Qualitative Study of Online Graduate Student and Faculty Advising Experiences

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ABSTRACT

As colleges and universities grow online graduate programs, rates of attrition and program withdrawal at many institutions remain significantly higher than face-to-face graduate programs. This paper is a qualitative case study designed to uncover the advising experiences of students and faculty as they relate to persistence and timely graduation and examine barriers to degree completion experienced by online graduate students at a school of education (SOE) at a selective public university. The study employs Lent, Brown, and Hacket's (1994) social cognitive career theory as a theoretical framework to consider how an individual's personal characteristics, background, learning experiences, self-efficacy, supports, influences, and choices combine to impact a student's persistence and how advising experiences affect performance domains and obtainments. Research findings from the study highlight distinct barriers experienced by students in online graduate education programs and inform future advising interventions to increase persistence to graduation.

Keywords: online graduate students, persistence, completion, student success, advising

DEDICATION

To Jason – for helping to create the space for me to pursue my dreams and ambitions.
To Ellery and Emmett – for challenging me every day to make a better world.

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I have heard it said that it takes a village to raise a child. I have found it takes an even bigger village to be a working parent earning a doctorate.

To my family – thank you for your unwavering support. Thank you for letting me lock myself in a room weekend after weekend to complete schoolwork. Thank you for your graciousness when I had to miss things to stay on track. And now, thank you for coming with me on the next phase of this journey when I know it has been hard to leave behind extended family and friends.

To my committee – thank you for your time, support, and feedback. I had the pleasure of taking class with all of you and I carry those lessons with me, personally and professionally, every day. Christian, thank you for patiently handling my type A personality and gently pushing me to broaden my thinking. Alan, thank you for making me a better writer and helping me find the organization within chaos. And Amanda, thank you for helping me find a way to merge my interest in career development and counseling into my higher education background and for helping me get back into the classroom.

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Introduction

As colleges and universities grow online graduate programs, rates of attrition and program withdrawal at many institutions remain significantly higher than face-to-face graduate programs. Diversity in age, race, ethnicity, and gender make it increasingly complicated for higher education institutions to serve and support online graduate students (Benshoff, Cashwell, & Rowell, 2015; Ferreira 2003; Ferriman, Lubinski, & Benbow, 2009). These students have different retention and persistence challenges than traditional, residential undergraduates and this diversity further stresses the student support mechanisms available on campuses that were not originally developed to serve adult learners (Benshoff, Cashwell, & Rowell, 2015). Rust (2015) points out that the barriers that students face in their success relate to the extent of support they receive during the course of a semester. Support could come from personal systems such as family or friends, but also needs to come from the college or university. According to Simplicio (2019) from his study of online student success, "regularly scheduled communication between students and other staff personnel such as advisors and tutors will keep crucial lines of communication open and will provide valuable resources and important real-life connections for online students" (p. 175). However, the vast majority of research on advising focuses on undergraduate and residential students, thus a gap exists in our knowledge of the services online graduate students need and the services that higher education institutions can and do provide.

Background

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), post-baccalaureate programs are growing. From 2000 to 2018, enrollments in graduate and professional programs increased from 2.2 million to 3 million. While post-baccalaureate growth soared, undergraduate

enrollments declined. Between 2010 and 2018, undergraduate enrollments decreased by eight percent, from 18.1 million in 2010 to 16.6 million in 2018. To negate the decline in undergraduate enrollments, many institutions began investing resources to expand their graduate and professional degree offerings and pursued online delivery methods (Jaquette, 2013; Thomas & Nedeva, 2018).

Analogous to post baccalaureate programs, online programs have also grown. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) in 2012, 26% of postsecondary students reported that they took at least one online course. In 2018, that number had increased to 36%. Examining graduate student data only, the number of students who took one or more online courses grew from 29% in 2012, to 40 % in 2018. Similarly, in 2012, 22% of students reported exclusively completing their graduate degree online, and by 2018, 31% of students reported exclusively completing their graduate degree online (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Demand for online graduate programs is increasing (Moloney & Oakley, 2010). As employment opportunities become more specialized, professional advancement has become more reliant on graduate degree credentials (Hoskins, 2011). Employees already have full-time positions, so online graduate programs provide an avenue for completing a graduate degree part-time while also maintaining full-time employment. According to employment search engine Indeed, the most common online graduate degrees are in business administration, healthcare administration, engineering, computer science, and health related fields such as nursing, physician assistant, and nurse anesthesia (Indeed, 2020). However, with minor research, a potential graduate student can likely find any program they desire online. Unlike undergraduate study, where students are exposed to a broader curriculum, online graduate students are often returning to school for career advancement, so many programs are oriented to be quick and

professionally focused (Kumar, Kumar, Palvia, & Verma, 2017).

Online graduate programs are attractive to universities for many reasons, but two common themes arise most in the literature. First, online graduate programs can be easier to scale and grow because they have specific curriculum with few elective choices (Chernikova & Varonis, 2016). Second, learning takes place off campus, so students do not occupy valuable classroom space often needed for undergraduate classes (Brubacher & Rudy, 2017). Growth in online graduate programs has also become a significant source of revenue for small and mid-sized public and private universities that are tuition dependent. Institutions facing budget shortfalls and decreasing federal and state financial support have rushed to enter the online graduate marketplace and competition has steadily increased (Taylor & Cantwell, 2019). Issues such as poor instructional quality and student attrition have hurt the reputation of online programs. Still, online graduate students seek these programs due to their flexibility and convenience (Palvia et al., 2018).

Many colleges and universities were unprepared for growth in graduate students or online programs (Lee, 2017) and advising and holistic support systems for online graduate students differ dramatically from institution to institution (Cross, 2018; Schroeder & Teras, 2015). Researchers have found that retention and graduation rates of both online and graduate students are lower than their undergraduate counterparts (Gardner and Barker, 2008; Thomas & Nedeva, 2018). As one specific example, attrition rates for online doctoral candidates tend to be 10% to 20% higher than face-to-face programs (Graham & Massyn, 2019). It is difficult to prove with certainty that online modality is the cause of higher attrition due to many other variables in a student's experiences and background that impact retention. However, research clearly suggests that modality may be an important factor in student success.

Graduate and online students are also more diverse in age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other demographics. According to NCES, while the majority of graduate and online students identify as White, there are 5-10% more Black and Brown students in graduate or online programs than in undergraduate, face to face programs. Overall, more women continue their education online than men, however, those numbers vary greatly by field with male dominated fields (engineering, information technology) observing more male enrollments and female denominated fields (nursing, education) noting more female enrollments (Chyung, 2007; Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2018; Larsson & Viitaoja, 2019).

Problem in Context

At a School of Education (SOE) at a large, public, research multiversity, the Dean's Office Department of Online Education is responsible for growing and sustaining online graduate degree programs. The university is decentralized, so deans of the respective schools that form the university have substantial decision-making power in terms of program modality, program staffing, admission cycles, and advising. SOE is one of many undergraduate-serving schools within the larger university and SOE is limited in the number of traditional undergraduate students it is allowed to admit into its degree programs. Transfers from community colleges and graduate students are the only options for SOE increasing its revenue stream. As enrollments in face-to-face programs began to decline, entrepreneurial programs began offering fully online versions of several signature master's degree programs. The growth in online learning prompted the SOE Dean to create a department dedicated to sustaining and growing online learning. In addition to online program development, the department is also tasked with retaining and graduating online, part-time and full-time graduate students within an

appropriate time to degree (ex. between 1-4 year for full-time students, 2-7 years for part-time students).

Expansion of online programs have been successful, but retention and timely graduation has been a larger challenge. The SOE does not offer any comprehensive advising programs or holistic student services to online students and does not charge online students a comprehensive fee. Literature suggests a lack of consistent advising process and robust student support negatively impacts retention and graduation rates (Smith & Allen, 2014). SOE enrollment management data shows that a fully online student is more likely to be a minoritized student (racial, ethnic, and/or first generation) than a face-to-face student. SOE online students are twice as likely to take a semester or more off during their studies. Average time to degree for online students is 14 months longer than face-to-face students. There are no requirements to meet with an advisor during a student's tenure at SOE and little is known or documented about the student and faculty experience in the advising process.

After reviewing enrollment management reports available from SOE's data warehouse, data analysis indicates that graduate online students are not being retained from semester to semester with 36% of students taking a break during their studies and only 68% of students graduating in the expected time to degree (UBI). Losing students or serving students beyond the expected time to degree negatively impacts SOE financial and staff resources as well as future growth. While there are other factors that may be influencing the lower graduation and retention numbers in the online master's program, literature about the importance of advising in supporting a student's progress to completion highlights that research is needed on the student and faculty advising experience at SOE. Currently, what is known is that the SOE does not have a consistent advising model for online master's degree students and that faculty advisors are not

offered preparation for advising diverse, adult, online learners. In a study to further understand this problem, I will research: 1) What are the advising experiences of online master's degree students and faculty at SOE? 2) How do online master's students at SOE describe their barriers to persistence and graduation? and 3) How do advising experiences align with online Master's students' needs and expectations?

Conducting this research and understanding the advising experiences of online graduate students and faculty will support institutional decision-making about investments in advising services, consistency in the delivery of advising services, and preparation for faculty advisors. Uncovering the specific needs of online graduate students and systematically meeting those needs may prove to be a vital lever in closing the gap between online graduate student and face-to-face graduate student persistence and timely graduation.

Literature Review

The following literature review provides a detailed analysis of the history, development, and research on online and graduate education and advising. It begins with a review of Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) social cognitive career theory which serves as a theoretical framework by which to organize literature and the research proposed for this study. Next is an examination of the literature around the history of distance education, concluding in more recent examinations of what is known about student success and completion in online programs. Graduate education literature intersects with distance education in terms of both a long history and decades of data showing low persistence and completion rates. Lastly, this section concludes with an examination of advising literature, highlighting the many pathways advising services can be delivered and the research conducted to determine how successful advising practices can positively impact student retention and completion.

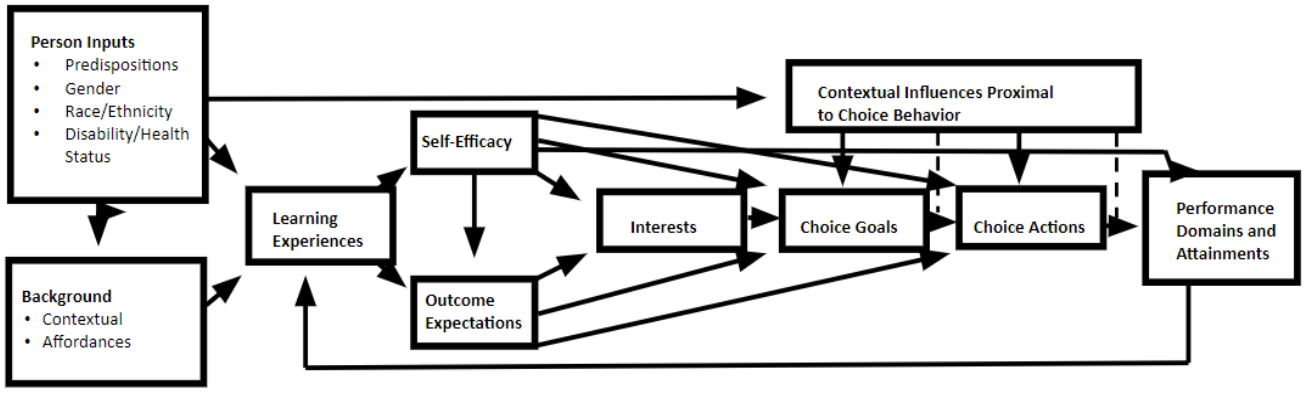
Theoretical Framework

The complexity of the online graduate student experience is a critical consideration when seeking to understand the advising experiences of students and faculty. Based on a review of available research, the complexity of the student experience may not be sufficiently considered in advising online graduate students. To better understand the complexity of the student experience as it relates to advising online graduate students, this study will employ Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) social cognitive career theory (SCCT). Advancing Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) and his work on self-efficacy (1986), SCCT emphasizes the role of self-referent thinking in guiding human motivation and behavior and can be used to articulate a pathway in considering the diverse factors that impact human behavior (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).

Bandura (1986) defines self-efficacy as the capability to organize or execute actions to attain a certain performance. Deeply connected to an individual's self-efficacy is their personal agency - their efforts, persistence, thought patterns, and emotional reactions when they find themselves confronted with obstacles. Bandura (1986) also theorized the triadic reciprocality which describes the components of an individual's personality. Personal attributes (such as cognition or physical appearance), external environmental factors, and overt behaviors all bidirectionally impact an individual's ability to achieve their personal goals. In SCCT, these same attributes are examined from the perspective of career goals and career attainment (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). As online graduate students seek additional education for career entry or advancement, SCCT, and specifically the SCCT performance model, provides a compelling framework for examining how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals are supported during the advising process and how performance level attainment (for the purposes of this study, timely graduation), is impacted by internal and external factors that can be influenced during advising (see figure 1).

Figure 1

Lent, Brown, & Hackett's (1994) Social Cognitive Career Theory



The success and perseverance of an online graduate student can be examined in detail when applying SCCT. Online graduate students are influenced by their previous experiences as college students and/or online students (Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, & Young, 2014; Koc & Liu, 2016). An online graduate student must demonstrate an appropriate amount of self-efficacy to successfully complete their program (Alqurashi, 2016; Bradley, Browne, & Kelley, 2017). Bandura (1986) argues that individual self-efficacy beliefs are influenced by personal performance, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and psychological states. Additionally, online graduate students are influenced by a number of external forces such as personal, familial, and financial challenges, and online learning environments which may be void of social and cognitive support that are normally available during the learning process. These background forces appear in this model in a person's inputs, background, and contextual influences proximal to choice behavior. Outcome expectations are aligned with self-efficacy because they serve as a means of reinforcing the validity of self-efficacy beliefs (Kreth, Spirou, Budenstein, & Melkers, 2019). Meeting expectations demonstrates effective self-efficacy. Also important in this model are performance goals. Performance goals "promote task persistence and direct people's attention to important outcomes and aspects of their behavior" (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, p. 99).

Both SCT and SCCT have been used to study the undergraduate experience and career attainment after graduation. However, a gap remains in the literature in applying SCCT to post-baccalaureate degree attainment. Graduate education is closely aligned with career attainment and as such, the research questions for this study seek to illuminate the internal and external factors that may act as barriers to online graduate student retention and graduation.

Simultaneously, this study will seek to identify advising supports that would positively influence a student's self-efficacy and by extension their personal agency.

Brief History of Online Learning in the United States

Harvard University, founded in 1636, is the United States's first brick and mortar university (About Harvard, n.d.). Many may be surprised to learn that distance education started less than 100 years later. While archivists are in debate about the first true distance courses, a *Boston Gazette* advertisement from 1728 suggests individuals were offering education through correspondence via mail almost 300 years ago (Pappas, 2013). In 1873, Anna Eliot Ticknor, the daughter of a Harvard Professor, founded the Society to Encourage Studies at Home to help educate women interested in continuing their education (Bergman, 2001). The term distance education was first used by the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1892 (Pappas, 2013). Before the advent of the Internet, distance education via correspondence was an important means of offering additional education to large numbers of interested students without the financial overhead of classroom space and other facilities (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). In the late 1960's, some institutions began offering distance learning through television and radio (Admin, 2019; Pappas, 2013). Various institutions such as the University of Phoenix, Pennsylvania State University, and many others claim to be the first to offer online courses or degree programs starting in the late 1980's to mid-1990's (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Kentnor, 2015; Pappas, 2013). As of 2020, 2,500 postsecondary institutions offer an online degree pathway, however, the largest online serving institutions serve over 50% of all online students (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020).

