

Advisor–Student Relationships and Caseload Size: A Qualitative Study of Perceptions and Policy

Recommendations

By

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Dedications

This study is dedicated to many, but first and foremost to my momma, Dorothy Louise. She was my greatest supporter and was so proud when I began this journey. I wish she were here to see me complete it. From an early age, she instilled in me the belief that I could accomplish anything, and that unwavering encouragement has made this achievement possible.

I also dedicate this study to my eighteen participants. Without their contributions, this research would not have been possible and certainly not as engaging. Their thoughtful and passionate responses, especially their dedication to their students, brought this study to life. I hope I have succeeded in amplifying their voices through this work.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological case study examined academic advisors' perceptions of their relationships with students and the extent to which caseload size impacts the quality of academic advising. As retention and graduation rates increasingly influence institutional funding (Cate & Miller, 2015a; Erickson & Kelchen, 2020), academic advising has become central to student success initiatives (Sanders & Killion, 2017; Uddin & Johnson, 2019). This study aims to contribute to existing research on academic advising, especially relating to caseload sizes and to influence institutional policies in best practices regarding advising caseload sizes.

The individual responses from eighteen professional, full-time, undergraduate academic advisors were collected through a survey and subsequently analyzed. The analysis was guided by frameworks and theories from NACADA, Schlossberg's Transition Theory, and Chickering's Seven Vectors of Development. These models were selected because they emphasize the importance of student development, transitional support, and meaningful advisor-student relationships, core themes in the study.

The three main research questions that guided this study were what are the perceptions of advisors' connections with students; how does caseload size impact advisors' connections with students; and to what extent are there shared solutions to institutional policies related to the size of caseload? Nine main themes surfaced when analyzing the responses from the participants along with relevant subthemes. For the first research question, the three main themes regarding perceptions of connections with students were: a) Many roles of Academic

Advisors, b) Relationship Building as Foundational, and c) Support System. The second research question examined advisors' perceptions of how caseload size impacts their ability to build connections with students. Three key themes emerged from the analysis: a) Caseload size Impacts Relationship Depth, b) Manageable Caseloads, and c) Advisors feeling Overwhelmed. For research question three, the three main themes for shared solutions to institutional policies related to the size for caseload were a) Optimal Caseloads, b) Workload-Based Approach when Determining Caseload size, and c) Restructured Institutional Organization.

The findings showed that large caseloads, along with added responsibilities, reduce advisors' ability to build strong connections and offer individualized support. Advisors identified 150–250 students as an ideal range, depending on program complexity. These findings contribute to the growing body of research that positions academic advising as a student-centered profession requiring intentional structure, policy clarity, and sustained institutional support.

Keywords: Student Success, Academic Advising, Student Perspectives, Caseloads, Student to Advisor Ratio, Academic Advisors, NACADA, Schlossberg, Chickering, Institutional Policy, Higher Education, Connections

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“Where am I going? What am I doing? I can’t find my shorts.” It is a short verse from a camp song heard many years ago. The song is intended for young children, but it relates to college students. As Bowers et al. (2019) explain, “Some students are unprepared for college level work. Others have difficulty understanding how to navigate the higher education system” (pp. 2-3). While college students may not be looking for their shorts, they do have their own version of confusion and not knowing, while trying to complete their path to student success.

Student success has become a key priority in the world of higher education (Millea et al., 2018). Higher education has gone through a major shift in the past decade, particularly in states like Tennessee, where funding models have changed significantly (Cate & Miller, 2015a). In Tennessee, higher education institutions are no longer being funded solely based on enrollment numbers but instead of outcomes such as student retention (Erickson & Kelchen, 2020; Quittmeyer & Veatch, 2023). This outcomes-based funding approach, implemented through Tennessee’s higher education funding formula, reflects a broader national trend, though it is not yet universally adopted. Student success is often defined through retention and graduation rates at higher education institutions (Uddin & Johnson, 2019; Museus & Rovello, 2021; Moody, 2023). The national six-year graduation rate is below 70% (NCES, n.d.). Due to this shift in funding, higher education institutions are looking for ways to increase retention and graduation, to keep their funding or gain funding that has been lost. Academic advising is instrumental in increased retention and graduation rates (Sanders & Killion, 2017).

Academic advising is linked to retention and graduation rates, justifying institutional focus on the profession (Cate & Miller, 2015a). Advising has always been a part of higher

education institutions, even with the first institutions in the 17th century. Gillispie (2012) states that advising “has been a prevalent concern since the birth of the college institutions of America” (p. 1). Cate and Miller (2015a) define four eras of advising with the first era dating back from 17th century to late 19th century. Since then, academic advising has been evolving to try to meet the needs of students and institutions (Gillispie, 2012). Academic advising is one predictor of academic success (Cate and Miller, 2015a).

Problem Statement

Academic advisors act as a connection between students and higher education institutions. Not only do they inform students of current policies, procedures, and curriculum, but they work with students establishing plans and goals that aid in keeping students returning from semester to semester, which is also known as persistence (Uddin & Johnson, 2019). Advisors play a vital role in students’ lives. They have always played this role, but it has become especially essential now with the focus on retention and graduation rate improvement (Zhang, 2017). However, it is pivotal that advisors provide quality advising.

Quality advising, or best practices, have been linked to student persistence, retention rates, and graduation rates (Cate & Miller, 2015a; Sanders & Killion, 2017; Uddin & Johnson, 2019). Advisors should be able to provide quality advising to each student through individualized support assisting students in degree completion. By connecting students with institutional resources, mentoring and developing relationships, helping students make connections between academic goals and future career goals, academic advisors provide quality advising that is key to student retention (Hawthorne et al., 2022; Moody, 2019; Sanders & Killion, 2017). Delivering personalized advising as described is a time committed process. If

there are not enough advisors for the students, then this type of advising may not be feasible (Bowers et al., 2019).

Advising caseloads refer to the number of students assigned to each professional. If advisors have large caseload sizes, then it limits the quality time spent with students meeting individualized needs (Bower et al., 2019; Moody, 2019). Caseload size hinders the ability of academic advisors to form meaningful connections with students, and while relationships with advisors are linked to retention, inconsistent research on the optimal caseload size complicates the understanding of this impact.

Statement of Purpose

It is paramount that students receive quality advising as it is linked to higher retention and graduation rates (Cate & Miller, 2015a; Hawthorne, et al., 2022; Sanders & Killion, 2017; Zhang et al., 2017). However, the size of caseloads limits the advisors' capabilities of providing meaningful connections with their students. A survey will be distributed to academic advisors to explore their perspectives on academic advising, with a particular focus on if and how caseload size impacts the quality of their advising capabilities. This study will contribute to existing research on academic advising, especially relating to caseload sizes and will influence institutional policies in best practices regarding advising caseload sizes.

Research Questions

Academic advisors play a pivotal role in student success, and there is a need to explore their perspective on academic advising and how caseload sizes impact the quality of advising provided. The following research questions are guiding this study:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the perceptions of advisors' connections with students?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How does caseload size impact advisors' connections with students?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): To what extent are there shared solutions to institutional policies related to the size of caseload?

Significance of Study

There is limited literature available on the impact of caseload sizes. The Council for the Achievement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) sets the standard for caseload sizes for Academic Advising Programs (AAP). CAS was established in 1979 as a council to help set standards for best practices in higher education institutions. Today, CAS still sets and promotes these best practices for the higher education profession. The following is a list of CAS (2023) standards regarding caseload sizes:

- AAP must provide adequate resources to ensure that academic advising caseloads are consistent with the institutional mission and stated goals and objectives of the program.
- AAP must consider the academic status of the student when determining caseloads.
- In determining caseloads, AAP must factor in mode of delivery, advising approach used, additional advisor responsibilities, student needs, and time required for this activity.

- AAP must take into account workloads of advisors working with students not officially assigned to them and other advising-related responsibilities that extend beyond direct contact with students.

(pp. 6-7)

It is not guaranteed that every higher education institution or AAP will adhere to the standards set by CAS. The significance of this study will be to show the importance of the size of caseload because of the impact it may have on advising students.

Context

Literature has shown that academic advising is linked to retention and graduation rates and/or student success (Cate & Miller, 2015a; Sanders & Killion, 2017; Zhang et al., 2017). Limited literature has been found with extensive research into the impact of the size of caseloads. This study will expand upon the knowledge of academic advising, specifically focusing on how the size of caseload impacts advising through the perspectives of academic advisors. It will serve as a valuable foundation for further research into this phenomenon. To gain a better understanding of advising and the impact of caseload sizes, this study was conducted through a survey of academic advisors at a four-year regional public higher education institution in the Southeast.

Role of Researcher

The researcher is an academic advisor at a four-year regional public higher education institution in the Southeast. At my institution, advisor caseloads vary with each college. As a previous student, I had a horrible experience with some advisors. Because of this experience, I wanted to become an advisor for students, to be the advisor that I needed. I bring to this

study my thoughts, stories, and experiences about the advising process as a student and as an academic advisor. As an academic advisor, I have firsthand experience with how caseload size directly affects the quality of my advising. When my caseload increases, particularly approaching 250 students, I often feel overwhelmed by the growing demands and responsibilities. This makes it difficult to build and maintain meaningful connections with my students, leaving me feeling inadequate in fulfilling that essential part of my role.

While my personal and professional experiences provide valuable context and insight, they may also introduce potential bias into the study. I recognize that my perspective as both a former student and current academic advisor could shape how I interpret data. To address this, I have practiced reflexivity throughout the research process, continually examining how my experiences influence my assumptions and interpretations. Additionally, I have prioritized participants' voices and used strategies such as the mentioned reflexivity and detailed documentation to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Conceptual Framework

The National Academic Advising Association: The Global Community for Academic Advising (NACADA), provides guidance and a framework for best practices in academic advising. The NACADA Pillars of Academic Advising are the main framework driving this research. The Pillars include NACADA's concept, core values, and competencies of academic advising, and it also includes the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education: Standards and Guidelines for Academic Advising (NACADA, 2023).

A secondary framework, one that will be used in conjunction with the NACADA Pillars, is the ACPA and NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators, more

specifically the Advising and Supporting section (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). ACPA, the American College Personnel Association is a student affairs association that advances student affairs practices (ACPA, 2023). NASPA, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, is a professional organization for student affairs members. It also provides guidelines to best practices in the field (NASPA, n.d.). Depending on the organization of a higher education institution, academic advising may be part of student affairs, academic affairs, enrollment management, or others. One of the foci of this research is on the importance and perception of quality advising. NACADA, CAS, ACPA, and NASPA provide guidelines for providing best practices in this field. It is key to have a foundation to compare the experiences of advisors and students receiving advising.

While these organizations provide great guidelines for best practices, some of the student developmental theories that provided the framework for these best practices need to be evaluated, too (Forbes, 2021). Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Chickering's Theory and the Seven Vectors of Development are fundamental student developmental theories that provide instrumental information to lead students to persistence and fruition.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory dates back to 1965, but it has been evolving along with the college students. Every student is going through a transition, which, according to Chickering and Schlossberg (2002), is a break in continuity in roles, relationships, and routines and causes a disturbance. More specifically, as students are ending one event in life, they are beginning another. Higher education is full of transitions, and it is essential that college students receive the support needed to successfully complete them. Academic advisors can offer the support

needed by utilizing the steps in Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Barclay, 2017; Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002).

Not only is it significant to note that college students are going through transitions, but it is equally important to know that the development of the college student is not linear. Arthur Chickering, one of the frontrunners in college student development since the 1960s, believes that it is cyclical. He developed the Seven Vectors of Development and noted that students can go through each one multiple times at different stages in their life. Wise (2017) encourages academic advisors to utilize the Seven Vectors of Development to create and maintain a connection with their students. This connection will help create a sense of belonging for students which is an influential piece for students staying in school (Barclay 2017; Bowers et al., 2019; Museus & Chang, 2021; Wise 2017).

These frameworks and developmental theories will guide this research in comparing the practices of advisors to best practices. Figure 1 shows the relationship between academic advisors and their students. It also depicts the instrumental part that advisors play in student success. It is extremely impactful that advisors provide quality advising.

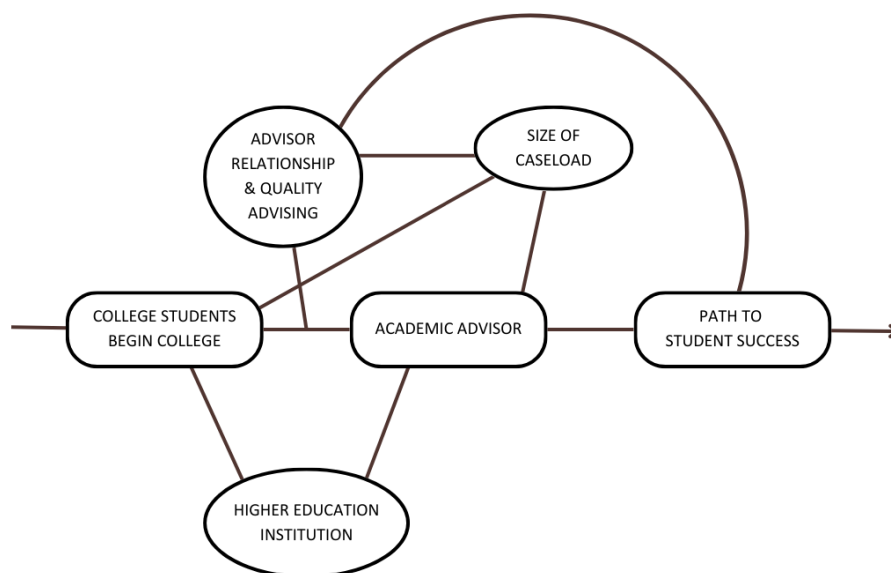


Figure 1

The importance of the Student-Advisor Relationship

Note. Developed from merging ideas from literature [Image].

Anticipated Limitations and Delimitations

This study relied on the answers of a qualitative survey that was sent to academic advisors, and they do not have to reply. The researcher also found limited literature on the size of caseloads and any impact that it may have on connections between academic advisors and students. One of the delimitations of this study is its focus on academic advisors whose primary role on campus is advising. Faculty, career and peer advisors, plus other types of advisors who do not serve as primary academic advisors were excluded from this study. Additionally, the research was conducted at a single four-year public higher education institution, which serves to narrow the scope but could also be considered a limitation.

Definitions and Abbreviations

AAP – Academic Advising Program (CAS, 2023)

Academic Advisor – Advisors are anyone who provides academic advising at their institutions, regardless of formal roles, titles, or positions (NACADA, 2017)

CAS – Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 2023)

Caseload – Set of students that academic advisors advise (CAS, 2023)

Graduation – persistence to earn a degree (Cate & Miller, 2015b)

HEI – Higher Education Institution

NACADA – The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA, 2017)

Persistence – motivation of wanting to complete a degree (Tinto, 2017)

Quality Advising – Meeting the needs of the individual students (Moody, 2019), “Mentoring motivating, and developing relationships with students” (Sanders & Killion, 2017)

Retention – percentage of freshmen who return for their sophomore year (Cate & Miller, 2015b)

Student Success – retention and graduation (Millea et al., 2018)

Summary

Retention and graduation rates are main highlights to higher education institutions because, in part, the funding formula has changed (Cate & Miller, 2015a; Erickson & Kelchen, 2020). To increase both rates, the students must be retained and must graduate. Students need to be guided through their academic career. Hawthorne et al. (2022) mention that quality advising will help students “navigate the institution, making connections between academics and future goals, and helping students to feel connected to the institution” (p. 2). However, if there are not enough advisors for the students, quality advising may not be feasible (Bowers et al., 2019). Through their connections with students and quality advising, academic advisors will help college students determine where they are going and what they are doing. It is pivotal that advisors have manageable caseloads, so they have the capability to provide quality advising that is linked to student success (Museus & Ravello, 2021).

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Academic advising is positively linked to retention and graduation rates, (Bowers et al., 2019). However, some advisors have large caseloads which may impact student connection and support. Understanding how impactful academic advising is to college students will show the importance of quality advising. Finally, the one thing that retention rates, graduation rates, and academic advising have in common is college students, so it is essential to understand the college student. These and other relevant topics will be covered in this review of literature.

Significance of Retention and Graduation Rates

Retention and graduation rates are a problem for higher education institutions that continue to grow (Nicoletti, 2019; Uddin, 2019; White, 2015). One of the reasons these institutions are putting such priority on retention is the lack of funding from the state and for private institutions the lack of private investors. With financial shortcomings, institutions are relying more on tuition for funding which creates a financial challenge for students (Zhang, 2017). According to Millea et al. (2018), “students who leave before they complete their degrees can cost universities thousands of dollars in unrealized tuition revenue and replacement recruiting costs” (p. 309).

Another reason that higher education institutions are focusing on retention and graduation rates is that it is related to institutional success. Higher retention rates are linked to positive institutional reputations (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2021; Thompson & Prieto, 2013), so the success of higher education institutions is measured through retention and graduation rates (Millea, 2018; Thompson, 2013). Millea (2018) also states that university success and student success are intertwined.

Funding is also intertwined with retention and graduation rates. Erickson and Kelchen (2020) state that “Congress prepares to reauthorize the Higher Education Act – given the current interest in using degree completion as an accountability metric linked to the disbursement of federal funds” (p.69). The better or higher the graduation rate, the more federal funds the higher education institutions receive. Originally, institutions received funding based on admissions, but now that the funding formula has changed, these institutions have switched their focus to retention and graduation rates. Even the Complete College Tennessee Act (2010) requires higher education institutions to receive funding based on the retention and graduation of their students (THEC, n.d.). Now, not only is enrollment key for higher education institutions (HEIs), but they are also creating and implementing efforts to retain students. This change in funding formula is helpful to student success. Efforts are being made by institutions to keep their students enrolled. If students stop out, then that can mean “unrealized potential and lower earnings over their working careers” (Millea, 2018, p. 309). Not only do universities benefit from the completion of degrees, but students do as well.

Tinto’s Theoretical Dropout Model

Tinto’s Theoretical Dropout Model offers explanations for the factors that contribute to students dropping out of higher education institutions. This Dropout Model is still widely used across HEIs (Nicoletti, 2019). It is centered around student engagement and motivation in higher education institutions. Student goals help fuel part of the motivation as students have a need to persist, meaning they want to finish a degree program. Tinto (2017) discusses the difference between HEIs focusing on retention and students focusing on persistence. Students want to complete the degree, not caring where they complete it as long as it is completed. They may

start their degree at one institution but transfer to finish at another institution. HEI's focus on retention means they want students to stay at the institution to finish the degree. Sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and connection with the curriculum also motivate the student (Tinto, 2017). Tinto (1987), as mentioned by Gravel (2012), "proposed that the desire to drop out results from student feelings of isolation, caused by lack of interaction within the academic environment that results in unmet personal needs and unattended interests" (p. 56).

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is very pivotal for college students. It is essential for them to make connections to the school. Chickering stressed the importance of developing healthy relationships for students and becoming accepted (Wise, 2017). When they begin college, students leave familiarity and come into an unknown. It is a disruption in their world, a transition. Schlossberg and Chickering explain that a transition is an event that causes a disruption in a student's life (Barclay, 2017). Barclay continues that this also creates a disruption in the sense of belonging. Students can feel isolated and alone. To gain this sense of belonging it is significant that students feel like they matter within a community (Tinto, 2017). Schlossberg emphasizes that it is central for students navigating transitions to build connections with institutional faculty and staff. This helps students identify their new roles and helps them discover a new sense of mattering (Barclay, 2017). Students that have a strong sense of belonging and a strong connection with their HEI are more likely to persist in graduation. (House et al., 2020; Museus & Chang, 2021).

There is also a strong relationship between persistence and self-efficacy. Persistence is the motivation of wanting to complete a degree (Tinto, 2017). Chickering says motivation or drive helps students uphold meaningful activities and commitments (Wise, 2017). Tinto (2017) states that “a strong sense of self-efficacy promotes goal attainment” (p. 257). Self-efficacy is the belief that one can successfully complete tasks and goals (Tinto, 2017; Degges-White, 2017; Sagone & Indiana, 2023). Students that have high self-efficacy are more likely to persist academically than students who have a low self-efficacy (Zapata & Onwuegbuzie, 2023). Sometimes during the transition into college, students’ self-efficacy can falter. Schlossberg says that it is essential for students to always have support, especially during times of transition (Barclay, 2017). It is very crucial for students to retain self-efficacy, because students that lose competence may have a difficult time transitioning into college life (Degges-White, 2017) Having self-efficacy helps students work through potential problems and/or difficulties (Sagone & Indiana, 2023). It is also an essential part of Chickering’s vector of developing integrity. Eventually, students will know their self-worth, take accountability for their actions and beliefs, and accept others as they are (Wise, 2017).

Curriculum is also a pivotal factor to students. Students want to be in a quality program. They also want to enjoy the courses that are a part of the program. If students do not like the curriculum of the program, the teaching methods, and/or values then they will move to another program or institution (Tinto, 2017). The program needs to be worth of “their time and effort” (Tinto, 2017, p. 259). According to Thomas (2017), “80% of students change their major” (para. 5). Many times, it is from students not being informed about the majors and/or programs (Thomas, 2017). For example, a student may declare Nursing as their major, but do not realize

that the curriculum involves sciences. If the student does not like science, then Nursing may not be for them.

