can meet.” Likewise, Petra found the current online scheduling program easier than the past scheduling system and said that, “ I remember it used to be so complicated. You have to email them or like, I don't even remember what. But now, you go on and it shows you a little picture of your advisor, whoever it is. You go click on their person, it shows their calendar, all the available dates and all the different time slots, which I think is super useful.” However, Palmer found this system cumbersome and felt that it decreased her sense of access to her advisor:

I'd improve the access to scheduling for advising because it gets frustrating. I find it difficult sometimes, it might just be me, to access the online portal. When I go to advising, I can never find [my advising center] in the little list. And I don't know if it's just through my account or something. It's never on my list.

Lee would have preferred to schedule her meetings via phone but felt very unwelcome to do so:

I think the only difficulty I've had would be one time I called the office because I'm a phone person. I called the office and asked to schedule an appointment, and I couldn't give you a name for the life of me. The lady was so rude and was like, "Uh, no. You need to get online, and you need to do it through UA Success, and then we'll talk to you." It just made me feel like, okay, you have a job to help

students. You wouldn't have that if I wasn't here. I don't feel the need to be attacked. I just need to know. Since then, it's made me more hesitant to want to come in for advising just because it was an annoying kind of red tape that like, I know you have access to the scheduling. I'm calling. Just, even if you can't help me that way, be a little nicer about it. That's been sort of, I don't really want to go in the center anymore because I just really don't want to deal with some rude gatekeeper acting like I don't deserve to be there to talk to an academic advisor.

This same participant stated that she would have preferred not to have to schedule a meeting at all and would have liked to just be able to walk-in to her advisor's office and wait for them to be available and stated that, "I understand that with not scheduling things, you're going to deal with ... You may, every time you pop your head in there he's going to have somebody in there, but I would rather make the choice to wait the five minutes for him to be done with that person."

While participants had a variety of different experiences with scheduling, some positive and others negative, one common theme was that participants who had more positive experiences with scheduling said that they felt it made their advisor more available to them and that students who had more negative experiences with scheduling said they felt it made their advisor less available to them.

**Length of wait time for an appointment.** Another common sub-theme that participants expressed impacting their feelings of advisor access was how long they had to wait for an appointment. Palmer felt that the size of the school and the number of students her advisor was responsible for had a negative impact on being able to book an appointment at the desired time:

Just the difficulty to access. I understand that we're a big school. Just having an advisor who has so many students to look after makes it a little difficult to connect all the way and to be able to book right when I need it. Yeah, that's honing it down a little bit.

Kory agreed that having to wait for an appointment had a negative impact on his advising experience and said that, "oftentimes, it can take a week or more to get an appointment

scheduled. So you can have a serious delay in the classes that you're trying to get in. So I see that as a real issue with our advising program.” Additionally, Kory equated his difficulty with getting a meeting with a staffing problem and stated, “I mean part of that I think is the fact that it is so hard to get a meeting. I think they're understaffed, they got to be.” Petra expressed that, “I've had, at times, where I couldn't actually be seen by an advisor, because they were so busy.” Overall, participants’ feelings about how long it took to see their advisor from the time they scheduled their meeting were mostly negative.

**Length of actual appointment.** Another area where participants talked about their perceived access to their advisor was in how long their actual meetings were. While some participants felt satisfied with their overall experience, nearly every participant expressed feeling rushed at least once in their conversation. Many participants felt the scheduled meeting time was too short for the discussion they wished they could have with their advisor. Daron felt that her meetings used to be longer:

I wish the sessions were longer because they used to be 30 minutes and now it seems like they're 20 minutes. I understand that there's probably a ton of people that are trying to get through. It just seems like it could be a really cool opportunity to sit there and question what do you want to be, what do you want to do, how do you want to contribute to society. Like asking the harder questions, instead of, "What classes do you want to take next semester?"

Denver agreed and felt that the short appointment length was tied to heavy advisor workloads. He stated that, “they're all pretty tight on that 20-minute time frame. I think all of our advisors have pretty busy schedules.” Additionally, Kory also felt that his meetings were too short and that the experience felt like an assembly line. Kory stated, “All of the meetings are spaced 15 minutes apart. So you know, I mean, pretty much just churning them out. There's no real time for any depth of discussion. It just feels like an assembly line kind of.”

Kris expressed that he felt a sense of obligation or pressure to keep meetings brief to be respectful of his advisor's time:

So, I guess it's kind of like an overarching thing that's in the back of my mind. Knowing that I want to be respectful of his time and the next person's time. But usually my questions are brief enough to where I don't feel super short on time.

Jo acknowledged that meetings felt brief but that she still felt like her advisor made time for her:

I don't know. Within the [Arts and Sciences] College, they make time for their students even within that short period that we talked about earlier. I guess that would be the most significant part of the [college of arts and sciences] advising I can think of that differentiates from the other colleges.

Palmer said that due to the length of meetings, she talked about a lot of important topics in her meetings, but never in-depth. She stated that, "the detail that we talked about was always great. Just logic wise we couldn't sit down and talk for two hours about our lives. So we always touched on career things and touched on things that I wanted post-graduation to look like, but it was never really in-depth." However, Petra expressed that the limited time and large number of meetings in a day had a negative impact on how close she felt with her advisor:

Like, my advisors here, they're personal, but I feel like they're, they've maybe been told not to be too personal to the students. I know they're on a time limit as well. They're probably like, "okay, you've got like 15 minutes to meet with this student, however much time. I have five people that I've had before her and I'm exhausted.

Several participants expressed that longer meetings would yield better advising conversations. Kris said that while some meetings could be short, certain questions might require more time and stated that, "it would really just depend on how much I wanted to cover. I mean it could be as short as 15 minutes." She followed up by stating that, "if you're fairly new to advising it might be best 30, 30 minutes. 30 to 45. Even if you have a lot of questions and don't really understand the class sign up process or how that works."

Brice also pointed out that certain types of students might need longer meetings than others:

As a student, say you're an incoming freshman and your advisor only has 20 minutes to meet with you and you have no idea what college is about, maybe if they had an extra 20 minutes or an hour it would make them feel more comfortable and not like I'm freaking out, if that makes any sense.

Overall, participants expressed that meetings often felt rushed or too short to talk at the level of depth that they ideally preferred. While some participants expressed that they still felt like their advisor made time for them, most expressed that 20-30 minute meetings often felt too short.

**Use of email in advising.** One factor that seemed to have a positive impact on participants' perception of access to their advisor was how their advisor used email. Darrel expressed that she liked that she knew her advisor could always be available via email and said that, "He would always respond... I knew I could always email him and ask him a question." Daron also felt like she could always email her advisor with anything she needed saying that, "I email my advisor anytime I have a question at all. I just emailed her less than a week ago just for another thing." Jess said that her advisor "always emailed me back really fast," and she appreciated that aspect of her advising.

However, Denver said his advisor sometimes took time to respond to an email but felt positively about waiting for a response. He said that he is, "not shy about sending an email out and then waiting for them to respond, which sometimes it can take a whole day but he's a really busy dude, that's the great thing about email; you get to it when you can get to it." However, Kory wished that he could do more with his advisors via email to mitigate problems he had with getting an appointment that felt inconvenient:

I walk here, like I walked here today just on something that could easily be taken care of online. Or even through an email thing. You could just email me instead of me having to walk here for a 15-minute meeting. I just think it's ridiculous.

Overall, participants expressed that positive email communication with their advisor positively impacted how much access they felt they had with their advisor.