Institutional Motivations to Move Online

Traditional brick and mortar institutions increased interest in online education in the late 1990's and early 2000's (Paliva et al, 2018). According to Paliva et al. (2018), institutions became interested in the potential financial boon of offering Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to establish their brand globally. While few MOOCS successfully entered into the degree granting marketplace, MOOCs offer low-cost credentialing to disadvantaged students and serve as a successful marketing tool to promote certificate and degree programs, often also offered online, but at the full price of traditional institutional tuition and fee structures. However, critiques of MOOC research point out great discrepancies in quality and student satisfaction (De Freitas, Morgan, & Gibson, 2015). Citing MOOCs as too impersonal and inequitable to in-person learning experiences, some researchers strongly contend that the future of online education will come from the institutions that will invest in the infrastructure to offer high quality learning experiences that leverage technology but are not devoid of personal connection and community building (McPherson & Bacow, 2015; Moloney & Oakley, 2010; Sun & Chen, 2016).

It is important to have a foundational understanding of the history and development of online learning as it relates to the research questions of the study. Many institutions embraced online course offerings for their capacity to increase revenues but research on student success in distance learning environments is relatively recent considering the long history of distance education in the United States. Literature demonstrates that personal connection and sense of community are important to successful distance learning models and advising can be a critical component of building personal connections to the institution.

A Concise History of Graduate Studies in the United States

The development of graduate education in the United States mirrors the development of online education in many ways. First, graduate education started well before it became a formalized course of study in a specific field. Akin to apprenticeships in other fields, early graduate students studied informally under mentors in preparation to further the discipline and to teach (Brubracher & Rudy, 2017). In 1876, Johns Hopkins was the first research university and the first to offer graduate study (Feldman & Desrochers, 2003). In 1900, more shape was brought to graduate study when several notable university presidents, including Johns Hopkins President Daniel Coit Gillman, convened a group to form the American Association of Universities which brought more structure and regulation to the practice of offering graduate degrees (Brubacher & Rudy, 2017).

Graduate degrees are commonly divided into two categories (Bok, 2015). Professional graduate programs offered at the masters and doctoral level serve fields where experiential learning, professional practice, and licensure preparation are often a part of the degree curriculum. Fields such as medicine, pharmacy, nursing, education, law, business, and many others offer professional graduate programs. Academic graduate programs are focused on extending knowledge through research and often align with fields within the arts and sciences. Program graduates will earn a Master of Arts, Master of Science, or Doctorate of Philosophy with a listed sub-field. However, some professional programs also have an option for research and sometimes graduate students receive a dual degree combining professional preparation and practice with research. As many fields have increased credentialing requirements, the number of graduate programs has been on the rise (DePauw & Gibson, 2022).

Institutional Motivation

In addition to expanded degree requirements in many professions, a major motivation for expansion of professional and academic graduate programs is diversifying tuition revenue sources (Webb, 2015). Graduate programs bring in additional students and tuition, but do not require the same on-campus space allocation as residential, undergraduate students. Graduate students can also provide inexpensive labor to their departments by increasing program teaching capacity or expanding productivity of research labs (DePauw & Gibson, 2022). Tuition models are also different for graduate education. Graduate tuition can be more expensive than undergraduate tuition and fees. Highly ranked and prestigious institutions often can charge higher premiums for degrees based on prospective returns from a successful alumni network (Taylor & Cantwell, 2019). Professional degrees can also be priced highly based on the expectation that professional degrees in fields such as medicine, law, pharmacy, and business offer high salaries upon graduation.

Market for Online Graduate Programs

Of the 4,300 colleges and universities within the United States, approximately 1,700 offer master's degrees and 1,500 offer doctoral degrees (NCES, 2022). While the quantity of programs would suggest there are enough graduate students to be served by all graduate degree granting institutions, it is still critical for universities to differentiate themselves in the graduate school market. Approaches to being competitive in the market include condensed time to degree, highly specialized curriculum, distinguished faculty, small class sizes, and personalized attention (Taylor & Cantwell, 2019). Graduate programs can also tie themselves closely to regional employers to draw a larger local or regional audience.

The demographics of the student audiences are also important in aiding a program in differentiating itself in the marketplace. Approximately 80% of graduate students report working

during graduate school and over 50% report working full-time (Carnevale, Smith, Melton, & Price, 2015). Another 40% of graduate students report being caregivers to children or elderly parents (Yoo & Marshall, 2022). With significant demands on their time, graduate students seek programs that are flexible and can be combined with their other work and life commitments. Online became a popular modality for graduate programs as online learning provides the level of flexibility that a working, caregiving graduate student needs to be able enter and persist in their program.

Challenges Faced by Online Graduate Programs

Initially, many graduate programs leaders were skeptical of moving to a fully online format. Early feedback on online learning suggested it was low-quality and consisted of low-engagement, busywork rather than substantial learning opportunities (Benson, 2003; Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). Data on retention and graduation indicated that students were less likely to be retained or persist to graduation (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007). However, critiques of early 2000's research on online learning suggest that while quality ranged greatly from institution to institution, retention and graduation numbers were based on a complex data set, and there might be little causation or correlation between low retention and graduation numbers and online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). At the same time, the publication of these early indicators created some hesitancy amongst traditional, residential universities to enter into delivering fully online degree programs.

Early data were also overwhelming based on traditional age and returning adult students in undergraduate education (Benson, 2003; Chyung, 2007). These studies failed to account for additional variables such as age, engagement, projected academic success, and external persistence factors such as financial or familial responsibilities that impact a student's

persistence, regardless of delivery modality and instead often exclusively focused as modality as a source of strife that led to withdrawal (Hart, 2012; Larsson & Viitaoja, 2019).

Arguably, many students would prefer an in-person learning experience if it was possible. However, most students cannot make the time-commitment to attend graduate school full-time or in-person. In an attempt to replicate in-person instruction, many graduate programs have tried hybrid learning or synchronous online courses (Butz, Stupnisky, Peterson, & Majerus, 2014; Coogan, 2009). In hybrid learning, a portion of in-person course time is replaced with fully online learning. The amount of time online versus in-person may vary. In synchronous instruction, students attend class in real time using web conferencing software. While this allows learners to be at home or at work during class time, synchronous learning does not offer the full flexibility of asynchronous online learning, which can be completed anytime or anywhere as necessitated by the learner's schedule (Lakhal, Bareman, & Bedard, 2017; Raes, Detienne, Windey, & Depaepe, 2020). This is also different from self-paced online learning, which is asynchronous online learning, but does not include regular due dates (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011). For the purposes of this study, the focus will be on learners' experiences in fully asynchronous online graduate courses.

Attrition in Online and Graduate Programs

Numerous studies desmonstrate both graduate and online programs suffer from higher levels of attrition (Chiyaka, Sithole, Manyanga, McCarthy, & Bucklein, 2016; Hart, 2012; Park & Choi, 2009; Patterson & McFadden, 2009). High levels of attrition have been tied to the individual characteristics of graduate and online students as well as programmatic characteristics (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011). In terms of individual characteristics, students have a variety of competing priorities, such as work, finances, and family, that negatively impact an online

graduate student's persistence to graduation (Bergman et al, 2014; Braun, 2008; Su & Waugh, 2018; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Indeed, graduate students are more likely to take online courses because of these same considerations.

The literature regarding online and graduate programs informs the research questions for this study and the importance of the SCCT framework for understanding a student's experience. Online graduate students arrive at an institution needing to meet a specific performance domain. Their background, personal commitments, and previous learning experiences influence their ability to persist to degree completion. Experiences such as helpful, timely advising impact a student's ability to stay on track to graduation and provide an important social connection to the student's program and institution.

Barriers to Persistence

Online graduate students seek a community of learners and a sense of belonging (Ortagus, 2017). Without a community, online graduate students report higher levels of stress and mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression (Charles, Karnaze, & Leslie, 2021; Gardner & Barker, 2008). Even more important than peer support, online graduate students seek meaningful relationships with program faculty and staff (Kumar & Johnson, 2017; Parks & Robinson, 2021; Su & Waugh, 2018). When students do not receive support, researchers see an increase in program attrition, course withdrawals, and program withdrawals (Allen, Lilly, Green, Zanjani, Vincent, & Arria, 2020). Examining student to student, student to instructor, and student to content interactions can help illuminate service gaps that create barriers to persistence (CITE).

Faculty-Student Interaction

Faculty mentorship of online students is a challenge. The sheer number of students who need mentorship are one part of the problem. Many institutions use online graduate programs as

strategies to maximize tuition revenue (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Rovai & Downey, 2010). In prioritizing online growth, some institutions enroll large numbers of students in online graduate courses. Faculty instructing large sections struggle to establish meaningful connections with individual students (Chen et al, 2017; Kumar & Johnson, 2017). In addition to a lack of mentorship from faculty, students in large sections share in assessment of instruction data low amounts of personalized and timely feedback during their enrollment (Boa, Selhorst, Moore, & Dilworth, 2018; Gaytan, 2015). Many faculty report that they do not feel appropriately prepared to engage in mentorship relationships from a distance, nor that they can keep up with personalized learning when they instruct larger and larger sections of students (Gaytan, 2015).

Even in courses with lower enrollments, faculty still may struggle making personal connections with students. Many institutions do not require that their faculty be trained as online instructors (Sun & Chen, 2016; Yang, Baldwin, & Snelson, 2017). A lack of training negatively impacts a faculty member's ability to engage with students because they may not be aware of online pedagogical strategies or may struggle with technology tools (Simplilico, 2019). Multiple studies point to faculty reporting that engaging online students is more time intensive than when in a face-to-face environment (Roddy et al., 2017; Sun & Chen, 2016). Faculty already face competing demands for their time and may not be able to invest extra time in online courses. Also, many online programs utilize adjunct faculty for online course instruction (Bedford, 2009; Smith, 2007). While online faculty can be trained, well-prepared online instructors, they may also be balancing a full-time position and other external demands that influence how and when they are able to engage students. High-turnover rates for adjunct faculty may also impact the ability for students and adjunct faculty to interact over a student's entire program of study (Bedford, 2009; Magda, Poulin, & Clinefelter, 2015).

Peer Student Interactions

Another challenge of online learning is fostering opportunities for meaningful interactions with peers. Researchers have demonstrated the importance of peer interactions in online courses (Charles, Karna, & Leslie, 2021; Hart, 2012; Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, & Young, 2014; Kumar, Kumar, Palvia, & Verma, 2017). Additionally, many graduate pedagogies are heavily discussion-based, reinforcing the need for meaningful peer interaction (Chernikova & Varonis, 2016). However, course elements such as discussion boards can become formulaic and do not recreate the rich interactions that take place in an in-person classroom setting. To allow for these interactions to proceed successfully, faculty need to create plans, consider discussion topics, and highlight the intention of interaction (Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, & Young, 2014). Students who report low student-to-student interaction are more likely to report dissatisfaction with a course and are less successful in meeting online course objectives (Charles, Karna, & Leslie, 2021; Hart, 2012).

One approach to creating intentional student to student interactions is group work. Group work can provide the guard rails and common activity to allow students to interact with a clear purpose (Koh & Hill, 2009). However, just as with in-person learning, group work also comes with challenges. Groups can be imbalanced, resulting in one or two group members completing most of the work (Cherney, Fetherston, & Johnsen, 2018). Group members may struggle to connect or engage (Stepanyan, Mather, & Dalrymple, 2014). Faculty need to walk a thin line between explicit directions and scaffolding, while leaving room for students to engage and interact. Students who report struggling with group activities in online courses also report high levels of dissatisfaction and struggle with successfully completing course assignments (Koh & Hill, 2009).

Ultimately, while student-to-student interactions appear to be the responsibility of the students, the faculty member needs to provide the scaffolding for successful interactions in a fully online and graduate environment. These scaffolds include detailed instructions, ways to engage with peers, space for informal engagement, and time to explore d value of peer engagement (Dabbagh, 2003). Beyond academic performance, when a student fails to engage with classmates, they lose an informal network of academic and personal accountability (Hart, 2012). When peers are dependent on one another and take the time to learn each other's names, strengths, and interests, the students form a community. When a student in the community struggles, there is a network to check on that student and to offer support and encouragement (Charles, Karna, & Leslie, 2021). Without that network and sense of accountability and dependability, it is easy for a student to disappear from the class.

Metal Health and Well Being

Students with inadequate interaction or support in online graduate programs report feelings of isolation and stress (Charles, Karna, & Leslie). Mental health and wellbeing are critical issues impacting online graduate students and persistence (McManus, Dryer, & Henning, 2017). Feelings of isolation can leave the student feeling lost and unmotivated to continue with the degree program. Without meaningful connections to their learning community, a student may find it easy to take a break or leave the program (Barr, 2014).

Other components of online learning, such as screen time and long periods of sitting, can also negatively impact students' sense of wellbeing (Lavados-Romo et al., 2021). Online students report higher amounts of screen time than in-person students. Long periods of screen time can cause blurry vision, dry eyes, headaches, and other symptoms (Lissak, 2018). Extended periods of sitting can also impact students' wellbeing; sedentary work has been tied to physical pain in

legs, neck, and back as well as other longer term health issues such as weight gain (Lissak, 2018). As online graduate learners may also work full-time, the amount of screentime and sitting time may be compounded depending on the student's working conditions. Students experiencing mental or physical wellbeing challenges may seek to take a break from their program to relieve these issues. However, studies indicate that when online graduate programs support student mental and physical wellbeing, students are more likely to persist to graduation (Barr, 2014; Charles, Karna, & Leslie, 2021). The current literature is not extensive and additional studies are needed to explore how and what institutional supports of wellbeing positively influence student persistence.

Familial Support

Support from family and friends is another important factor in a student's ability to persist to graduation. Support comes in many forms including financial, mental, physical support, as well as through acts of service such as providing childcare or a spouse taking on additional responsibilities at home to allow a partner to focus on classwork (Bain, Fedynich, & Knight, 2011). Examining the SCCT framework, support also impacts a student's personal characteristics, background, and contextual influences that affect a student's goals and actions. The absence of appropriate levels of support can negatively impact the ultimate performance domains and obtainments through limiting a student's previous experiences and expectations.

The impact of familial support on student persistence and degree attainment is well-documented. Quantitative studies documented student perceptions of familial support positively supporting their persistence and have indicated spouse and parent support are key factors to supporting degree attainment (Bain, Fedynich, & Knight, 2011; Posselt, 2021). Studies of single parents in graduate school demonstrate that more single mothers attempt online graduate degrees

than single fathers (DiPierro, 2017). Single mothers indicated that asking for help from family or friends was critical for their continued enrollment in their degree program (Posselt, 2021). A lack of familial support was also cited as a top contributor to why a student withdrew from a degree program in several quantitative and qualitative studies on students' reasons for leaving an online and/or graduate program (Bain, Fedynich, Knight, 2011).

Discrimination

Discrimination was another common contributor to a student's withdrawal from a program . Minoritized communities have reported that discrimination in the forms of blatant racial or ethnic intolerance and microaggressions have reduced students sense of belonging and learning community engagement and negatively impact student retention (Posselt, 2021). Minoritized students report experiencing additional barriers to academic success such low interaction with faculty and a lack of representation in classroom settings (Tran, Jean-Marie, Power, Bell, & Sanders, 2016). While some scholars initially thought that a fully online format may reduce discrimination, other studies have found that online communities with low faculty and peer engagement more negatively impact minoritized students (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2008). These students are not seeking isolation but rather a community of learners where they feel acceptance and belonging.

Gender and LGTBQ

Students who identify as gender non-binary or LGTBQ have also reported discrimination and microaggression in online courses (Dentato, Craig, Messinger, Lloyd, & McInroy, 2014). Transgender and gender non-binary students are doubly impacted. Online course systems often use legal names for students. Many students who wish to have their name updated in their online course system must file requests and navigate university policies and procedures around name

changes and preferred pronouns (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). Additionally, student pictures in online systems may not reflect a student's preferred identity. The ability to change system requirements such as names or pictures varies by institution and can undermine these students' feelings of acceptance and belonging.