Academic Advising

Many researchers agree that academic advising is key to increasing retention and graduation rates (Alojohani et al., 2023; Alvarado & Olson, 2020; Museus & Ravello, 2021; Uddin & Johnson, 2019). This is a huge jump from the original role of an advisor during the mid-17th century as a clerical role for faculty. Academic advisors have a significant influence on students that aid in retention (Thompson & Prieto, 2013). In fact, quality advising is known to be a significant contributor toward increased retention rates by increasing student satisfaction, leading to higher grades earned which leads to lower dropout rates (Sanders & Killion, 2017). Academic advising is “one of the two most important levers to pull within the university to positively impact student success” (Thomas, 2017, p. 1). Advisors can directly impact student development and success through their interaction (He & Hutson, 2016). Fundamentally, academic advisors should create intentional relationships with students to help in their development and provide positive interactions needed for student encouragement to persist (Wise, 2017). “Retention should be an institution-wide mission, with quality academic advising as one of the major identifiers to be associated with a positive outcome” (White, 2015, p. 276). Students that meet with academic advisors are more likely to stay enrolled from semester to semester, know the correct curriculum, and are more likely to graduate. They are also more likely to enjoy their time at college. Academic advisors play a distinct role in the lives of students as they are the bridge between students and the university (Uddin & Johnson, 2019). Because of this role that advisors play, it is vital that advisors are trained continuously to improve their

services to their students. They have a significant impact on students' lives (Thomas, 2017).

Quality academic advising is devised to impact all students (Vander Shee, 2007). Charlie Nutt (2015), the former NACADA Executive Director explains advising:

Academic advising is all about making students feel that they can be successful...Our students come to us with academic goals . . . with career goals . . . with life goals . . . They come to us with dreams and passions. They come to us wanting to become people that they aren't now. They come to us wanting to not only better themselves, but better their families, better their communities, better their cities, better their countries, better the globe . . . That's why we do what we do. That's why academic advising is important . . . it's about changing students' lives. (as cited in Cunningham, 2022, p. 3)

Academic advising has many definitions. Beginning with Burns Crookston's definition that moved advising away from prescriptive advising to a developmental approach, academic advising involves building meaningful relationships with students. It emphasizes fostering connections and collaborating with students to enhance their personal development and skills (Cunningham, 2022; White 2015). Crookston (2009) believes that the advising process is a shared learning experience for both advisors and students. Then Terry O'Banion developed another definition that holds similar concepts of Crookston's, but added five dimensions (Cunningham, 2022). Crookston and O'Banion both discuss a relationship and growth concept in their definition, but O'Banion adds these five dimensions: (a) exploration of life goals; (b) exploration of vocational goals; (c) program choice; (d) course choice; and (e) scheduling courses (Cunningham, 2022, p.7). O'Banion thinks students should explore life and that their progression is linear (Burton & Wellington, 1998). While many definitions exist, HEIs can still create their own definition of advising. The 2023 CAS Standards and Guidelines for Academic Advising outline the role of the academic advisor, drawing on White (2015) to emphasize that advisors empower students and help them gain confidence in their skills and abilities.

Additionally, academic advisors guide students in taking responsibility for their own learning and decision-making processes (CAS, 2023; White, 2015).

Based on surveys, students turn to academic advisers more often than others on campus. Advisers are a great connection to the university (Bowers et al., 2019; He & Hutson, 2016; Uddin & Johnson, 2019). They are the hub of information for students (Moody, 2019). In addition to assisting with schedules, advisers develop relationships with their students. White (2015) says that academic advising should not be considered a service. Services encompass “customer satisfaction”, while academic advising should be about goals and learning outcomes. White (2015) further promotes that academic advisers have a unique opportunity to reach all students. Academic advising has not always been developmental and relationship based; it started small and grew to what it is today.

Advising History

There are four eras in academic advising: (a) First Era, mid-17th century to late-19th century; (b) Second Era, late-19th century to late-20th century; (c) Third Era, late-20th century to early-21st century; and (d) Fourth Era (current era), early-21st century to present (Cate & Miller, 2015a). During the first era, advising occurred at the first institutions such as Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Dartmouth, King’s, Philadelphia, New Jersey, and Rhode Island Queen’s colleges, by faculty that were predominantly clergymen. These institutions were modeled after universities in England, providing a classical education, which incorporated few subjects (Gillispie, 2012). During this time faculty not only taught students but lived amongst them as well.

Two notable events occurred during the second era. The first academic advising system was introduced in Ohio at Kenyon College (Cook, 2001), and the term advisor was coined by the president of Johns Hopkins University, Daniel Coit Gilman (Cate & Miller, 2015a). Additionally, during this period, the curriculum was added to higher education (Gillispie, 2012). Due to this growth, choices were complex, and advisors were used to help students choose their curriculum. Advisors were anyone who “prescribed” courses for a student.

Two imperative articles were published during the third era, one article was Burns Crookston’s “Developmental View of Academic Advising as Teaching,” and the second article was Terry O’Banion’s “An Academic Advising Model” (Cate & Miller, 2015a). Crookston’s article helped shift advising from prescriptive to developmental. Prescriptive advising is similar to the relationship between a doctor and a patient. The patient comes to the doctor with a problem; the doctor gives instructions and expects the patient to follow his advice. Advisors that used prescriptive advising expected the same from their students (Crookston, 1994; Cunningham, 2022). The process was very transactional. Crookston’s developmental approach focused on viewing students holistically and establishing collaborative relationships with shared learning experiences with them (Crookston, 1994).

O’Banion’s approach was also relationship centered. Cunningham (2022) stated that this approach was an “interactive partnership, the advisor serves as both the teacher and guide, with the aim of enhancing the student’s self-awareness and fulfillment” (p. 7). He believed that scheduling courses should come after everything else with the student.

These articles caused a shift in advising, creating a more proactive approach. Advisors reached out to students to assist with potential problems, while also building and maintaining relationships. During this third era, three components of advising were created by Wes Habley in 1987: (a) informational; (b) relational; and (c) conceptual (Cate & Miller, 2015a; Smith & Cunningham, 2022). These components are used to aid in the success of students. The informational concept is the information that advisors must know, such as curriculum, resources, and policies and procedures. Developing interpersonal relationships with students is part of the relational component (Cate & Miller, 2015a; Smith & Cunningham, 2022). These relationships are central as they provide needed support for students as they transition into college life and throughout their academic journey (Barclay, 2017). The conceptual component refers to advisors understanding student developmental theory, academic advising approaches, and the students (Smith & Cunningham, 2022).

During the current era, the fourth era, advisors were and are beginning to be recognized as professionals. NACADA, the National Academic Advising Association, created a task force in 2003, to develop five competency areas for advisors that stem from the three components. The competency area for advisors in the conceptual component is foundations knowledge. This includes knowing the history of advising, student developmental theories, and advising approaches (Cate & Miller, 2015a, Smith & Cunningham, 2022). Communication and interpersonal skills are part of the relational component. This involves fostering relationships with students, communicating respectfully, and facilitating effective advising interactions (Cate & Miller, 2015a; Smith & Cunningham, 2022). This competency will help formalize an individualized plan for each student which Chickering stated was paramount (Wise, 2017). The

informational competencies that were developed are: (a) knowledge of college student characteristics; (b) career advising knowledge and skills; and c) knowledge of application of advising at local institutions (Cate & Miller, 2015a). Furthermore, NACADA has created more guidelines and best practices for advisors, expanding on the core competencies that Habley created and created the Pillars of Academic Advising (Cate & Miller, 2015a).

NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising

NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising is an organization that supports academic advisors to ensure they provide quality advising through best practices. Four Documents that NACADA endorses make up the Four Pillars of Academic Advising. These pillars do not cover everything advising, but they provide a framework for advisors to begin. The four documents are (a) Concept of Academic Advising; (b) Core Values of Academic Advising; (c) Core Competencies of Academic Advising; and (d) Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education: Standards and Guidelines for Academic Advising (CAS) (NACADA, 2023).

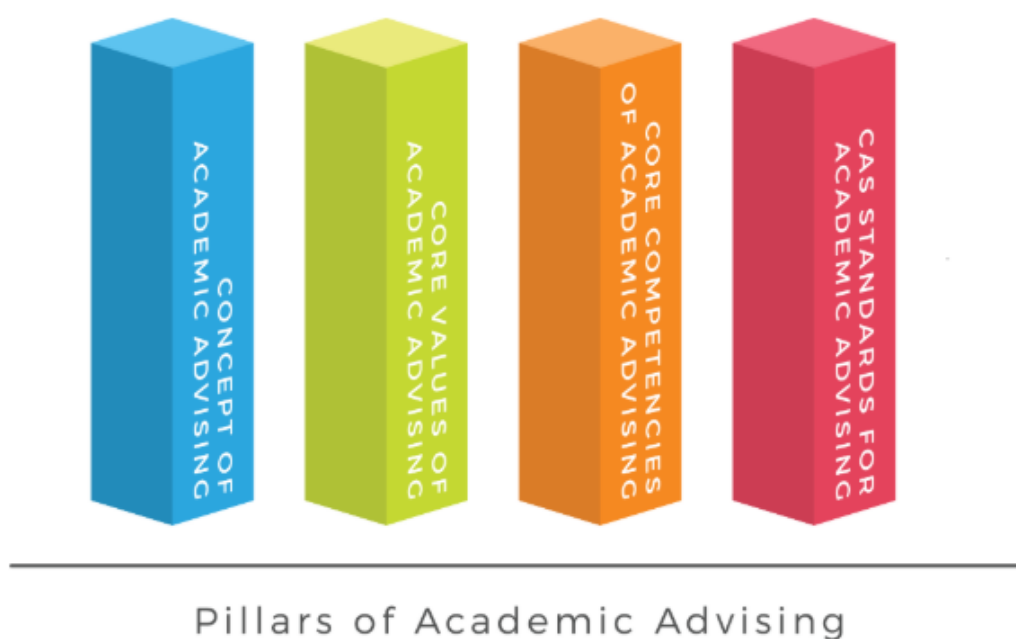


Figure 2

Pillars of Academic Advising

Note. NACADA. (2024). *Pillars of Academic Advising* [Image].

<https://nacada.ksu.edu/resources/pillars.aspx>

Concept of Academic Advising

Concept of Academic Advising mentions that academic advisors play a pivotal role for college students. Advisors provide support for students as they transition through the beginning, the middle, and the end. Academic advisors play a vital role not only in guiding students through their curriculum, but also in helping them navigate university life, develop critical thinking skills, and grow into engaged, contributing members of society (Cate & Miller, 2015a; NACADA, 2006). Academic advisors should look at the student holistically, which was Crookston's goal with his advising theory (Cunningham, 2022). NACADA (2006) states that

“academic advising has three components: curriculum (what advising deals with), pedagogy (how advising does what it does), and student learning outcomes (the result of academic advising)” (para. 5).

The Curriculum of Academic Advising should: (a) be developed from theories based in human and social sciences; (b) include the higher education institution's mission statement and values; (c) incorporate a cultural aspect; (d) integrate the academic curriculum; and (e) teach decision-making skills (Cunningham, 2022; NACADA, 2006). The Pedagogy of Academic Advising, which is the way that advisors present the curriculum (Cunningham, 2022), involves a learning process that includes preparation, implementation, documentation, and assessment, emphasizing the importance of the relationship with the student and mutual respect (NACADA, 2006). The Student Learning Outcomes of Academic Advising should align with the higher education institution's mission statement and goals, recognizing that each institution will have a different set of outcomes, which outline what students should know, learn, and demonstrate through academic advising (Cunningham, 2022; NACADA, 2006).

Core Values of Academic Advising

The next document that is included in the NACADA Pillars is the Core Values of Academic Advising. The core values are to guide advisors in a global society (NACADA, 2017). According to NACADA (2017), advisors are anyone who provides academic advising at their institutions, regardless of formal roles, titles, or positions. The core values are fundamental, and NACADA (2017) recommends that every higher education institution have a set of their own, to provide support for the academic advisors. NACADA's (2017) core values include (a) caring, which involves creating a safe and welcoming environment for students through respect and empathy;

(b) commitment, which reflects dedication to students, colleagues, the institution, and student success; (c) empowerment, which focuses on motivating and supporting students throughout their higher education experience; (d) inclusivity, which emphasizes creating a safe and supportive environment for all cultures and diversities while maintaining an open mind; (e) integrity, which highlights the importance of ethics, transparency, and accountability; (f) professionalism, which entails acting in accordance with the values of the academic advising role; and (g) respect, which involves building supportive relationships and maintaining a student-centered focus. Understanding NACADA's Core Values is essential for academic advisors, as these principles serve as a guiding framework for effective and ethical advising practices (Smith & Cunningham, 2022) and were created to support academic advisors in their career (NACADA, 2017). They were also meant to help advisors with "challenging situations" (Smith & Cunningham, 2022, p. 8).

Core Competencies

NACADA's Core Competencies is the third document to the pillars. The core competencies as mentioned previously are conceptual, informational, and relational. NACADA did not create the core competencies, but have expanded on them (Smith & Cunningham, 2022).

Conceptual Competency

Conceptual Competency is what the advisor should understand for academic advising. Knowing the history and progression of the profession offers a secure foundation in which academic advisors can grow. It gives them an opportunity to provide excellent advising to their

students (Folsom et al., 2015). Furthermore, understanding the history of academic advising gives advisors insight into the different theories along the way (Smith & Cunningham, 2022).

Academic advisors must also understand the theories that are relevant to advising. As cited in Smith & Cunningham (2022), “Hagen and Jordan (2008) contend that effective advising cannot be conducted without the knowledge of theory” (p. 9). There are many different theories that are encompassed by academic advising, not just one theory will work. These theories help advisors develop their framework for advising. However, no one student is alike (Thompson & Prieto, 2013; Tinto, 2017; Zapata & Onwuegbuzie, 2023), so it is beneficial to understand these theories. Understanding the theories allows academic advisors to adjust advising approaches for each student (Smith & Cunningham, 2022). Some of the theories include:

- Schlossberg’s Transition Theory
- Chickering’s Seven Vectors of Development
- Bronfenbrenner’s Theory of Ecological Systems
- Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development
- Erickson’s Stages of Development

(Smith & Cunningham, 2022)

For the purpose of this study, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and Chickering’s Seven Vectors of Development will be examined as this study explores the student-advisor connections and relationships.

Student Developmental Theories

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's Transition Theory focuses on providing support for students during critical times of transition. A transition is defined by Schlossberg and Chickering as an event that causes disruption in the lives of students (Barclay, 2017). Schlossberg details that students are always transitioning. Students are either transitioning into something, through something, or out of something. Transitions can challenge students' sense of belonging and self-worth. Providing meaningful support during these times helps them adjust to new roles, reconnect with their sense of value, and restore their connection to the campus community.

Because of the stress and anxiety transitions can ensue (Zapata & Onwegbuzie, 2023), Schlossberg recommends that anyone going through transitions to "take stock" (Barclay, 2017). There are four domains to taking stock that advisors can help students navigate to help with smoother and successful transitions. Taking stock includes situation, support, self, and strategies which are explained below.

The situation encompasses the present and refers to the circumstances during the time of transition. It is valuable for advisors to know if the situation was a surprise, anticipated, or a nonevent. A nonevent is explained as an event that the student is expecting to happen, but does not – a disappointment (Barclay, 2015). Schlossberg (2008) emphasizes the importance of labeling the situation, encouraging advisors to ask students questions such as: (a) Is the situation positive or negative? (b) Is the situation expected, surprising, or a nonevent? After the situation has been identified, it becomes essential to explore the timing involved. Timing can affect how the student reacts to the situation (Schlossberg, 2008). It also is significant to

consider where the student is in the transition. Is the student at the beginning, middle, or end of the transition? The answers to these questions will influence the type of support the student needs (Barclay, 2015; Schlossberg, 2008).

Having appropriate support during transitions is pivotal (Niewoudt & Pedler, 2021; Zapata & Onwegbuzie, 2023; Zhang et al., 2019). Schlossberg (2008) notes that psychologists Robert Kahn and Toni Antonucci identified three functions of support: affection, affirmation, and assistance. Advisors can offer assistance in all three areas by providing emotional support, affirming that students are taking the right steps, and equipping them with appropriate resources and tools. It is valuable to recognize that each student will require different types of support (Barclay, 2015). A strong support system remains consistent during times of change, providing stability. Additionally, students can receive support from significant others, family, friends, and co-workers. To check that students are receiving the support that is needed, the following questions can be asked: (a) Is the student getting what they need from the three functions, affection, affirmation, and assistance? (b) Is the student getting support from other sources such as friends and family? (c) Does the student know how to access additional support such as other campus resources like professors, Student Food Pantry and Counseling Services? (d) Did the transition disrupt the original support system (Barclay, 2015; Schlossberg; 2008)?

By providing the necessary support, advisors can help students engage in self-evaluation (Barclay, 2015). This process allows students to identify their strengths that can aid them during transitions. It is also important to recognize any resistance the student may encounter. Self-confidence plays a significant role in these situations; transitions can often diminish self-confidence, making it fundamental to rebuild it. Additionally, resilience and self-efficacy are

pivotal factors. Advisors can consider asking the following questions: (a) Does the student feel challenged or stressed by the transition? (b) Is the student resilient? (c) Is the student optimistic or pessimistic? (d) How is the student's self-confidence? (e) Does the student feel in control of the transition (Barclay, 2015; Schlossberg, 2008)? The answers to these questions will inform advisors of the best assistance to provide students.

Strategies is the last domain of Schlossberg's Taking Stock. It is the way and how students function or cope through the transition. Barclay (2015) uses the example of a student beginning college. They will need a class schedule. Do they see an advisor to ensure they are going to be registered for the correct courses, or do they register without consultation? Which way is most effective for the student? Schlossberg (2008) mentions that there are four coping strategies that can be chosen. Students can choose to either change the situation, change the meaning of the situation, which is usually completed before stress is felt, relax about the situation, meaning they are managing, or do nothing (Barclay, 2015; Schlossberg, 2008).

If students are struggling in courses, it may be due to the transition from high school to college. One option for students is to utilize tutoring services, which can help change the situation. By seeking tutoring, students can better prepare for the coursework and improve their performance in the class. However, opportunities to change situations may not be available all the time (Schlossberg, 2008). Students may need to change the meaning of the situation. An example is the bereavement process. If students experience a close death or tragedy, they cannot change it, but they can change the meaning of it. Schlossberg (2008) notes that there are times when students cannot change the situation or its meaning, but they can implement strategies to cope and navigate through it. As they encounter the effects of stress,

students will develop these coping strategies, learning how to relax and manage the transition more smoothly (Schlossberg, 2008). One way that advisors can assist is by providing the list of campus resources such as counseling services, so students know where to go to strengthen their coping strategies. Students can also choose to do nothing. For example, students may be struggling in a course, instead of seeking help through tutoring services, they may decide to quit going to class (Barclay, 2015). Advisors should consider reflecting on the following questions when working students going through transitions: (a) Does the student use a variety of strategies? (b) Does the student take action to change transitions? (c) Is the student able to change the meaning of these transitions? (d) Does the student make an effort to manage stress effectively? (e) Does the student recognize when it's appropriate to take no action, or is the student taking no action when there should be action? (f) Can the student appropriately apply different strategies to various transitions when necessary (Barclay, 2015; Schlossberg, 2008)?

The sense of mattering plays a critical role in student engagement. When students experience feelings of isolation or disconnection, they are more likely to disengage. According to Schlossberg, students often perceive themselves as unimportant to others during periods of transition, which can heighten this disconnection. She “described mattering as a reciprocal process – that only do individuals matter to others, but there is an element of dependency of one on the other as well” (Barclay, 2017, p. 25). Academic advisors need to be supportive during these times of transition to help students regain their sense of belonging and mattering to others (Barclay, 2017). Advisors can utilize Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to help students regain their sense of belonging and find their footing once more (Barclay, 2017; Roufs, 2015).

Chickering's Seven Vectors of Development

Arthur Chickering was at the forefront of student development during the time when researchers were increasingly focusing on developmental practices in higher education (Wise, 2017). Researchers, including Chickering, argued that student development should be considered when designing and redesigning student programming and student support services in higher education (Hemwall et al., 1999). Chickering developed the seven vectors of development which are (a) developing competence; (b) managing emotions; (c) moving through autonomy toward interdependence; (d) developing mature interpersonal relationships; (e) establishing identity; (f) developing purpose; and (g) developing integrity (Roufs, 2015; Wise, 2017). Originally, the theory explained that there was a certain order students progressed through the vectors (Hemwall, 1999). The first vectors needed to be completed before students could move onto the last three vectors (Jordan, 2016; Roufs, 2015). However, the vectors are now seen as a cycle. Students can go from one vector to another and then revisit a mastered vector as needed (Jordan, 2016; Wise, 2017).