**Location and physical space of the advising center.** The last sub-theme that participants discussed regarding access to their advisor was the way that the location and physical layout of the advising center impacted how accessible their advisor seemed. The site of the study was a centralized advising center for a large liberal arts college where all students' advisors are located in one building. The center has a check-in desk located in a lobby where students wait for their advisor to come greet them at the beginning of their meeting. Lee expressed dissatisfaction that the location of the advising center felt inconvenient to the rest of her academic life:

I know this is probably not something you want to hear, but not in [the current location]. This is probably the worst place on campus if you want students to come by their own volition and just show up. If you even want them to come out of their way to come here, this is probably the least likely place that they would come.

Kory expressed that the center felt too out of the way to feel worth walking for a short advising meeting, stating that "having to come all the way to this building" felt "ridiculous".

In addition to the physical location of the building, some students found having to check in with someone before seeing their advisor to be negative. Darrel expressed that she felt like the front desk staff kept her from getting access to her advisor in a time of crisis and stated that, "it was just a big miscommunication to all of them and I wasn't able to see an advisor here. They kept making me, I had to talk to front desk people and to other students and so I just felt like no one was trying to help me." Lee expressed that she wished she could just walk-in to her advisor's office to see if her advisor was available in the same way that she walks-in to her professor's offices:

If it were super easy for me to just walk in and chit chat and I didn't have to go through the whole snafu like scheduling and dealing with all of that, if I could just walk in and see if he had somebody in there and just go in like I do with my professors, I would definitely go in more often.

Another aspect of the physical space of the advising center that impacted the participants' experiences was the use of cubicle style offices instead of private offices with walls. Jo expressed that the openness of the advising environment impacted what she felt she could talk about in a meeting:

I wish that it wasn't set up in cubicles. Maybe that's just me. There's obviously room, it's difficult to find room for everyone, especially when the number of students are growing and the number of advisors have to grow with that. But I wish they had their own private offices. I feel like that would be able to open up a bigger communication channel for me, but I have weird social anxiety, so it feels weird talking in a cubicle sometimes. But [my advisor] does a good job of trying to block that out for me.

One of the major themes that developed during the study was the theme of advisor access. Participants expressed that being able to reach their advisor either through email or a timely appointment were high priorities to feeling satisfied with their experiences. Participants largely felt that meetings should be longer in order to have the level of depth in conversation that they felt was necessary. Additionally, some participants felt that the physical location and layout of the advising center felt inaccessible.

### **Advisor Consistency**

A second theme that arose through the study was the theme of advisor consistency. During the time of the study advisors were assigned to students based on their major. So, some participants worked with the same advisor from the time they met with them at orientation through their last semester and graduation. However, some participants had to work with more than one advisor, either because they changed their major or because their advisor left the

advising center during their time as a student. Whether or not a participant had to change advisors as a student, most had something to share about the theme of advisor consistency.

**Benefits of advisor consistency.** A common sub-theme of advisor consistency was how valuable participants found working with the same advisor over multiple years. Brice mentioned that it was easier to talk to someone she knew and felt that, “when your advisor knows you and your professor knows you, it's easier to talk to them rather than a complete stranger.” Daron also said she felt like having the same advisor added steadiness to her experience and expressed that her advisor had been, “a steady person in my life for three years now so I feel like I know her a little bit.” Jo said she felt like having a stable advisor helped her feel more able to focus on doing well in her courses:

I think it's helped me form some kind of concrete plan, and I need that stability with my advisor to be able to have a grounding and to do well in my classes and really focus instead of, "Oh, I have this class next. Is this a class that's going to go towards my degree audit? Is this going to allow me to complete the criteria of the English department?" Instead of having those worries in the back of my mind, I know that [my advisor] already set it up to the point where I can go through my classes and know these are pushing me towards graduation. Yeah, it's a good support network I have.

Denver stated that he liked that his advisor remembered specific details about him each time they met:

He's almost like a friend ... whenever I walk in he remembers ... even if it's a short list of like ... you're doing research with this professor and you're into ... that's your favorite color you know just basic, to add some personableness to it, it was a long way and he definitely exceeds my expectations of what I would think you would get in an undergraduate advising appointment.

Kris expressed that getting to know his advisor helped him learn how the university system worked and said that he was, “glad that I had the opportunity to get to know my adviser in regards to how he’s helped me with learning how the system works, and how I’m supposed to choose classes, and understanding the ins and out of the University.” Petra who did not get to

work with one advisor throughout her degree expressed that she wished she could have done so and expressed that, “maybe having advisors who, I don’t know if you all want them to follow them all the way four years.” Many participants expressed that they enjoyed building a relationship with their advisor over multiple semesters and that it either made them feel valued or supported.

**Disadvantages of changing advisors.** However, some participants experienced advisor changes due to advisors leaving the advising center. Most participants who experienced this shared how the change made them feel. Darrel expressed that the changes to her advisor made her feel less likely to go to advising:

I used to go to [my first advisor] but ever since [he] left I haven’t really had a consistent advisor so not that great. But when I had [him] I would email him and see him every semester and it was great but now it’s I don’t really go to advising as much anymore I guess cause I don’t have a consistent one.

Denver said that his advisor changed at an important time for him and that the change made him feel like he did not know what was going on in his degree:

Starting out in probably spring of '16, there was the pretty high turnover rate within my major's advisor, so that was kind of confusing, and it was like a crucial time for me because I was just starting out, and it was like, here's somebody else doing it, here's somebody doing it. They're like, "I don't know what's going on." Well I was like, "Well, I don't know what's going on”.

Petra specifically stated that she didn’t like having to build a relationship with multiple new advisors: and said, “I mean, I've had multiple, too, that doesn't help, that I have to keep making new relationships.” Palmer compared getting a new advisor to getting a new doctor and having to catch them up on everything they have done to that point:

And now I have a new advisor and I don't know what's happening. I haven't seen him yet but I need to. It just one of those things... it's like having to go to a doctor’s appointment with a new doctor. You're like ugh I have to go through all this stuff, and it's gonna be annoying. He's not going to know what I want or what I've done, just kind of that.

**Suggestions for how to handle advisor change.** When participants did have to experience a change to their advisor, many shared suggestions for how they would want that change handled. Palmer wanted to be warned before her advisor changed: “Could you give us some warning or slow it down a little bit?” Darrel expressed that changes in the middle of the semester felt really disruptive and would prefer any change be scheduled in a break:

I guess the only thing [I would change] would be not having the switch of advisors.” Or if it had to change “I would say maybe more ... What's the word I'm looking for? Notice ahead of time. Or not in the middle of a semester. Maybe in the middle of a break or the summertime.

She also expressed wanting to be told about the change from her old advisor and then being contacted by her new advisor with an introduction:

And have communication about it. I think how they did it was fine. [My old advisor] emailed us and was like, "Hey, I'm leaving. This is my last week." Then once he was gone [my new advisor] emailed us and just introduced himself. I think that was good.

Participants who talked about suggestions for how to handle change suggested advanced notice to the change, communication from outgoing and incoming advisors, and, when possible, scheduling changes during slow periods of the year. Those participants who got to work with advisors for multiple semesters expressed that they appreciated the relationship they built and those who had to change advisors often expressed feeling a little lost.

### **Depth of Knowledge**

A third theme that I identified when talking with participants was the depth of knowledge they wanted from their academic advisor. This depth of knowledge was categorized in to several sub-themes: specific disciplinary content knowledge, knowledge of professors and specific

course information, career or pre-professional knowledge, and broad knowledge of related academic questions. Each of these sub-themes will be explored below.

**Disciplinary content knowledge.** Some participants expressed that they wished their advisors could talk more in-depth with them about the discipline as a whole. Brice expressed that she wished her advisor had more experience in the field:

Put someone in there who knows or who has experience with the field that, don't just give you to a random advisor. Go to someone with experience in the field or has talked to students that are also in the same boat I guess. I don't know how to describe it better than that, not someone who says I don't know, I can't help you.