Low Socioeconomic Status and First-Generation Students

Other populations impacted by discrimination are low income and first-generation students. While these populations of students may be unique from one another, they can also overlap and both populations experience some similar challenges in online and graduate programs. First, both groups of students have highlighted a hidden curriculum to their college experiences (Lunceford, 2011; Tate, Fouad, Marks, Young, Guzman, & Williams, 2015). Hidden curriculum elements cited in the literature include how to engage professors, what clubs, organizations, or study groups to join, lack of awareness of how to get affordable or low-cost course materials, and a lack of social or cultural capital to navigate university business systems such as add/drop, withdrawals, financing their education, tutoring, and others (Jury, Smeding, Stephens, Nelson, Aelenei, & Darnon, 2017).

Academic Readiness

Another persistence barrier surfaced in current literature is academic preparedness. The bulk of this literature is on undergraduate students and their preparation for higher education. Online undergraduate students who are underprepared for college struggle in fully online classes (Gabriel, 2017; O'Neil, 2009). Some of these students are drawn to online programs because they are nervous about interacting with faculty and peers in face-to-face classrooms. However, the self-guided nature of many online programs requires a level of self-discipline and self-advocacy that an underprepared student may lack (Alqurashi 2016; De Freitas, Morgan, &

Gibson, 2015; Kaufman, 2015). Other factors such as condensed semesters also can harm a less prepared student. By the time the student realizes they need academic support, it may be too late for the student to engage with needed resources to improve their grade and pass the course (Bradley, Browne, & Kelley, 2017). Failed courses do not just impact academic progress, but may have farther reaching consequences in terms of a student's ability to maintain a scholarship, financial aid offer, or employer tuition support (Hart, 2012; Lambrinidis, 2014). Additional research is needed on online graduate students and academic preparation, but a common theme in the literature available suggests a student's positive self-perception of preparedness in graduate school yields more success in graduate school (Huss, Randall, Patry, Davis, & Hansen, 2002; Santiago & Einarson, 1998). This theme aligns with the SCCT framework of this study and the notion that self-efficacy is an important factor in student persistence.

Barriers to persistence are ever-present as an online graduate student attempts to persist to graduation. Avoiding or overcoming institutional or personal barriers to persistence is imperative to a student's success. Learning more about advising experiences and the ways in which advising can support mitigation of persistence barriers offers important data for institutions to consider how they can use resources to best support their students.

Motivation to Persist

Several studies note that career advancement goals are a common criterion amongst students who successfully complete online graduate programs (Amida, Algarni, & Stupnisky, 2020; Su & Waugh, 2018; Yang, Baldwin, & Snelson, 2017). For some students, career advancement equates movement towards higher level positions in their current organization. Often the organization is partially or fully sponsoring the cost of the graduate program (Yang, Baldwin, & Snelson, 2017). Others are attempting a career change. The degree or credential is a

necessary component to enter the new job market. As an example, students wishing to become a teacher, nurse, or pharmacist must be licensed by their appropriate state agencies in order to be employed in those fields. Professional requirements such as licensure are more commonly linked to successful degree completion than programs where initial licensure is not associated with degree completion (Battle, 2012; Jeffreys, 2007; Müller, 2008).

Personal Characteristics of Persistence are Complex

While some researchers continue to search for the unique characteristics that make some students more persistent to graduation than others, there is dissension in the literature regarding if it is even possible to identify personal persistence characteristics (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011; Gaytan, 2015; Hart, 2012; Nichols, 2010). Persistence seems tied to a combination of factors, many of which are tied to the SCCT framework including: academic ability, personal support systems, self-efficacy, and avoidance of major life events that may derail a student's progress such as the birth of a child, death of a family member, or significant professional change (ex. promotion or termination)(Su & Waugh, 2018). The quantitative approach of several of these studies fails to provide the detail necessary to understand the unique factors that students may face during their enrollment in graduate school (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011; Ortagus, 2017). At the same time, qualitative studies such as Gaytan's (2015) interviews with a small number of faculty and students associated with an online program do not provide findings that could be more generalizable to a broader community of learners. Ultimately, although both types of methodologies can shed some new light on the factors impacting student persistence, many of these factors are not in the student's control. Thus, a strategy employed by some institutions is close monitoring of the academic progress of online students (Britto & Rush, 2013; Polson, 2003).

Program Characteristics that Support Persistence

Due to the difficulties in identifying individual student characteristics that lead to persistence, other researchers have instead chosen to examine the characteristics of online graduate programs within local university settings to identify best practices which may be applicable more globally (Park & Choi, 2009; Su & Waugh, 2018; Yang, Baldwin, & Snelson, 2017). State and federal guidelines associated with online learning have changed over the years. Prior to 2013 and the creation of the State Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA), online program administrators took advantage of many loopholes that allowed them to offer online programs with minimal support structures for online students (Shiffman & Hall, 2017). Required services now include 24/7 information technology support and academic advising. However, there is still a significant discrepancy in the services offered to residential students compared to online students (Conover, 2008; Ortagus, 2017).

Gap in Institutional Services for Online and Graduate Students

Institutions have prioritized support for residential, traditional age students and a gap has persisted in services available to graduate and online students (Medvecky, 2021; Polson, 2013; Rempel, Hussong-Christian, & Mellinger, 2011; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Unlike undergraduate students, online graduate students can be anywhere in the world while completing their studies. Additionally, online graduate students are diverse in their developmental stages, needs, and interests. These factors make it incredibly challenging for student support professionals to design programming or support offices adequately prepared for supporting the vast needs of online graduate students (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Lambrinidis, 2014). Currently, there is inadequate research to help inform student affairs professionals on how to successfully serve online graduate populations.

Expanding In-Person Support to Online Students

One way in which institutions are attempting to support online students is by expanding existing residential services to online students (Conover, 2008; Wladis, Conway, & Hachey, 2016). The challenge of this approach is many services provided on a campus do not translate into an online environment. Additionally, many of the services offered on residential campuses do not meet the needs of the adult learner populations often enrolling in online graduate programs (Patterson & McFaddden, 2009). Another challenge is that many service providers, such as career counselors, psychological counselors, and academic tutors are not trained to appropriately deliver their services from a distance (Gadhia, 2018; Smith et al., 2007; Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005; Prince, 2015).

Institutional Supports for Students Lacking Personal Success Characteristics

Personal characteristics such as self-efficacy and time management are important factors in student success (Amida, Algarni, & Stupnisky, 2020), but institutional support programming can aid students in building personal success characteristics that may be underdeveloped at the time of enrollment (Elliott, 2016). A comprehensive orientation can assist students with developing a time management plan and a sense of belonging within the institution (Barrera, 2020; Murphy et al, 2020). Programming emphasizing community building aids students in creating a support network that students can rely on during times of stress or crisis (Barrera, 2020; Becker & Luthar, 2002; Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018). Social networks that form organically in residential undergraduate education do not often form in online graduate communities without infrastructure and programming initiated by the college or university (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Schwartz et al, 2018).

Advising for Online Graduate Students

Although the bulk of literature focuses on the impact of advising on traditional undergraduate students, new literature is emerging on the impact of advising programs strategically targeting online graduate students (Cross, 2018; Fiore, Heitner, & Shaw, 2019; Harker Martella, 2017; Lehan, Hussey, Shriner, 2018; McGill, 2019; Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Graduate students need a dependable relationship with their advisor. Online graduate student advising needs to be more holistic in its approach. An online graduate student may need a blend of services from their advisor including academic advising, counseling, coaching, financial advising, career advising, technical support, and more (Lehan, Hussey, Shriner, 2018; Schroeder & Terras, 2015). The literature examining online graduate student advising has a blend of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Surveys are often conducted to see how students respond to advising interventions (Cross, 2018). However, qualitative research has been better utilized to identify and review smaller interventions and the ways in which advising supports impact online graduate student retention (McGill, 2019; Redfern, 2008; Schroeder & Terras, 2015).

Advising Models

Academic advising is a critical component of the student experience (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Elliott, 2020; White & Schulenberg, 2014). Academic advising serves numerous purposes such as supporting students in identifying and declaring a major, mapping student degree progress, creating space for a meaningful relationship between students and faculty or staff advisors, providing informal counseling and support to students who are struggling, aiding students in finding academic or social support, and more.

Structural Models Centralized Advising. In a centralized advising model, advising is typically offered by professional advising staff and is organized in and offered from a central

office. While services are usually provided by staff, sometimes faculty are also assigned to the central advising office (also known as "split model advising") (Pardee, 2004). Centralized advising is found at approximately 14% of colleges and is most typically seen in community colleges (Pardee, 2004). Centralized advising is also known as self-contained advising, referring to the physical nature of the advising office versus students having to seek out faculty advisors spread across the campus (Pardee, 2004). Benefits of a centralized model include ease of use and access for students, while drawbacks of the model include a lack of mentorship from faculty who are embedded in a student's discipline of interest.

Decentralized. Decentralized advising, also known as the "Faculty Only Model" is advising conducted by faculty often tied to the discipline of the student's major. Faculty-led advising remains the most popular advising model. Currently 28% of all higher education institutions use a faculty only model and it is the most common model in private institutions (Pardee, 2004). Benefits of decentralized advising include establishing a mentor-type relationship with faculty in a student's chosen discipline and creating tighter connections between students and academic departments (Pardee, 2004). Drawbacks of decentralized advising include great variation in the advising services across departments and competition for faculty time with other faculty priorities such as teaching or research (Pardee, 2004).

Shared (also known as Blended). Shared advising is becoming more commonplace in higher education. Also known as a "supplementary model," shared advising deliberately and strategically combines professional staff and faculty advising models (Pardee, 2004). As an example, consider an institution that assigns general advisors before a student declares their major and later pairs the student with a discipline-specific faculty advisor later in their academic journey. Proponents of a shared model suggest that pairing a student with a professional advisor

early in their college pathway supports student orientation to college and supports students during common transitional challenges as students settle into college life (Pardee, 2004). Students are adjusted by the time they are paired with a faculty advisor and are ready to engage in more academic questions versus general curriculum questions. Opponents of shared advising point to the challenges of having to switch advisor mid-college career and the lack of flexibility of this model if a student is clear on their path and wants to declare a major early (Pardee, 2004).

Academic Advising Approaches

In addition to whether advising services are centralized, decentralized, or blended, there are also several approaches to the types of advising services that are offered. The approach to advising is dependent on several factors including size of the institution, types of academic programs and policies, composition of the student body, and the goals or priorities of the institution.

Prescriptive Advising. In a prescriptive advising model, advisors provide students with a plan that the student implements (Burton & Wellington, 1998). There is very little interaction between the advisor and advisee and the responsibility in the advising relationship falls on the advisor. Centralized, decentralized, or shared models could all follow a prescriptive advising method. Arguably, a prescriptive method could support a student's timely completion of degree requirements through the rigid oversight of their degree progress by their advisor. However, this model does not account for any social, emotional, financial, or academic challenges a student may experience during their enrollment.

Developmental Advising. While the prescriptive advising model takes an advisor-led approach, the developmental advising model is a partnership between the advisor and the student. In a developmental model, the advisor acts as a support to the student as they define

their academic and career goals and identify their best path forward (Crookston, 1972). The relationship between the advisor and the student is ongoing and there are clear plans for communication and engagement. An advisor may refer a student to other support resources in order to best assist the student in meeting their goals. While developmental advising can be offered in centralized, decentralized, and shared models, it is critical in this model that the student and advisor have a significant period to build their relationship and a shared model where advisors are changed halfway through a student's academic journey might negate the benefits of a developmental advising model.

Intrusive/Proactive Advising. Intrusive advising is a proactive model of advising that helps students and advisors create relationships before a student needs advising services or support (Cannon, 2013). In this model, an advisor will contact a student before their help is needed, rather than waiting for a student to initiate contact. Intrusive advisors connect students to needed resources and maintain a frequent cadence of communication so that students also feel as if support or help are available (Varney, 2012). Although this model can work for all populations, it has been specifically successful in institutions with diverse and first-generation students (Cannon, 2013). In addition to academic advising, an intrusive counselor may also connect a student to resources about academic success and campus culture.

O'Banion's Advising Paradigm. Published in 1972, Terry O'Banion's model of academic advising was landmark and went on to influence many subsequent models. O'Banion's paradigm had five, linear stages: 1) Exploration of Life Goals, 2) Exploration of Vocational Goals, 3) Exploration of Program Choice, 4) Exploration of Course Choice, and 5) Exploration of Scheduling Options. While this initial model was based on research on a predominantly white,

male, residential population, expansion and revision of the O'Banion model has been possible to better serve a more diverse population of learners.

Learning Centered Advising. Learning centered advising takes the approach that advising is not separate from, but rather part of the learning process. Additionally, modality and advising model type do not matter because learning centered advising can be embedded in all forms of advising practice (Reynolds, 2013). Based on work from both Angelo (1993) and Chickering and Gamson (1987), fundamentally, learning-centered advising takes the core principles of what is known about learning and includes them in the advising process. Notably, these principles include establishing clear goals, active learning, engagement, motivation, and feedback (Reynolds, 2013).

Appreciative Advising. Appreciative advising is a framework for advising services based on organizational development theory, appreciative inquiry, and positive psychology. The model includes six parts (Howell, 2010). First, *disarm* the student to create a safe environment for the student where they feel comfortable speaking with the advisor. Next, *discover* includes asking the students open-ended questions to learn about their strengths, interests, and abilities. Third, *dream* with the students by uncovering their hopes and dreams for the future. Fourth, engage in a *design* relationship where the advisor helps co-create a plan for making hopes and dreams a future reality. Fifth, *deliver* on the established plan. In this phase, the advisor supports and encourages the student while the plan is enacted. And finally, *don't settle*. This phase includes supporting students through challenges and encouraging them to set and maintain high expectations in the spirit of high achievement. Proponents of appreciative advising argue it is an accessible model which can be successfully used with already high achieving students but can

also be employed to serve students in academic or personal crisis or non-traditional students (Butler, Blake, Gonzalez, Heller, & Chang, 2016; He & Hutson, 2016; Hutson & Bloom, 2006).

Strengths-Based Advising. In strength-based advising, the advisor supports students in identifying their strengths and then applying those strengths in various learning and professional environments (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). The steps for strength-based advising include: 1) identify students' strengths, 2) affirm strengths and students' awareness of personal strengths, 3) envision a future where students see strengths supporting their future goals, 4) plan steps students can take to enact their goals and use their strengths, and 5) apply their strengths to challenges they may face during their plan. Schreiner and Anderson contend that this lens of advising supports diverse students by focusing on their natural talents. A literature review completed by Schneider and Kranzow (2022) indicates that strengths-based advising has successfully served non-traditional learners and diverse populations engaged in early retention programming such as first year experiences.

Advising as Coaching. Advising as coaching is another approach to the advisor and advisee relationship. This model includes 6 components that form the acronym "advise" (McClellan & Moser, 2011). The model is not linear, but rather circular, and during the relationship with the student, the advisor may revisit many or all the components of the model. First, A - active listening. In active listening, the advisor begins the relationship with the advisee. Second, D - determine, desire, and dream. In this phase of the model, the advisor is uncovering the problem that brought in the advisee and is seeking to understand the desired resolution or outcome. Third, V- evaluate what has been done. Here, the advisor is trying to learn about what the advisee has tried to work toward solving their problem or meeting their goals. Fourth, I - identifying options. In this phase, the advisor supports the advisee in considering alternative and

creative solutions for the problem or goal. Fifth, S - selecting options. After coming up with options for moving forward, the advisee engages in the selection phase to determine a path forward based on the options available. And finally, sixth, E - engage and evaluate. Here, the advisee enacts the best option or solution and then examines and evaluates their progress towards their resolution or goals. It is clear why this model needs to be cyclic, as advisees may need to repeat or revisit phases as they encounter different challenges and opportunities. Studies of advising as coaching suggest that students assigned a coach are more likely to persist towards graduation and that coaching allows for more inclusivity and cultural competency (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Vaccaro & Camba-Kelsay, 2018).