The first vector is developing competence, which encompasses three domains: intellectual, physical, and interpersonal (Wise, 2017). The second vector is managing emotions. Students transitioning to college experience a range of feelings, including excitement, hope, anxiety, and fear as they navigate the unknown (Chickering, n.d.; Wise, 2017). The third vector is moving from autonomy toward interdependence, which is a key developmental milestone for students (Chickering, n.d.). Initially, students must cultivate autonomy by learning to take care of themselves. Once they have developed this independence, they can begin to explore interdependence, which involves understanding the give-and-take of relationships (Wise, 2017).

Developing mature interpersonal relationships, the fourth vector, is the process where students learn to accept others as they present themselves and become more tolerant of the views and beliefs of others. They also cultivate deep meaningful relationships with emotional connections that improve the sense of belonging (Wise, 2017). Developing these types of relationships will likely be long-lasting (Chickering, n.d.).

Establishing identity is one of the most important vectors as it involves developing a strong sense of self-efficacy and determination (Wise, 2017). It incorporates the following elements: (a) comfort with body and appearance; (b) comfort with gender and sexual orientation; (c) sense of self in a social, historical, and cultural context; (d) clarification of self-concept through roles and lifestyle; (e) sense of self in response to feedback from valued other; (f) self-acceptance and self-esteem; and (g) personal stability and integration (Chickering, n.d.; Wise, 2017). Typically, toward graduation, students have completed these vectors (Wise, 2017).

The final two vectors, developing purpose and developing integrity, are equally essential. Developing purpose is key to fostering motivation and drive. Having a clear goal helps students stay focused and on track toward graduation (Chickering, n.d.; Wise, 2017). Achieving and developing integrity signifies that students have cultivated a strong sense of self and developed respect for others, having gained a deeper understanding of who they are (Chickering, n.d.; Wise, 2017).

Academic Advising Approaches

Advising approaches and strategies must be understood by academic advisors. Understanding these is advantageous, so they provide the best connection with each student. No single advising approach can effectively meet the needs of all students (Banta et al., 2002).

The advising approaches fall under two broad categories prescriptive and developmental (Smith & Cunningham, 2022). Prescriptive advising approaches are transactional while developmental advising approaches look at the student holistically (Cunningham, 2022).

An understanding of the “expected outcomes of advising” (Smith & Cunningham, 2022, p. 14) is essential for effective academic advising. According to NACADA (2006), “the student learning outcomes of academic advising are guided by an institution’s mission, goals, curriculum and co-curriculum” (para. 8). It is also important for academic advisors to convey clearly to students the goals and objectives expected of academic advising (Smith & Cunningham, 2022).

It is also essential for academic advisors to recognize the importance of creating and maintaining safe, inclusive environments for students (Smith & Cunningham, 2022). Personal biases, stereotypes, and background may impact the environment that academic advisors create. Academic advisors need to be aware of their biases and how this could impact advising (Smith & Cunningham, 2022).

He and Hutson (2016) explain that there are three different types of advising programs: centralized, decentralized, and shared. Centralized advising has professional advisors that their one job is to advise. Decentralized advising uses faculty members to advise their students, and shared advising utilizes the mixture of the two. Advising programs can either provide prescriptive or intrusive (proactive). Prescriptive advising is transactional; the advising process is one-sided. There is very little room for exploration and decision making from students (He & Hutson, 2016). This type of advising, even though commonly used, is usually highly criticized,

because it does not intervene. Vander Schee (2007) states, prescriptive advising “may be ineffective because it does not address the root causes of poor academic performance” (p. 51).

The other type of advising is intrusive advising or proactive advising which is service based (Varney, 2013). Academic advisors create an individualized care and plan for each student. They work directly with students, fostering relationships and help identify problems and intervene at pivotal moments in students’ lives (Vander Schee, 2007). With this type of advising, academic advisors can offer the essential support that is needed during transitions (Barclay, 2017). Identifying problems and intervening can help keep students enrolled, thereby improving retention and graduation rates (Varney, 2013).

Proactive advising can be encompassed into the developmental advising approach and vice versa. Developmental advising is a holistic approach. Not only is an academic advisor concerned with the educational needs of students, but other needs as well, such as personal ones (Grites, 2013). This type of advising is also a shared responsibility; both the advisor and the student contribute (Grites, 2013).

The appreciative advising approach is about providing great services to students. Like the developmental advising approach, it is also a collaborative experience. Bloom, Hutson, and He (2013), mention that there are six phases in this approach: (a) build trust and rapport with each other; (b) uncover their strengths and assets; (c) be inspired by each other’s hopes and dreams; (d) co-construct plans to make their goals a reality; (e) provide mutual support and accountability throughout the process; and (f) challenge each other to set higher expectations for their educational experiences (p. 83).

Strength-based advising takes a distinct approach compared to other methods. Instead of looking at students' deficiencies, academic advisors help students find their strengths and cultivate them (Schreiner, 2013). One of the benefits from this approach is the effects last post-graduation (Soria et al., 2017). The five steps to this approach are: (a) identify students' talents; (b) affirm students' talents and increase awareness of strengths; (c) envision the future; (d) plan specific steps for students to reach goals; and (e) apply students' strengths to challenges (Schreiner, 2013; Soria et al., 2017).

Each student is different and requires different approaches, at different times (CAS, 2023). Advisors should have a strong grasp of the student developmental theories that reinforce these practices, as illustrated in Figure 3. Establishing meaningful connections with students allows advisors to tailor their approach to meet each individual's unique needs (Forbes, 2021).

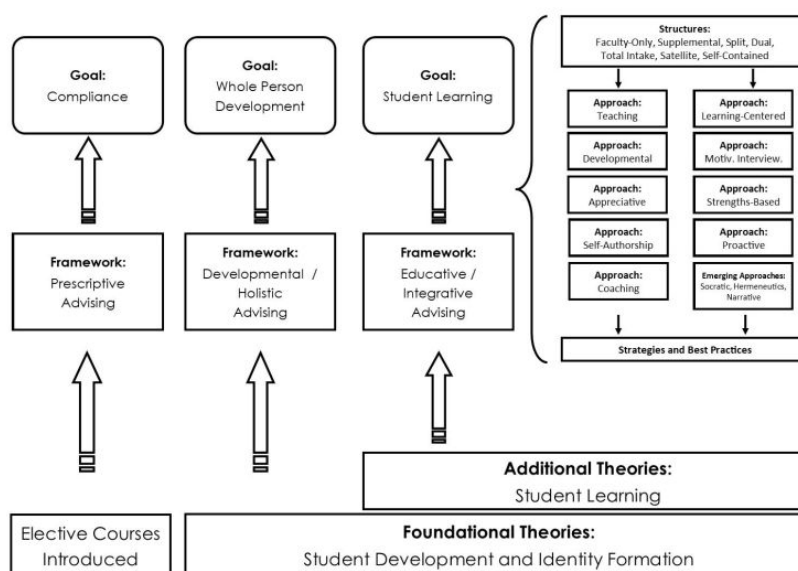


Figure 3

Graphic Organizer for Advising Frameworks, Structures, and Approaches

Note. Forbes, S. A. (2021). *Graphic Organizer for Advising Frameworks, Structures, and*

Approaches [Image].

Informational Competency

The Informational Core Competency basically is the information that academic advisors need to know to advise their students effectively. NACADA lists knowing the history of advising, the mission statements, the vision, the value, and culture as an area that advisors need. (Smith & Cunningham, 2022). Knowing this information allows advisors to gain understanding about the innerworkings of their higher education institution. This will help them if they have challenging situations (Smith & Cunningham, 2022).

A strong understanding of “curriculum, degree programs, and other academic requirements and options” (Smith & Cunningham, 2022, p. 19) contributes to an advisor’s professional credibility, an essential factor in earning and maintaining students’ trust (Smith & Cunningham, 2022). Academic advisors need to know about the academic requirements in order to effectively advise their students (Smith & Cunningham, 2022).

Academic advisors must have a thorough understanding of their institution’s policies and procedures (Smith & Cunningham, 2022). Not knowing about them could potentially affect students poorly (Smith & Cunningham, 2022). For example, if academic advisors are unaware of specific course withdrawal deadlines, they may unintentionally advise students to withdraw too late, potentially resulting in negative financial consequences for the students.

Academic advisors must know about “legal guidelines of advising practice, including privacy regulations” (Smith & Cunningham, 2022, p. 20). This not only covers the advisor, but the legal protections for students, too (Smith & Cunningham, 2022). Academic advisors must be knowledgeable about confidentiality practices, including compliance with FERPA guidelines, and

must refrain from disclosing students' personally identifiable information (Smith & Cunningham, 2022).

Relational Competency

Developing strong relationships with students is a key component of effective advising. Chickering's fourth vector states the importance of developing mature interpersonal relationships (Wise, 2017). Creating a personal advising philosophy defines the roles and responsibilities of the advisor and the student. Students will know exactly what to expect from their advisors, and there will be less miscommunication (Smith & Cunningham, 2022). While building relationships with students, it is essential to make them feel valued and accepted for who they are. An advisor-student relationship is about mutual respect.

Smith and Cunningham (2022) emphasize the importance of conducting effective advising interactions. A key component of effective advising is preparation. This includes reviewing academic records, reading past notes, and gathering any forms the student may need. When academic advisors are well-prepared, it creates a more comfortable and productive environment for the student. These interactions also include referrals to other resources and departments, so it is also critical for advisors to develop relationships across their institution (Smith & Cunningham, 2022).

Effective communication skills are a key component of building relationships. These skills are not passive; they require continuous practice and refinement. Communication encompasses both verbal and written expression, as well as active listening and nonverbal cues like body language (Jordan, 2015). Academic advisors must be aware of things that can impact their communication and interactions, such as their physical and emotional state (Jordan, 2015).

2023 CAS Standards & Guidelines for Academic Advising Programs

According to Campbell and McWilliam (2016), CAS is a professional association that promotes and encourages professional guidelines for higher education institutions. The CAS international standards provide guidelines for academic advising programs. They also state that it is pivotal for these programs to develop and implement and regularly review their advising missions (Campbell & McWilliams, 2016).

There are many CAS standards for academic programs that provide guidance for program organization, services offered, and even hiring practices. For the purpose of this study, standards relating to caseload sizes will be explored. In section 2.3, of the 2023 CAS Standards, it states that the following must be considered when determining caseloads and caseload sizes: (a) academic status – certain groups of students such as undecided students and students on probation may require more advising time; (b) advising approaches used; (c) student needs; (d) advisor’s other responsibilities; (e) time required for appointments. The guidelines also state the advisor workload beyond the assigned students also needs to be considered. There needs to be a balance of efficiency and effectiveness. It is essential that students have access to advising, particularly during times that matter most (CAS, 2023).

Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators

ACPA and NASPA (2015) also provide a list of guidelines or professional competencies for student affairs educators. At some higher education institutions, academic advising is part of the student affairs division, so ACPA and NASPA have included a list of professional competencies in advising. The organizations also have set guidelines to increase holistic wellness not only in students, but in advisors, too.

The competencies are categorized into foundational, intermediate, and advanced levels. Foundational competencies for advising include building rapport with students, assisting with problem-solving, and knowing how to effectively utilize available resources (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Intermediate competencies involve coaching students in decision-making, creating a safe and inclusive environment, and identifying patterns of behavior (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). At the advanced level, competencies include collaborating with other departments for a holistic approach, evaluating advising practices, and conducting research on holistic student issues (ACPA & NASPA, 2015).

Caseloads

Caseload size is a vital factor in the effectiveness of academic advising. Advising extends beyond course selection; it includes supporting internships, next steps, and overall student well-being. It is essential for advisors to be fully invested in each student. NACADA does not recommend a specific caseload size, instead stating that it depends on the institution's mission, the type of student, and the advising approach. As such, caseloads vary across institutions. NACADA encourages institutions to evaluate all roles and responsibilities of advisors when determining the ideal caseload size (Flaherty, 2023; Uddin & Johnson, 2019).

“A 2011 NACADA study found that the median number of advisees per advisor was 296, though many advisors today have even larger caseloads” (Flaherty, 2023, para. 27). A study from Tyton Partners (2021) discovered through a survey that advisors list caseload size as a significant barrier to improving advising practices. The study showed a significant negative relationship between larger caseloads and first-time, full-time student retention. It found that as caseload size increases, the ability to provide holistic and proactive advising diminishes. The study further

demonstrated that reducing caseloads by 100 students could increase retention rates by one percentage point.

Academic advising is a key aspect of campus retention initiatives (White, 2015). The availability of advisors is essential, as they provide students with relative institutional information (Orozco et al., 2010). Orozco and others (2010) suggest that the larger the caseload, the less time advisors have for students, limiting access to valuable guidance. Applegate and Hartleroad (2011) note that advisors are often overwhelmed by large caseloads, and to mitigate this, recommend subcategorizing the caseload. Students themselves have recognized how large caseloads negatively impact advising; they reported feeling rushed and unheard during advising appointments (Walker et al., 2017).

Students also find it more difficult to build relationships with advisors who manage higher caseloads, compared to high school counselors who typically have lower caseloads (Walker et al., 2017). Larger caseloads result in less time spent with individual students, hindering the development of meaningful advisor-student relationships. Research shows that developmental advising, which focuses on the growth of the student, is most effective with a low student-to-advisor ratio (Aydin et al., 2019). Similarly, proactive advising requires a low ratio (Van Jura & Prieto, 2021). Uddin and Johnson (2019) further mention that larger caseloads leave advisors with less time to provide adequate support, potentially leading to students dropping out of courses.

Summary

Academic advising plays a vital role in promoting student success. Many researchers agree that advising plays a key role in retention and graduation rates. They also agree that

higher education institutions need to make this their priority, because their success depends on it. Many individuals and accreditors are looking at retention and graduation rates to determine the success of the institutions. Institutions need an increase in retention due to financial demand; they need the tuition and fees from their students. Vander Schee (2007) affirms, "Student services that connect students to the institution, such as those offered by academic advising centers, have a significant effect on retention" (p. 52).

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Bowers et al. (2019) noted that advisors with large caseloads, sometimes reaching up to 600 students, may find it difficult to provide quality advising. The sizes of caseloads may impact the quality of advising that is provided to students (e.g., the larger the caseload, the less time the advisor can spend with each student). With student success being brought to the forefront, and retention and graduation rates scrutinized (Tinto, 2017; Fain, 2018), students should receive quality advising. Advisors have access to all students, and they are key to student success (White, 2015; Uddin & Johnson, 2019). The primary goal for this qualitative study was to gain perspective through advisors at a four-year regional public higher education institution in the Southeast about advising. The study explored the types of advising exercised, but specifically focused on how the size of an advising caseload impacts an advising approach, quality, and connections with students. The study also explored shared solutions to large caseload sizes.

Restatement of the Problem and Research Questions

Retention and graduation rates are low (Fain, 2018; Cate & Miller, 2015a; Erickson & Kelchen, 2020; White 2015), and these rates are tied to federal funding for public higher education institutions (Cate & Miller 2015a, Erickson & Kelchen, 2020). HEIs have shifted their focus to retention and graduation rates. One of the programs that has helped with these rates is academic advising. Cate & Miller (2015a) states, “academic advising emerged as one of only three predictors of academic success” (p. 46). White (2015) even explains that academic advisors need to be engaged in the lives of every student. Academic advising is vital. Are advisors able to give quality advising with large caseloads? Because advising plays a key role in

student success, this paper explored the following research questions based on perspectives from advisors:

1. What are advisors' perceptions of their connection with students?
2. How does caseload size impact this relationship?
3. To what extent are there shared solutions to institution policies relating to the size of caseload?

Research Design

The design of this research was a qualitative methodical study with a phenomenological framework. A qualitative study was chosen, because there is an “issue that needs to be explored” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 45), the issue being the size of caseloads. According to Creswell & Poth (2018), qualitative “methodology [is] characterized as inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analyzing the data” (p. 21). They also state that it is typically from the “ground up, rather than handed down from a theory” (p. 21). The phenomenological framework was the most suitable approach for this study, which aimed to explore the shared experiences of professional, full-time, undergraduate academic advisors at a four-year higher education institution. In phenomenological research, the focus is on understanding how individuals experience a particular phenomenon. In this case, the phenomenon under investigation is academic advising, as described by Creswell and Creswell (2023). This study also adopted a case study design. A case study is researching or evaluating a particular program over a set time and setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This study gathered data from academic advisors at a four-year regional public higher education institution in the Southeast, all of whom are affiliated with the same advising program. The interview questions

explored their experiences in academic advising, spanning from the onset of their roles to the present. To collect data, the researcher administered a survey through Qualtrics, a cloud-based survey platform, to professional, full-time, undergraduate academic advisors at the selected institution. The survey (as seen in Appendix C) was designed to capture a variety of experiences, perspectives, and practices related to academic advising, especially the impact of caseload size has on those experiences and practices.

As an academic advisor, the researcher drew on their own advising experience while also gaining valuable insights from the perspectives of other advisors. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the importance of being "in the field" (p. 21) with participants, as this helps establish rapport and fosters a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. The data collected through the survey was used to explore and discuss the phenomenon of quality academic advising.

Population and Sample

All participants in this study remained anonymous and were selected from a four-year regional public higher education institution in the Southeast. The sample was not a representation of the institution as a whole; rather, it was a purposeful sample, with participants chosen based on their academic advising experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were volunteers recruited via email invitations (Appendix A) to complete the survey. The anticipated sample size was between five and eight participants; however, the actual sample size was eighteen participants.

Instrumentation

A researcher-designed survey was given to participants from Qualtrics. According to Braun et al. (2021), a qualitative survey is an effective research tool, because of its openness and flexibility and its ability to focus on a particular phenomenon. The participants were given a chance to answer the open-ended survey (Appendix C) anonymously and freely. Prior to beginning the survey, participants were given an explanation of the study and assured of confidentiality (Appendix A).

Academic advisors at the selected institution were asked to participate in the survey during the spring semester. The survey (Appendix C) included demographic and academic advising questions. Once the surveys were completed, they were reviewed and coded.

The researcher also maintained a reflection journal as part of the study. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), reflexivity is a critical component of qualitative research, as it enables the researcher to examine their own values, biases, and experiences in relation to the phenomenon under study. It is essential for researchers to remain aware of how their personal experiences may influence the interpretation of data.

Data Collection Procedures

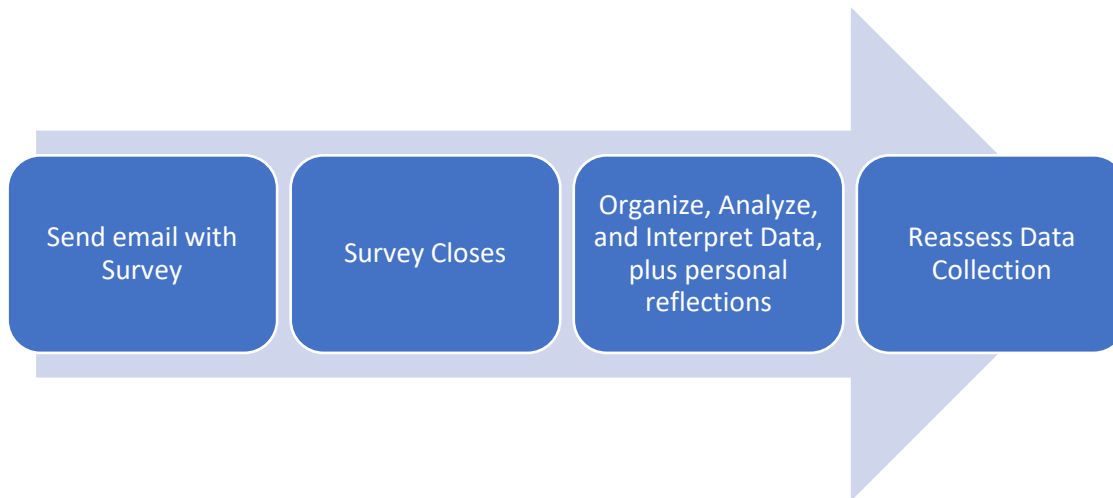


Figure 4

Explanatory Sequential Design

In the spring semester, academic advisors received qualitative surveys via email through Qualtrics. They were given four weeks to complete the surveys. The data collected from these surveys was securely stored on Microsoft OneDrive, protected by a multi-factor authentication process.

The survey first included demographic questions to gather background information, particularly regarding the number of years participants have been involved in advising. Following these demographic questions, the survey featured more detailed inquiries focused on the experiences and perceptions of the advisors. These questions explored how advisors perceive the impact of their caseload size on their ability to connect with students.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data collected from the surveys was analyzed using the data analysis spiral. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation are not linear steps but rather interconnected, as illustrated in Figure 5.