Petra felt that her advisor's lack of experience in the field limited her advisor's ability to make specific course suggestions:

They don't really know anything about what I'm doing and they don't have any experience, either in my field, or they don't know how, or like, they can't give me an opinion on classes or what I should do for the future.

However, Jess expressed that her advisor did know enough to help her plan her curriculum and said that, "He always knew exactly what courses I would need."

**Knowledge of professors and specific course information.** Another area where many participants shared feelings was the level of knowledge their advisor should have about specific professors and classes. Many felt that advisors should be able to recommend specific professors or share more details about the course than were available through the course description. Palmer felt that this was a great aspect of what her advisor provided during meetings:

So we talked a lot about what classes to take, who are good professors, who are not good professors, well they're still good professors, but ... Who, What professors to take to balance their coursework so she knew that some professors had heavier coursework and some had lighter coursework. She explained it all and said, "This schedule is gonna work for you. You aren't gonna feel overwhelmed."

Daron really liked that her advisor had experience with her department on the campus and stated that, "She was a student here in Psychology, so she actually knows the classes that I'm taking,

professors, if they're the same professors.” Denver also felt that his advisor, “knows the department and the professors, and a lot of what's going on.”

However, Carmen felt that none of the advisors she worked with knew enough about the classes to answer her questions. She stated that her advisors, “were all the same. Super nice, super helpful as much as they could, but they didn't know anything about the classes.” Carmen wanted her advisor to be able to talk about the teaching methods of the professors of the classes she was considering taking and said that, “it would just be better if they could kind of relay, or give you, a course description” and wished that her advisor could address the each faculty’s teaching method and give about such as, “this is how you learn, so this is how this might correspond.” She also wanted her advisor to have access to course syllabi and share them during advising meetings:

I think it would be great if they could have access to a copy of the syllabus almost. Personal course description from the teacher to have hands on experience of the class so you can get a better idea of what the teacher's like, what the course is going to entail, how hard it's going to be, how much work it's going to be, and stuff like that.

Alex wanted his advisor to know which classes to expect multiple semesters in advance:

Knowing when classes are, really on their radar, because there's one class that I have to take that hasn't been offered for two semesters. I've been waiting to take it, it's still not offered, it's one of those things I have to take, and I don't know why it's not being offered, and my advisor is just like, "Yup, just whenever.”

**Career or professional knowledge.** Another topic participants wanted to be able to talk about with their advisor was future career planning and pre-professional planning. Some participants felt their advisor was able to help them and others did not. Darrel found her advisor helpful when planning for the MCAT and stated that, “I'm pre-med so especially he [my advisor] helped me a lot determining when I should take a class in relation to when I was taking the MCAT so that was really helpful.” Brice felt her advisor was able to help her know how to

approach applying to graduate school and appreciated that she could, “talk to him about a lot of things, especially grad school. He's been super helpful giving me tips about the GRE, classes, what professors, you know which grants, scholarships to look at, just different routes to go.”

Daron pointed out that her advisor was able to help her plan for medical school, even though she didn't feel like it was her advisor's main focus:

She was very knowledgeable about something that wasn't even what she was supposed to know about. It was pre-med, her division is specifically Psychology, but she was still very knowledgeable about even something that didn't really relate. So, it was awesome.

However, Petra felt that her advisor was not able to help her plan for graduate school at all and felt her advisor, “didn't know anything about graduate school.” Jess said that she wasn't sure if it was her advisor's job but wished her advisor was more prepared to help students with career exploration:

I don't know if this falls on the shoulders of just academic advising, but more career exploration, because there are a lot of young people, they don't exactly know what they're doing. Especially, I know a lot of people that start a degree and they weren't even completely sure what they wanted to do with it, or you start a degree and you realize you don't like it, but ... The reason I decided to switch majors is because I actually started taking classes and I really liked the professors and I really liked the subject.

In addition to having deep knowledge of a student's discipline or major, many participants also wanted their advisor to know details about programs in other colleges or about other resources on campus. Palmer who had two majors housed in different colleges wished that her advisors knew something about both majors:

The only time I felt uncomfortable was when the [business] college was having me take somethings and [the arts and sciences college] was having me take other things and it's just grinding at each other throats and you could just tell that they weren't connecting well or getting along well.

Darrel also felt that she had to go back and forth between two colleges' advising centers multiple times to get an answer regarding a question about her minor:

When talking about having to go back and forth between two advisors: I felt like I was so on track for these three years and then the fact that this class just all of a sudden popped up and it didn't fit in my four-year plan. I was just like, "Oh, did they lie to me these past three years about this one class?"

Petra wished her advisor knew something about scholarship requirements to help her decide if she could afford taking classes in the summer:

I mean, my advisors don't usually know anything about scholarship requirements, the different scholarships that you have, whether that covers summer terms. So, they usually tell me to go to the treasurer's office or something.

Lee expressed that her ideal advisor would be able to be a reference to help her find the answers to any question she had about her academics:

Ideally it would be that I could ask all the questions that I needed to ask and get thorough answers or a link to a webpage that gives me all the thorough answers on every single one and just know for sure that that is the correct answer. That's ideal for me. That's all I'm asking.

As highlighted by the sub-themes associated with advisor knowledge, many participants wanted their advisors both to be experienced and knowledgeable about their discipline but also have broad, general knowledge about other programs and majors as well as career and professional planning.

### **Connectedness**

Another theme that emerged from the study was tied to the theoretical lens of the study, connectedness. Participants were asked how connected they felt to the university and their department or major and if advising impacted that connection. Some participants expressed that their advisor did help them feel more connected, while others did not. Those participants who did express that their advisor helped them feel connected highlighted the importance of the

relationship they had with their advisor and related it to feeling supported and valued. Palmer expressed that her advisor was a major resource in her experience on campus:

Advising is “very key. Knowing that I have a resource, knowing that I have something to go to, and something that is focused on me in such a big school is really important. Just kind of like grounds everything in my whole experience. I know that there's someone out there being like, ‘Hey, this girl's going way off her path. Let's get her back and kind of put her back where she needs to go and give her a little guidance.’ It's just good to have a knowledge that somebody's there watching out for you in such a ... when you have such power over your own coursework and your own class schedule, just good to have someone like, ‘Hey, watch out.’”

Darrel whose advisor left the university expressed feeling less connected and stated, “I feel like now that he's left and everyone's still trying to find an advisor it feels a little more disconnected.”

Brice expressed that her advisor impacted how connected she felt, because her advisor was someone who was part of her progression from semester to semester:

I would say yes because when it comes to choosing classes, I don't know I see it as a progression like oh I'm going from a sophomore to a junior and then from a junior to a senior and just kind of on the right track.

Kory who felt negatively about his advising experiences said that his experiences negatively affected how connected he felt:

Definitely makes me feel like I'm not really valued that much. Just all the impediments to actually enrolling in classes is ... I think it's designed sometimes to be tricky, yeah. There's so much red tape around enrolling in classes.

Some participants expressed that their advisor did not impact how connected they felt to campus or their program or department. Carmen said that advising was just part of the process:

I just feel like it [advising] kind of goes along with the process of school, it doesn't really impact my relationships with the university as a whole, it's just kind of part of what I have to do to get through my classes and stuff like that.

Alex also felt that his advising experience did not substantially impact how connected he felt:

Yes [advisors] help me with classes and stuff, but it doesn't feel like that contributes to or detracts from my experience, it just feels like a separate entity. It's just there, it's something I have to do, whereas everything else on campus informs my experience.