Holistic Advising. Holistic advising is an approach that honors that a student is a whole person and that an academic advisor must be able to support the whole person and not just advise through an academic lens (Kardash, 2020). Unlike other models that refer to steps or cycles, holistic advising must be more flexible and tailored to support individual students. However, the guiding principles of holistic advising use the acronym SSIPP. The relationship between the advisor and student is sustained. The student must be able to content on the support from and the relationship with the advisor. The advising must be strategic. The advisor must balance the culture of the institution, available resources, and the needs of the student to best support the student. This may mean referring the student to other resources or supports, whether on or off campus. Advising must be integrated. Integration refers to both making the advising process a natural and built-in part of the student experience, but it also refers to the ways in which the many faculty and professionals supporting individual students can see each other's notes or communicate. A shared technical system may be a benefit in this form of advising. Advising must be proactive. A proactive approach includes both using the academic calendar to drive

communications and support resources to students based on common challenges, but it also means addressing specific issues (personal or academic) with a student before they become barriers to a student's success. And lastly, holistic advising must be personalized. It is important for the relationship between advisor and advisee to feel authentic and the information and resources shared with the student must be considerate of that student's needs.

Common Factors Meta Model of Advising. A meta model of advising ultimately suggests that the models that have proceeded this section all have merit and could be valuable in using any one model (or more than one model) to support the success of a student. "Common factors" refers to literature around counseling and relationships with counselors and clients. With this in mind, Schaffling (2018) advocates that advisors have awareness of advising models and approaches, but also guide their practice, regardless of model or approach, with the four common factors: alliance, empathy, goal setting, and therapist allegiance. Alliance refers to the bond between the student and the advisor. Empathy both means seeing and understanding the other person's perspective, experiences, and feelings. Schaffling argues that this may be the most important and compelling part of this approach as true empathy drives connection between the advisor and student. Goal setting is making sure that the advisor and the student are clear about their intended outcomes of their relationship. And therapist allegiance refers to the confidence in and commitment to the theory that is being applied and used in addressing the issue which brought in the student. The individual nature of holistic advising has made it a successful model for serving diverse populations (Lewis, 2021; Pelaez, 2021). However, the individualized nature can also make this model resource intensive, and it may not be able to be sustained by every institution.

Advising Implementation Options

Depending on the resources available and the size of the institution, advising services can be implemented in various ways. The three most common options are one-to-one advising, group advising, and peer advising. One-to-one advising allows for the most flexibility and accommodation of individual student needs, but it is incredibly time and resources intensive (Mann, 2020). It may be challenging for larger institutions to offer one to one advising to all students. Group advising allows advisors to support multiple students in one session and allows for camaraderie and conversation to build for multiple student perspectives (Lowe & Toney, 2000). At the same time, group advising removes the confidential and private feeling of one-to-one counseling and some students may be unwilling to share or engage in a group counseling experience. Lastly, peer counseling allows students to interact with peers trained in basic academic advising skills and processes (Diambra & Cole-Zakrzewski, 2002). Many students engage in informal peer academic advising, where a peer makes course recommendations based on their own personal experiences. Formalized peer counseling helps avoid the spread of misinformation but allows for the same comfort and ease that may arise from talking with a peer versus faculty or professional advisor. The downsides of peer advising include frequent turnover and increased training needs, the inability of a peer counselor to engage in more holistic forms of advising, and the fact that some students may not want to engage in peer counseling, preferring instead to work with a faculty or professional advisor who may seem more reliable or reputable.

Providing Services Does Not Guarantee Engagement

Even with robust student support offerings, online graduate students are reluctant to engage with the services that are available (Lehan, Hussey, & Shriner, 2018; Nichols, 2010). Online graduate students appear to have doubts about their academic success. Fear and

uncertainty prevent them from seeking support when they are struggling (Hart, 2012). Older online students do not understand the services available and thus, do not engage (Hart, 2012). Additionally, approximately 80% of online students report working full or part time while enrolled in an online degree program (Su & Waugh, 2018; Ubell, 2019). Many are unable to take advantage of services offered between business hours because they themselves are at work. Personal connection, either with a community of peers or a mentor faculty or staff member is a primary way institutions can assist students with connecting with support service offices (Thomas & Nedeva, 2018). Berry (2017) suggests that the stories of other classmates using support services successfully or a personal referral from a trusted mentor are the most helpful in encouraging an online graduate student to initiate connection with student services.

Summary of Literature

The literature supports the notion that a strategic academic advising model can improve student retention and completion. Additionally, the literature reinforces that without strong personal ties to the institution, department, and/or program, an online graduate student may not persist during times of challenge or crisis. However, a gap exists in the literature regarding the specific advising components that are necessary to successfully support online graduate students and the impact that a consistent advising approach can have on an online graduate student's retention and time to degree completion. Using Lent, Brown, and Hackett's SCCT theoretical framework examining research questions focused on advising at the SOE, I intend to learn more about online graduate student advising and the impact of advising on retention and graduation.

Proposed Study and Contribution to Literature

The proposed study seeks to add to a growing body of research around advising for online graduate and adult students. Much of the current advising literature focuses on

undergraduate students and the importance of advising to the success, retention, and graduation of students in the 18-25 age group. Existing literature is consistent in demonstrating that interactions with advisors have a positive effect on student retention; less understood is whether the same types of advising relationships have a positive impact on graduate student retention and whether the advising models designed to target 18–25-year-old students meet the needs and expectations of a more diverse and complex student population. Additionally, main existing studies used a quantitative approach to measuring advising experiences and their impact on retention. A gap remains in the literature in regard to understanding how these advising services are experienced by both the advisor and student and what about the advising experiences positively impact retention.

To frame this study of advising, I will employ Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) social cognitive career theory (SCCT). Unlike bachelor's degree students, who may or may not have specific career plans and are developing personally as much as they are professionally, graduate students enter graduate school to further specific career and professional goals. SCCT includes a student's personal characteristics, background, learning experiences, choices, interests, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations to understand a student's professional attainment. Within this framework, I will look at advising as an important contextual factor that can influence a student's choices and actions and thus impact their retention, graduation and professional attainment.

Methodology

Introduction

Chapter two described the current literature on online and graduate education, as well as literature on advising and student retention until graduation. This section will describe the proposed study design, sampling strategy, data collection, data analysis, and limitations. Due to my interest in examining the unique factors that impact student retention and completion and the lack of formalized processes for advising in place at the SOE, a qualitative methodology allows for an examination of individual student experiences will be best for addressing my research questions. The research questions for this project are: 1) What are the advising experiences of online master's degree students and faculty at SOE? 2) How do online Master's students at SOE describe their barriers to persistence and graduation? and 3) How do advising experiences align with online master's students' needs and expectations?

I have chosen to employ a qualitative case study approach. A qualitative case study is the most appropriate method for the research questions identified because it allows me to collect in-depth, experienced based data from participants. According to Yin, "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (2003, p. 16). Using Yin's definition as a guide, the advising experience of faculty and students serve as the case to illuminate the black box of advising and to better understand the challenges and opportunities experienced by those providing and receiving advising. As such, using a qualitative approach will allow participants to speak openly about their individual experiences and will reveal the specific barriers affecting the student body at SOE.

For the purpose of this study, "advising" will include synchronous (virtual, phone, or in-person meetings that occur in real time) and asynchronous (email) interactions with advisors. "Advising resources" will include advising support materials such as websites, degree plans, and other written materials posted online or provided by an advisor to a student to help them plan and sustain their path towards graduation. Because advising is not formalized and consulting with an advisor is not required at SOE, it is important to understand both the interactions between advisors and students, but also the materials that students have access to as a part of the advising process.

Researcher Paradigm

As I approach my research questions, it is important to note that as a researcher I am using a social constructivist lens and this lens informs the study design in several ways. First, adopting a stance that there are multiple, subjective realities which are socially constructed by and between individuals, this study will seek to understand the experience of advisors and advisees by uncovering how their interactions create knowledge and support action (Creswell, 2013). Second, social and cultural factors will influence an individual's unique experience. As I engage with study participants, I will seek to understand these factors and the influences that these factors may have on an advisor or advisee's experience. A social constructivist approach also aligns well with qualitative, case study which allows for interaction with research subjects to uncover and understand a participant's lived experiences.

Study Design

I will apply a single instrument, descriptive case study design to understand how faculty and students experience advising at SOE and how those experiences align with retention and graduation barriers also experienced by students. According to Frey (2018), a single instrumental

case study approach “is a vehicle to illustrate and better understand the underlying concern” (p. 70). A descriptive case is used when the researcher “seeks to gather rich detail regarding the inner-processes of the case and to provide multiple ways of understanding the layers of meaning inherent in the case” (Frey, 2018, p. 101). As defined by Frey, this design approach will provide the best possible structure for collecting data on individual student and faculty experiences and coding that data to uncover different layers of meaning in the student and faculty experiences.

Site

As this is research situated in a local context, the site for this study is a SOE which is part of a larger research one institution in the mid-Atlantic. The university is decentralized and each specialized school within the university combines to form the academic structure of the institution and are each lead by a dean. Deans hold substantial decision-making power in terms of program modality and staff effort to support programming. Support for graduate programs are completely decentralized with each school determining the staffing needs and models appropriate for their degrees and student populations. Similarly, school deans have the authority to develop policies and procedures that best align with their curriculum and staffing models as long as they do not supersede any university or federal policies.

Within the SOE, this study will be specifically limited to two, fully online Master of Education (MEd) programs in two different departments within the SOE. Due to the fully online nature of the programs, the site itself is technically virtual. Faculty and students interact mainly through asynchronous or synchronous communication channels. The fully online nature of the programs has also led to the development and importance of web-hosted advising materials that can be accessed via students independent of their advisor.

Although the SOE has several other fully online programs, they are newer to fully online delivery and the experiences of the students and faculty in the newer online programs would differ greatly from the experiences of the more established MEd programs. Additionally, many of the other fully online programs are in a different department and rely more heavily on adjunct faculty support for teaching and advising, which does not align with the research questions for this study. In the MEd programs addressed in this study, only full-time general faculty provide advising to students.

Participants & Sampling

Using a case study methodology, I interviewed faculty advisors and online MEd students about their experiences with advising at SOE, their use of advising materials such as websites and degree plans, and perceived barriers to student persistence. Additionally, I conducted document analysis on advising materials such as websites, degree plans, and other advisor curated materials that are available or provided to students as part of the advising experience at SOE.

Interview Sampling

I used a purposeful typical sampling procedure to select participants for advising appointment interviews. Typical sampling reflects the average person and for this study, I am interested in the experiences and perceptions of typical, online graduate students (Robinson, 2014). The two SOE online MEd programs maintain enrollment of about 400 degree seeking students per semester. Students were contacted via a virtual community tool that all MEd students are enrolled in upon matriculation. Students were invited to participate in individual interviews lasting 30-45 minutes. The two MEd departments selected for this study combined have on average (depending on sabbaticals, new hires, and retirements) 25 full-time general

teaching faculty and tenure-track faculty who serve as advisors to fully online MEd students. All current faculty advisors were invited to participate in a 30–45-minute interview. Using a phenomenological approach, I intended to interview 20 online graduate students and 10 faculty advisors but planned to reduce the number of interviews if I reach a saturation point. I accepted offers of participation in the order they are received. The initial student message was sent two-weeks into the advising period for the following semester and 18 students emailed with their interest to participate in the study. A follow up message was sent two weeks later, but no additional interest was yielded. Recruitment messages are provided in Appendix A. Using email, I verified if students were eligible for the study by confirming they were current MEd programs enrolled in one of the fully online master's programs in the two relevant departments. Of those who emailed back, 12 students were eligible to participate. Interviews were scheduled and I found a saturation point after nine interviews. I alerted others who wished to be included via email that the study slots have been filled.

Of the 25 faculty emailed about the study, only four responded with a willingness to be interviewed. A follow up was sent three weeks later and yielded an additional two faculty interested in participating in an interview. Recruitment emails are provided in Appendix A. Saturation was reached after the fifth interview, but the fifth and sixth interview were scheduled closely together and I decided to include interview six, even though saturation had been reached because the overall sample was small and the final interview provided additional balance of faculty perspectives from the two different departments.

Document Sampling

According to Frey (2018) given the large selection of available documents related to the research questions, it is critical to identify a set of clearly defined inclusionary and exclusionary

criteria to focus the selection of documents and ensure representativeness of the documents identified for the study. The documents analyzed for this project are all primary documents and will align with three categories. First, advising materials that are available on the SOE website. Students can discover these webpages independently or be directed to these webpages by their advisor. Websites are updated frequently at SOE, so the websites used for analysis were collected between October and November during the peak advising period aligned with this study. Screenshots were taken of each website analyzed and a sample of redacted screenshot documents are found in appendix B. The web search for these pages were limited to the search terms: Master of Education, Curriculum and Instruction, SOE, and degree requirements. I excluded any websites that pertained to a different program area within the Masters of Education or any websites that pertain to EdD or PhD students.

Second, I analyzed program curated curriculum worksheets. Program worksheets provide students with a suggested curriculum pathway to earn a degree within a specific time to degree (between one to three years). Program worksheets are not freely available online and are provided to the student by their assigned advisor. To sample these documents, I requested each faculty advisor who agreed to be interviewed to provide their program worksheets for inclusion in the study. Five faculty agreed to provide examples with student identifying information removed or blank templates. There are a variety of elective combinations a student can select depending on the concentration area that is defined between the faculty advisor and the student. There are currently ten concentration areas, and I collected a program worksheet from five different concentration areas. I asked each advisor to provide the date of the last update to the worksheet. A sample of a program worksheet in the document samples provided in Appendix B.

Third, are advising emails generated by the faculty advisor to a student advisee. Meeting with an advisor is not required in the program. Because advisors may be consulted about course selection, academic issues, personal issues, or other advisor related concerns via email, exemplar email trails between faculty advisors and students will be an important data point. Additionally, advisors may proactively reach out to students during periods of course selection and registration. I asked each of the advisors who agree to be interviewed to provide an advising email trail between themselves and two different advisees. Five of the faculty agreed to provide this data. I requested that these emails be dated during the same time frame as the website data collection, October and November. The date limitation is intended to align the data collected from the websites and the advisor's email. Personal identifiers of the students in the emails, such as names and email addresses, will be redacted. Identifying information about the institution was also redacted. A sample email is included in Appendix B.

Instrument

For the purpose of the study, I created a student and advisor interview protocol (Appendix C and D). For interviews, the semi-structured interview approach allowed me to ask participants a series of consistent questions but provided the flexibility to ask follow up questions and to apply probes depending on the specific details shared by the participant (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The purpose of the interviews is to address the research questions: 1) What are the advising experiences of online master's degree students and faculty at SOE? 2) What do online master's students at SOE describe as their barriers to persistence and graduation? and 3) How do advising experiences align with online master's students' needs and expectations?

Through my review of literature, I found many of the existing advising studies used a quantitative approach and I was unable to identify an existing survey instrument that would let

me appropriately address my research questions. As such, I used research findings on advising best practices to help inform the development of my interview questions. Additionally, I asked three peers in advising services and student affairs offices to review the questions and provide feedback for improvement. Peers were specifically asked to address question wording and vocabulary selections to minimize bias and leading within the questions.

Data Collection & Procedures

Data collection in the form of both interviews and document analysis was conducted concurrently. The purpose of conducting collection concurrently was to mimic the access to available advising resources available to faculty and students during a registration cycle. To illuminate the advising experiences of faculty and students, it is important to conduct data collection during a typical advising period. Although this work was done concurrently, there was still a chronological nature to my tasks. First, I began with a document analysis of webpages to gain a deeper understanding of openly available advising materials. This analysis helped me refine my semi-structured interview protocols.