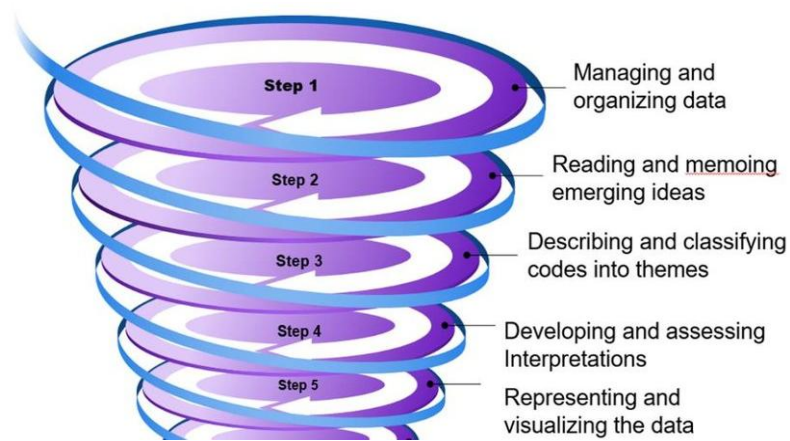


Figure 5

Data Analysis Spiral

Note. Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among fine approaches* (4th ed.) [Image].

1. Managing and organizing the data – The researcher began the analysis process by gathering and organizing the data by creating digital files on secure storage through Microsoft OneDrive with the two-step authenticator process. (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
2. Reading and memoing emergent ideas – Researcher took notes as reading and began the reflexive process by writing in reflection journal of initial thoughts during this process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
3. Describing and classifying codes into themes – The researcher classified and applied codes from the emergent ideas. It was valuable to keep a list of code categories and descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
4. Developing and assessing interpretations – Looking at the codes, the researcher explored and found different themes from the data. The researcher also related the themes back to the literature review and the theoretical frameworks, Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Chickering's Seven Vectors as previously mentioned (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).
5. Representing and visualizing the data – Finally, the researcher presented findings in tables and other visuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Refer to the table below for a detailed overview of the specific analyses corresponding to each research question and their corresponding survey questions.

Table 1

Logic of Research Design

Research Question	Corresponding Source of Information	Corresponding Data Analysis/Reporting Procedures
RQ1: What are advisors' perceptions of their connection with students?	Survey questions from Appendix C: 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B, 6A, & 6B	Descriptive Statistics, coding, themes
RQ2: How does caseload size impact advisors' connections with students?	Survey questions from Appendix C: 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, & 6B	Descriptive Statistics, coding, themes
RQ3: To what extent are there shared solutions to institution policies relating to the size of caseload sizes?	Survey questions from Appendix C: 4E, 5A, 5B, & 6B	Descriptive Statistics, coding, themes

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. For credibility, the data was collected through a survey, which provided verbatim responses, minimizing the potential for miscommunication. Since each participant completed the same survey, a consistent data analysis approach was applied to all responses. Surveys are research

methods used by previous researchers (Shenton, 2004). Plus, Braun et al. (2021) agreed that a qualitative survey is an effective research tool. Shenton (2004) also proposed that to enhance a study's trustworthiness, researchers should possess a strong understanding of the organization and establish a trusted relationship with participants. In this qualitative study, the researcher fulfilled that criterion by serving as an academic advisor at the institution being studied. The participants also completed the survey anonymously which added a level of security and trust. While this sampling could not be random as Shenton (2004) suggested, the anonymity added a level of randomness. Shenton (2004) also suggested that using multiple methods of data gathering is the best practice for credibility. However, due to the role of the researcher at studied institution, only the method of the anonymous qualitative survey was used to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Transferability in this study was supported through detailed descriptions of the institutional context, participant roles, and advising structures, allowing readers to determine the relevance of the findings to their own settings. By presenting vivid, descriptive data and direct participant quotes, the study provided insight into the shared experiences and challenges of academic advisors, which may be applicable to similar institutions.

Dependability was supported by a well-defined and consistent research process, which included transparent data collection, thorough documentation of procedures, and reflective analysis. The researcher maintained a reflection journal throughout the study, enhancing both the credibility and reliability of the findings. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize reflexivity as a key validation strategy in qualitative research. As an academic advisor at the institution, the researcher shared professional experiences with participants, and the use of the reflection

journal allowed for the acknowledgment and examination of personal biases and prior experiences. This practice also aligns with Shenton's (2004) recommendation for strengthening confirmability and overall trustworthiness.

Summary

This study used a qualitative research design with a phenomenological framework to explore the experiences and perceptions of academic advisors regarding the impact of large caseloads on advising quality. Data collected through a survey administered via Qualtrics to professional, full-time, undergraduate academic advisors at a four-year public institution in the Southeast. The survey included both demographic and open-ended questions, and the study followed a case study design, focusing on the experiences of advisors affiliated with the same advising program. Data was analyzed using the data analysis spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and the researcher maintained a reflection journal for reflexivity and bias disclosure. The research contributed additional insights to the literature on academic advising, specifically regarding the impact of caseload sizes.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Introduction

This phenomenological case study explored the perspectives of academic advisors on academic advising, particularly regarding caseload sizes. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions of advisors' connections with students?
2. How does caseload size impact advisors' connections with students?
3. To what extent are there shared solutions to institutional policies related to the size of caseload?

This chapter encompasses participant information including descriptions, the findings of the study, and themes found within the data. Additionally, the chapter includes responses from participants' survey and a conclusion.

Participant Information

Participant Recruitment

A Qualtrics survey was emailed to academic advisors at a four-year regional public higher education institution in the Southeast. A Qualtrics survey was chosen for data collection opposed to interviews or focus groups to protect the academic advisors' anonymity given the researcher's role at selected institution. It was sent to sixty-five academic advisors, and eighteen successfully responded beyond the demographic questions. Below are brief descriptions of the demographics of the participants along with the assigned pseudonyms.

Participant Descriptions

Alex is between 45 to 54-years old. They prefer not to answer gender identity, and they are white. They have worked in higher education for over ten years. They also note that they worked in academic advising for over ten years and at their current institution, too.

Suzi, a white female, is between 55 to 64-years old. She has four to six years of higher education experience that includes less than three years of academic advising experience. She also has less than three years of academic advising experience at her current institution.

Amanda, who identifies as a white female, is between 45 to 54-years old. With over ten years of higher education experience, Amanda, specifically, has seven to nine years of academic advising experience. She also has seven to nine years of academic advising experience at her current institution.

Hazel is a white female who is between 18 to 24-years old. She has four to six years of higher education experience, which includes less than three years of academic advising experience including her current institution.

Jane identifies as a cisgender white female who is between 25 to 34-years old. She has seven to nine years of higher education experience. This includes four to six years of academic advising experience including her current institution.

Pat, a white female, is between 45 to 54-years old. She has more than ten years of higher education experience, academic advising experience, and academic advising experience at her current institution.

Sally is between 34 to 44 years old, and she is a white female. She has less than three years of higher education experience. This includes less than three years of academic advising experience and less than three years of academic advising experience at her current institution.

Emma is between 55 to 64-years old, and she is a white female. She has more than ten years of experience in higher education, in academic advising, and in academic advising at her current institution.

Lou is white female who is between 34 to 44-years old. She has more than ten years of higher education experience. This also includes more than ten years of academic advising experience and more than ten years of academic advising experience at her current institution.

Skipper, who identifies as a white female, is between 34 to 44-years old. She has four to six years of higher education experience, which includes less than three years of academic advising experience. She also notes that she has less than three years of academic advising experience at her current institution.

Jasmine, a white female, is between 45 to 54 years old. She has less than three years of experience in higher education, in academic advising, and in academic advising at her current institution.

Ellie is between 34 to 44-years old and identifies as a white female. She has four to six years of higher education experience. This also includes four to six years of academic advising experience and at her current institution.

Samantha, who is a white female, is between 55 to 64-years old. She has less than three years of higher education experience along with less than three years of academic advising

experience. She also has less than three years of academic advising experience at her current institution.

Charlotte is between 45 to 54-years old, and she is a white female. She has less than three years of academic advising experience and academic advising experience at her current institution. She, however, has seven to nine years of higher education experience.

Kirsten is between 55 to 64-years old and identifies as a white female. She has seven to nine years of higher education experience which includes less than three years of academic advising experience. It also includes less than three years of academic advising experience at her current institution.

Annabel, who is a white female, is between 45 to 54-years old. She has more than ten years of higher education experience. She also has seven to nine years of academic advising experience and at her current institution.

Dot is between 55 to 64-years old, and she is a white female. She has more than ten years of higher education and academic advising experience and more than ten years of academic advising experience at her current institution.

Bethany, identifying as a white female, is between 34 to 44-years old. She has more than ten years of higher education experience which includes more than ten years of academic advising experience and at her current institution.

For a quick glance of the participant demographics, Table 2 is below.

Table 2*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age Range	Gender	Ethnicity	Years of Higher Education Experience	Years of Academic Advising Experience	Years of Academic Advising Experience at Current Institution
Alex	45-54	Prefer not to answer	White	10+	10+	10+
Suzi	55-64	Female	White	4-6	0-3	0-3
Amanda	45-54	Female	White	10+	7-9	7-9
Hazel	18-24	Female	White	4-6	0-3	0-3
Jane	25-34	Female/cisgender	White	7-9	4-6	4-6
Pat	45-54	Female	White	10+	10+	10+
Sally	34-44	Female	White	0-3	0-3	0-3
Emma	55-64	Female	White	10+	10+	10+
Lou	34-44	Female	White	10+	4-6	4-6
Skipper	34-44	Female	White	4-6	0-3	0-3
Jasmine	45-54	Female	White	0-3	0-3	0-3
Ellie	34-44	Female	White	4-6	4-6	4-6

Samantha	55-64	Female	White	0-3	0-3	0-3
Charlotte	45-54	Female	White	7-9	0-3	0-3
Kirsten	55-64	Female	White	7-9	0-3	0-3
Annabel	45-54	Female	White	10+	7-9	7-9
Dot	55-64	Female	White	10+	10+	10+
Bethany	34-44	Female	White	10+	10+	10+

Note. Demographic information from Qualtrics Survey.

As shown in Figure 6, participants vary in their levels of experience in both academic advising and higher education. Eight participants have three or less years of academic advising experience, while ten have four or more years, indicating that nearly half are relatively new to advising. In contrast, the majority, fifteen participants, have four or more years of experience working in higher education, with only three having three years or fewer. Figure 7 further demonstrates that the eight participants with zero to three years of advising experience still bring a diverse range of higher education backgrounds. Notably, five of these eight participants have four or more years of experience in higher education despite being newer to academic advising.

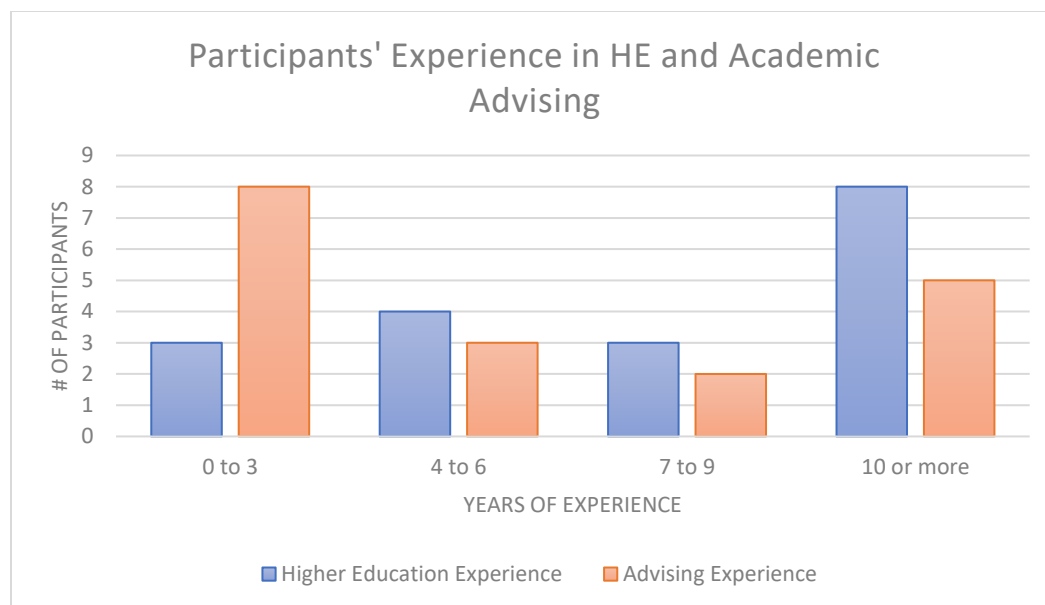


Figure 6

Participants' Experience in Higher Education and Academic Advising

Note. Information gathered from Qualtrics Survey [Image].

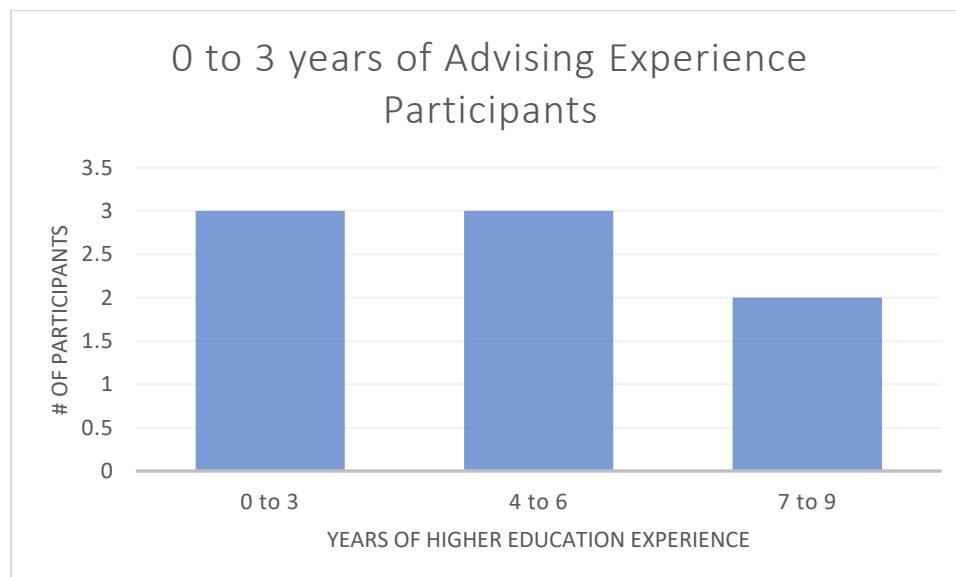


Figure 7

Zero to Three years of Advising Experience Participants

Note. Information gathered from Qualtrics Survey [Image].

finalized, a second round of coding was completed, descriptive coding. Following the analysis process described by Creswell and Poth (2018) in Figure 5, initial, in vivo, and descriptive coding were applied. Memoing, which is a brief phrase written down for future reference during the analysis, was also used (Godwin, 2025b). From the descriptive coding, themes emerged for each of the research questions.

The resulting themes for each research question are presented below.

RQ1: What are advisors' perceptions of their connection with students?

Theme 1: Many roles for Academic Advisors

Theme 2: Relationship Building as Foundational

Subtheme 1: Partnership and Collaboration

Subtheme 2: Advising as Teaching

Theme 3: Support System

Subtheme 1: Holistic Approach

Subtheme 2: Empowerment

RQ2: How does caseload size impact advisors' connections with students?

Theme 1: Caseload size Impacts Relationship Depth

Theme 2: Manageable Caseloads

Theme 3: Advisors feeling Overwhelmed

RQ3: To what extent are there shared solutions to institutional policies related to the size of caseload?

Theme 1: Optimal Caseloads

Theme2: Workload-Based Approach when Determining Caseload size

Theme 3: Restructured Institutional Organization

Subtheme 1: Standardized and Consistent Advising Practices

Subtheme 2: Regular Assessments

Subtheme 3: Administrative Support

In vivo, Descriptive, and Thematic Analysis

Initial coding was completed at the beginning of the data analysis. This type of coding is used to highlight first impressions of the initial reading of the data (Godwin, 2025a). This is also part of the Reading and Memoing analysis step, which is a distinct step in the initial process when beginning to analyze data; Creswell and Poth (2018) note that it involves reading the data several times and writing down memos. This was then expanded with in vivo coding by creating direct codes from the responses of the participants (Godwin, 2025). After creating a list of the in vivo codes, descriptive codes were applied. During the coding process, overarching themes began to emerge.

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of advisors' connections with students?

The data collected for Research Question 1 originated from the following questions on the Qualtrics Survey:

- Describe your definition of advising.
- Describe your perceptions of quality advising.
- How do you implement developmental theories into advising?
- Describe the advising approaches or best practices you use.
- Describe your most memorable moment in your academic advising career.

- Describe any additional thoughts or insights you would like to share about academic advising.

Theme 1: Many Roles of Academic Advisors

Academic advisors play many roles in students' lives. One of the themes that emerged from the responses of the academic advisors was the fact that academic advisors "wear many hats." Hazel explained,

I'm a life coach, a mentor, a mother figure, a confidant, a recruiter, a salesperson, and a constant source of support. There's no other title that fully encompasses all of these roles, but they are all integral to the work I do.

This multifaceted nature of advising was echoed across the participants' reflections. Charlotte described academic advising as "rooted in servant leadership," highlighting how advisors serve as "mentors, educators, and advocates" through a "proactive and personalized" experience that acknowledges the "multidimensional" development of students. Dot reinforced the advocacy component, stating that "to be an advisor means to be a student advocate," supporting them in various ways. Sally added that "implementing developmental theories into academic advising involves meeting students where they are" and tailoring the approach to their unique stages of growth. It is pivotal to be flexible and be the advisor the students need. Amanda supported this student-centered perspective, emphasizing the importance of doing "what feels right for that student." Suzi captured the dynamic nature of the role by explaining that "academic advising is a nonlinear process," while Alex summarized the role as "providing support, education, and direction to a student." Hazel also noted that academic advising involves "cultivating a relationship that evolves and strengthens throughout their academic journey." Skipper provided great insight that sometimes an advisor's relationship is "reactive," especially if the advisor is

still new to the role, Collectively, these insights illustrate the many roles and responsibilities academic advisors embrace to support and empower students holistically.

Theme 2: Relationship Building as Foundational

A second theme that emerged from the analysis was relationship building is foundational in academic advising. Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships with students is impactful. This theme also encompasses two subthemes: Partnerships and Collaboration and Advising as Teaching. Charlotte's explanation is best at describing the overarching theme. She described academic advising as "a relational practice where advisors build trust-based connections."

Through intentional relationship-building, Charlotte added that advisors engage in "critical inquiry and ethical guidance," empowering students to participate in "lifelong learning, self-reflection, and informed decision-making." This foundation of trust allows advisors to actively listen, empathize, and guide students in alignment with their goals. Bethany emphasized that quality advising "goes beyond a transactional meeting," describing it as a process of "learning about them as a person" and reaching out to sustain the connection. Similarly, Lou highlighted the importance of "clear and consistent communication," tailoring each interaction to the student's individual goals. Annabel and Kirsten echoed this idea, stressing relationship building through "multiple interactions" (Annabel) and "clear communication and transparency, even through the hard discussions" (Kirsten). Ellie simply stated, "quality advising involves building relationships with students," while Sally referred to it as a "relationship-driven process" rooted in mentorship and empowerment. Pat spoke of fostering "professional relationships grounded in trust, empathy, shared responsibility, and

consistent communication,” supported by proactive strategies like open-door policies and preparing ahead of meetings so that she can spend time building relationships with her students. Hazel emphasized the power of transparency and honesty in advising, noting that these elements help students gain clarity and confidence during critical decision-making moments. Alex shared a practice of “asking open-ended, inclusive questions” and “actively building rapport” through listening and outreach. Skipper described advising as “getting to know and help students,” while Jane reflected on how a meaningful conversation transformed a struggling student’s path, leading to a strong, lasting relationship. She noted, “If I wouldn't have gotten down to what it was that was bothering him and found a way to hopefully solve it, this student could be who knows where at this point. We now have an absolutely wonderful relationship.” Together, these insights affirm that relationship-building is not only foundational to academic advising but essential to fostering trust, growth, and student success.

Subtheme 1: Partnerships – Collaboration

Within the main theme of relationships, a subtheme occurred, partnerships and collaborations. Sally, Pat, and Amanda agreed that academic advising is a collaborative process. Sally stated that it is “collaborative process between students and advisors that helps students navigate their educational journey by guiding course selection, degree requirements, career goals, and personal development.” Pat and Amanda stated very similar but also added further definition “where students work with an advisor” as the relationship is a “shared responsibility” (Pat), and it included providing “active listening, clear communication, and empowering students to make informed decisions and take ownership of their academic journey” (Amanda).