Denver who did not feel advising impacted her connectedness described the experience as a work transaction. She expressed, "I don't see much correlation between meeting with my advisor and connectedness to the university. They're doing their job, and I'm doing my requirements of me." Petra said that her advising experience did not impact their sense of connectedness but wished that it had:

I mean, I wouldn't say it makes me feel super connected to the university. It's not like the main thing that I think of when I think of, how are you connected to the university? Oh, my advisor. I wish it was, I guess, in a sense. But, I feel like if I didn't have that advisor, especially my freshman year, because now it's not a necessity.

Lee expressed that the accessibility she felt with her advisor positively impacted her feelings of connectedness:

Probably positive just because I do feel like [my advisor's] really accessible by email, I feel like he's going to answer me, which is a nice feeling, whereas if you call other offices on campus you just may never get a call back, which is scary. I don't feel like I'm getting lost in a sea of students whenever I email him, and he's quick to respond, so that's definitely good.

Jess said the way that her advisor connected her to other resources had a positive impact on her sense of connectedness:

They have a lot of knowledge about other people on campus and other programs. If you're interested in other programs, they can help you to get that connection, or they just have a lot of general knowledge, because they deal with so many students from the same major about career paths that are feasible with that major and things like that.

Lee attributed the lack of impact advising had on connectedness to the fact that she did not meet with her advisor every semester:

Not really, just because it's more like ... I don't know. Just because I haven't talked with my advisor a lot, it doesn't have that huge of an impact on my entire university experience, and probably because we don't meet every semester, that sort of thing. I would say no.

Those participants who did express that their advising experience positively impacted how connected they felt to the university or department talked about the importance of the relationship they had with their advisor. They spoke about feeling valued and that they thought it was important that someone at the university cared about them. Palmer said that she felt that her advisors and faculty caring about her made campus feel like a community:

Um, I feel very accepted and included. I feel like it's community and um, it's a big school, but I feel like my faculty cares about me. I feel like my advising cares about me. It feels good. I'd say, yeah.

Brice expressed that it was easier to talk to someone she knew rather than a stranger, and that it made her feel accepted and supported stating that, “your advisor knows you and your professor knows you, it's easier to talk to them rather than a complete stranger.” She also liked how much her advisor remembered about her despite perceiving how busy her advisor was saying that, “It was very personal, and I really liked that. Advisors are usually pretty good about remembering all their advisees, you guys have so many, it's really personal I really enjoyed it.” Daron also felt like her advisor remembered personal things about her and expressed that this made her feel like her advisor really cared about her:

But also, I think that I like that she knows, she has to take notes or something about me, because she remembers exactly... And it makes it easier to listen to advice from somebody who seems like they care about you, so I really enjoy that.

Petra said that the friendly, warm way she was treated by her advisor made her feel like she belonged and expressed, “I mean, I feel like my advising has reassured me in that I belong here, in a certain extent, because everyone's always very friendly. Everyone is always very warm.” Jo expressed that even though her advising meetings were very brief, they always made her feel

wanted and said that her advisor, “gets me in, she gets me out real fast. There's no fluff in between. It's just getting in and out real fast while still making me feel wanted and a part of the university.” Kris expressed that his advising experiences positively impacted his sense of connectedness because it made him feel like the university cared enough to provide him an advisor:

I guess I would say [my advising experiences have] made me feel, like I guess me being a student here is value I guess I would say. That the university cares enough to have people that their sole job is to help people out. So I think that's really a great thing because I never felt like I wasn't going to get a question answered or that I wasn't going to be able to find out what I wanted to know. And so I guess it makes me feel valued.

Jess said that she always left their advising meetings feeling encouraged and that this made her feel supported by the university:

I would say [my advising experiences] always made me feel more supported. There was never a time when I left an advising appointment and felt discouraged about it. I would say it's more the opposite. It was more like maybe there were other things in my life making me feel more discouraged about it, but I would come to advising and I definitely always felt, okay, these people have laid out a plan and they think that it's feasible, and I never felt like they were ... they didn't believe in the plan or anything like that.

Alex said that he felt like advising should feel like a relationship and that it can help quell anxiety:

I think it should be more of a relationship than a job in terms of really diving into "What's going on? How is the student doing?" and I guess this gets back to the other question. I mean, the advisor should talk to the student about how they're doing in terms of, "Are you anxious about this? Do you feel overwhelmed? Well, can we work something out to where you don't do as much this semester and still get what you need done?" I think if the advisor can quell some anxiety, if the advisor can make the student feel like they're doing really well and that they're there to help them succeed, but also flourish in a lot of ways, I think that would be the ideal in terms of the way it's accepted.

While not all participants felt that their advising experiences had an impact on how connected they felt to the university or department, those who did highlighted the importance of the relationship they had with their advisor.

### **Ideal Advising**

The final theme that emerged from the study was the theme of ideal advising. All participants spent part of their interview describing how they imagined ideal advising. Their descriptions can be categorized into two main sub-themes: the ideal advisor and the ideal content of an advising meeting.

**Ideal advisor traits.** Several participants described what they thought of when they thought about an ideal academic advisor. Petra stated that when, “everyone's friendly, if everyone wants to help, I think that's the core of advising”. She also described her ideal advisor as, “reassuring and warm and friendly and knowledgeable”. In her interview, Brice indicated that their ideal advisor should care about them as a person:

It should be really personal, one on one... [the advisor should] tell you a little bit about them, where they graduated, what their degree was in, what they do, they try and get to know you, which is, I like, very personal experiences makes you feel like you're more so part of the university and you're doing the right thing I guess.

In his interview, Denver stated that he, “usually feels at ease after [His advisor] is all smiles and super encouraging.”. Jess said that she felt it was, “really important that the advisor be of the utmost organized”. Daron also felt that it was “really important for an advisor... to be organized. Because you have to be very on top of what that person's taking”. Carmen felt that it was important for her advisor to know who she was, not just to have a relationship but to get good advice:

I would hope that they would remember who I am and what my course, like what my degree is, if I'm a senior, what I wanna do and maybe have an idea of what

classes they would recommend for me to take based on previous classes I've taken and how my feedback from those.

Palmer also felt that it was important that her advisor care about her personal experience as well as academics:

I want them to start with quick life things. How I'm doing in life and how the schedule is and how I'm feeling about school, um because it always feels like it's just geared toward class planning, whereas I think it should be more of a personal experience.

**Ideal content of advising meeting.** While talking about ideal advising, participants also shared a great deal about what they felt should be the content of an ideal advising session. The topics they discussed included degree planning, career/big picture planning, finding balance in a semester schedule, and referrals to other campus resources.

Several participants shared that an ideal advising meeting should include long-term degree planning. Denver expressed that he felt it was really important to know where he was going with his future courses and said that it was important to talk about, “course work, it's where you are right now with your courses, where you want to be with your courses, and how you're going to get there”. Kris said that it was important for him that students, “ask questions and get to know their major and minor pretty intimately as far as what classes are available to them, what classes they need to take”. Jess expressed that it was very important to talk about specific courses but in the context of a degree plan:

I would say, obviously, there should be talk about specific courses, because I've known a lot of people who, it's kind of crazy to me, because I'm very, at least with my degree plan, I like to analyze it really closely, because I want to make sure there's not one random credit that I don't get done, but I know people that they forgot to add in one credit, so they're graduating a semester late or something just because of that.

Denver expressed that it was important to, “make sure that everything is tidy for your current semester”.

Participants also talked about the importance of talking about career planning with their academic advisor. Brice expressed that academic advising felt like a place to talk about how she wanted to contribute to society:

It just seems like it could be a really cool opportunity to sit there and question what do you want to be, what do you want to do, how do you want to contribute to society. Like asking the harder questions, instead of, 'What classes do you want to take next semester?'