Once the interview protocol was finalized, I solicited my sample of faculty and student interviews. Student interview participants were offered a $10 gift card for completing a 30–45-minute interview. Faculty participants were not offered a gift card due to institutional rules around faculty gifts. Interviews were scheduled at the student or faculty member's convenience and interviews were conducted on the Zoom web conferencing platform. I conducted each interview. Interviewees were encouraged to find a quiet, comfortable location to use while being interviewed. I also conducted my side of the interview from a quiet and neutral location to prevent interruptions. During the interview, I took minimal notes to avoid distracting the person being interviewed and used the recording to make a record of unique probes or follow up

questions used in the interview. All interviews were recorded, and each interview participant was notified in advance that interviews would be recorded, their participation in the study would be anonymized, and recordings deleted once the study was completed.

During the interview process, I also engaged in the collection of the advising worksheets and advisor and advisee emails for document analysis. During the interview, I asked participants about the advising worksheets and written communication exchanged between the participant and their advisor or advisee. I requested if they were willing to share these documents. Some of the documents were duplicates, so analysis focused on the unique documents that were collected from the interview participants. Collecting these documents allowed for a deeper understanding of the entire advising experience.

As part of the data collection process, I kept field notes and researcher memos to ensure I recorded the question and sensemaking process that arose during data collection. A sample of a field note and researcher memo is provided in Appendix E. Data collection was completed in eight weeks. I was prepared to extend the timeline if I was unable to reach data saturation for either interviews or document analysis. However, during the data collection process, I reviewed collected data to monitor saturation, and found data collection complete in late December which allowed me to begin data analysis.

Data Analysis

Although I reviewed publicly available documents briefly before engaging in interview and document data collection, all data analysis formally began once data collection was complete. I used a content analysis method. According to Frey (2018), a content analysis method is best employed when a researcher is looking to evaluate patterns to gain a deeper understanding

of experience. To engage in this analysis, Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend a process of coding and categorizing, interpretation, and thematic analysis.

To begin my analysis, I read and re-read the documents I collected three times. I transcribed the interviews that were conducted, and both re-listened to interviews and re-read the transcript two times to become familiar with the data collected. In analyzing both document and interview data, I began with a set of a priori codes that were created using the research curated as part of the literature review and theoretical framework for this project, as well as utilizing my prior knowledge of advising practices in my role as a practitioner at SOE. However, as suggested by Saldaña (2016), preliminary codes are just a starting place, and I found it necessary to reorganize and refine codes as I analyzed the data. During the analysis process, I recorded analytic memos as I proceed with coding. These memos are meant to serve as an audit trail and to clarify the thought process and procedures around coding decisions and interpretation. A sample analytic memo is included in Appendix E. I used the SCCT framework as a guide in defining and refining codes and found that the framework offered a thematic approach to organize and understanding the applied codes. After completing an initial coding process, I reviewed the data and coding two additional times to ensure coding was complete.

Once coding was complete, I engaged in a process of thematic analysis of codes. Codes were grouped into related categories based on my content analysis. Three themes emerged. First, background experiences, which involved the personal experiences, learning experiences, and background of the advisees and advisors that informed their behavior and expectations in the advising process. Second, self-perception and assumptions, which revealed what confidence and/or self-efficacy the students perceived about themselves as a graduate student. This theme also includes faculty perceptions, observations, and assumptions of students advisees in their

program and how those understanding inform advising support and created written materials. Finally, the third theme, contextual influences, which evidenced personal and institutional experiences that influenced a student's goals and actions on their path towards degree completion and the way in which advisors also served as a contextual influence to support students in times of challenge or opportunity.

Trustworthiness

In conducting my data collection and analysis, I aimed to create trust between myself and the audience of this research. According to McGregor (2019), to create trust I must be transparent and open to critical thinking. Strategies McGregor recommends for establishing trust include saturation during data collection, peer review, audit trails, reflexivity, and debriefing. I deployed each of these strategies to achieve trustworthiness. To ensure data saturation, I conducted interviews and document analysis until there were no unique responses. I employed peer review of my protocols, coding, and interpretation with two professionals from the fields of advising and qualitative research. I maintained an audit trail, such as researcher memos, to be sure that others may follow the procedures and logic, I employed in my data collection and analysis. I engaged in reflexivity and regularly self-critiqued to acknowledge my predispositions, assumptions, and biases. And finally, I regularly debriefed with academic advisors, faculty with case study research experience, and professional peers engaged in online learning to identify any blind spots or fallacies in logic or process.

In addition to trustworthiness, I sought confirmability in this study. To achieve confirmability, I aimed to be neutral in interpreting data and brought self-awareness into the study. Personal or professional values could influence the interpretation of the data, so it was important to ensure that findings could be corroborated by others and that the findings were

reflective of the participants of the study and not of me, as the researcher. In the following chapter I heavily reference the materials shared with me by interview participants to represent their views and experiences more accurately. Similarly, to add credibility to this study, I used de-identified quotations from participants to demonstrate faithful accounting of participants' experiences as they are recounted to me during the data collection process.

Generalizability

The qualitative data collected for this study is specific to the local context of the research site selected for this study. To that end the data collected and the following findings are not generalizable to other contexts. While the findings are not broadly applicable, it is hoped that the instrument could be reused to collect data and determine findings in different research site contexts.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations to this study include limits specific to document analysis and interview analysis. According to Frey (2018), documents such as those being collected for this study were proposed for a specific purpose and may lack the detail to specifically address the research questions. There is also a small pool of private email communication between advisors and advisees for use in the study. While these communications were more specific than the web-based documents that were publicly available, the documents provided to me were edited to protect student identity. Lastly, documents can also be biased. As I asked for interview participants to volunteer documents such as personal emails, the selectivity they may bring to providing those documents may not provide a full picture of the email interactions between faculty advisors and student advisees. To attempt to negate these limitations, I defined clear

inclusionary and exclusionary criteria and kept detailed records on the documents to avoid an overly biased or edited document sample.

Website data was collected via screenshots in November 2022 and the research site website went under a substantial revision in early 2023. This limited the study by reducing the relevancy of the website analysis and prevented me from being able to return to the live website to collect any additional data. Analysis of the former website only meant that analysis was only relevant to the student at that moment in time.

Interview data limitations included the available sample, reliance on interview participant accuracy as they recount their experiences. SOE has a limited number of students who are in the fully online master's degree program. The population size was challenging to solicit a large enough sample to reach data saturation. Secondly, as I asked advisors and advisees to recount their experiences, I had to trust the accuracy of their memory and their descriptions of their feelings and experiences. I negated some of the limitations implicit in interview data collection by incentivizing participation and using a semi-structured interview format to make sure I could use follow up interview questions to reach clarity and understanding of participant responses.

As a delimitation to this study, I made a decision to only include participants who were currently enrolled at SOE in a fully-online master's program. While there is a population of withdrawn students who could have been interviewed for this study, I was concerned about the ability to reach these while they were not actively enrolled in the program. Additionally, as these students had elected to take a break or permanently withdraw from their studies for personal reasons that were unknown to me, I was concerned that contacting these students to participate might cause a hardship for these students that was unnecessary when I had other means of addressing my research questions.

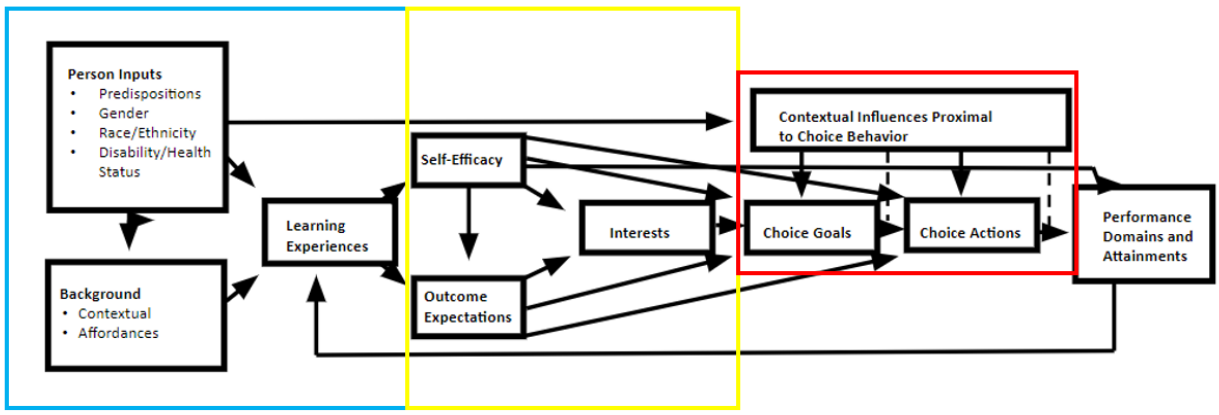
Study Results

Chapter four presents the findings from this case study of faculty and online graduate student advising experiences and how their experiences may impact student program retention and timely degree completion. The findings are results from analysis of the coded interviews conducted with faculty and students, as well as analysis of codes generated from 25 advising related documents. The documents are a mix of publicly available program information located on the SOE website and documents students and faculty advisors provided to me after our interview as examples of materials they used to support the student and faculty advising experience. Combining the interview and document data provides a more comprehensive view of the student and faculty advising experience.

To organize the findings from this study, I return to Lent, Brown, and Hackett's Social Cognitive Career Theory framework (1994). Responses from the students and faculty interviewed fit within three organizational themes aligned with the framework.

Figure 2

Lent, Brown, & Hackett's (1994) Social Cognitive Career Theory



Organizational Themes

The first theme, background experiences, examines the personal input, background, and previous learning experiences that the students and faculty bring to academic study and the advising experience (blue box, Figure 2). By nature of being a graduate student, each student interviewed had contextual knowledge about attending college for an undergraduate degree. Many referred to their undergraduate experience as they attempted to articulate their understanding of the role and purpose of a faculty academic advisor. Similarly, the faculty perspective on academic advising was also informed by the faculty member's own undergraduate and graduate advising experiences, as well as their learning experiences while functioning as an academic advisor as part of their current faculty role.

The second theme, self-perceptions and assumptions, examines the student's self-perceptions and the faculty assumptions of the population that is enrolled in the program (yellow box, Figure 2). No student offered the term "self-efficacy," but each student self-identified as a strong academic performer and many shared that by entering the program, they had the confidence they would complete the program. The strong reputation of the program itself also backed assumptions about high-performing students with strong academic backgrounds. Faculty interviewed shared that students admitted to the program possessed self-awareness and were viewed as capable adults who could navigate the graduate program independently. Faculty also shared that students were led to graduate study by their discipline specific interests and work in their various fields which also contributed to their high degree of confidence and high expectation for successful completion of the program.

The third theme, contextual influences, examines the personal and institutional experiences that impact an online graduate student's progression towards degree completion and

the ways in which advising functions as a form of influence on student goals and actions (red box, Figure 2). Seven of the nine students interviewed shared they had a positive or negative personal barrier that threatened to impact their degree progress. All nine students shared they encountered an institutional barrier that impacted their plan of study. The presence and communication with a faculty academic advisor played a significant role in how each student addressed their perceived barriers. Faculty preparation for advising and understanding of the role of an academic advisor also influence the use and effectiveness of the academic advising relationship.

Background Experiences

To collect information on student background, students were asked to introduce themselves and I asked probing questions as necessary to learn more about their age, gender identity, racial identity, family background, educational history, and professional experience. The nine interviewed students were fairly diverse in age (28-65 years old) and gender (5 female, 3 male, 1 gender non-binary). One student offered, "I've been away from academia for almost 45 years." Otherwise, the participant sample reported several similarities. Eight identified as white. Eight identified as coming from middle class families and consider themselves currently middle class. Eight were married, seven had children, and six had dependent children under 18 years old. One student shared, "I got married and had 2 kids before I was 30. It was not conducive for me to be away and get my masters…My kids were young. It was just not something I was gonna do." Eight of the nine had a traditional undergraduate experience which was defined broadly as either starting college immediately after high school and/or completing their undergraduate degree before turning 25.

Support Systems

All students shared they had a significant personal support system. Supportive partners, parents, children, friends, and employers all played a role in the student being able to enroll in a graduate program. Types of support provided included child care, financial support, emotional support, and academic support. One student said, “Most of my support has been my wife and friends and family.” Another offered, “My district offered this opportunity. It’s not something I would have pursued on my own or been able to pursue on my own financially.” A third raved about her husband taking on more domestic responsibilities, “My husband does everything else at the house. He cooks. I had no time.” Academic support included creating time and space for the student to complete academic work, but also included support for classwork such as proofreading or brainstorming. One student, grateful for the support of his wife, said, “She should really get her name written under mine. She’s my proofreader, my editor in chief. I can bounce ideas off her. I can say, does this concept make sense? And stuff like that.” As much as familial support was critical, one student also noted the intention of her family to support her, but their inability to do so.

> My family is awesome, but they are far away. My mom and dad have passed away. My mom and dad never went to college. They didn’t really help with anything because they didn't know how to. My sisters are always a great support, but one has two kids. And my brother has some mental differences. So he’s awesome, but he’s never gone to college and like he doesn’t know how to relate to that experience. And nobody’s gone through a master’s program. So my husband is really the one to support me.

This student is describing how familial support differs between first generation students and students with parents or extended family members who have experienced college. For this

student, even though they felt loved and supported by their family, they did not have personal experiences with college and could not offer tangible advice or support to bolster the student's success. Instead, the student's partner, who had completed a college degree, was the only support the student could rely on for relevant support. It is important to note that everyone in the sample mentioned significant personal support from family.

Religious Support

A form of support I had not anticipated in the results of this study was religious or spiritual support. However, two students shared that their faith and religious practice were an important support factor in both pursuing graduate study and persisting in both undergraduate and graduate study when they encountered challenges. One student shared, "I prayed really hard about it because I was like, Lord, if this is what you want me to do, you've got to show me some signs" in regard to their decision to apply to graduate school. Another student said, "I am a very spiritual person, so I look to God for a lot of my guidance" in relation to why they choose to apply to a fully online graduate program.

Online Learning Experiences

All nine students were specifically seeking a fully online graduate degree program. One student shared,

> When I was done with undergrad I did not want to sit in another class ever again. This was back before online learning was a thing or at least I didn't know it was a thing. It wasn't on my radar at all back then.

Both professional and family obligations prevented students from considering an in-person program. A number of students described their inability to complete an in-person program. One

student said, “I couldn’t do this coursework if it wasn’t entirely asynchronously online.” and one offered, “The online program was just the best with my lifestyle right now.” Another explained,

> The virtual component with asynchronous has really allowed me to manage my own time and just to kind of take command of my learning in a different way, you know, rather than going and sitting in class after class after class. I am really able to kind of digest the materials at my own pace.

For others, the choice of a fully online program was financial. For example, three students discussed the financial ramifications of an online program. One said,

> Online was attractive because being a millennial, I’m still paying off student loans for my undergrad life. So you know I specifically wanted to be able to work full-time but also have a flexible program that I could study and prepare for next steps.

A different student voiced, “I got into in-person programs, but when it came down to it, I wasn’t able to find that money.” The other student felt an affordable graduate degree was the only thing that would allow them to pay off undergraduate debt and one day raise a family on a single income if necessary.

None of the nine students interviewed had previously enrolled in a fully online degree program, but all had taken at least one fully asynchronously online or hybrid (a combination of asynchronous online and in-person instruction) course. All of the students reported previous experiences in online courses were not positive. A student who had a particularly bad experience shared,

> I had to take a couple of online courses before, and they were terrible. They were absolute garbage. I felt like I didn’t get anything from it, I was like

> this is a waste of money. I want my money back; it is a complete waste of time. But SOE is a night and day difference.