Several advisors emphasized that this kind of collaborative advising depends on intentional strategies and interpersonal skills. Hazel highlighted how collaboration is built through “honest and supportive” guidance. She stated, “Quality advising is about offering clear, honest, and transparent guidance.” She also mentioned that one of her students “later expressed deep appreciation for my transparency and for helping him clarify his path.” Emma supported collaboration by asking students about their interests to better understand their preferences, while Samantha said that she “practices active listening.” She lets “student share their stories and dreams.” Dot noted the importance of “gaining knowledge about the student,” and Pat explained how building relationships allows her to “create connections and move systematically” through appointments. Suzi and Kirsten emphasized the give-and-take nature of advising, where advisors develop rapport and sometimes share their own experiences to strengthen the connection. Suzi said, “I find it best to develop rapport.” She likes to “encourage a discussion about everything the student needs rather than being an authority to the student.” Kirsten stated, “[I like to have an] open line of communication, sometimes exposing my own vulnerabilities and struggles to create connection.” This reciprocity reflects a true partnership, where both parties feel valued and heard. The strategies mentioned above show how thoughtful engagement lays the groundwork for a productive advising partnership.

Honesty and trust were also described as foundational to collaborative advising. As Hazel stated creating these connections “is about offering clear, honest, and transparent guidance,” while Suzi spoke about maintaining “open and honest interactions where students feel comfortable.” Skipper added that being “honest” and a “good listener” are essential, and Samantha pointed out the value of remaining “open and upbeat.” Kirsten discussed that she

builds “strong relationships” through “mutual respect” and “earning trust.” These advisors’ responses reinforce the idea that honesty enhances the advisor-student partnership.

The academic advisors also emphasized the value of celebrating students’ achievements, highlighting its role in fostering effective collaboration and strengthening partnerships. Sally noted the joy of “watching them complete their studies and achieve success.” She also noted that “it’s incredibly rewarding to see students take that next step toward their career goal, especially when they’ve work so hard to get there.” Lou recalled the meaningfulness of receiving a heartfelt thank-you message: “The most memorable moment was receiving a thank you email from a student.”

Lastly, advisors shared that collaboration requires a deep understanding of each student's unique journey. Hazel uses a “stoplight” framework to identify and prioritize student needs, ensuring a proactive and balanced advising experience.

The green represents areas where the student is thriving or excelling, the yellow highlights areas that may need some additional attention or improvement, and the red indicates issues that require immediate focus and prioritization. This framework allows us to address both strengths and challenges in a balanced, proactive way, ensuring that we tackle the most pressing concerns first while also acknowledging and building upon areas of success.

Jane echoed this personalized approach, stating, “Only by knowing their story can I effectively support them in writing their ‘college chapter’ and beyond.” These insights affirm that successful advising partnerships are rooted in empathy, individualized attention, and shared investment in student growth.

Subtheme 2: Advising as Teaching

The second subtheme under relationship building is seeing advising as teaching or academic advisors as teachers. Charlotte stated,

quality advising is educational in nature... Advisors act as educators by facilitating meaningful conversation that encourage self-reflection, goal-setting, and problem solving. Advising includes structured learning outcomes, where students gain competencies such as decision-making, resilience, and self-advocacy. The use of advising assessment and evidence-based practices ensures continuous improvement and enhances student success and retention... Advising, to me, is a form of teaching. Learning is a lifelong journey, and advising plays a crucial role in facilitating this journey. Advising should help individuals set clear goals tied to academic, career and personal development and create actionable plans to achieve them. I encourage critical thinking, self-reflection, and skill development with identified student learning outcomes. I empower students to become active participants in their own educational and personal development, equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary for lifelong learning.

Jasmine agreed at seeing “advising as teaching.” She said “I’m here to help them navigate what is sometimes a whole new world for them and they don’t know what they don’t know. This has to be taught.” Bethany even mentioned the importance of teaching in her illustration, “I try to implement a mindset of ‘Give a man a fish, he eats for a day but teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime.’” These perspectives underscore that academic advising is not merely a support service, but a form of teaching that fosters learning, growth, and the development of essential life skills.

Theme 3: Support System

The third and final theme that emerged from the data is support system which includes two subthemes: holistic approach and empowerment. The academic advisors described their roles as rooted in providing consistent, compassionate, and knowledgeable support throughout a student’s academic journey. Bethany explained that advising involves offering “guidance, advice, support, referrals, and more” as students navigate the complexities of higher education. Dot emphasized the importance of being a student advocate. She says, “That includes assisting them in many ways but especially in their quest to graduate with a degree. Guiding them and

assisting them in knowing their academic plan and the resources available to achieve success and reaching the ultimate goal of graduation.” Charlotte described advising as a “student-centered, developmental practice that fosters holistic growth by balancing challenge and support, guiding students through their academic, personal, and professional journeys.” She also noted the importance to “create a supportive environment.”

Advisors shared how they create a safe and supportive environment that empowers students to thrive. Jasmine noted that many students are entering “a whole new world” and often “don’t know what they don’t know,” underscoring the need for guidance at every step. Skipper described advising as “supporting and guiding students” through educational and career decisions, while Lou emphasized “helping students reach their academic goals by providing guidance and support while adhering to university policies and procedures.” Amanda, Alex, and Ellie similarly discuss providing guidance. Amanda said that academic advising is “a collaborative process that helps students achieve their academic, personal, and career goals through guidance and support.” Alex labeled academic advising as “providing support, education, and direction to a student.” Ellie also mentioned that advising is “guiding students through matriculation during their college career, offering input and advice on many facets of college life.”

The emotional and interpersonal dimensions of support also emerged strongly. Kirsten discussed developmental advising as a method for helping students think through decisions independently, while also connecting them to campus resources. She said, “[she guides] students to think through situations to come to their own conclusions, providing support and supplemental resources across campus as needed.” Samantha highlighted the importance of

“remaining compassionate, open and upbeat” and greeting students in a “friendly and pleasant tone.” Alex also mentioned being “friendly, professional, [and] encouraging.” In this way, advisors act not only as institutional guides but also as steady, supportive figures who help students overcome obstacles and move confidently toward their goals.

Subtheme 1: Holistic Approach

Holistic approach is the first subtheme of Support System. The academic advisors consistently mentioned looking at the whole student and having relationships with students that go beyond transactional. Kirsten explained her advising approach is one that involves “looking at the student as a whole person, not just a retention or graduation statistic.” Similarly, Hazel described holistic advising as a

developmental process that fosters the growth of skills, behaviors, and habits essential for success. The goal is for these qualities to extend beyond the classroom and university setting, positively impacting all aspects of an individual's life—both personally and professionally—throughout their lifetime.

Charlotte reinforced this, saying she “prioritizes the needs, growth, and well-being of students,” focusing on student development as “multifaceted, encompassing academic, personal, and career dimensions.” She says, “I strive to provide holistic support that addresses all facets of their lives. I encourage them to explore their passions and values, set and revise goals, and develop the resilience and adaptability needed to thrive in an everchanging world.”

Sally emphasized that holistic advising involves a “blend of structured academic planning and personalized support,” where advisors must meet “students where they are in their personal, educational, and professional growth.” Bethany agreed that “quality advising goes beyond a transactional meeting.” She noted, “I aim to have my students make choices that they think are in their best interest and give them tools to do so vs. just supplying the information.”

Samantha and Suzi both emphasized the importance of providing emotional support as an integral part of their advising practice. Samantha described her approach as offering “compassionate counsel.” Similarly, Suzi shared, “I strive to create an environment where students can feel comfortable to discuss whatever they need,” emphasizing her commitment to fostering a safe and supportive space for open dialogue which is a notable trait to the holistic approach.

Multiple advisors emphasized the importance of empowering students with lifelong skills. Pat described advising as a means of equipping students with “essential skills for lifelong learning and decision-making,” because it “goes beyond course guidance.” Amanda added that her holistic approach is grounded in “active listening, clear communication,” and helping students take ownership of their journey. She does “what feels right for [her] student[s].” Jane said that the “student/advisor relationship [is] to assist in not only educational goals, but career, and personal as well... not prescriptive/entirely class focused,” and Ellie simply noted that “quality advising involves the whole student and their well-being.” Jasmine described advisors as essential figures who “support students through major life changes by identifying challenges and providing the right resources.”

Holistic advising is about recognizing and responding to the full spectrum of a student’s experiences. As Charlotte stated, she “places the student’s needs and well-being at the forefront of all advising interactions.” Whether through offering emotional support, facilitating goal setting, or connecting students to campus resources, advisors are deeply committed to providing care that honors the complexity and individuality of each student’s journey.

Subtheme 2: Empowerment

The second and final subtheme for support system is empowerment. This is a core feature of the academic advisor and student relationship. It is giving students the tools and encouragement needed to succeed not only in courses but throughout academic career and after graduation. Amanda stated, “It empowers students with accurate information, fosters critical thinking, and connects them to resources, helping them make informed decisions and achieve their goals.” It also about helping student “take ownership of their academic journey.”

Charlotte described advising as “rooted in service and empowerment.” She shared that “advisors encourage students to engage in intentional exploration, push beyond their comfort zones, and take ownership of their educational journey.” She also highlighted that academic advising “strikes a balance between challenging students to expand their perspectives, develop resilience, and take ownership of their educational and personal goals.”

Kirsten shared a personal example of empowerment in action:

But I helped her to see that she was capable and could do this. While I don't do this for the kudos, it is always good to be made to feel that I am making a difference. Because that is my goal: to make a positive difference in the lives of my students and help them grow into successful, adaptable, resilient, and thriving adults.

Similarly, Hazel spoke about her previously mentioned “stoplight approach.” She said, “This framework allows us to address both strengths and challenges in a balanced, proactive way, ensuring that we tackle the most pressing concerns first while also acknowledging and building upon areas of success.” Developing these kinds of connections are essential to empowering students. Jane emphasized that empowerment in advising is not about directing students, but

rather about encouraging autonomy and decision-making so that, by graduation, students are equipped to navigate life independently. Jasmine supported this with a theoretical perspective, referencing Chickering's theory, "Chickering's theory highlights the importance of building skills, developing independence, and shaping identity, which advisors can encourage through goal-setting and self-reflection." Sally echoed these sentiments, stating that "quality academic advising is a relationship-driven process supporting student success through guidance, mentorship, and empowerment."

The results for Research Question 1 revealed that academic advisors perceive their connections with students as deeply multifaceted and essential to student development. Three major themes emerged: the many roles of academic advisors, relationship building as foundational, and advisors as support systems. Advisors described themselves as mentors, coaches, advocates, and educators who tailor their approach to meet each student's unique needs. Relationship building stood out as central to effective advising, emphasizing trust, collaboration, and open communication. Two key subthemes, Partnerships and Collaboration and Advising as Teaching, highlighted the importance of mutual respect, shared responsibility, and the educational role of advisors in fostering student growth. Additionally, advisors identified themselves as vital support systems, with subthemes focusing on holistic advising and empowerment. They expressed a commitment to understanding the whole student, providing emotional and academic support, and equipping students with lifelong skills. Overall, the data underscores that strong, trusting, and student-centered relationships are at the heart of impactful academic advising.

Research Questions 2: How does caseload size impact advisors' connections with students?

The data collected for Research Question 2 originated from the following questions on the Qualtrics Survey:

- Describe what type of students you advise.
- Describe the type of relationships you have with your students.
- Describe your feelings and your experiences toward your current caseload size.
- Describe if and how your experiences changed since you began this role.
- Describe your experiences with if or how your caseload size had impacted your advising and connections with your students.
- Describe any additional thoughts or insights you would like to share about academic advising.

Theme 1: Caseload size Impacts Relationship Depth

One of the main themes that emerged from the survey questions for research question two is caseload size impacts relationship depth. The academic advisors consistently indicated that smaller caseloads enable them to build stronger, trust-based relationships with students. Lou reflected, "I look forward to catching up with [my students], and I know most of them by name." Similarly, Pat shared, "When I started in this role I had a little over 200 students in my caseload. I knew everyone's name and met with them more in person." Sally expressed that she loves connecting with her students on a deeper level:

When... my caseload is more manageable, I can take a more proactive approach. I'm able to do targeted outreach, create resources, and provide more individualized support that helps students not just stay on track but truly succeed. I love being able to engage with students on a deeper level, helping them navigate challenges and plan for their futures beyond just course registration.

Conversely, many advisors also discussed the challenges and limitations that arise with larger caseloads. Sally also continued:

The size of my caseload has definitely had a significant impact on my advising and connections with students... When the caseload increases – especially when I’ve had to balance multiple caseloads or was the only advisor for nearly 1,000 students – those personal connections become much harder to maintain. I end up focusing on the basics... just trying to keep up with the sheer volume of advising tasks rather than focusing on the holistic support I would ideally like to offer.

Lou echoed this, stating, “When I have too many students, it's hard to get to know them.”

Similarly, Samantha noted, “The greater the caseload, the less time spent with students in conversation and advising counsel.” Kirsten added by explaining:

It's hard to make strong connections with 250 students, especially when advising times are tight and have to be rather structured like during priority registration planning. My department has worked to develop a Navigate communication plan where we send automated midterm kudos or graduation congrats and I think that helps create a perceived personal connection. At least I hope so.

Other advisors additionally reported that while they do their best, larger caseloads inevitably lead to more transactional interactions. Pat admitted, “Given the size of my caseload, I am not able to create close relationships with all of my students, and many may have limited interactions with me.” She also added, “I still build close relationships with many, but I feel that others would benefit from more attention if I had the time available to do so.” Jane described similar experiences: “When I had an average caseload size with my students, there was definitely some suffering as my schedule was busy and I didn't get to see everyone as much as they would have liked. (A part of this, I will say, is self-inflicted on the student part because, once again, most wait until the last minute).”

Amanda highlighted the use of technology with increasing caseload sizes: “My caseload is way too big to be able to provide the level of support students need. I'm able to leverage tech

tools to some extent, but my current students don't get the same level of service that I've been able to provide with smaller caseloads in the past.” Finally, Annabel stressed how expanding responsibilities reduce time for personal engagement with students: “Accelerated meetings are required to meet with increasing caseload; exponential increase of administrative duties, professional development/training requirements, and reporting constrains time able to invest in 300+ students.”

These perceptions and reflections from the academic advisors consistently show the theme: Caseload size Impacts Relationship Depth. To further explain, as caseloads grow, advisors shift from proactive, relationship-centered advising to a more transactional, survival-based model. As seen, many advisors work creatively to bridge the gap, but it shows the importance of caseload size to the quality and depth of the advisor and student relationship.

Theme 2: Manageable Caseloads

Manageable caseloads is a third theme for research question two. While it may not have been as consistent, some academic advisors perceived their current caseloads as manageable, such as Alex and Kirsten. Alex stated, “I feel that my current caseload is full but manageable,” and Kirsten elated, “I love my kiddos! My caseload is manageable.” Some also reflected on a time when they had a manageable caseload. When caseloads are manageable, they feel they are able to build strong connections with students and offer the support they need. Suzi expressed, “My caseload is around 275 and [this] feels optimum for me to keep up with the work and be able to provide personalized attention.” Hazel’s response showed the importance of having the time to make connections with students:

My caseload size feels manageable, and I’ve found that the depth of my connections with students really depends on the frequency of our meetings. The more I interact with

them, the easier it becomes to remember their interests, goals, and personal preferences. I make a conscious effort to reach out and communicate with all of my students, and while I may not hear back from everyone, it's rewarding when I do receive a reply. Additionally, spotting familiar faces on campus is always a gratifying reminder that those connections are having a positive impact.

When her caseload is manageable, Sally mentioned, "I can truly take the time to build meaningful relationships, get to know my students... I can reach out to students proactively, offer resources, and engage with them on a deeper level to ensure they feel supported." Lou offered an interesting perspective on manageable caseloads: "Too few students and I'm not fulfilled in my role."

Theme 3: Advisors feeling Overwhelmed

Theme 4, advisors feeling overwhelmed, slightly formed, but it is significant enough to note. Few academic advisors mentioned feeling overwhelmed, stressed, tired, and mentally drained due to the demands of their caseloads and other work responsibilities. Annabel shared that she felt "overwhelmed" about her current caseload size. Similarly, Charlotte stated, "I feel a little overwhelmed with my level of responsibility and the number of students I am responsible for;" she even mentioned that it was "stressful." Dot also stated, "I sometimes feel overwhelmed at times with the sheer number of advising appointments/emails/phone calls at certain times during the semester." Finally, Emma reflected to a time when she had 400 students on her caseload: "I went home tired and mentally drained."

The results for Research Question 2 revealed the perception is the size of academic advisor's caseload significantly impacts their ability to build and maintain meaningful connections with students. The three themes that emerged: caseload size impacts relationship depth, manageable caseloads, and advisors feeling overwhelmed. Smaller and more

manageable caseloads allow academic advisors to engage in proactive, personalized support and build deeper relationships, as seen in several of their reflections. In contrast, large caseloads and growing responsibilities often lead to time constraints, making interactions more transactional and limiting academic advisors' connections with students. While few expressed satisfaction with their current caseloads, many academic advisors shared feelings of being overwhelmed. Overall, the data shows clear perceptions that caseload size impacts advisors' connections with their students.

Research Question 3: To what extent are there shared solutions to institutional policies related to the size of caseload?

The data collected for Research Question 3 originated from the following questions on the Qualtrics Survey:

- Describe what you think is the optimal caseload size for advising at your current institution and why (range and reasons for suggestions).
- Describe recommendations you would suggest for institutional policies related to optimal caseload sizes for academic advisors.
- Describe recommendations you would propose for institutional policies regarding academic advising in general.
- Describe any additional thoughts or insights you would like to share about academic advising.

Theme 1: Optimal Caseload Size

A prominent theme for research question three that emerged was the identification of an optimal caseload size that balances student support with advisor capacity. As reflected in

Figure 9, the range most frequently cited was 150 to 175 students, with 250 appearing most consistent in the responses. The academic advisors emphasized that this number allows for personalized attention, meaningful engagement, and proactive advising. Annabel noted that “250 maximum” is necessary to allow for “excessive reporting, training, meeting times, permit for non-meeting interactions with students, and recruiting events.” She also stressed that “if career advising is an additional component then the number should decrease to 200 maximum.” Similarly, Charlotte supported a model of “250 per academic advisor,” with adjusted loads for directors to enhance student and staff support.

Several advisors preferred slightly smaller ranges: Samantha mentioned “150-175” is ideal to avoid stress, while Sally suggested “150-200” for quality, personalized advising and improved retention. Hazel explained, “a caseload size of 150-200 students is manageable if there isn’t a requirement for regular meetings with each student. However, if regular meetings were mandatory, I believe the optimal caseload would need to be reduced to around 125-150 students.” Lou stated, “200-250 is a sweet spot. I’ve had more and less. I can fully and thoroughly assist every student at this number. I can get to know them and help them grow. This number also keeps me from being bored.” While some, like Pat and Jane, acknowledged that needs may vary by program intensity, recommending “200–300” or “250–300” accordingly. They stressed that exceeding 300 students impairs behind-the-scenes work. Even those with higher thresholds, such as Alex at 280–330, noted this range still allows for “proactive communication.” Overall, participants agreed that lower caseloads enhance advisors’ ability to build relationships, prepare thoughtfully, and maintain high-quality advising.

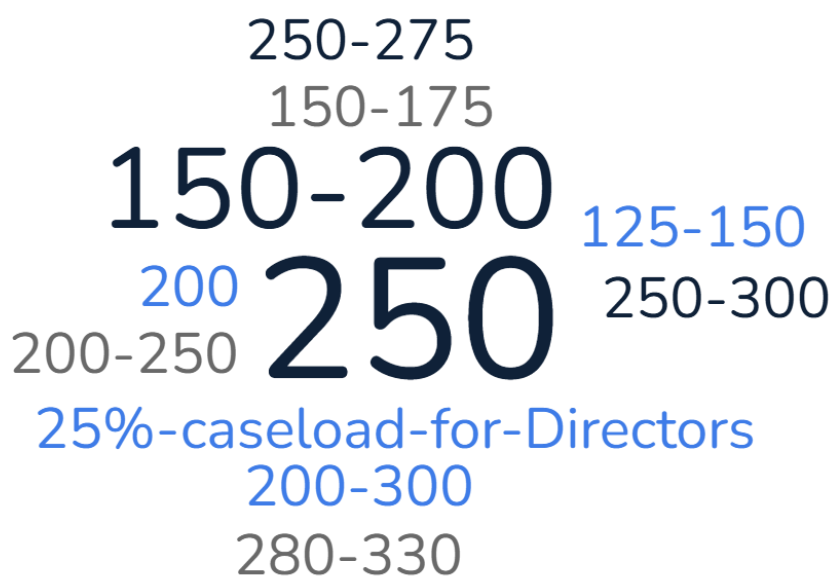


Figure 9

Optimal Caseload Size Word Cloud

Note. Information gathered from Qualtrics Survey [Image].

From the participants' perceptions, Table 3 was created to define small, manageable, and large caseload sizes.

Table 3

Academic Advisor Caseload Size Categories

Caseload Size Category	Number of Students on Caseload
Small	Fewer than 250
Manageable	250-300
Large	More than 300

Note. Information gathered from participants' perceptions.

Theme 2: Workload-Based Approach when Determining Caseload size

Another prominent theme that emerged for research question three was using a workload-based approach rather than just a headcount when determining a caseload size. Academic advisors have other responsibilities such as recruitment fairs and administrative paperwork beyond meeting and connecting with students. Charlotte cited, “Advisor responsibilities should be measured by workload, not just the number of students assigned. Factors like time spent per appointment, follow-ups, committee involvement, and non-advising duties should be considered when determining an advisor's capacity.” She also suggested that “institutions should develop a formula or workload model that accounts for advising duties beyond scheduled meetings (e.g., outreach, retention initiatives, programming, assessment).”