When talking about the two most important advising topics, Palmer said, "I think career planning and then the required classes I think are really important". Jess wished that her advisor did a better job helping her with career exploration and wished advisors could, "do a better job recruiting people and trying to educate people about all the different things they can do". Daron wished she had been able to take a career assessment test and talk about it with her academic advisor:

I don't know if this is a feasible option, but maybe some sort of, within your advising sessions maybe some sort of career assessment test or something like that, because I really didn't ... My thing is I didn't go pre-med until my third year because I didn't force myself to think about what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I think somehow forcing freshman to think about, hey, do you really want to do this for the rest of your life? Are you going to love this when you're 40?

Kory said that it was really important that students talk about, "Where they want to go and what they want to do with their degree" as well as make sure they do some "long-term planning".

Denver also said that it was important that ideal advising include, "looking at and thinking about what they're going to do after their undergraduate". Alex stated that talking about the long term was very important because it would mean advisors were, "helping students pair classes with their goals".

During interviews participants also talked about the importance of discussing semester balance in an ideal advising session. Jo stated that it was important to talk about, "where do I

need to be, where on my audit does it say I need to fulfill requirements, and then how can I meet that without getting burned out throughout the semester”. Darrel also felt that in ideal advising, advisors should be talking about students’ “concerns with taking certain classes together”.

Palmer felt that talking about class balance was an essential part of their advising experience:

That's kind of my experience too where my advisor can be like oh this will work with this class and you won't feel too overwhelmed and all that stuff where it just balances nicely so I've never felt crazy, out of control of all my classes because it felt all nicely balanced with each other.

In an ideal advising session, Alex felt that, “an advisor should be able to go, ‘Hey, this is a really intense schedule. You should, maybe, consider taking one of these a different semester””.

The last topic participants discussed when talking about ideal advising session content was getting referrals to other resources on campus. Lee expressed that she wanted her advisor to tell her about, “clubs and pre-professional programs on campus” because these are the kinds of things that “we're not necessarily made aware of immediately”. Darrel said that it was important for her advisor to, “know a little bit more about different colleges or having some sort of resource in another college” so that her advisor could help her explore options outside of the college of arts and sciences. Jess expressed that her advisor knew a lot about other people and offices around campus that helped her feel more connected:

They have a lot of knowledge about other people on campus and other programs. If you're interested in other programs, they can help you to get that connection, or they just have a lot of general knowledge, because they deal with so many students from the same major about career paths that are feasible with that major and things like that.

When talking about ideal advising, participants shared about the personality traits they most desired in their advisor and what content they hoped ideal advising sessions should cover. Participants described their ideal advisors as organized and caring. They

discussed four major content areas that were important to discuss: degree planning, career/big picture planning, semester balance, and campus referrals.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I summarized the purpose and methodology of the study. Additionally, I shared the structural narrative for all 13 participants. From these descriptions, five themes emerged: access to advisor, consistency of advisor, depth of advisor knowledge, the advisor's impact on a student's sense of connectedness, and ideal advising.

Within the theme of access, five sub-themes emerged: ease of scheduling, length of wait time for an appointment, length of actual appointment, use of email in advising, and location and physical space of the advising center. Within the theme of advisor consistency, three sub-themes emerged: benefits of advisor consistency, disadvantages of changing advisors, and suggestions for how to handle advisor change. Within the theme of depth of knowledge, four sub-themes emerged: disciplinary content knowledge, knowledge of professors and specific course information, career or professional knowledge, and broad knowledge. Within the theme of ideal advising two sub-themes emerged: ideal advisor traits, and the ideal advising session. Participants expressed the desire to feel important to their advisor even if the relationship with them was not overly personal. Topics discussed as important in an ideal advising session included degree planning, career/big picture planning, semester balance, and campus referrals.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

Most centralized advising models are designed to allow administrators and advisors more control over the ways students experience academic advising, and specifically changes in academic advisors. Research demonstrates that students' sense of connection to their institution is positively impacted through out of class interaction with faculty and staff and that this positive connection can improve student success (Goodenow, 1993; Hagerty et al., 2002; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Tinto, 1992; Wilson & Gore, 2013). By examining students' experiences of a centralized advising model, I was able to gain the perspective of my participants' sense of connection to their institution and how it was tied to their relationship with their advisor. The themes that emerged from our conversations revealed which aspects of their academic advising experience participants valued most. This chapter will provide an overview of these findings and discuss implications for future research and practice. Before discussing these findings, I provide an overview of the study as it was conducted and discuss the research and practice implications of the findings.

### **Overview of the study**

The purpose of this study was to explore how undergraduate students experience and understand academic advising within the context of a four-year centralized, primary role advising center at a public research university in the mid-south. In the study, I examined the following questions:

- a. How did students ascribe meaning to their lived experience of academic advising within a four-year centralized, primary role advising model?
- b. How did students' relationships with their advisors affect their sense of connectedness to the university?

This qualitative study used the method of phenomenology to explore its research questions. Phenomenology involves using an interview based approach to explore the relationship between the noema, the experience or perception of the phenomenon, and the noesis, the reason behind the experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 31). I collected data through a series of group and one-on-one interviews with 13 participants who were junior or senior students within the college. Participants were asked to self-identify their age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Thirteen participants were interviewed one-on-one. Of the thirteen, eight also participated in one of the two focus groups.

I used the modified Van Kamm method as outlined by Moustakas (1994, pp. 120-121). Using this process, I created structural descriptions for each participant by summarizing the participant's main experiences as they shared them. I then created textural descriptions for each participant by removing duplicate statements and clustering common themes into a concise summary of the participant's experiences. I used these structural and textural descriptions to identify common experiences and created a composite description for the entire participant group (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

From these descriptions, five themes emerged: access to advisor, consistency of advisor, depth of advisor knowledge, the advisor's impact on a student's sense of connectedness, and ideal advising. Within the theme of access, five sub-themes emerged: ease of scheduling, length of wait time for an appointment, length of actual appointment, use of email in advising, and location and physical space of the advising center. Within the theme of advisor consistency, three sub-themes emerged: benefits of advisor consistency, disadvantages of changing advisors, and suggestions for how to handle advisor change. Within the theme of depth of knowledge, five sub-themes emerged: disciplinary content knowledge, knowledge of professors and specific

course information, career or professional knowledge, and broad knowledge. Each of these themes was discussed in-depth in chapter 4.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

In this section, I will review and discuss the findings for each research question of the study. I will then discuss the limitations of the study as well as present my recommendations for future research and practice based on the themes that emerged from the study.

### **Research Questions**

The first research question I explored was, “How did students ascribe meaning to their lived experience of academic advising within a four-year centralized, primary role advising model?” As with all personal experiences, participants expressed widely varied ways of talking about their advising experiences, but through our conversations, the main experience that participants shared was that they wanted quick access to advisors who could give them trustworthy and thorough information and that they wanted to work with just one advisor, when possible. Some participants also expressed wanting to have a deeper professional relationship with their advisor, but all participants expressed that they wanted an advisor who was friendly, welcoming and could remember details about their academic life. While some participants described having important professional relationships with their academic advisors, most did not describe their advising relationships as being central to their academic experience. While all participants wanted a friendly advisor who took the time to get to know them a little, how they described ideal advising was primarily transactional, ensuring that they got accurate information that they felt they could trust.