One student described their previous online learning experience as a "read and test course". However, interviewees reported that the convenience of online learning was the most important decision factor in selecting an online program, even with concerns about previously poor online courses. In relation to this a student shared, "I think online courses are great. I can do it when I feel like it. And if I miss something, I can go back, and I don't have to waste time going back and forth." Students also reported considering program cost and the prestige of the institution. One student shared, "I've had a number of courses on Coursera, mostly, but EdX as well and from all over the world. But SOE has a really good reputation." In summation, all of the students wanted a highly flexible, affordable program that had a respectable reputation.

Previous Learning Experiences

Previous, successful undergraduate experiences also influenced each student's decision to pursue an online graduate degree. Each student thought of themselves as strong academic performers. While I will discuss self-perceptions of academic performance in the next section, it is important to note here that past academic performance associated with being a strong student influenced these student's willingness to enroll in a fully online degree program. One student shared they "knew how to navigate school" and another reported they were a "strong writer". These positive undergraduate experiences built student's confidence and self-efficacy that they would be successful in a fully online degree program.

None of the students shared any positive experiences with academic advising in their undergraduate experience. One student called academic advising "perfunctory" and another student described their experience with advising as "checking a required box". The limited

impact advising had on interviewed students during their undergraduate experience seemed to generate low expectations and a lack of clarity of what to expect from advising in a fully asynchronous online graduate degree program.

Faculty advisors also brought their background and their previous learning experiences into their role as an academic advisor. All six faculty interviewed reported they did not receive any formal training or professional development before being assigned academic advisor responsibilities. One faculty member shared, “In my memory, there was probably something (training) but I just can’t remember. It was probably very informal and probably needs based.” In the absence of formal preparation, the faculty referenced their experience in their own undergraduate and graduate education journey to inform how to provide academic advising support to students. One faculty said,

> In the online space, I think at least from my experience, it (advising) has been helpful, especially since you could potentially go through a program and not have met your advisor or faculty. I have found advising, especially in the online space, to be a relationship builder, a way to, like, create trust, possibly reliability, and a personal connection.

All of the faculty interviewed considered the advising experience an important part of the overall online student experience.

In the absence of formal training, performing the many facets of the advisor role came from learning on the job and peer mentorship. One faculty member shared, “I’ve been around long enough that there aren’t many questions a student asks me that I am not going to know. But when I first started, I really relied on my colleagues.” And another offered, “I constantly had someone available to me to teach me the ins and outs of how to deal with things and who to go

to. Initially, new faculty were mentored informally. But I don't think that is true anymore." I found all six interviews referenced the importance of colleagues in the way the faculty member approached advising and the various tools faculty used to support the advising process.

Self-Perceptions and Assumptions

To understand more about each student's self-efficacy, expectations, and interests, I asked interviewed students to describe their perception of themselves as students. Students' responses aligned with the second theme, self-perceptions and assumptions. Each of the nine interviewees expressed that they identified as a strong student who could succeed in the program. One student called themselves a "reformed perfectionist." Another student who encountered a significant personal barrier during their first year of enrollment told me,

> There was no altering (their degree plan). I mean, for one, I'm a perfectionist. So if I set my goals and set standards, it really bothers me when I can't reach the goal. Like I'm willing to push hard enough to reach the goal.

Another student shared a struggle they encountered while enrolled and when I asked whether they considered taking a break in their enrollment or taking an incomplete, the student said, "No, I was going to do it." Beyond perfectionism and a drive to meet goals, another student described themselves as "technology literate" and another as "tech savvy," suggesting that technical issues would not impact their ability to be successful in a fully online program. My interpretation of these responses led me to understand this sample of students to have a high degree of self-efficacy. According to Bandura, self-efficacy is the person's belief that they can exercise control over their own progress in life and can overcome events or obstacles that may challenge them on their path towards their goals or idea of success (Bandura, 1997). Every student shared a strong

belief that they would complete the program, regardless of any issues they may encounter during their enrollment.

Students also shared that they considered themselves adults and demonstrated that their understanding of adulthood meant they had the wherewithal to be successful in an online graduate program. One student said, “I mean, I’m a pretty high functioning adult with a full time job and two kids, so you know, like the things I allow to get in my way are minimal.” The main point here is that it is challenging to be an employee and a parent. The student’s previous success in these roles and responsibilities developed their confidence and self-efficacy to be successful as an online graduate student. One student described a challenging course they wish they had not taken. When asked if they had considered dropping the course, the student replied, “Yeah, I don’t think I’ve ever dropped a course. Maybe I’ve dropped one course in my entire undergraduate career.” The student conveyed this as to suggest it was shameful, weak, or wasteful to drop a course. The student was willing to suffer through completing the course to honor the commitment of taking the course and to earn the credit for the tuition already sunk into the course. Another student shared,

> Even when I had Covid early, when it was kind of a big deal, and I was sick for like three months, like I still completed class…somebody in their early twenties would have handled it differently. I think it's just a place that we are in our lives where we handle things differently.

Again, this demonstrates the student’s belief that as an adult, things such as illness should not inhibit their success and performance attainment. However, this belief that as adults these students should be high achievers who do not need help may impact the student’s willingness to seek support from an advisor when they encounter a problem or question.

Many of the students interviewed shared the perception that as adults, they should be able to navigate their online graduate program with little support. One student said, “So I didn’t go to my advisor for any assistance because it just isn’t something that I personally needed help with.” Another shared, “My advisor is always available, but I don’t necessarily take them up on that all the time.” And another explained,

> We have an advisor, but obviously, like I was teaching in middle school and like a middle school counselor, it's kind of an ambiguous position of like, what are they there for? Is it scheduling? Is it a shoulder to cry on? So I knew I had an advisor listed on my profile and I would say my first semester I really didn’t have to interact with that person.

Between their self-perceptions as high-functioning adults and an ambiguity about the role and function of an advisor for a graduate program, the students did not appear to know how and when to use an advisor. In trying to make sense of the role of an online graduate student advisor, one student explained, “Graduate students need support, but it will be different. The support at the undergrad level, although recognizing the variances and differences, but the same level support.” In not fully understanding the role of the advisor and the services the advisor could offer the student, some students refrained from using advising support.

Faculty Assumptions

As students grappled with understanding the role of a faculty, graduate, online advisor, I sought to understand how faculty perceived their advising role. Faculty interviewees were asked to describe their understanding of the role of an academic advisor in the SOE. Interestingly, each of the interviewees provided strikingly similar answers. First and foremost, they described their role as responsible for providing a plan of study for the students and to help students monitor

their progress of their plan of study using cloud-based tracking sheets that both faculty and student advisees could access and update with ease. One faculty member explained that advising was, “Helping them plot their journey and supporting them on the way.” And another described it as, “Establishing a plan of study based on their interests.” The responsibility of creating a plan of study was so important that it came up 113 times in the student and faculty interviews. Additionally, of the 25 documents analyzed for this study, 20 documents were related to creating a plan of study. These documents showed the choice of courses, often with consideration of areas of concentration for electives, as well as when students could expect these courses to be offered. I also analyzed the cloud-based tracking sheets many faculty maintained for their advisees. One faculty member said, “I find it helpful to have a written trail” and another shared “Some programs have choices and others there is no choice, so just figuring out what to take when is critical.” I interpreted the sheer amount of material pertaining to the plan of study as indicating both the importance of the plan of study, but also the desire to make planning and monitoring a plan of study something a student could do independently or with an advisor.

Second, the advisors explained they felt required to provide what the students needed within the advising relationship. One faculty member described this as, “I help students navigate the system and the systems” and another said, “It’s really tailored to what a person wants out of an advisor.” The complexities of the advising experiences are complicated and nuanced. Faculty members wish to provide the support their student advisees need, but online, graduate students may not know what services they need or what services are available. And the services and support possible appear to be varied and vast. One faculty member explained, “There is not a common issue that comes up. The issues are really diverse from what I experience. Like I don’t ever think, oh I’ve heard that one before.” For example, these services may be referrals to other

offices like financial aid or registrar. One faculty member said, “Lots of financial aid questions and understanding how what and how many courses they are taking impacts their ability to get funding or maintain funding.” Students need help with financial questions and consider the advisor a point of contact for such questions, but in reality, many of these questions may be out of the scope of the faculty member’s knowledge or sphere of influence. Or at times student needs may be related to career planning or issues students are tackling in their professional role. The interviewed faculty used labels to describe the roles they played offering these secondary supports that were related, but tangential to academic advising. They offered words like mentor, professional coach, cheerleader, and navigator to help describe this work and how much it varies between students.

Further complicating the advising experience for both students and faculty are faculty member’s own perceptions and assumptions about online graduate students being adult learners. For example, one faculty member described their students as “driven.” Multiple faculty shared that once they help students establish a plan of study towards the degree, they become more hands off with the student until the student requests support. One faculty said, “Once you set up their plan of study, they are just kind of on their own. Unless you make an effort to reach out to them” and another explained,

> So I have people and they are pretty self-sufficient because they are working adults. They don’t often reach back to me until near the end. But when they do reach out, it's usually things like I’ve got a crisis or complication or something has changed in my life. Can you help me figure it out?

Faculty make assumptions about student needs based on their previous experiences and the self-efficacy they have observed in students. However, by assuming and not asking students what

they need or not telling students what they can expect, there can be a misalignment of advising expectations and experiences. One faculty shared,

> I think advising is very hit or miss and I think it depends on the person who is doing the advising and what they know and what experiences they have had to impact how and what type of advisor they are.

Another faculty said,

> There is a lot I wonder about. How often do you meet with your advisees? How do you keep track of them? I worry a lot because to some extent I have students who will pop up and say I'm ready to graduate and they haven't taken something or you know, they haven't taken a required test.

Online graduate programs at SOE were described as complicated, with differing requirements that necessitate tracking towards completion. Advisors have the ability to play a critical role in supporting student success, at minimum at a logistical level, but in the absence of advisor preparation or training, the advising experience is beholden to previous advisor experiences, advisor assumptions, and student self-perceptions of what an adult should be capable of in an education context versus when they can and should ask for help.

Assumptions from both students and faculty about SOE as an educational institution add fuel to the idea that SOE students are all high achievers who need minimal support. SOE has a strong regional and national reputation as a very selective institution. Enrolled students demonstrate institutional pride at being admitted into SOE. Only undergraduate admittance rates are shared on the institutional website, and on average only 25% of undergraduate applicants are admitted. Although the graduate program admissions rates for SOE are less publicized, the knowledge that undergraduate admissions are competitive appears to have led prospective

graduate students to conclude that graduate admissions are equally as stringent. One student shared that they selected SOE "knowing that the reputation of SOE was quite good." In considering an online program, reputation was important to students. One student explained this saying, "I started looking at financial options and I was surprised SOE was reasonable. I looked everywhere. I looked at the University of Phoenix. And that was expensive by the way and I didn't want that on my resume." In other words, the student did not want to attend an institution that was considered a lesser, online serving institution and preferred the reputation of SOE in addition to its reasonable tuition structure. In some ways, SOE's reputation is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because SOE is selective, students do often demonstrate a high degree of self-efficacy and have a self-perception, based on previous experience, that they are high performing students. Similarly, faculty make assumptions about the academic and executive functioning abilities of students who qualify for admission.

Excerpts from interviews related to this theme demonstrate that student's self-perceptions lead students to define themselves as high-functioning adults who are prepared for graduate study. Faculty perceptions indicate faculty also recognize online graduate students as adults. Faculty want to meet online graduate students' needs but have assumptions about students' needs and wants. The resulting assumptions are that students feel they do not need to consult or bother their advisor because they are a functioning adult who should not need help. Faculty advisors assume students are progressing through their program successfully unless a problem is brought to their attention. There is not a clear definition of the advisor role, so both the students and the faculty advisors use previous experiences, self-perceptions, and assumptions in making sense of the advisor/advisee experience. Because previous experience is an important data point, in many

cases, this form of experience meets the needs of both the advisor and advisee. However, this is not true all the time. For example, one student shared,

> There were a number of stupid questions that possibly, you know, a 20 year old or a 22 year old came out of being just in a bachelors program already knew. So I had many questions. I was just thinking about the processes, how to get an ID, how to get registered, all those things. I needed help.

Many assume the high-functioning adults can figure out systems, but in this example, the student, who had been out of college for many years, struggled with the newer systems in place and privileged the experience of younger students who were more familiar with how systems functioned today. Similarly, although these students are high-functioning adults, they are also in their prime years to experience many of life's major changes such as marriage, divorce, childbirth, death in the family, promotion, job loss, job change, relocation, and more (Bergman et al, 2014; Braun, 2008; Su & Waugh, 2018; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). One faculty advisor explained this perfectly by saying, "Graduate students, for the most part, are adults and life is predictable, but life is also very unpredictable." Next, we turn to the unpredictable and review the contextual influences that influence the advising experience, student progress, and degree completion.

Contextual Influences

Every student admitted into the master of education program enters with the same goal - to earn a degree. However, what happens to the student from matriculation to graduation is highly contextualized and influenced by the background experiences, self-perceptions, and assumptions discussed above, but also the challenges and opportunities the student's experience during their enrollment and the supports available to the students that help them navigate these

challenges and opportunities successfully, so that they main obtain their degree. Lent, Brown, and Hackett refer to graduation as the "performance attainment" (1994, p. 89). Within this theme, I will review the contextual influences which affected sample student behaviors, goals, and choices on their way to performance attainment. Contextual influences divide into several categories. First, I will report personal student barriers, both positive and negative, that were identified in the study. Second, I will illustrate institutional barriers. Third, I will review the influence of the advising experience.

Personal Student Barriers

Personal Barriers. Each student interviewed was asked if they experienced any personal challenges and/or opportunities that influenced their degree completion. Eight of the nine students shared significant personal experiences that I coded as either positive or negative barriers to completion. Positive barriers were defined as momentous and joyful events - most of which were predictable and planned. For example, one student shared about their wedding,

> Getting married. I mean, I talked with them before and said this. What do you think? Last summer I took two courses and it was great. But I was just busy, busy. This summer I'm getting married and flying to another country to do it. I've got all these events and I was like you know what? What do you think? My advisor said, you can still graduate on time. It won't make any difference if you take two courses in the summer or two in the fall. And you are going into an area with no internet. Get me the work when you can.

Another student offered, "I was planning a wedding the first year." Another student got married and had a child, so they deferred their start of the program for a semester. Other positive barriers included a job change, a move to a new city, and two students reported building new homes after

entering the program. For the student's that experienced positive barriers their progress towards degree completion could have been derailed or deferred, but except for the one student who delayed starting the program due to marriage and childbirth, the rest of the students continued in their program as planned. Although a barrier presented itself, the influence on student behavior did not lead students to choose to take a break in their studies or to leave their program. Students reported being comfortable sharing positive personal barriers with advisors, but only two reported seeking any support from their advisor to adjust for the positive barrier in their course of study.

Negative barriers were defined as unexpected, momentous events that were sad or painful. These barriers are something you do not want to happen yet are common and occur to many students during graduate study (Bergman et al, 2014). Negative barriers I anticipated in study results included family death, divorce, physical illness, mental illness, professional issues, and financial issues. Three students reported losing loved ones while they were enrolled in the program. One student shared,

> My father passed away in the first year of the program and everyone was supportive. In the second year, right after I got back from my wedding, my grandmother passed away. I went to the States for a little while and my advisor said, you're telling me you are really struggling with this. Why don't you not withdraw from the course but take an incomplete and then catch up in a few weeks during the break between semesters. And I did. And it was great. And I ended up getting an A in the course. And at the time, if they had not suggested taking an incomplete, no way. With traveling and where I was mentally, I couldn't function.

Another student lost her mother and her sister in the same year. Describing the loss of her sister, the student said,

> My sister passed away suddenly. I was at a very, very dark place, and I felt comfortable enough to contact her (advisor) and just lay it all out there and ask for guidance on how to push forward because it was a very hard time to continue to push forward. It was a hard time to find joy.