The complexity of certain programs was indicated as a factor when considering the workload for academic advisors. Sally and Suzi mentioned that some majors should require smaller caseload sizes. Sally said that it was important to “recognize that certain programs or departments may require a lower caseload due to higher complexity;” flexibility should be allowed. Suzi simply stated that determining a caseload size should “depend on how many different majors an advisor handles.” Lou agreed that majors should be taken into consideration when determining caseload size for academic advisors.

Several academic advisors mentioned that the type of students on a caseload should also be factored into the workload. Sally noted that “student demographics” should be taken into consideration. Amanda mentioned that one of the factors to consider for adjustments to caseload is “student needs.” Hazel suggested

Institutions should recognize that some student populations—such as first-generation students, transfer students, adult learners, or students with disabilities—may require

more intensive advising support. Caseloads for advisors should reflect these factors to ensure every student gets the attention and resources they need.

Some of the academic advisors emphasized that aligning caseload sizes with workload is essential for building strong student relationships and ensuring adequate support. Sally stated, “Advisors should have the time and capacity to engage in proactive outreach, provide mentorship, and assist with career development.” When discussing taking student demographics and needs into consideration, Hazel said that “setting a maximum caseload based on advisor capacity and student needs (e.g., 125-150 students for a more personalized advising experience) would allow advisors to maintain strong relationships and provide effective support.”

Academic advisors strongly advocated for a workload-based model when determining caseload size, emphasizing that student headcount alone does not accurately reflect the scope of their responsibilities. Factors such as program complexity, advisor duties beyond student meetings, and the varying needs of student populations must be considered to ensure fair and effective caseload distribution. A flexible, workload-informed approach allows advisors to offer meaningful, personalized support and build lasting connections with students. By incorporating these elements into caseload policies, institutions can better align advising structures with both advisor capacity and student success outcomes.

Theme 3: Restructured Institutional Organization

Another theme for research question three was a recommendation from the academic advisors to restructure some institutional organization and systems. The subthemes for this theme include standardized and consistent advising practices, regular assessments, and administrative support. Participants proposed various structural changes that would enable a

more student-centered and collaborative advising model. Annabel suggested to “restructure the Career Center.” She mentioned that currently, “Career Advisors are not currently working the responsibility level of Academic Advisors,” so she suggested that academic advisors become career advisors, too. This would allow the Career Center to focus on “employer relations and career events.” She also recommended to “reduce volume of executive level staff in non-student facing positions... and hire student facing advisors.” This would help address advising workloads more effectively and ensure more consistent student support. Samantha highlighted the inefficiencies caused by institutional/administrative barriers, such as catalog issues and course overrides, recommending that colleges adopt faster processes and standardize advising procedures campus-wide: “If the Colleges could quickly make small changes to the catalog so that advising time would not be spent doing subs or overrides.”

Several advisors also advocated formal advising checkpoints and early intervention models. Charlotte suggested developing structured advising touchpoints, including “mandatory advising for first-year students, milestone advising for academic progress checks.” She and Sally both recommended a tiered or team-based advising model. Charlotte noted that this team approach would “distribute advising responsibilities efficiently.” Sally expanded on this idea: “A team-based approach ensures that students have access to a wide range of support services, from academic planning to career development and mental health resources.” She also expressed the importance of integrating academic performance initiatives into the advising process. She stated, “Advisors should be actively aware of and refer students to programs that provide additional academic support for those facing challenges. Hazel and Suzi echoed the importance of early and team-based interventions. Hazel advocated for required advising within

a student's first semester to catch early academic or personal concerns: "Early advising helps ensure students are on the right track academically, and it provides an opportunity for advisors to address any early challenges, clarify academic expectations, and set long-term goals." While Suzi emphasized the value of a team-based approach for struggling students:

When students have multiple people involved in their education it makes sense to me the assorted faculty and staff meet with the student to make sure we are all on the same page. This would not be intended to overwhelm or shame the student but to support and ensure communication is open.

Collectively, these insights support the idea that intentional restructuring of advising systems and campus roles can significantly improve both advisor workload and student outcomes.

Subtheme 1: Standardized and Consistent Advising Practices

The first subtheme that emerged under restructured institutional organization is the importance of implementing standardized and consistent advising practices across the institution. The academic advisors emphasized the need for clear guidelines, structured processes, and consistent expectations to ensure high-quality, equitable support for all students. Several participants stressed the value of establishing consistent training and clear definitions for the advising role.

Charlotte offered a comprehensive vision for standardization in advising, recommending the creation of a structured onboarding process for new advisors, as well as consistent, ongoing professional development. She proposed institutions "create an onboarding process for new advisors to create consistency" and "establish guidelines for advising session length, follow-up expectations, and student learning outcomes to ensure a high-quality, intentional advising experience." To further strengthen consistency, Charlotte advocated for "structured advising touchpoints," such as "mandatory advising for first-year students" and "milestone advising for

academic progress checks.” She also highlighted the importance of “ongoing training and certification for advisors, covering advising theories, student development, equity-minded advising, and technology tools,” and participation in professional development opportunities like NACADA conferences. Sally reiterated many of these points, placing a particular focus on consistent expectations and support systems tied to caseload management. She proposed institutions should “establish clear caseload guidelines – set a recommended range for caseload sizes (e.g., 150–200 students per advisor) to ensure advisors can offer personalized attention and maintain meaningful relationships with students.”

Charlotte recommended creating a formal onboarding process for new advisors, supported by ongoing training, citing, there should be “ongoing training and certification for advisors, covering advising theories, student development, equity-minded advising, and technology tools.” Charlotte and Sally both mentioned the importance of a clear definition of advising and the role of an academic advisor. Like Charlotte, Sally emphasized the need for clarity in advisor responsibilities, recommending institutions “establish clear guidelines for the responsibilities and expectations of academic advisors,” such as advising hours, proactive outreach, and student engagement. Sally also advocated for “professional development for advisors” and highlighted the importance of “early intervention and proactive advising,” including “regular check-ins with students” and tracking academic progress. Additionally, she called for better “technology integration,” suggesting institutions “invest in advising software that helps track student progress, provides real-time data on academic standing, and facilitates communication between advisors and students.”

Other participants reinforced the desire for more consistency. Jane expressed frustration with vague or uneven expectations, stating, “We need well-defined training and clear expectations that every advisor should meet instead of loosey goosey guidelines.” Similarly, Suzi focused on consistency in documentation, saying, “I would like to see more uniform notes and an established time frame for reporting on appointments.” Lou also stated that she would like to see more centralized advising practices, especially regarding “training and operating procedures.” Collectively, these voices underline the critical need for standardized advising practices, clear role definitions, structured onboarding and training, and proactive institutional support to ensure a consistent and equitable advising experience for all students.

Subtheme 2: Regular Assessments

The second subtheme that emerged centers on the importance of conducting regular assessments to ensure that advising practices remain effective, equitable, and responsive to institutional changes. The academic advisors stressed the necessity of using data-driven methods to evaluate advising systems, caseload distribution, and advisor performance, with the ultimate goal of improving student outcomes and advisor capacity and well-being.

Charlotte suggested that institutions should “regularly assess and adjust caseload policies,” further explaining that they “require annual assessment of advising effectiveness based on student learning outcomes, retention data, and student satisfaction survey.” She also included that “policies should allow for flexibility and scalability as student enrollment and institutional needs evolve.” Sally echoed Charlotte, stating that institutions should “monitor advisor workload regularly – conduct periodic assessments of advisor workloads to ensure staffing levels align with student needs, especially during peak times like registration or

orientation.” She recommended that the assessments include “student feedback surveys, advisor performance assessments, retention metrics,” and they be used “to improve policies, refine advising strategies, and ensure that advising services meet the needs of students.”

Hazel reinforced these ideas from Charlotte and Sally by calling for “regular review and feedback mechanism,” which includes feedback from students and academic advisors. She offered that “this could involve surveys or focus groups to understand how caseloads are impacting the quality of advising.” Once the feedback is assessed, Hazel said, “adjustments can be made... to ensure advisors can provide effective and personalized support.”

Together, these perspectives reflect a shared belief in the necessity of regular, data-informed assessments to maintain the quality and responsiveness of academic advising. Such assessments not only ensure that student needs are being met but also help institutions adapt to changing conditions and uphold advisors’ wellbeing.

Subtheme 3: Administrative Support

The third and final theme that emerged for research question three is the pressing need for stronger administrative support for academic advising. Academic advisors across the board voiced concerns that institutional leadership often fails to understand the evolving nature of advising, undervalues their contributions, and provides insufficient resources or recognition to support their work. There was also a shared desire for deeper institutional investment, both structurally and culturally, in the advising profession.

Kirsten highlighted how advising has evolved beyond its transactional roots. She stated,

I would like for the institution to have a deeper understanding of how advising has evolved in the last 10 years or so. Our efforts as advisors way exceed the old stereotype of transactions advising, where all we did was tell students what classes to take.

She further explained the many roles that academic advisors play: “Advisors are now often in the role of mental health support, teacher, food provider, relationship counseling, family dynamics counselor.” She said that she would like to see “more university buy-in on the value of academic advising, especially in the holistic sense,” and this would be “a step in the right direction.”

Pat similarly called for a shift in institutional perspective and action, stating that “more research should be done at the institutional level to see what works best for students and advisors.” She suggested that “focus groups, retention data, and interviews can help get a picture of how we can improve student outcomes and keep advisors from burning out.” Pat also advocated for viewing advising as a serious, long-term profession: “To remember that advising is more than course selection and degree requirements. That there is research and professional development and to treat these positions as careers rather than jobs that can easily be replaced.” She expressed concern over stalled progress in her institution, noting, “This institution was a leader 11 years ago when they increased the number of advisors, but they have stalled since then in promoting advisor development and using best practices in advising.” Pat also warned that “frequent turnover in advising is usually detrimental to student outcomes” and urged institutions to “look at the obstacles that advisors are facing and continue to make progress.”

Charlotte echoed the need for systemic support and policy development, urging institutions to “create policy for academic advising on our campus” and “ensure all advising stakeholders (professional advisors, faculty advisors, administrators) understand and adhere to a consistent advising framework.” She called on institutions to “strengthen institutional support

for academic advising” by recognizing it “as a critical component of student success.” Charlotte also recommended that leadership “prioritize advising resources and funding,” “establish career progression pathways for advisors,” and “create an advising council or committee to oversee policy implementation, share best practices, and advocate for advising improvements.”

Other advisors voiced frustrations about how institutional leadership perceives and supports their roles. Lou stated plainly, “Universities need to recognize the importance of academic advisors in the student support ecosystem.” Jane was more direct, saying, “We need to do something about administrators really having an incredibly horrible outdated view on the profession of a whole.” Annabel also noted, “Executive Administration does not understand the daily role of academic advisors.”

Hazel focused on advisor well-being, advocating for policies that support work-life balance. She explained, “Policies should recognize the demands placed on advisors and support their well-being by ensuring reasonable workloads, professional development opportunities, and adequate time for both student advising and administrative duties.” She emphasized that burnout not only affects advisors but also “the quality of advising.” Hazel concluded, “Academic advising is truly a calling – a career that deserves far more recognition and appreciation than it currently receives.”

Sally captured the emotional toll of administrative neglect, stating, “The lack of support from leadership, especially in terms of addressing degree requirements, pay, and lack of progression within the field, is disheartening.” She expressed frustration with the disconnect between institutional messaging and action: “The disconnect between leadership’s words and

their actions can make it feel like the hard work we do as advisors is undervalued and underappreciated, even though we are making a real difference in students' lives."

Collectively, these perspectives illustrate that academic advising is a multifaceted and essential profession that depends on strong administrative support, well-defined policies, and a cultural transformation in how institutions value and invest in their advising staff. In the absence of such support, advisors are more susceptible to burnout, retention challenges increase, and the overall quality of student outcomes is compromised.

The results for Research Question 3 revealed shared solutions to policies and procedure regarding caseload size. The three themes that emerged from the responses were ideas for optimal caseload sizes, workload-based approach when determining caseload size, and restructured institutional organizations. Three subthemes that surfaced under restructured institutional organizations were standardized and consistent advising practices, regular assessments, and administrative support. There was a clear consensus among academic advisors on the need for caseload policies that prioritize workload over headcount. Most identified an ideal range between 150 and 250 students, with adjustments based on program complexity and additional responsibilities. Advisors emphasized the importance of regular assessments of caseload size and strong administrative support to ensure fair distribution and sustainable practices. A flexible, workload-based approach was widely favored to maintain high-quality, personalized advising while minimizing burnout. Shared solutions focused on aligning policies with advisor capacity to better support both student success and advisor well-being.

Summary

Across all three research questions, academic advisors expressed a strong commitment to student success and a desire for institutional structures that better support their roles. They described advising as an essential, relationship-based practice that contributes significantly to student retention, development, and success. However, high caseloads, inconsistent policies, limited time, and lack of administrative support pose major challenges. Advisors strongly endorsed reforms focused on manageable workloads, regular assessment, professional development, and systemic support as necessary for improving both advising practices and student outcomes

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This phenomenological case study explored the perspectives of academic advisors on academic advising, particularly regarding caseload sizes. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions of advisors' connections with students?
2. How does caseload size impact advisors' connections with students?
3. To what extent are there shared solutions to institutional policies related to the size of caseload?

This chapter discusses the interpretations of the data analyzed in Chapter IV. It also includes how interpretations relate to literature and theory. Additionally, this chapter includes limitations, implications for practice and future research, and a conclusion to this study.

Discussion

This section examines the interpretations of the data results from Chapter IV. Through discussion of the thematic findings, the significance is shown as it relates to the research questions and literature. Additionally, this chapter will also discuss the limitations of this study as well as the implications for not only practice and policy but for future research, too. Finally, the chapter will be wrapped up with a summary of this study.

Interpretation of Findings and Connections to Literature and Theories

Summary of Thematic Findings

This study examined the perspectives of academic advisors on academic advising, particularly regarding caseload sizes. Three research questions were developed to guide this

study, and themes emerged for each research question during the data analysis. The first research question sought to explore the perceptions of academic advisors regarding their connections with their students. The second research question explored their perceptions of how their caseload size impacted those connections. Finally, the third research question wanted to find any common and/or shared solutions to policy/practices regarding caseload size within academic advising. The following themes and subthemes emerged for the first research question:

Theme 1: Many roles for Academic Advisors

Theme 2: Relationship Building as Foundational

Subtheme 1: Partnership and Collaboration

Subtheme 2: Advising as Teaching

Theme 3: Support System

Subtheme 1: Holistic Approach

Subtheme 2: Empowerment

For the second research question, the following themes emerged:

Theme 1: Caseload size Impacts Relationship Depth

Theme 3: Manageable Caseloads

Theme 4: Advisors feeling Overwhelmed

With the third research question, the following three themes and 3 subthemes emerged:

Theme 1: Optimal Caseloads

Theme2: Workload-Based Approach when Determining Caseload size

Theme 3: Restructure Institutional Organization

Subtheme 1: Standardized and Consistent Advising Practices

Subtheme 2: Regular Assessments

Subtheme 3: Administrative Support

These themes reflect academic advisors' strong commitment to student success and their call for institutional structures that better support their roles. Advisors described academic advising as a vital, relationship-driven practice that significantly impacts student retention, development, and overall success. They also highlighted how caseload size can limit meaningful connections with students. The following sections provide an in-depth discussion of each research question and its corresponding themes.

Research Question 1: What are advisors' perceptions of their connection with students?

Three themes and four subthemes popped out when considering advisors' perceptions of their connection with their students. The three main themes are academic advisors serve many roles, relationship building is foundational for academic advising, and academic advisors provide a support system for students. The relationship building themes encompasses two subthemes, partnership and collaboration and advising as teaching. The support system theme also encompasses two subthemes, holistic approach and empowerment.

Theme 1: Many roles for Academic Advisors

Several participants noted that academic advisors play many roles in the lives of students. Hazel wrote that she felt like she is a “life coach, a mentor, a mother figure, a confidant, a recruiter, a salesperson, and a constant source of support.” She explained that “there’s no other title that fully encompasses all of these roles, but they are all integral to the work [she does].” He and Hutson (2016) echoes the integral role of academic advisors: advisors

can directly impact student development and success through interactions. Charlotte also agreed with the multifaceted role by describing the roles of advisors as “mentors, educators, and advocates.” Students are multidimensional, academic advisors should be flexible and adaptable and tailor their approaches to the unique stages of growth of students. This aligns with NACADA’s *Concept of Academic Advising*, which emphasizes that flexibility and tailoring approaches to individual students are essential components of the advising pedagogy (NACADA, 2006). Schlossberg stresses that academic advisors should provide support to students during this growth period (Barclay, 2017). Amanda stressed the importance of doing “what feels right for that student.” However, there are times when academic advisors are still more reactionary and transactional with students, especially when they are new to the academic advisor profession. The reflections from the participants highlight the many roles and responsibilities academic advisors must embrace to support and empower their students. Moody (2019) agrees that academic advisors are the hub of information for students.

Theme 2: Relationship Building as Foundational

Academic advisors consistently emphasized that building strong, trust-based relationships with students is foundational and instrumental to effective advising. This aligns with the NACADA’s *Core Competencies* pillar, the *Relational Competency*, which stresses that developing strong relationships with students is a key part of effective advising (Smith & Cunningham, 2022). Charlotte described advising as “a relational practice where advisor build trust-based connections,” empowering student through “critical inquiry and ethical guidance” that foster lifelong learning, self-reflection, and informed decision-making.” This perspective was echoed by many, with Ellie stating simple, “quality advising involves building relationships

with students,” and Sally referring to advising as a “relationship-driven process” grounded in mentorship and empowerment. Wise (2017) explained that cultivating these connections plays a significant role in supporting student development, because they help students feel a sense of belonging. Students that have a strong sense of belonging and a strong connection with their HEI are more likely to persist to graduation (House et al., 2020; Museus & Chang, 2021). According to Chickering’s fourth vector, developing mature interpersonal relationships, these trust-based connections are essential for students’ development and sense of belonging (Wise, 2017).

The participants highlighted the collaborative nature and partnership aspect of these relationships, viewing advising as a shared partnership. Sally explained it is a “collaborative process between students and advisors that helps students navigate their educational journey.” Pat described the advisor-student dynamic as one of “shared responsibility,” while Amanda emphasized the importance of “active listening, clear communication, and empowering students to make informed decisions.” This collaboration and partnership depend on mutual trust, transparency, and a genuine understanding of each student’s goals and challenges. These principles are reflected in NACADA’s *Core Value* of respect that involves building supportive relationship and maintaining a student-centered focus (NACADA, 2017). As Hazel noted, “quality advising is about offering clear, honest, and transparent guidance,” and Kirsten shared how she fosters connection through “mutual respect” and “earning trust.” These responses align with Crookston’s (1994) developmental approach to academic advising which focuses on establishing collaborative relationships with shared learning experiences. Additionally, academic advising is about collaborating with students to enhance their personal development and skills

(Cunningham, 2022; White 2015). Crookston (2009) also believes that the advising process is a shared learning experience for both advisors and students.

Bethany stated that quality advising “goes beyond a transactional meeting.”

Transactional advising is seen as prescriptive advising, which is very similar to relationships between doctors and patients. According to Crookston (1994) and Cunningham (2022), this means that advisors who use this method tell students what to do, and they expect the student to do it. It lacks establishing collaborative relationships. White (2015) asserted that advising should be more than a service, it should foster learning outcomes and meaningful growth. NACADA’s *Concept of Academic Advising* pillar also encompasses that academic advisors should foster relationships with students that help them grow throughout their journey (Cate & Miller 2015a; NACADA, 2006).

Academic advising is about intentionally building relationships. Alex shared that academic advisors should be “asking open-ended, inclusive questions” and should be “actively building rapport” through listening and outreach. Wise (2017) emphasized that academic advisors should create intentional relationships with students to help in their development and provide positive interactions needed for student encouragement to persist. Lou added that strong advising includes “clear and consistent communication,” which aligns with Jordan’s (2015) view on effective communication. Jordan expressed that effective communication skills are a key component to building relationships, and academic advisors should be aware of things that can affect their communication and interactions. These attributes align with the proactive and appreciative advising approaches. Grites (2013) explains that proactive advising is a shared responsibility, both the advisor and the student contribute. Bloom, Hutson, and He (2013)

explain that appreciative advising is also a collaboration experience, and there are six phases. The attributes shared fall into the following phases: build trust and rapport with each other, be inspired by each other's hopes and dreams, and challenge each other to set higher expectations for their educational experiences.