The second research question explored in the study was “How did students’ relationships with their advisors affect their sense of connectedness to the university?” Connectedness

involves the overall fit of the students with the university and specifically with the students' perception that they have a supportive environment where they are accepted, included, and supported (Wilson & Gore, 2013, p. 178). While some participants expressed that their advising experiences had a positive impact on their sense of connectedness, other participants did not feel that their advising experiences impacted their sense of connectedness. Those participants who did express that their advising experiences positively impacted their sense of connectedness focused mainly on their relationship with their advisor and described their advisor with positive, helpful characteristics. Participants who expressed feeling disconnected often also described challenges getting access to their advisor or having multiple advisors due to staffing changes during their time as a student.

For the purposes of this study, I used Wilson and Gore's (2013) definition of connectedness and specifically asked participants what helped them feel accepted, included, and supported by their institution. When talking about what made them feel accepted, most participants talked about their relationships with their friends and other social aspects of college. When talking about what made them feel included most participants talked about clubs, organizations, and events they attended through their departments. When talking about what made them feel supported, most participants talked about the relationships they had with their faculty, mentors, and academic advisors. These data support Tinto's model of Institutional Departure (1993) which highlights the importance of both social and academic systems of support through both formal and informal interactions. So, while most participants did not describe academic advising as a main reason that they felt connected, many participants expressed that their academic advisor and other mentors on campus were essential as support

networks. These support networks would fall in to Tinto's (1993) formal and informal academic system's of student support.

A development that I did not expect when participants talked about their sense of connectedness was how important physical space was to many participants. Most participants mentioned, in some way, the importance of physical space in how they related and connected to campus. One participant talked about how much she liked that once a week her whole department got together in one space for lectures and discussions. Another participant said that his advising experiences felt very disconnected from the rest of his college life, because it felt like the advising center was in such an out of the way part of campus. The way participants talked about physical space related to their academic experience support Astin's theory of Student Involvement and the importance of how students engage with their campus environment (Astin, 1984).

When describing their advising experiences and talking about how they impacted a sense of connection, most participants described their advising experiences as important for making sure that they would graduate and as good places to get referrals for other campus resources. However, most participants did not express that they felt their academic advising experiences were a central part of what connected them to their academic experience. A large body of past research highlights the importance of academic advising in student success (Cook, 2009; Crookston, 1972; Cuseo, 2002; O'Bannon, 1972; Tinto, 1993). What the data from this study indicate is that participants who identified aspects of their experience that helped them feel accepted, included, and supported expressed high levels of connectedness to their institution and generally described having a positive academic experience. Conversely, participants that did not identify aspects of their experience that helped them feel accepted, included, and supported

expressed low levels of connectedness to their institution and often expressed negative feelings about their overall academic experience. These data support the theory that high levels of connectedness are a positive indicator of student success as outlined in Wilson and Gore (2013). However, the data from this study may indicate that these measures of connectedness do not need to come from one sole relationship.

The results of these interviews are important because they add complexity to the context of how and why advising may be an important component in student success. While most participants did not describe academic advising as directly important in creating a sense of connection, most participants did expressed that the conversations they had with their academic advisor were important in helping them meet their graduation goals. Overall, participants described their experiences as transactional rather than transformational, while still highlighting that the felt they were important in future semester and long-term graduation planning and having a sense of campus support. Rather than supporting an advising model where students rely heavily on an advisor/advisee relationship to create a sense of connectedness, this study supports an advising model where a student's academic advisor is one point of support and connection who can also help them integrate into academic life by connecting them to other supports such as career advising, student life, and faculty mentorship (Tinto, 2006). This model of academic advising is also supported by Padilla's (1993) theory that students must navigate a "geography of barriers" in order to be successful (p. 153). When describing their advising relationship, most participants described a relationship that lends itself to this theory. Academic advisors are well placed to be resources to assist students in navigating academic barriers. They can do this by introducing other campus resources and opportunities for connections to campus and serving as a "hub" of support for students (Ender et al., 1982). The results of this study also support the

findings of Sheldon, Garten, Orr, and Smith who found that students were looking for available and knowledgeable advisors who supported students in making autonomous decisions about academic planning (2015).

### **Limitations**

This study's goal was to explore the experiences of students at one university within a single college system, which limited its transferability to other situations. The results of this study are transferrable only to students with similar experiences within schools that share similar advising modes. However, this is consistent with typical limitations in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The participants of this study were primarily white students attending a historically white institution (HWI). Additionally, at the time of interviews, most advisors in the advising center were also white. So, students of color working with advisors in the same advising center may not have shared the same experiences. Additionally, students of color may have chosen not to participate in the study if they did not feel comfortable sharing their experiences with me, a white advisor who worked at the site of the study. Most participants stated that even if they did not have a close connection with their academic advisor, they did have some kind of faculty or staff mentor they worked closely with on campus. Research indicates that students of color may have a harder time finding campus mentors at HWIs when low percentages of faculty or staff are also people of color (Guiffrida, 2005; McClain & Perry, 2017; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005).

Also, the participants of this study were traditionally aged juniors and seniors. While some participants did transfer to the institution from another school, most were students who would share similar age demographics to a majority of students on campus. Students on the same campus who were non-traditionally aged may have different experiences than those of the

participants. Additionally, all participants were students who persisted through college to their junior and senior levels. So, the results are not representative of the experiences of students who did not persist at the university through junior year or who transferred to other institutions.

As the primary investigator, I am a primary role academic advisor in the advising center that was the research site. During the study, I ensured that I had no advising contact with any of the participants and assured participants that their academic advisors would not be aware of their participation. However, participants were aware of my connection to the advising center and their answers may have been impacted by this knowledge.

All voluntary interview based studies are limited by response bias (Cresswell, 2014). Even though participants were compensated for their time, they volunteered to be interviewed about experiences that had been either highly satisfactory or highly unsatisfactory. One participant expressed very negative experiences with his academic advisor but was also unwilling to share much detail about his experiences. His interview was very brief, lasting only fifteen minutes. Even though I disclosed that his advisor would not be aware of his participation, my role as an advisor in the office we were discussing may have limited his trust that I would not share his information or that I would trust and believe his experiences.

Last, due to low turnout for both focus group and one-on-one interviews, I had to adjust my interview protocol to remove the focus group component for several participants. Those participants had only one opportunity to share their experiences. Losing the opportunity to reflect on their advising experiences between the focus group and one-on-one interview may have limited the time they had to reflect and share thoughtful responses.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

To strengthen the transferability of these findings, similar studies with a larger diversity of participants or at different institution types are recommended. While challenging to complete, a similar study with students who did not persist would be useful as well. Qualitative work in under researched areas is an excellent tool to determine future gaps in research. Each theme that arose from the study prompts an area of potential future research.

### **Access**

One of the major points of discussion for participants was the physical layout and location of their advising center. Some participants commented that the center was not close to other parts of campus where they spent most of their time and felt inconvenient. Some participants commented that their advisor's cubicle space made them feel less comfortable sharing personal details. Some participants expressed that having a lobby where they were required to check in before seeing their advisor felt like gate-keeping. Each of these issues contributed to participants feeling a lack of access to their advisors. Centralized advising centers are becoming a more common occurrence on college campuses. Since many participants expressed that the layout of the center negatively impacted how much access they felt they had to their advisor further research should be done on the potential impact of the physical space and layout of centralized centers on student experience.

### **Advisor Changes**

Within this study, several participants experienced unexpected advisor changes while students. Those participants shared that these changes caused them to feel less connected or more anxious about their academic decisions. They also gave recommendations for how to manage these changes when they become necessary. Most institutions do not offer primary role advisors

the opportunity to gain tenure, so advisor change is an inevitable possibility for many students. Further research in this area should include exploration of how directors of advising can leverage the benefits of the centralized model to ease the transition of an advisor change.