And yet another student shared they lost their mother and explained, “Unfortunately, I lost my mother right before I started. And that did make me think about delaying my start for a while. But I know she would have wanted me to move forward.” This student did not share this loss with their advisor. In the face of these losses, it was remarkable to me that all three of these students elected to continue with their program. Personal support systems, flexible faculty, and engaged academic advisors all supported students to progress towards graduation.

Other negative barriers that surfaced during the interviews included physical wellbeing and job stress. One student reported,

> Within a week or two of beginning classes, my wife had a heart attack. A couple of weeks after that, probably due to stress, who knows, my knee became a problem. So the first few weeks of class I got behind. But I don’t know what that has meant to my grade.

And another shared,

> I think being a full-time teacher, like, it's just really hard. I mean because even if it was just this, like my job never really stops and I never feel completely detached and I never feel like I am done. And then to put graduate work on top of that…it doesn’t necessarily feel like you have

> enough hours in the day or you're always able to maybe, like, do your best all the time. There are certain times when I have to compromise.

One student was balancing stress at home and at work. They explained,

> Work has been stressful, I have two kids, one of which is struggling in school which is a stress and made me wonder if I should continue the program. I have a good support system at home, so we've been able to deal with that.

Despite these significant personal and negative barriers, these three students also chose to continue in their degree program as planned. None of these students shared their negative personal barriers with their advisor. When probed, they offered they were comfortable enough with their advisors to share personal issues, but the timing of the issue and the sense they were responsible adults who could handle these barriers prevented the students from reaching out to their advisor for support.

While advisees differ in how and when they reach out to advisors for support, the advisors interviewed also described their observations of the positive and negative personal barriers that influence their students. I asked faculty advisors to recount what barriers they have witnessed when working with student advisees. One advisor shared,

> Sometimes they tell me things like I have had a really stressful semester. I had a job change or I had a sick family member, or you know something along those lines. But I hear that more from students in my courses than from my advisees. Students most often come to me about breaks when someone is expecting a baby or they are moving across the country and they are like, I just want to take a break. Occasionally I have a mental health

> issue. Occasionally it is because a family member has a terminal illness. Those are the most common.

Another offered,

> One thing that comes up, I'm floundering in this class and I don't know how to handle it so can you help me interface with the instructor. Another big one, sometimes a student starts the program and they've got lots of money and then they need financial aid. So they might need me to help figure out, you know, getting them the right source of aid.

One highlighted the contrast between the negative and the positive barriers. They explained,

> My most common issues are medical, then divorce, then someone is ill or dying. Or maybe someone is military and they are moving. Taking a break is rarely for academic reasons. Right now, I have a student whose husband was in a car accident and I have a student who got married and went on honeymoon. Happy stuff, not stressors, but it impacts classes, you know.

It is evident from both student and faculty responses in this study that personal barriers have the potential to negatively influence the choice to persist and progress to degree attainment. The high degree of self-efficacy reported by the student sample in the study, as well as strong support systems, appear to aid the student in making the choice to continue towards graduation. Advising can be an important part of the student support system, but it is a secondary support compared to both support coming from family and student's inner motivation to persist. As an example of this, one faculty advisor said, "I have an advisee going through medical issues. And it's like, she's comfortable to reach out, but also, you know, these are motivated people. That's why they

are here and so they advocate for themselves." Analyzing the interview responses from faculty, it was evident they wanted to meet student advising needs. However, meeting needs was challenging because of the diversity of obstacles students faced and the reluctance students often had in asking for help.

Institutional Barriers

In addition to personal barriers, the institution also creates barriers that can influence student choice behavior and degree attainment. The three institutional barriers that surfaced during the interviews were section availability, navigating institutional systems, and class issues.

Section Availability. Section availability involved students being able to register for course sections during the semester the course was needed. Sometimes courses were not offered every semester which negatively impacted a student's plan of study. One student said,

> The broader issue is there are some classes that are required for this degree, but they will only be offered once one semester out of the year, maybe depending on the professor's availability. And so that awesome thing I did communicate with my advisor about it. And we had to connect with some folks to confirm.

Another student shared a similar concern,

> But you know, there is a schedule issue that kind of prevents you from progressing when you're a working adult and not being able to get into a class that you'd really like to take or have to wait or have to delay graduation.

This student explained that due to this scheduling issue, their graduation would be delayed from May until the following December. Fortunately for one student, a course section that was filled

required a revision of their degree plan, but did not derail their time to degree. The student said, "I haven't been able to register for a course I wanted on my plan and had to reach out to pick a different course." While section availability only influenced three of the nine students from the study, this barrier did have a negative influence on one student's ability to graduate within their anticipated time to degree. Of all the institutional barriers described by students, section availability had the most potential to be addressed through positive advising experiences. Many of the documents analyzed tried to account for section availability by alerting students to which semester classes would be offered. However, even with these aids, students still reported section availability issues.

Navigating Institutional Systems. All nine students discussed difficulty navigating institutional systems. The registration system was mentioned most frequently. A student shared, "The biggest issue for me has been registration." Another said, "The process of registration is a little bit more convoluted than one would think." When asked to explain, the student described the issue,

> You find your classes and put them in your cart, but you still aren't registered. It's like there are a few different things you have to do before even being registered for the course. That meant I was late and I needed help.

One student described this as "There were just too many steps and it wasn't clear." And yet another student shared, "The registration system is not friendly. It took me a long time to be able to add a course." So, the technical act of looking up courses and registering for them was seen as a major barrier.

Beyond the technical ability to register, the rules around registration also proved to be a barrier for students. One student tried to explain how students were sorted into different registration groups and each group had a different registration date. The student explained, “So once, for some reason, maybe the deadline to register for classes, and I didn’t make it into the class. It was full and we corresponded and she (advisor) took care of it.” Students are not aware that they may have to register quickly to ensure they obtain a seat in a high demand course. Another student indicated they were nearing graduation. They shared, “I am at the end of my degree and I’m kind of like, what do I do? Do I need to do anything?” Preparing for graduation can be a multistep process including applying for graduation, obtaining a gap and gown, and obtaining ceremony tickets. These complicated, multistep processes become a larger institutional barrier if it influences student choice behavior and time to degree. Although advising could help alleviate barriers caused by registration rules and processes, students referred to the registrar when talking about graduation and did not connect the act of graduation to the academic advising process.

One more system students reported as a barrier was the institutional website. Students found the website complicated and difficult to navigate. One student said, “I’m sometimes over higher education, institutional web pages because a lot of it is like marketing and sometimes the information is not the most helpful and valuable.” Another student was considering extending their time at SOE to complete a certificate and shared, “After graduating, I was considering staying to do a certificate…and the page for that is not helpful, especially as it relates to current students.”

Faculty also mentioned the website as a barrier in their interview responses. One faculty member said, “I always have a list of helpful links that I give them because our website

overwhelms students." And another faculty advisor interpreted student use of the website as something they forget, not something that was difficult. They said, "I'm as bad as my students for going online to use resources. There are a lot of supports I just forget." Overall, neither students nor advisors found the website to be a reliable or easy to use source of program guidance.

Class Issues. The last institutional barrier that was discussed referred to class issues. Faculty absence was the most common class issue that students shared as a barrier. One student said, "There was this one class and the professor that I had was just not grading things and not providing feedback." Referring to a different course, another student shared, "I ended up dropping the course because I could not get what I needed." Faculty members interviewed also mentioned students initiating class issues. One faculty member shared, "I've had a few students complain about courses and I've gone back to the faculty who oversee the courses to say, hey, here is what the students are saying." Students had high expectations for their courses and when those expectations were not met, they became disengaged in the course. As seen in the second example, this can be a significant institutional barrier that influences choice behavior. If a student chooses not to continue with a course, they can lose tuition money and delay their time to degree. While advisors did try and get involved when students reported an issue with a faculty member instructing a course, there was some noticeable discomfort at the idea of questioning a peer faculty member's instructional practice or classroom management. Often, the advisor encouraged the student to seek resolution on their own through appropriate supervision channels. While this is not directly advising, this is an example of an important form of support an advisor can provide a graduate student, particularly in an online context where paths for course disputes may not be clear.

Advising Experience

The last contextual influence is the actual advising experience that takes place between the student and faculty advisor. When positive, an advising experience can deeply connect the online graduate student to the institution, create a sense of accountability, and support a student's retention and timely graduation (Cross, 2018; Fiore, Heitner, & Shaw, 2019; Harker Martella, 2017; Lehan, Hussey, Shriner, 2018; McGill, 2019; Schroeder & Terras, 2015). When the advising experience is negative or absent, the student can feel adrift and if the student is self-advising, the student could miss a critical program milestone or requirement which leads to delayed graduation or program withdrawal (McGill, 2019; Redfern, 2008; Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Of the nine students in the sample for this study, seven students reported a positive advising experience, and two students reported a negative or absent advising experience. Students were asked to describe their advising experiences. Interview questions were designed to examine both the logistics involved in an advising relationship, but also the quality, consistency, and usefulness of the advising relationship. Results are organized by descriptions of positive experiences and descriptions of negative experiences.

Positive Advising Experiences. Positive advising experiences had common characteristics including reliable communication, access to the advisor, and support. Reliable communication was described as timely communications that helped students take necessary actions, helped students understand institutional systems, and assisted students in following their plan of study. Reliable communication often started even before the student began their courses. One student said,

> She put together my course of study and when I had questions that first week, I was thinking, do I actually want to do this? I had some questions

> and she was really fast in answering those questions, like let me figure out is this the concentration I want to do? It was a big help.

Another said, “She’s good about checking in from time to time. I’d say about once per semester. She’s very proactive about letting us know things. Like when course registration is happening.” Another student described this reliable communication this way, “I think she just recognized all those unique factors about our culture and our needs and really good about anticipating those needs and being proactive about communication.” For many the plan of study is the most important piece of communication. Regarding the plan of study, a student said,

> I have a tracking sheet that lays out all my requirements. I consulted with her, asked her thoughts on my taking just one class and what I gave as my rationale and she totally agreed with it…I need that person to bounce off ideas.

In addition to interview results, document analysis of four emails faculty sent to advisees also exemplifies the timely, reliable communication that students referenced as effective. One email began,

> I hope you are doing well. How is the semester going? I wanted to reach out to you in advance of the spring semester to check in on advising. I can’t believe it is already time for you to register for your final semester! Time has gone by so quickly. If you want to finish this spring, you should register for…

This excerpt illustrates the friendly tone and the reliability of the semester-to-semester messages that assure the student they are on track and that someone is paying attention to their progress in the program.

The faculty interviewed also recognized and mentioned the importance of reliable communication. One faculty shared, “I regularly communicate with the students, welcome them into the program, make sure they understand what courses they’re going to take, and answer any questions.” Another said,

> There’s something different about a face-to-face interaction, those gestures and body language that you just don’t get in a Zoom session. But at the same time I feel like there are more clear and direct lines of communication and there are a lot more modes of communication for them to communicate with me. So in that way, I think it is helpful.

And in reference to using excel tracking sheets as an advising communication tool, a faculty member said, “The advising plans on excel are great. I really like them. Someone wants to speed up or slow down and I revise the plan. They know and I know.” To ensure reliable and timely communication with students, faculty often share templates and other communication resources to meet student needs. One faculty member explained, “Someone made this monthly checklist they shared, and it is so helpful. Here are things to think about when it comes to advising from month to month and then it links directly to the relevant thing.” Analyzed documents in this study reflect the collaborative approach the faculty take to creating, sharing, and adapting advising supports. For example, one faculty member shared a blank advising template they use with their students to track their plan of study. A separate faculty shared a similar document with modifications to include the faculty member’s disciplinary focus and preferences for tracking student questions. Three of the faculty interviewed shared that it was common for one faculty to take the initiative to create a document or tracking method to fill a need and for other faculty in the program to adopt or modify the shared resource to meet their specific needs.

Interviewed students also mentioned access to the advisor as an important part of their satisfaction with the advising experience. Access relates how easy it was for the student to reach the advisor for a question or meeting. One student said, “She’s very hands on and responsive. She’s been the most responsive professor too.” Another student encountered a problem with their enrollment and shared, “I heard from her without initiating contact.” Often these interactions do not have to be long. One student said, “Our calls last rarely 20 minutes because it's like what do you need? All right. What are you interested in? Bam, bam, bam. Sorted. And I like it.” And another student shared about scheduling meetings with their advisor, “All I have to do is reach out and we’ll schedule a Zoom if I have any questions. She’s very easy to access.” Faculty members understand this need for access. One faculty member shared, “I communicate with students in their preferred communication method…and I’m flexible to time zones.” And another explained that some students need more interaction than others, “Some need to hear your voice and some like the convenience of email.” The students who felt they could access their advisor used their advisor more than the students who did not feel like they could reach their advisor in times of need or question. As a contextual influence, this support from an advisor creates positive influences in student choice behavior. Students have the resources they need before they take choice actions.

Lastly, students who had positive advising experiences referenced the support they felt they received from their advisor. Support came in the form of listening to student questions and concerns. One student shared, “But she talked to me about, you know, I have questions about life planning because I was like, do I want to do this right now? And where we might be trying to have a baby and does that make sense?” Another student who experienced a significant negative

personal barrier said, “I told her the whole story and she was just very supportive. Very, very, very supportive. So I really appreciated that.”

Faculty shared trying to learn more about students' lives to be able to offer them the best possible support and advising. One faculty explained,

> I need to understand what their teaching lives are like and what their home lives are like because many have family or coaching or other responsibilities. It is important to have this information to help them determine what they can do. Should they take one course at a time or two? What can they handle?

In regard to the plan of study and how the faculty member offers support, one advisor said, “I emphasize this is a draft. If things come up, if life comes up, you get sick, you know, maybe have a baby. Whatever challenge. We can revisit this.” And when a student came to the advisor in distress about a personal issue, the advisor described their approach with the student,

> I tell them, first and foremost you are going to be okay. Your well being comes first. It’s okay to defer for a semester. Or a year. I think we’ve had positive conversations about that. Others, we slow down, but they don’t stop.

One faculty member shared how they used to help advisees prepare for graduation, “I used to go and pick up things like invitations and robes and caps and gowns for my advisees and deliver them to students.” Support can come in many forms, but ultimately the students reported that they felt supported, regardless of the specific action taken by the advisor. That support also translated into a positive contextual influence on their choice behaviors and progress towards degree.

It is important to note that even with students describing positive advising experiences, students also shared ways the advising experience could be improved. One student offered,

> It might be helpful to say, if you are on the fence about 2 concentrations, pick the one you are most interested in. Like, I'm not regretful at all about what I selected as my infrastructure. But like, you know, if I were choosing between 2 and I was regretful, and I didn't know what I was going to have to take until it was too late.

Another student explained that although they had a great relationship with their advisor, she still was not sure if she had to take the courses she registered for,

> She gave me my recommended course of study. I was just under the impression that those were the courses I had to take from my area for my degree and I'm still not sure cause I never asked her, but were those courses prescribed to me? Or were there other courses I could have selected from if I had asked that could have interested me more.

And some students were satisfied with simple interactions and did not want more. One student said, "I met my advisor through email after I was admitted. We emailed about courses and how I would register and that was it. We really haven't talked since then. I follow my plan of study." And sometimes faculty want to offer support, but support is beyond their knowledge or sphere of influence. One faculty said,

> Students reach out about questions not in my lane. So, for example, questions about tuition are not in my lane, but I'm happy to help. Maybe it isn't a meeting, but connecting them to the right resource…The most

> common questions are not in my lane, so tuition, holds on accounts, and student financial services.

In this example, a student can be satisfied with the advising experience, but have unmet needs in areas like institutional system navigation that can still negatively influence their choice behavior and progress to graduation.