Additionally, many academic advisors framed their relationship as educational, likening it to teaching. Charlotte explained that “advisors act as educators by facilitating meaningful conversations that encourages self-reflection, goal-setting, and problem-solving,” adding that “advising, to me, is a form of teaching.” This aligns with having goals and learning outcomes which is part of a teacher-student relationship (White, 2015). Jasmine also explained, saying, “I’m here to help them navigate what is sometimes a whole new world for them – and they don’t know what they don’t know. This has to be taught.” Bethany added a teaching metaphor, stating, “I try to implement a mindset of ‘Give a man a fish, he eats for a day but each a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime.’” According to Cunningham (2022), O’Banion’s approach positions the advisor “as both the teacher and guide” in the advising process (p. 7). The *Curriculum of Academic Advising* from NACADA also encompasses teacher as a role for academic advisors (Cunningham, 2022; NACADA, 2006). Bethany’s response also aligns with NACADA’s pillar of *Concept of Academic Advising* that states that advisors need to help students learn how to navigate the university, think critically, and become a contributing member of society (Cate & Miller, 2015a; NACADA, 2006). Schlossberg emphasized that students need effective support to successfully navigate their new roles and transitions (Barclay, 2017).

Collectively, these responses affirm that relationship building is not only foundational to academic advising but also functions as a collaborative and educational practice. Through trust,

shared responsibility, and teaching moments, academic advisors help students grow personally and academically, ensuring deeper engagement, greater confidence, and continued student success beyond the institution.

Theme 3: Support System

The participants described themselves as a consistent, compassionate, and knowledgeable support system for students throughout their academic journeys. Barclay (2017) and Schlossberg (2008) explain that a strong support system should remain consistent, especially during times of transition to provide students with stability. Schlossberg (2008) also says that academic advisors should provide students with emotional support which encompasses compassion.

A few academic advisors voiced that they create a safe and supportive environment that empowers students to thrive. NACADA's (2017) *Core Value* of inclusivity explains the significance of creating safe and supportive environment for all students. The academic advisors also stressed the value of emotional presence and accessibility. Samantha spoke of the importance of "remaining compassionate, open and upbeat," while Alex described their demeanor as "friendly, professional, [and] encouraging." Suzi added that she strives to foster "an environment where students can feel comfortable to discuss whatever they need," reinforcing the importance of emotional safety and openness in advising. Furthermore, Charlotte emphasized the importance of "creating a supportive environment' that helps students explore their values, set goals, and build resilience. These responses from Samantha, Alex, and Suzi, are

examples of the impact of providing safe space that can support students through transitions, a core concern of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Barclay 2017, Schlossberg 2008).

At the heart of this role is a holistic approach to advising, one that prioritizes not just academic planning but also personal and emotional development which aligns with Crookston's (1994) view that development advising encompasses viewing students holistically. NACADA's pillar of *Concept of Academic Advising* encourages academic advisors to look at students holistically (NACADA, 2006). Bethany explained that advising involves offering "guidance, advice, support, referral, and more" to help students navigate the complexities of college life. Similarly, Dot emphasized being a student advocate, stating, "That includes assisting them in many ways but especially in their quest to graduate with a degree." However, O'Banion believes that course discussion should come after everything else with the student (Cunningham, 2022).

This support often involves meeting students where they are, academically, personally, and emotionally. Charlotte described advising as a "student-centered, developmental practice that fosters holistic growth by balancing challenge and support," and she strives "to provide holistic support that addresses all facets of their lives." Kirsten shared that she focuses on "looking at the student as a whole person, not just a retention or graduation statistic," and Hazel noted that holistic advising should "positively impact all aspects of an individual's life – both personally and professionally," which reflects the central principle of developmental advising (Crookston, 1994). In developmental advising, academic advisors are responsible for not only educational needs of students but other needs as well, such as personal ones (Grites, 2013), which supports Ellie's belief that "quality advising involves the whole student and their well-being."

A second part of this support system is empowerment, helping students develop confidence, autonomy, and the skills needed for lifelong success. Amanda captured this role clearly: “It empowers students with accurate information, fosters critical thinking, and connects them to resources, helping them make informed decisions and achieve their goals.” One of NACADA’s *Core Values* is empowerment which involves motivating and supporting students throughout their higher education experience (NACADA, 2017). Charlotte described advising as “rooted in service and empowerment,” encouraging students to “engage in intentional exploration, push beyond their comfort zones, and take ownership of their educational journey.” This theme connects directly to Chickering’s vector of developing purpose, where motivation and goal-setting are key (Wise, 2017).

Several advisors provided powerful examples of how they empower students. Kirsten recalled helping a student realize her potential: “I helped her to see that she was capable and could do this... my goal is to make a positive different in the lives of my students and help them grow into successful, adaptable, resilient, and thriving adults.” Charlie Nutt (2015), the former NACADA executive director explains, “Academic advising is all about making students feel that they can be successful” (as cited in Cunningham, 2022, p.3). Jane emphasized that advising should encourage independence, not dependence: “By graduation, students should be equipped to navigate life independently.” Jasmine connected this empowerment to theory, noting that “Chickering’s theory highlights the importance of building skills, developing independence, and shaping identity.” Jasmine also thought this can be done through “goal-setting and self-reflection.” Goal-setting is also part of the advising process, making them a reality for students (Bloom, Huston, & He, 2013).

Ultimately, the participants saw themselves not only as guides, but as advocates who provide students with tools, encouragement, and safe space to succeed. As Sally put it, “Quality academic advising is a relationship-driven process supporting student success through guidance, mentorship, and empowerment.” Their responses strongly align with O’Banion’s view on advising that academic advisor-student relationship is an “interactive partnership; the advisor serves as both the teacher and guide, with the aim of enhancing the student’s self-awareness and fulfillment” (Cunningham, 2022, p. 7). Together, these perspectives reinforce that academic advisors serve as essential support systems, offering holistic care and empowering students to grow, overcome obstacles, and achieve meaningful goals.

Research Question 2: How does caseload size impact advisors’ connections with students?

Three themes emerged during the data analysis for the impact caseload size has on connections with students. The three themes are caseload size impacts relationship depth, manageable caseloads, and advisors feel overwhelmed.

Theme 1: Caseload size Impacts Relationship Depth

The academic advisors consistently reported that smaller caseloads foster strong and more meaningful relationships with students. When caseloads are manageable, advisors can engage more deeply and proactively. As Lou shared, “I look forward to catching up with [my students], and I know most of them by name.” Pat reflected on an earlier point in her role when she had just over 200 students: “I knew everyone’s name and met with them more in person.” This sentiment aligns with the literature, which emphasizes that developmental and proactive advising models, those most conducive to student success, are only feasible with lower

caseloads (Aydin et al., 2019; Van Jura & Prieto, 2021). Sally expressed that with a manageable caseload, she can “take a more proactive approach,” provide targeted outreach, and “engage with students on a deeper level,” supporting not only course planning but their long-term goals. Her comments directly support research showing that lower caseloads enable more holistic and proactive advising, which leads to increase retention (Tyton Partners, 2021; Flaherty, 2023).

Conversely, larger caseloads were consistently described as a barrier to forming strong student connections. Sally acknowledged that when her caseload increased, at times nearing 1000 students, “those personal connections become much harder to maintain.” She added that the work became more about “just trying to keep up” rather than offering holistic support. Others similarly experienced this: “When I have too many students, it’s hard to get to know them,” said Lou, and Samantha observed, “The greater the caseload, the less time spent with students in conversation and advising counsel.” Students also perceive a disconnection reporting that in a high caseload environment, they feel rushed and disconnected (Orozco et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2017). Kirsten noted that with 250 students, it becomes difficult to build strong relationships, especially during peak advising periods, though strategies like automated messages can offer some level of perceived connection. Research supports her concern, explaining that students are less likely to form deep bonds with advisors when caseloads are high, affecting their sense of belonging and persistence (Tinto, 2017; Museus & Chang, 2021).

The participants also acknowledged that even with the best intentions, larger caseloads often force them into a more transactional approach. Pat admitted, “Given the size of my caseload, I am not able to create close relationships with all of my students,” though she strives to do so when possible. Jane added that “some suffering” occurred when her caseload was

larger, as she did not have time to meet with every student as often as needed. Amanda noted that although she uses technology to help, “my current students don’t get the same level of service that I’ve been able to provide with smaller caseloads in the past.” These responses show the value of the NACADA-supported recommendation that institutions must evaluate advisor workload comprehensively to ensure that relational advising is possible (CAS, 2023; Flaherty, 2023). These responses also reflect Crookston’s (1994) developmental advising model, which requires time and collaboration, both compromised when caseloads become unmanageable. As seen across responses, high caseloads force academic advisors into reactive, transactional interactions, whereas smaller caseloads support the intentional relationship-building that fosters student growth and retention. NACADA’s *Relational Core Competency* supports the intentional relationship building (NACADA, 2006) as well as the *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators* from ACPA and NASPA (2015).

These reflections reveal a clear pattern that as caseloads grow, the depth and quality of advisor-student relationships wane. Academic advisors shift from a personalized, relationship-based approach to a more reactive, task-driven model, highlighting the impactful role caseload size plays in shaping advising effectiveness. Uddin and Johnson (2019) support this by stating that larger caseloads leave advisors with less time to provide adequate support. They also mention that this could result in students dropping out of courses.

Theme 2: Manageable Caseloads

While not as commonly reported, several academic advisors expressed that their current caseloads felt manageable, allowing them to build stronger relationships with students, which

reinforces research that links caseload size with advising quality (Tyton Partners, 2021; Uddin & Johnson, 2019). Alex shared, “I feel that my current caseload is full but manageable,” while Kirsten noted enthusiastically, “I love my kiddos! My caseload is manageable.” In these cases, advisors felt more able to offer personalized attention and proactive outreach. Suzi reflected, “My caseload is around 275 and [this] feels optimum for me to keep up with the work and be able to provide personalized attention.” This aligns with research that developmental advising, marked by personal support and shared learning, is most effective with moderate caseloads (Crookston, 1994; Cunningham, 2022). Hazel emphasized how consistent and frequent interaction strengthens student relationships: “The more I interact with them, the easier it becomes to remember their interests, goals, and personal preferences.” Her proactive approach resonates with Schlossberg’s recommendation for individualized support during transitions (Barclay, 2017). Sally similarly described the benefits of a balanced workload: “I can truly take the time to build meaningful relationships, get to know my students... I can reach out to students proactively, offer resources, and engage with them on a deeper level to ensure they feel supported.” Interestingly, Lou offered a different angle, remarking, “Too few students and I’m not fulfilled in my role,” suggesting that workload satisfaction can also be tied to professional engagement and purpose. These reflections suggest that a well-balanced caseload support not only student success through individualized attention but also advisor satisfaction and professional engagement, which is something NACADA (2023) advocates for by encouraging institutions to balance efficiency with effectiveness.

Theme 3: Advisors feeling Overwhelmed

Although less prominent, a noteworthy number of academic advisors described feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and mentally exhausted due to the demands of their caseloads and additional responsibilities. The emotional toll of the role surfaced in reflections from several participants who linked high student volume and competing duties to burnout.

Annabel shared feeling “overwhelmed” by the size of her current caseload, while Charlotte admitted, “I feel a little overwhelmed with my level of responsibility and the number of students I am responsible for,” describing the experience as “stressful.” Dot echoed these concerns, stating, “I sometimes feel overwhelmed at times with the sheer number of advising appointments/emails/phone calls at certain times during the semester.” Emma recalled a particularly demanding period when she was advising 400 students, noting, “I went home tired and mentally drained.” These accounts highlight the need for institutions to consider not only student outcomes but also advisor wellness, a component emphasized in the ACPA & NASPA (2015) professional competencies. Emotional fatigue can compromise advising quality, ultimately affecting student retention which is supported by findings from Applegate and Hartleroad (2011) that argued that overwhelmed advisors struggle to meet the needs of students.

These responses, though fewer in number, reveal that for some advisors, the workload can reach a point where it negatively impacts their well-being. This theme reveals the emotional burden that often accompanies high advising demands and the need for institutions to monitor and manage caseload expectations to support advisor wellness.

Research Question 3: To what extent are there shared solutions to institutional policies related to the size of caseload?

Three themes and three subthemes surfaced when exploring shared solutions to institutional policies related to the size of caseload. The three themes are optimal caseloads, workload-based approach when determining caseload size, and restructure institutional organization. The restructured institutional organization consists of the following three subthemes: standardized and consistent advising practices, regular assessments, and administrative support.

It is notable that most participants in this discussion have between zero and three years of academic advising experience. However, five of the eight participants also have four or more years of experience working in higher education. Interestingly, among the ten participants with four or more years of advising experience, half chose not to respond to questions on the survey that related to Research Question 3.

Theme 1: Optimal Caseloads

A key theme that emerged from research question three was the identification of an optimal caseload size, one that balances advisor capacity with the ability to provide personalized, high-quality support to students. While preferences varied slightly, most academic advisors cited 150 to 250 as ideal, with 250 frequently mentioned as a realistic upper limit. This is consistent with NACADA's (2023) guidance to consider advisor duties and institutional mission rather than applying a one-size fits-all standard (CAS, 2023).

Advisors emphasized that smaller caseloads allow for deeper engagement and proactive advising. As Annabel stated, “250 maximum” is necessary to accommodate the growing demands of “reporting, training, meeting times, non-meeting interactions with students, and recruiting events.” She also noted that if career advising is included, “the number should decrease to 200 maximum.” Charlotte similarly supported a model of “250 per academic advisor,” with reduced loads for directors to enhance support structures. These suggestions follow the guideline from CAS (2023) that recommends that institutions need to consider the workload of academic advisors beyond the number of students. These numbers also closely align with NACADA data, which show the median caseload at 296 and highlight that exceeding this number negatively impacts advising outcomes (Flaherty, 2023).

Some advisors preferred lower numbers. Samantha identified “150–175” as ideal to avoid advisor stress, while Sally suggested “150–200” to ensure meaningful student connections and stronger retention outcomes. Hazel explained, “A caseload size of 150–200 students is manageable if there isn’t a requirement for regular meetings. . . [but] if regular meetings were mandatory... it would need to be reduced to around 125–150 students.” This reflects developmental advising principles (Crookston, 1994), which emphasize collaboration and sustained student support, goals that become harder to achieve with high caseloads.

Lou described “200–250” as a “sweet spot,” sharing, “I can fully and thoroughly assist every student at this number. I can get to know them and help them grow. This number also keeps me from being bored.” This supports Schlossberg’s (Barclay, 2017) recommendation that strong support systems require sustained engagement. Others, such as Pat and Jane, acknowledged that ideal caseloads may vary based on program complexity, recommending

ranges of “200–300” or “250–300,” while warning that exceeding 300 students on the caseload limits time to complete everything such as connecting with students and other responsibilities. Even Alex, who reported a caseload of “280–330,” felt it still allowed for “proactive communication.” The shared conclusion was that lower caseloads result in better relationship-building, increased retention, and greater job satisfaction; outcomes also supported by the Tyton Partners (2021) study, which demonstrated that reducing caseloads by 100 can increase retention by one percentage point.

Overall, participants agreed that keeping caseloads within a manageable range is essential for fostering strong advisor-student relationships, supporting student success, and preventing advisor burnout.

Theme 2: Workload-Based Approach when Determining Caseload size

Another significant theme that surfaced for research question three was the need to adopt a workload-based approach, rather than relying solely on headcount, when determining caseload size. Academic advisors emphasized their roles involve far more than meeting with students, including recruitment events, administrative tasks, committee participation, and proactive outreach.

Charlotte emphasized that “advisor responsibilities should be measured by workload, not just the number of students assigned,” noting that institutions should develop a formula that accounts for duties like “retention initiatives, programming, [and] assessment.” This approach, she argued, would provide a more accurate reflection of advisor capacity. Her reflections also support CAS’s (2023) assertion that effective advising requires balance between efficiency and quality. Sally and Suzi echoed this sentiment but also added that program

complexity should also be considered. Sally explained that some departments may require smaller caseloads due to higher complexity and stressed the need for flexibility, while Suzi noted caseload size should “depend on how many different majors an advisor handles.” Their responses reflect O’Banion’s advising model which suggests that student goals and program selection must be prioritized before course scheduling (Cunningham, 2022). O’Banion’s advising model is often highlighted in NACADA’s *Concept of Academic Advising* (Cunningham, 2022; NACADA, 2006).

Similarly, Amanda pointed to the importance of recognizing “student needs,” and Hazel noted that certain populations, like first-generation, transfer, or adult learners, “may require more intensive advising support.” She concluded that institutions should set caseloads accordingly “to ensure every student gets the attention and resources they need.” This view aligns with Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, which underscores the need for differentiated support based on student situation, resources, and needs (Barclay, 2017). CAS (2023) standards also recommend taking academic status and student needs into consideration when determining caseload sizes. For example, students that are undecided and students that are on academic probation may require more advising time. No one student is alike (Thompson & Prieto, 2013; Tinto, 2017; Zapata & Onwuegbuzie, 2023).

The participants agreed that a workload-based system better supports student success and relationship-building. Sally remarked, “Advisors should have the time and capacity to engage in proactive outreach, provide mentorship, and assist with career development.” In sum, the academic advisors advocated for a more flexible, holistic approach to caseload assignment, one that considers the full scope of their responsibilities and the unique needs of their students.

This model, they argued, is essential for sustaining high-quality advising and advancing institutional goals for student engagement and success.

Theme 3: Restructured Institutional Organization

The participants recommended a number of institutional and structural changes to create a more student-centered and collaborative advising model. One prominent suggestion involved realigning roles and responsibilities within the university to better support advising functions. Annabel proposed to “restructure the Career Center,” suggesting that that academic advisors also serve as career advisors, while the Career Center focuses on “employer relations and career events.” This reflects a broader movement toward integrated advising models, where support is streamlined and student-centered (NACADA, 2023). Cate and Miller (2015a) listed career advising knowledge and skills as part of the *Informational Competencies for Academic Advising*. She also recommended reducing “executive level staff in non-student facing positions... and [hiring] student-facing advisors” to better manage advising workloads and improve consistency of student support.

Academic advisors also pointed to the need for more efficient administrative processes. Samantha cited frequent delays caused by catalog updates and course overrides, advocating for campus-wide improvements: “If the colleges could quickly make small changes to the catalog so that advising time would not be spent doing subs or overrides.” As part of the *Informational Competency* in NACADA, academic advisors should know the curriculum (Cate & Miller, 2015a; Smith & Cunningham, 2022), so they would know how the processes could serve as barriers to students and the significance of expediting some of these procedures. This also aligns with

some researchers, including Chickering, that believe that student development should be considered when designing and redesigning student programming (Hemwall et al., 1999).

In addition to streamlining processes, advisors called for structured advising checkpoints and early intervention strategies to better support students. Academic advisors would need to know the different resources available to students to provide that better support. This type of knowledge is recommended under the *Informational Competency* in NACADA (Smith & Cunningham, 2022). Charlotte recommended “mandatory advising for first-year students” and milestone-based progress checks, while also endorsing a team model that would “distribute advising responsibilities efficiently.” Sally expanded on the value of this model, explaining, “A team-based approach ensures that students have access to a wide range of support services, from academic planning to career development and mental health resources.” She also emphasized integrating academic support programs into advising: “Advisors should be actively aware of and refer students to programs that provide additional academic support for those facing challenges.” These practices are backed by Schlossberg’s emphasis on early intervention during transitions (Barclay, 2017) and Chickering’s call for mature interpersonal development through consistent contact (Wise, 2017).

Hazel and Suzi reiterated the importance of early and collaborative intervention. Hazel advocated for required advising early in a student’s academic journey: “Early advising helps ensure students are on the right track academically... and set long-term goals.” Suzi stressed the benefit of a team approach for at-risk students, stating, “It makes sense to me [that] assorted faculty and staff meet with the student... to support and ensure communication is open.” These models promote intentional support, consistent with proactive and appreciative advising

frameworks that are reflected in the *Conceptual Competency* in NACADA. (Varney, 2013; Bloom et al., 2013; Smith & Cunningham, 2022).

A recurring subtheme in response to research question three was the importance of implementing standardized and consistent advising practices across the institution. The academic advisors emphasized that clear guidelines, structured processes, and defined expectations are essential for ensuring high-quality and equitable support for all students.

Charlotte advocated for a comprehensive approach to standardization, recommending the development of a formal onboarding process for new advisors and consistent training over time. She suggested institutions “create an onboarding process for new advisors to create consistency” and “establish guidelines for advising session length, follow up expectations, and student learning outcomes to ensure high-quality, intentional advising experience.” She also supported the implementation of “structured advising touchpoints,” such as mandatory advising for first-year students and milestone advising throughout academic progression. Lou would also like to see more centralized features such as these in advising. These ideas align with NACADA’s *Core Values* of professionalism and commitment (2017), as well as the CAS guidelines promoting effective and equitable advising (CAS, 2023).

Charlotte further stressed the need for “ongoing training and certification for advisors, covering advising theories, student development, equity-minded advising, and technology tools.” Sally agreed with this approach, adding the importance of clear expectations tied to caseloads. She recommended institutions “establish clear caseload guidelines – set a recommend range for caseload sizes (e.g. 150-200 students per advisor): to allow for

meaningful, personalized advising that includes early intervention, regular student check-ins, and technology integration. These attributes are components of proactive advising that are only successful when standardized across the institution (Varny, 2013; White, 2015).