### **Depth of Advisor Knowledge**

Several participants in the study who felt dissatisfied with their experience expressed that they wished their advisors knew more about the content of their courses and faculty teaching styles within their major department. Additionally, several advisors who were very satisfied with their advising experience expressed that one of the factors that contributed to their satisfaction was how much their advisors knew about the courses they were taking and faculty teaching styles within their major department.

As centralized advising models begin to rely more heavily on primary role advisors who are not content area experts in the disciplines for which they advise, future research on the impact of these changes is necessary. For example, many participants expressed that they wished their advisor could give them more career advice, or help them prepare for medical school, or help them find ways to get connected on campus. However, the participants attended an institution that housed a career center, dedicated premedical advising services, and an office of student activities. Further research on the role of primary advisors should continue to explore what advisors should be expected to have expert knowledge in and how to effectively connect students to additional campus services.

### **Connectedness**

The findings of this study indicate that while not all participants felt that their advisor contributed to their sense of connectedness, those participants whose advisors did contribute to their sense of connectedness expressed that it was because their advisor made them feel valued

and important. Some participants in the study expressed that while their advisor did not make them feel more connected, the advisor was helpful in ensuring that they felt confident in their academic plans. Further study to explore how students distinguish between meaningful and transactional relationships will contribute to our understanding of how students create a sense of connection through relationships with faculty and staff on campus.

### **Ideal Advising**

Connected to further exploration of the role of connectedness in academic advising, further researchers should explore the importance of transactional versus transformational academic advising experiences. While most participants expressed that they wanted to feel that their advisor remembered them or had a relationship with them, the most important aspects of an ideal advising session were content focused. Participants expressed a desire for accurate information that connected to their big picture plans and wanted helpful referrals to other offices. Many of these items are highly transactional in nature. Future researchers should explore how these transactional experiences impact student success.

### **The Role of the Student**

Additionally, an interesting result of this study is how little participants spoke about their own responsibility in creating an ideal advising environment. Only one or two participants even mentioned what they thought they needed to do in preparation for an advising meeting. Very few participants discussed advising as a place to learn how to become independent problem solvers and resource finders, which is a stated goal of the NACADA Core Competencies of advising (NACADA, 2017). This gap may relate to the format of my interview protocol, which focused heavily on what participants wanted from advising, but future researchers could explore student perceptions of their own responsibilities in academic advising.

## **Recommendations for Practice**

The findings from this study have several practical implications for campuses relying on centralized, four-year advising from primary role advisors. The themes that developed from this study were: access to advisors, advisor consistency, depth of advisor knowledge, connectedness, and ideal advising. By exploring how these themes interrelate, I identified several recommendations for future practice.

### **Customer Service**

Front of house customer service can play a key role in how students experience a sense of access to their academic advisors and support from their academic advisors. A main feature of most centralized advising centers is a lobby where students check in and wait for their appointments. Some participants expressed frustration that they could not just walk in to their advisor's office like they do with faculty offices. Ensuring that the lobby or waiting area feels welcoming and friendly will help to minimize any frustration that students are not able to walk-in to their advisor's office any time they are not with another student. This may be accomplished by ensuring that students are greeted when they enter the advising center by someone who is assisting them to check in. Additionally, advisors should remember to greet their students by preferred names or nicknames and ask not just about academics but about how students are doing. Participants also expressed that they felt especially valued when advisors remembered details about previous conversations.

### **Depth of Advising knowledge**

Consistent feedback that participants shared during this study was that they wanted academic advisors who were both generalists, familiar with a wide array of academic knowledge, and specialists, able to speak in-depth about a specific field or course. Within centralized

advising models, individual advisors can be trained to serve as subject matter experts in specific areas of knowledge, prepared to assist other advisors in the center in supporting their students. For example, if an advising center serves students with a variety of majors, each advisor could be assigned to coordinate with specific departments and cultivate relationships with faculty within the department who can assist with discipline specific knowledge.

Many participants also expressed a desire for their academic advisors to be able to discuss academics within the context of career planning. While many universities and colleges have separate career centers, there may be value in targeted cross-training with academic and career advisors so that advisors are better able to contextualize the work they do with students in to the bigger picture of the work students do with other campus resources.

### **Changes in Advisors**

Sudden or unexplained changes to a student's advisor were events that participants expressed concern about in the study. A few participants had advisor changes when they changed their major. However, several participants also experienced a sudden advisor change when their advisor left the advising center in the middle of a semester. Participants expressed that sudden changes increased their anxiety and fear that they may not get accurate information, reducing student trust in the advising center. Additionally, anytime a student's advisor does need to change, their former advisor should, when possible, be the first person to inform them, followed quickly with an introduction email from their new advisor. When this is not possible, emails from an advising administrator should be sent to students, explaining the change and introducing the new advisor. Additionally, all advising notes should be shared between advisors and reviewed by advisors before meetings so that students do not feel that they are starting completely over, building a completely new advising relationship. These same notes can be used

by advisors to ensure that they can remember personal details about the students they work with. These data support the findings of previous research on advisor transitions, which recommends creating closer to the first advising relationship while creating a smooth transition to new advisor (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014, p. 443).

Additionally, the format of the centralized advising center lends itself to more control over advisor changes. During the time of this study, the advising center that was the research site assigned advisors based on major. So, if a student's major changed, so did their advisor. By using the ability to cross-train advisors for related majors, directors of advising centers can work to minimize necessary changes of advisor based on major.

### **Building Trusting Advising Relationships**

Participants who stated that they had positive and trusting relationships with their advisors also expressed that they felt connected to campus. Additionally, participants who did not say that they had strong advising relationships but did say that they developed strong mentorship relationships with other faculty or staff on campus also expressed that they felt connected to campus. Only participants who stated that they had no important relationships to any faculty or staff on campus expressed very low connection to campus. These data indicate that regardless of who students connect with or what kind of advising model they experience, building relationships with someone on campus who is faculty or staff is an important element to students' perceptions of connection. Campus administrators need to be mindful that the models they develop for undergraduate advising and mentorship provide opportunity for students to have out of class contact with a variety of academic faculty and staff to maximize opportunity to develop meaningful relationships. These findings support a shared model of primary-role

advising and faculty advising or mentorship, which has been recommended by previous researchers (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014).

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I reviewed the purpose and methodology of the study and discussed the results for each research question. Through this study, I found that participants stated that they were looking for easy access to trusted advisors who could give them thorough answers to their course planning questions. Participants also expressed a desire to work with just one advisor who could get to know them during their academic experience. However, few participants described their advising relationships as deeply important to establishing a sense of connection to campus.

Additionally, I reviewed possible future areas of research related to each theme that emerged from the study. Further research on the centralized advising model should focus on the impact of a sudden advisor change to student success and ways to use the centralized model to create smooth advising transitions. Further research on the growth of the primary role advisor should continue to explore what the content of advising should include and how to use academic advising to effectively connect students to additional campus resources.

Last, I explored implications for current practice that center around how to incorporate structure in centralized advising models to maximize student connectedness. As primary role advisors continue to grow in numbers and more campuses begin to centralize advising services, it will be important for administrators of advising to use practices that enhance opportunities for advisors and advisees to build trusting relationships. As one participant shared, even though he did not describe his advising experiences as the most important aspect of what connected him to the university, he did state that they made him feel valued by the university. He said that his advising experiences made him feel like, “the university cares enough to have people that their

sole job is to help people out.” The data from this study indicate how important it is to implement practices that highlight the importance of positive, supportive transactional experiences, as well as provide opportunities for students to create transformational relationships across campus with multiple people, both faculty/staff and other students.