Other academic advisors expressed similar concerns about inconsistency. Jane called for more structure, stating, “We need to well-defined training and clear expectations that every advisor should meet instead of loosey goosey guidelines.” Suzi emphasized the need for uniform documentation practices: “I would like to see more uniform notes and an established time frame for reporting on appointments.” These concerns highlight the *Relational Competency* pillar of NACADA, which relies on mutual understanding, clarity, and transparency (Smith & Cunningham, 2022). These calls for standardization reflect research findings that lack of advising consistency leads to inequities in student experience and advisor frustration (He & Hutson, 2016; White, 2015). A clear institutional framework improves training, communication, and the student journey.

Performing regular assessments is a second subtheme that surfaced when analyzing research question three. It highlighted the importance of ongoing, data-informed assessment to ensure advising practices remain effective, equitable, and responsive to changing institutional needs. Advisors stressed that regular evaluations are essential for supporting both student outcomes and advisor capacity. Campbell and McWilliams (2016) encourage regular evaluations, because they mention that academic advising programs should develop, implement, and regularly review their advising missions.

Charlotte emphasized the need to “regularly assess and adjust caseload policies” and recommended “annual assessment of advising effectiveness based on student learning outcomes, retention data, and student satisfaction surveys.” Basing advising effectiveness on student learning outcomes reflect that advising as teaching model (Cunningham, 1994; Cunninham, 2022). She also noted that polices must allow for “flexibility and scalability as student enrollment and institutional needs evolve.”

Sally reiterated these ideas, urging institutions to “monitor advisor workload regularly” and “conduct periodic assessments of advisor workloads to ensure staffing levels align with student needs, especially during peak times like registration or orientation.” She suggested using tools such as “student feedback surveys, advisor performance assessments, [and] retention metrics” to refine strategies and policies.

Hazel reinforced the importance of feedback loops and collaborative evaluation, advocating for a “regular review and feedback mechanism” involving both students and advisors. She suggested methods like surveys and focus groups to evaluate how caseloads affect advising quality and stated, “adjustments can be made... to ensure advisors can provide effective and personalized support.” This is a practice supported by NACADA’s emphasis on continuous improvement through data (NACADA, 2006). Regular assessment would provide insight and allow institutions to respond to changing enrollment patterns, student needs, and advisor capacity. This theme connects closely with institutional accountability, which is increasingly tied to student outcomes and federal funding (Erickson & Kelchen, 2020). Tyton Partners (2021) found through a survey that advisors identified caseload size as a major barrier

to enhancing advising practices, highlighting the need for regular assessments to ensure advisors have the capacity to refine and improve their work.

The third and final subtheme to emerge from research question three is the fundamental need for stronger administrative support for academic advising. Advisors voiced a shared concern that institutional leadership often lacks a clear understanding of the evolving role of advisors, undervalues their contributions, and fails to allocate the necessary resources or recognition to support their work effectively. Kirsten explained how the profession has transformed: “Our efforts as advisors way exceed the old stereotype of transactional advising, where all we did was tell students what classes to take.” This is supported by the history of advising where in the beginning academic advising was prescriptive and transactional. However, Burns Crookston’s definition of advising moved it away from prescriptive to a developmental approach (Cunningham, 2022; White, 2015). NACADA (2006) also emphasizes the value of advisors understanding the history of academic advising, as outlined in the *Conceptual and Informational Core Competencies*. She further highlighted that academic advisors now serve multiple roles, “mental health support, teacher, food provider, relationship counseling, family dynamics counselor,” and called for “more university buy-in on the value of academic advising, especially in the holistic sense.”

Pat echoed the call for institutional change, suggesting that more research be conducted to determine what supports both advisors and students best. “Focus groups, retention data, and interviews,” she said, could help institutions “improve student outcomes and keep advisors from burning out.” She also urged institutions to treat advising as a career, not just a job, warning that “frequent turnover in advising is usually detrimental to student outcomes.”

Charlotte emphasized the need for clear policies and strategic investment. She recommended institutions “create policy for academic advising on our campus” and ensure all stakeholders “understand and adhere to a consistent advising framework.” By creating and implementing policies regarding academic advising, institutions will show their investment and overall support in the value of the profession. NACADA (2017) recommends that every higher education institution have a set of their own core values, to provide support for the academic advisors. She also called for career pathways, better funding, and the creation of advising councils to “advocate for advising improvements.”

Other academic advisors voiced direct concerns about the disconnect between leadership and the realities of academic advising. Lou stated, “Universities need to recognize the importance of academic advisors in the student support ecosystem.” Jane was more blunt: “We need to do something about administrators really having an incredibly horrible outdated view on the profession as a whole,” while Annabel pointed out that “Executive administration does not understand the daily role of academic advisors.”

Advisor well-being was another consistent concern. Hazel advocated for policies that support work-life balance and sustainable workloads: “Policies should recognize the demands placed on advisors and support their well-being... burnout affect the quality of advising.” She also added that “academic advising is truly a calling – a career that deserves far more recognition and appreciation than it currently receives.” Her statements echo ACPA & NASPA (2015) guidelines that stress wellness and sustainability as professional competencies. Sally summarized the emotional toll of administrative neglect, noting the disconnect between “leadership’s words and their actions.” NACADA (2017) recommends that higher education

institutions have their own set of core values for academic advising to provide support for its academic advisors.

These findings reflect a strong consensus among advisors on the need for intentional restructuring of institutional systems to reduce advisor burden and enhance student support. Key recommendations include developing standardized advising policies, clearly defined roles, comprehensive training, and effective use of technology. Advisors also emphasized the importance of routine, data-driven assessments to optimize workloads and maintain high-quality services. Collectively, these insights reinforce that academic advising is a complex, student-centered profession that requires institutional commitment, policy clarity, and cultural respect to prevent burnout and support meaningful student outcomes.

Limitations

This study relied on the responses from participants from an anonymous survey which meant they could not be contacted again for further questions or clarity. The survey was also emailed to the academic advisors during a high peak advising period. The advisors were meeting with students to prepare for summer and fall registration. One of the anticipated limitations was that academics advisors could choose not to participate. However, after conducting the survey, academic advisors participated, but their responses could have been restricted due to the timing of the survey. A limitation that falls within this frame is that half of the ten participants that have four years and over of advising experience opted not to answer certain questions on the survey, particularly ones aligning with suggestions on policy changes for Research Question 3. Due to the anonymity, the participants were not contacted for a follow up to complete any gaps. The participants who mostly identified as female with one preferring

not to answer was another limitation. This could have impacted on the generalizability of the responses. The participants also were all white, this could have also impacted the generalizability of the responses. The academic advisors at the studied institution included both men and women from diverse ethnic backgrounds, but only white females chose to participate, apart from one participant that preferred not to identify gender. This was not an anticipated limitation.

One of the delimitations of this study is its focus on academic advisors whose primary role on campus is advising. As anticipated, faculty advisors, career advisors, peer advisors, and other types of advisors who do not serve as primary academic advisors were excluded from this study. Additionally, the research was conducted at a single four-year public higher education institution, which served to narrow the scope, but could also be considered a limitation.

Implications for Practice

This study's implication for practices revolves around connections and relationships with students. Several participants mentioned the significance of building strong relationships and partnerships with students. Ellie emphasized that "quality advising involves building relationships." According to Wise (2017), advisors should create relationships with students, because these positive interactions are needed for students to persist. Additionally White (2015) says that academic advisors have a unique opportunity to reach all students, since surveys have shown that students turn to advisors more often than other faculty and staff on campus (Bower et al., 2019; He & Huston, 2016; Uddin & Johnson, 2019).

Given the importance of relationship-building in academic advising, it is essential to examine the barriers that hinder it. The data implies that the caseload size impacts the connections with students. The academic advisors share responses that demonstrated that when the caseloads were too large that they did not connect with students as often. Larger caseloads also made them revert to transactional advising which is not linked to building strong relationships with students (Cunningham 2022, White, 2015). One of NACADA's (2017) core values is commitment which includes dedication to students. If caseloads are too big, then academic advisors cannot show that dedication. This can also have an impact on retention as the literature states academic advisors are connected to retention, positively (Sanders & Killion, 2017).

Conversely, if caseloads are smaller or more manageable, academic advisors can create meaningful connections with their students. Sally expressed, "When... my caseload is more manageable, I can take a more proactive approach. I am able to do targeted outreach, create resources, and provide more individualized support that helps students on a deeper level." The literature supports these connections: Vander Shee (2007) explains that academic advisors create individualized care for each student. They work directly with students and know when to intervene at pivotal moments.

Another key implication of this study is the identification of shared strategies to address the breakdown in advisor-student connections impacted by large caseloads. Several academic advisors suggested workload-based approach when determining the size of caseload and regular data-informed assessments for caseloads. Charlotte responded that "institutions should develop a formula or workload model that accounts for advising duties beyond scheduled

meetings” such as “outreach, retention initiatives, programming, [and] assessment.” This supports CAS (2023) recommendation for academic advising programs to consider the advisor workload beyond the number of students, including academic status of students, students’ needs, other responsibilities, and the time required for the appointments.

Sally suggested that institutions should “monitor advisor workload regularly, conducting periodic assessments of advisor workloads to ensure staffing levels align with student needs.” Hazel also suggested that the monitoring could “involve surveys or focus groups to understand how caseloads are impacting quality of advising.” Once the feedback is analyzed, Hazel said, “adjustments can be made...to ensure advisors can provide effective and personalized support.” This is supported by the Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators guidelines that suggest advising practices should be evaluated (ACPA & NASPA, 2015).

Future Research

The findings of this study point to several noteworthy areas for future research that can help further explore academic advising practices and improve institutional support structures. These areas include advisor burnout and turnover, time constraints with academic advisors, student perceptions of advising relationships, the connection between advising and student success metrics such as retention and/or graduation rate, professional development, and the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on advising models.

One critical area that warrants deeper exploration is advisor burnout and turnover. Multiple participants spoke to the physical and emotional exhaustion that can accompany advising roles, particularly when caseloads are high or responsibilities expand beyond

reasonable limits. Hazel emphasized the need for institutions to promote advisor well-being: “Advisors should also be encouraged to take breaks and maintain work-life balance to prevent burnout, which can affect the quality of advising.” Emma shared a personal account of burnout: “I had a semester with almost 400 students... I went home tired and mentally drained.” Sally discussed the consequences of turnover, stating, “The biggest challenge has been the constant turnover, with six advisors quitting in just over two years.” Pat added, “Frequent turnover in advising is usually detrimental to student outcomes,” emphasizing the institutional responsibility to create supportive environments. Future research should investigate the causes of advisor burnout, its correlation with turnover rates, and the effects this has on both advisors and the students they serve. Mixed-methods studies could offer valuable insights into how staffing stability influences student engagement, satisfaction, and retention.

A second area that is in need for further study is the masked theme that appeared in research question two. This theme highlights how time constraints, driven by large caseloads, additional responsibilities, and peak advising periods, significantly hinder advisors' ability to build meaningful, supportive relationships with students. While some advisors adapt by finding balance or receiving support from leadership, most expressed that time limitations reduce the quality and depth of their advising. Further investigation is needed to explore how institutions can address these reported issues to ensure advisors have the time and capacity to engage with students effectively.

Another area in need of further study is student perceptions of their relationships with academic advisors. While this study focused on advisor perspectives, understanding the student experience is equally vital. Future qualitative or mixed-methods research should explore how

students define meaningful connections with their advisors, what factors contribute to trust and support, and how these relationships impact their academic success, decision-making, and sense of belonging. This line of inquiry would complement the current study's findings and help institutions design advising systems that are responsive to student needs and preferences.

Another opportunity for future inquiry is the quantitative assessment of advising's impact on retention and graduation rates. While existing literature supports the positive correlation between academic advising and student success (Bowers et al., 2019), further institution-specific studies could strengthen this evidence base. Researchers could use institutional data to analyze advising frequency, advisor caseloads, and advising delivery models in relation to student persistence, credit accumulation, and degree completion. Such data-driven studies would be particularly useful for institutional leaders seeking to justify investments in advising resources and personnel.

Additionally, research should explore the impact of onboarding and continuous professional development for advisors. The steep learning curve reported by advisors such as Suzi, who described the role as particularly complex, suggests a gap in advisor preparation. Charlotte emphasized the importance of onboarding, recommending that institutions "create an onboarding process for new advisors to create consistency." Future studies could examine the effectiveness of structured onboarding programs, mentorship models, and ongoing training in improving advisor performance, satisfaction, and student outcomes.

Finally, the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic advising presents another area for further research. Lou observed that "the pandemic completely changed the

way we advise,” noting its influence on both advising methods and the challenges faced by students. As many institutions rapidly transitioned to virtual or hybrid advising models, future research could explore how these shifts affected advisor-student engagement, access to services, and student success. Studies might also examine which aspects of remote advising should be retained or reimaged in the post-pandemic environment.

Collectively, these areas for future research will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the advising profession, inform evidence-based improvements, and support the creation of advising systems that meet the evolving needs of students, advisors, and institutions.

Conclusion

This phenomenological case study explored the perceptions of academic advisors regarding their relationships with students, the impact of caseload size on those relationships, and shared solutions to improve institutional advising practices. Through qualitative analysis of advisor responses, the study identified recurring themes that emphasized the multifaceted role of academic advisors, the foundational importance of relationship-building, and the critical need for manageable workloads.

The study found that excessive caseloads significantly hinder the depth and quality of advisor-student relationships, often forcing advisors into reactive, transactional interactions rather than proactive, developmental partnerships. Conversely, when caseloads were reported as manageable, advisors expressed greater satisfaction and a stronger ability to engage with students meaningfully.

Participants also shared practical, institution-focused recommendations to improve advising systems, such as adopting workload-based caseload models, implementing structured onboarding and professional development, and conducting regular assessments of advisor capacity and student needs. Advisors called for stronger administrative support and recognition of their evolving roles within higher education.

Finally, the study reinforces the dynamic role academic advising plays in supporting students academically, personally, and professionally. By examining advisor experiences and proposing data-informed solutions, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogue on improving academic advising structures and practices. Further research in the following areas, advisor burnout and turnover, student perceptions of advising relationships, the connection between advising and student success metrics such as retention and/or graduation rate, professional development, and the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on advising models, will contribute to a better understanding of the academic advising profession.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Email to Advisors for volunteers to participate in survey

Subject Line for Email Recruitment: Survey Invitation: Research Survey on Academic Advising and Caseload sizes

Dear MTSU Academic Advisors,

I hope this email finds you well. I am Denise Seyl, a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a research study titled “Advising Under Pressure: Academic Advisors’ Perceptions of Caseload Size and its Impact on Quality of Advising.”

You can help me by participating in my survey. Participation time will be approximately 15 minutes. Your input and contribution to my research are invaluable.

Thank you in advance for being a part of my study; your support is greatly appreciated!

Study Description and Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of academic advisors at a four-year regional public higher education institution in the Southeast. This research aims to provide insights into the advisors’ perceptions on academic advising and how the size of caseload impacts their advising. There will be no compensation for this study.

Participation in this study will involve taking part in a survey.

Survey: It will take participants approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey. The survey will remain open for four weeks. The survey will also contain questions regarding place of employment.

The survey can be accessed through Qualtrics in the link below.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and all information will be kept confidential.

IRB Details:

Study Title: Advising Under Pressure: Academic Advisors’ Perceptions of Caseload Size and its Impact on the Quality of Advising

Protocol Number: IRB-FY2025-220

Approval Date: 03/20/2025

Principal Investigator: Denise Seyl

Institution: Middle Tennessee State University

Target Population:

I am looking for participants who meet the following criteria:

- At least 18 years old
- Employed as academic advisor at MTSU

Exclusion Criteria:

Under 18 years old, not currently employed as an academic advisor at MTSU.

Risks & Benefits:

Risks: Participants may experience discomfort when responding to questions. Emotional distress is possible when recounting any negative experiences. Additionally, you will be asked questions regarding place of employment. If the study results in changes in institutional policies, participants could be affected.

Benefits: The research aims to provide valuable insights into the experiences of academic advisors. Participants may benefit from having their voices heard and contributing to meaningful institutional change. For society, the study could offer evidence-based recommendations for improving academic advising.

Additional Information: N/A

Contact Information:

Principal Investigator: Denise Seyl
 Contact Information: denise.seyl@mtsu.edu
 Faculty Advisor: Kim Godwin
 Contact Information: kim.godwin@mtsu.edu

For additional information about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance at 615-494-8918 or via email at irb_information@mtsu.edu. (<http://www.mtsu.edu/irb>)

Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to important research on academic advising experiences. Your participation will be invaluable in helping us understand and improve the educational environment for students.

Survey Link:

https://mtsu.yul1.qualtrics.com/jfe/preview/previewId/e4eca87b-d54f-4394-9c72-790db3fdc052/SV_8e5eN2ElamxRfYa?Q_CHL=preview&Q_SurveyVersionID=current

Appendix B

Informed Consent

Study Title: Advising Under Pressure: Academic Advisors' Perceptions of Caseload Size and its Impact on Quality of Advising
 Protocol Number: IRB-FY2025-220
 Approval Date: 03/20/2025
 Principal Investigator: Denise Seyl
 Institution: Middle Tennessee State University

You are being asked to participate in a research project. The following information is provided to inform you about the research project and your participation in it.

1. Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of academic advisors at a four-year regional public higher education institution in the Southeast. This research aims to provide insights into the advisors' perceptions on academic advising and how the size of caseload impacts their advising.

2. Description of procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the study:

You will complete a Qualtrics survey that will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey will include open-ended questions pertaining to academic advising, connections with students, caseload size, and institutional policies and procedures. You will also be asked questions regarding your place of employment.

3. Compensation for participation:

There will be no compensation for participation in this study.

Here are your rights as a participant:

- a) Your participation in this research is voluntary.
- b) You may skip any item that you don't want to answer, and you may stop the research at any time. Note that if you leave an item blank, you will be warned that you missed one, just in case it was an accident. You can still click that you don't want to answer. Some items may be required in order to accurately present the study.
- c) You may experience discomfort when responding to questions. Emotional distress is possible when recounting any negative experiences. Additionally, if this study results in changes in institutional policy, then you could be affected. You will also be asked questions regarding your place of employment.
- d) There are no real benefits to you from participating besides possibly learning something about the research.
- e) You will NOT be asked to provide any identifiable personal information.
- f) All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private, but total privacy cannot be promised. Your information may be shared with

people at MTSU (such as the MTSU Institutional Review Board) or other agencies (such as the Federal Government Office for Human Research Protection) if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

Contact Information: If you should have any questions about this research study please contact:

Principal Investigator: Denise Seyl

Contact Information: denise.seyl@mtsu.edu

Faculty Advisor: Kim Godwin

Contact Information: kim.godwin@mtsu.edu

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance at 615-494-8918 or via email at irb_information@mtsu.edu. (<http://www.mtsu.edu/irb>)

If you're ready to get started, please make your choice below before clicking the arrow button.

Thanks again for volunteering your time to this project!

I have read the information above. I am at least 18 years old. I believe I understand the purpose, risks, and benefits of the research, and I know what I will be expected to do as a study participant.

I consent to participate

I decline to participate

Appendix C

Academic Advisor Survey

1. Demographic Questions

- A. What is your age range?
 - 18-24
 - 25-34
 - 35-44
 - 45-54
 - 55-64
 - 65 and over
- B. What is your gender identity?
 - Self-identify as: _____
 - Prefer not to answer
- C. What is your ethnic background?
 - White
 - Hispanic or Latino/Latina
 - Black or African American
 - Asian or Asian American
 - Native American or Alaska Native
 - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 - Middle Eastern or North African
 - Mixed/Multiracial
 - Other (please specify): _____
 - Prefer not to answer
- D. How many years have you been working in higher education?
- E. How many years have you been an academic advisor?
- F. How many years have you been an academic advisor at your current institution?

2. General Advising Questions

- A. Describe your definition of advising.
- B. Describe your perceptions of quality advising.

3. Advising Approaches Questions

- A. How do you implement developmental theories into advising?
- B. Describe the advising approaches or best practices you use.

4. Caseload Questions

- A. Describe what type of students you advise.
- B. Describe the type of relationships you have with your students.
- C. Describe your feelings and your experiences toward your current caseload size.
 - Describe if and how your experiences changed since you began this role.
- D. Describe your experiences with if or how your caseload size had impacted your advising and connections with your students.

- E. Describe what you think is the optimal caseload size for advising at your current institution and why (range and reasons for suggestions).

5. Recommendations for Institutional Policies

- A. Describe recommendations you would suggest for institutional policies related to optimal caseload sizes for academic advisors.
- B. Describe recommendations you would propose for institutional policies regarding academic advising in general.

6. Wrap-Up

- A. Describe your most memorable moment in your academic advising career.
- B. Describe any additional thoughts or insights you would like to share about academic advising.