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## Appendix A Invitation to Participate in a Paid Advising Study

Dear Junior or Senior student-

You are invited to participate in a research study about your academic advising experience at the university. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a Junior or Senior who has had multiple advising encounters.

Participants will be asked to take part in a face-to-face focus group discussion with other students from the college about their advising experiences. This focus group will be followed up by a face-to-face one-on-one interview. These individual interviews will occur during the months of February and March. Both focus groups and interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed using a pseudonym and will not include any personal identifying data. The potential benefit to this study is to improve the experience students have with academic advising and to better understand the role of primary role academic advising within the field of higher education and student success.

If you are willing to participate, please include your contact information below, and we will be in touch as soon as possible to confirm your participation and schedule your interview. If you are not willing to participate, you do not have to return this form.

Thank you,  
Nicole Rowan, Co-Investigator  
Doctoral Candidate, University of Arkansas  
[nrgreen@uark.edu](mailto:nrgreen@uark.edu)

Dr. Ketevan Mamiseishvili, Co-Investigator  
Associate Professor, University of Arkansas  
[kmamisei@uark.edu](mailto:kmamisei@uark.edu)

UARK IRB Protocol #: 17-01-399

- I am interested in participating in the study:
  - Name: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Email: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Major: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Year: (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior) \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B Focus Group Protocol

### Demographic information:

Each student will be asked to include the following information on a form at the time of the Focus Group

Group # of Focus Group:

Date:

Facilitator:

Participant #:

Age:

Gender:

Race or Ethnicity:

Classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior):

Academic Major:

First Semester and year at Institution:

### Description of the Study:

The focus group facilitator will inform the participants about the purpose of the study, its expected duration, and procedures. The facilitator will also explain how the findings of the study will be used and disseminated. The participants will also be informed that they will be contacted in the future to check the accuracy of the findings.

### Questions:

1. Tell me about your overall experiences with academic advising.
2. Describe your relationship with any advisors you have worked with.
  - a. Possible follow up:
    - i. What types of things do you talk about with your advisor?
3. How have your advising experiences made you feel?
4. Have you had out of class contact with any other faculty or staff on this campus who you might consider mentors or advisors?
  - a. Possible follow up:
    - i. Describe your relationship with these people.
    - ii. What types of things do you talk about with these people?
    - iii. Describe how these experiences with experiences made you feel.
5. Do you feel connected to the university?
  - a. Describe how your advising experiences have impacted how connected you feel to the university.
6. Do you feel connected to your academic department or major?
  - a. Describe how your advising experiences have impacted how connected you feel to your department or major.
7. Do any of you have anything else you would like to share about your advising experience in general?

## Appendix C Personal Interview Protocol

Group # of Focus Group:

Date:

Facilitator:

Participant #:

Description of the Study:

The interviewer will inform the interviewee about the purpose of the study, its expected duration, and the procedures. The interviewer will also explain how the findings of the study will be used and disseminated. The interviewee will be also informed that he or she will be contacted in the future to check the accuracy of the findings.

Questions:

1. Tell me about personal advising experience in as much detail as possible.
2. Describe the first time you met with your current advisor in as much detail as possible.
3. Tell me about your relationship with your current advisor.
4. Tell me about what you talk about with your advisor in as much detail as possible.
5. Describe any other advising or mentoring experiences you have had that have not been with your current advisor.
6. Describe your relationship with any other mentors or advisors you have had at the university.
7. Describe what you talk about with other mentors or advisors in as much detail as possible.
8. Describe any difficulties you have had in your advising experience in as much detail as possible.
9. How do you feel about your overall experience with academic advising, taking into account the entire time you have been at this institution?
10. What you would imagine to be an ideal session with your advisor.
11. What things do you think are important to talk about with your advisor?
12. Do you feel accepted, included, and supported at this university?
  - a. Describe how your advising experiences have impacted how accepted, included, and supported you feel on this campus
13. How would you improve or what would you change about your advising experience at the university?

[At this point, the interviewer has the option of mentioning specific statements or themes that were discussed in the focus group and asking the interviewee to elaborate on them].

## **Appendix D Informed Consent Form**

### **Building Relationships: A Phenomenological Study of Students in a Four-Year Centralized Advising Center**

#### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

Principal Researcher: Nicole Rowan

Faculty Advisor: Ketevan Mamiseishvili

#### **INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE**

You are invited to participate in a research study about the academic advising experience with the Fulbright College Advising Center at the University of Arkansas. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a Junior or Senior at the University of Arkansas, majoring in a field housed within Fulbright College.

#### **WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY**

*Who is the Principal Researcher?*

Nicole Rowan, nrgreen@uark.edu

*Who is the Faculty Advisor?*

Ketevan Mamiseishvili, kmamisei@uark.edu

*What is the purpose of this research study?*

The purpose of this study is to explore how undergraduate students experience and understand academic advising within the context of a four-year centralized, primary role advising center at a public research university in the mid-south where students can work exclusively with one advising office from orientation through to graduation.

*Who will participate in this study?*

We expect to have 12-15 participants who are current college students. Age range will vary, but all participants will be over the age of 18.

*What am I being asked to do?*

Your participation will require the following:

Participants will be asked to take part in a face-to-face round table discussion with other students from the college about their advising experiences. This round table will be followed up by a face-to-face one-on-one interview. Both interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed.

*What are the possible risks or discomforts?*

There are no anticipated risks to participants.

*What are the possible benefits of this study?*

The potential benefit to this study is to improve the experience students have with academic advising and to better understand the role of primary role academic advising within the field of higher education and student success.

*How long will the study last?*

Round table discussions are expected to last approximately 90 minutes. One-on-one interviews will take place with one month of the round table and are expected to last 60 minutes.

*Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?*

Yes, participants will be paid \$15 to participate in the round table and \$25 to participate in a one-on-one interview.

*Will I have to pay for anything?*

No, there will be no cost associated with your participation.

*What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?*

If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. Your relationship with the Fulbright College Advising Center will not be affected in any way if you refuse to participate.

*How will my confidentiality be protected?*

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law.

Participants will be assigned pseudonyms and no identifying information will be used in any reports or publications

No data about participants will be shared with the participants' academic advisors.

All records of the interviews will be stored in a secure location.

*Will I know the results of the study?*

At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the faculty advisor, Ketevan Mamiseishvili, [kmamisei@uark.edu](mailto:kmamisei@uark.edu) or Principal Researcher, Nicole Rowan, [nrgreen@uark.edu](mailto:nrgreen@uark.edu). You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

*What do I do if I have questions about the research study?*

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Nicole Rowan, [nrgreen@uark.edu](mailto:nrgreen@uark.edu)

Ketevan Mamiseishvili, [kmamisei@uark.edu](mailto:kmamisei@uark.edu)

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP

Institutional Review Board Coordinator

Research Compliance

University of Arkansas

109 MLKG Building

Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201

479-575-2208

[irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu)

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

## Appendix E Approval Memo



Office of Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board

November 13, 2017

### MEMORANDUM

TO: Nicole Rowan  
Ketevan Mamiseishvili

FROM: Ro Windwalker  
IRB Coordinator

RE: EXEMPT PROJECT MODIFICATION

IRB Protocol #: 17-01-399

Protocol Title: *Building Relationships: A Phenomenological Study of Students in a Four-Year Centralized Advising Center*

Review Type:  EXEMPT

New Approval Date: 11/13/2017

Your request to modify the referenced protocol has been approved by the IRB. If you wish to make any further modifications in the approved protocol which would change the level of risk to the participants, you must seek approval *prior* to implementing those changes.

Please note that we will no longer be requiring continuing reviews for exempt protocols.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval *prior* to implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).