Negative or Absent Advising Experiences. Two students in the study described negative advising experiences. Unlike positive advising experiences, negative experiences focused on a single issue - advisor presence. One student shared, “I’ve never met her and I guess that is the short answer. There are a number of people involved in the program and they are more responsive. So the advising process doesn’t exist from my perspective.” And the other student said,

> It (connecting with an advisor) became problematic when I wanted to choose some of the other course options. But I wanted to make sure that it would fulfill the requirements of the program. And my advisor was very problematic. They were a full professor, very respected, and we never had a conversation.

Eventually, this student was able to switch advisors, but connecting with the advisor remained an issue. The student explained,

> There would be weeks at a time where there would be a blackout of the internet where they were and I would send a communication and not hear anything back for weeks. It makes me sound very needy. They were responsive, but there was a lack of consistency. They weren’t great with technology, so we would attempt to meet but we couldn’t actually

> communicate. (Online) there is a natural roadblock to building the relationships that go with fostering those next steps (considering future study). For me the advisor would be the natural person to help facilitate that. But when I would reach out to them, she knew her limitations.

In this example, the faculty member was absent due to communication challenges. The instructor did not have reliable internet access and also was unable to successfully use SOE technology for teleconferencing with students. But even when the advisor was present, the advisor could not address the students questions or concerns. The advisor was unable to offer the support the student needed in terms of career planning or considering further graduate study. In ending their interview, this same student shared,

> My advisor changed and it was this added stress. I think yeah, it made me want to pause, made me think about possibly taking a break. But also, like maybe just power through and get it done.

Advisor presence can have a positive influence, but when an advisor is absent, it can cause a student to delay their studies or even withdraw permanently. However, this sample population of students with high self-efficacy are determined to progress and can overcome the negative influences of negative advising experiences. Neither student who experienced an absent advisor took a break in their studies and both are on track for on-time graduation.

Summary of Results

To summarize the findings of this study, Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) SCCT framework provided the organization structure to understand how student retention and timely graduation, known as performance attainments in the SCCT framework, are impacted by personal experiences, self-perceptions and assumptions, and contextual influences. How these

three pieces ultimately impact performance attainment was illustrated through an examination of the student and faculty advising experiences at the SOE research site. Sample students from the study revealed backgrounds with strong personal support systems and successful undergraduate experiences. The students perceived themselves to have high degrees of self-efficacy and outcome goals confident that they would be able to complete a fully online graduate degree program. Contextual influences such as personal barriers, instructional barriers, and positive or negative advising experiences all influence student choice behaviors, goals, and actions impacting whether or not they persist in their program and graduate on time. Personal barriers are often unpredictable, so to create positive contextual influences institutional barriers need to be removed and institutions need to provide positive and consistent advising experience if they wish to positively influence persistence and degree attainment. The following chapter will be a discussion of these results and recommendations for the research site to consider strengthening the advising experience and reduce institutional barriers to student success.

Research Question Discussion

Introduction

In chapter four, I presented the findings from the qualitative case study on student and faculty advising experiences at the SOE research site. Using Lent, Brown, & Hacket's SCCT framework, I organized findings in terms of participants' background experiences, self-perceptions and assumptions, and contextual influences (1994). In this chapter, I turn to a discussion of these results and answers to the following research questions: 1) What are the advising experiences of online master's degree students and faculty at SOE? 2) How do online master's students at SOE describe their barriers to persistence and graduation? and 3) How do advising experiences align with online master's students needs and expectations? The chapter concludes with recommendations for online graduate student advising programming that supports student retention and timely graduation and aligns with practices highlighted in the literature review.

Advising Experiences

Research Question One: What are the advising experiences of online master's degree students and faculty at SOE?

Through responses to the semi-structured interview questions, students and faculty shared detailed accounts of their experiences with advising at SOE. Student responses focused on their specific relationship with one advisor. Faculty recounted their experiences through examples of interactions with master's level student advisees throughout their time advising at SOE. Within the SCCT framework, advising experiences are a contextual influence on student choice behavior. Contextual influences can either positively or negatively influence both student choice

behavior and student action in regard to performance attainment, defined in this study as timely graduation.

Student Advising Experiences

Students qualified their experiences with advising as either positive or negative, with the majority of students (7) describing a positive experience with their advisor and the remaining students (2) describing a negative experience. Whether describing a positive or negative experience, the main qualifier that students used to gauge their satisfaction with their advising experience was responsiveness of the advisor. Students who had a responsive advisor, described as responding to email or scheduling a meeting promptly, were satisfied with their advisor. Students who had an unresponsive advisor described their advising experience as negative and were then less likely to engage in the advising relationship.

In research literature on advising, the interactions with the advisor are deemed a critical part of the benefit of the advising experience (Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorn, 2013; Zarges, Adams, Higgins, & Muhovich, 2018). Particularly in an online context, the advisor serves as a connection between the student and the institution. The advisor gives the institution a name and face and the personal connection the advisor makes with the student can bolster student persistence and retention (Su & Waugh, 2018; White, 2015). Although students were asked about what they discussed with their advisor and how proactive their advisor was in initiating contact, the students interviewed all discussed emailing their advisor and how quickly they did or did not receive a response. The repetition of this response led me to understand that a present and responsive advisor was the determining factor of a student's advising experience.

Another element of the advising experience is what service the student expected from the advisor. Overwhelmingly, interviewed students said they wanted and needed a degree plan. As

adult learners, they wanted to know what courses they needed to take and when to take the courses to most efficiently reach graduation. If the student's circumstances remained constant, the student was often able to proceed towards graduation with limited interaction with their advisor. If the students encountered some sort of personal or institutional barrier, the student sought support on how to alter or stay on their degree plan.

Students who viewed their advising experience as positive were open to talking to their advisor about barriers, but often didn't feel like they needed to because they had other support to meet those needs. Students who viewed their advising experience as negative had not fostered a relationship with their advisor and were not comfortable disclosing personal or institutional barriers. Students who reported negative advising experiences also did not have an advisor curated degree plan to help them progress through their program.

Faculty Advising Experiences

Faculty advisors interviewed all described their advising experiences as offering flexible student support to meet diverse student needs. They echoed the students interviewed by highlighting that degree plans were a critical part of the advising experience. Although their main responsibility is to offer academic advising support, advisors shared that their experiences also included offering support beyond academic advising such as institutional navigation advice, technical systems navigation advice, career advice, professional advice, and emotional support.

All faculty respondents shared they could not recall any formalized training or preparation to serve as an academic advisor. Each relied deeply on their peers and mentors to understand the role of an advisor and how to address the diversity of student needs and questions specific to SOE's context. Two advisors acknowledged that advising experiences may look very different depending on the advisor assigned and offered that training may add a consistency to

the advising experience that may be missing more broadly across SOE's masters level degree programs.

Overall, faculty were satisfied with their advising experiences, but noted they required substantial effort. It is time consuming to be proactive about communication, responsive to student needs, and maintain the rest of their faculty workload. However, they also noted the value of the advising experience and understood they played an important role in the student's connection to the institution.

Barriers to Persistence and Graduation

Research Question Two: How do online master's students at SOE describe their barriers to persistence and graduation?

Chapter IV detailed many of the barriers students described during their interview. Barriers to persistence and graduation are also aligned in the SCCT framework with contextual influences that can influence student choice behavior and action (1994). To review, students experienced positive and negative personal barriers as well as institutional barriers. Positive personal barriers were expected, beneficial occurrences. Usually, a student was able to plan for or address these barriers before they occurred. Positive personal barriers described in the findings included marriage, childbirth, job promotion, and relocation. Students did not interpret these positive personal barriers as barriers; however, they did acknowledge that these positive occurrences did sometimes require a reconfiguration of their degree plan or a break in their studies. Thus, I interpreted these positive occurrences as barriers as they had the potential to negatively impact a student's time to degree and were a contextual influence, specific to the student, that influenced their choice behavior and actions.

Negative personal barriers were unexpected and often emotionally or physically challenging. Because these barriers were unexpected, students could not plan for them and when these barriers occurred, for example in the beginning, middle, or end of a semester, also impacted how these barriers would affect a student's time to degree. Negative personal barriers discussed in the findings included physical and mental health issues, health issues of a family member, family death, divorce, and job loss. Several study participants reported one or more of these barriers. However, timing of the barrier, self-efficacy, and effective personal support systems all helped study participants mitigate these barriers' influence on their choice behaviors and actions. Advising, as a form of contextual influence, also played a role in terms of finding flexibility in degree plans when needed to accommodate a student burdened with a barrier.

Institutional barriers were also described by students. Students highlighted multiple aspects of the registration process as a major institutional barrier. The cadence of class offerings and the availability of classes could negatively impact a student's degree plan and by extension time to degree. The students also reported the registration itself was difficult to navigate and hard to use to search for open classes within their program.

Other institutional barriers included class instruction and inconsistent advising experiences. Students sometimes struggled in classes. Usually, these struggles were due to communication and feedback challenges with the instructional faculty, not an academic challenge felt by the student. Hence, this is listed as an institutional barrier and not a personal barrier. Two of the nine students reported negative advising experiences. These students did not have a clear degree plan and when they encountered other institutional barriers, such as a filled class section and an inability to register for the class, these students were in greater danger of increasing their time to degree.

Advising Alignment with Students Needs and Expectations

Research Question Three: How do advising experiences align with online Master's students needs and expectations?

The final research question required considering the advising experiences that both the student and faculty interviewed described alongside the barriers students described and faculty observed as experienced by advisees. The goal of the question was to understand the alignment between the services that were being offered and the needs a student might express whether they had fewer contextual influences impacting their progress or if they encountered a progress barrier.

Overwhelmingly, the students had low expectations of the academic advising experience. If the student was given a degree plan and the advisor was reasonably responsive to email questions and requests for meetings, student expectations were met. However, the faculty described a much more elaborate and flexible support structure that was available should the students need it. But in document analysis and interviews, it was not apparent where or when students would learn about the extent of support that could be available to them as a part of the advising process. Low expectations also seemed tied to previous learning experiences where students in undergraduate programs had a perfunctory academic advising experience.

Students who avoided persistence barriers or only experienced positive persistence barriers did indicate that their needs were being met by the current advising process. Students who shared negative persistence barriers also had their academic advising needs met through the current advising process and indicated that other supports were provided by their personal support systems. As noted in the literature review for this study, personal support systems play a critical role in sustaining a student's progression towards timely graduation (Bain, Fedynich, &

Knight, 2011; Charles, Karna, & Leslie, 2021; Posselt, 2021). If a student needed to edit their degree plan to accommodate a negative persistence barrier, they had support to do so.

However, faculty advisors approached supporting student accommodation needs differently. Some advisors supported a student's request to take a break or withdraw from a program with little question. Other advisors described a sense of responsibility to help the student make a strategic choice. These advisors would recommend alternatives to withdrawal, such as working with the student's instructor on extensions or taking an incomplete rather than withdrawing. Here the alignment of services to needs and expectations is murkier. For some students, the support to stay on target to graduation may be welcome. For others, it might feel like an intrusion during a difficult time.

Students also reported support needs addressing institutional barriers. Some of the institutional barriers, such as the ease of use of technology systems, may be outside of the scope of the services of the academic advisor. However, advisors understanding technology barriers and escalating technology issues or concerns to administrators may help remove this barrier. It was clear from document analysis that faculty advisors were trying to address student needs around course availability. They addressed this barrier by using Excel spreadsheet degree maps with tabs which provided lists of whether or not a course would be offered in a given semester. Tools such as these can help meet student needs, but the challenge remains that a spreadsheet can become out of date and a student may expect to be able to find this information in the institution's registration system.

Recommendations

Examining the findings from this study and the answers to the research questions led me to identify five recommendations to improve the online graduate advising student experience.

Although findings suggest that many student's needs are being met by the current advising process, there is an inconsistency in student experience and student and faculty advising expectations. Recommendations are also grounded in the literature reviewed for this study and best practices associated with academic advising and online learning environments.

Recommendation One: Set Clear Advising Expectations for Students and Faculty

Academic advising is a black box for students and faculty. Students make assumptions about online graduate student academic advising based on their previous learning contexts. In the absence of a clearly defined advising program, that is strategically introduced to students during key milestones of their onboarding and matriculation process, students are left to set their own expectations. When students set their own expectations, institutions are ill-prepared to meet the needs and expectations of their students. Students may set high expectations that are unrealistic or impossible to meet, or equally concerning, students may set low expectations and never interact with services or supports that could bolster them during moments when they encounter personal or institutional barriers.

Faculty advisors also need clear advising expectations. As described in this study, the current faculty model is flexible and adaptable, but also inconsistent and time intensive. The student experience is highly dependent upon faculty experience with advising and faculty-to-faculty peer support, which may leave knowledge gaps in an advisor's ability to support an advisee. Additionally, because the needs of students are extremely diverse, it is important to set guardrails for faculty. Faculty need a clear understanding of their responsibility in an academic advising relationship and when and how to hand off a student who has additional needs that can be met through other support options within the institution. Thus, clear expectations can also

address the burden of the time-intensive demands of unruly advising needs and can bring more consistency to the advisor and advisee relationship.

Additional research may be required to develop an accurate and sustainable list of expectations that align both with student needs and faculty ability. However, given the findings from this study and comments made by students and faculty advisors, there is a clear set of expectations that the SOE could implement to address the most pressing student and faculty advising concerns. Advising expectations can be set at new student orientation which is held at the beginning of each semester. Each student should be offered a 15-30 minute appointment with their advisor to discuss and set their degree path. From there, the SOE should set and follow the following expectations:

1. Timely, advisor-initiated communication: The advisor should send check-in emails to advisees twice per semester. At the beginning of each semester, the advisor should be proactive in checking that the student is on progress with their degree plan, is registered for the right courses, and addresses any personal or professional changes in the student's life that may impact their degree plan. The second communication should be delivered during a specific date range leading up to course registration. This communication should offer students the opportunity for a virtual meeting, review the student's degree plan, seek updates on a student's academic progress, and address any new or lingering barriers (personal or institutional) influencing a student's progress towards timely graduation. Records of these communications and degree plans should be kept in a central location, easily accessed by the advisor and student. Should any changes

to advisor assignments be necessary, this ensures a smooth transfer of information and records.

2. Timely advisor responses to advisee requests: Currently, there are no guidelines around advisor and student communication. Setting an expectation that advisors will respond within a set time period (somewhere between 3-7 business days) will help students understand what constitutes timely communication. Additionally, if an advisor will be away from their advisor duties because of travel or not being on contract during the summer, any away message should instruct students on how to receive advising support in their absence.
3. Provide a clear list of advising supports: Findings in the study demonstrated that students felt a responsibility to complete certain graduate program administrative tasks on their own because they are adults. Similarly, faculty advisors shared that students reported trouble navigating the website, accessing and using the course registration system, and asking advisors questions about student services or course grievances. Students need support to stay on an efficient path to graduation and faculty advisors should only handle the academic needs of the students. To align student needs and SOE resources, SOE should maintain a document that describes questions that should be discussed in advising appointments. This list would include:
    1. Degree planning or degree plan adjustments;
    2. Alignment of courses with professional goals;
    3. Possibilities for diversifying electives with permission or pursuing a certificate which enrolled in a degree program;

4. Preparation for further graduate study;
5. Academic progress and any academic challenges including referrals to any academic supports.

Along with providing clear guidelines about academic advising interactions, the SOE should also provide a student services document and course grievances process that can be shared and re-shared with students during advising. A short version of this document could also become part of the course syllabus template to ensure easy access and repeated sharing with students.

Recommendation Two: Train Academic Advisors

All advisors interviewed for this study indicated that they did not receive or did not recall receiving formalized training before being assigned academic advising responsibilities. In the absence of specialized academic advising training, some faculty created program or discipline specific peer networks to discuss and address student advising needs and challenges. However, not all faculty assigned advising responsibilities had access to such a network. In the absence of training and/or peer support, advising practices can be inconsistent or inadequate to meet student needs. Academic advising for online graduate students also includes additional complexities such as technology mediated communication (rather than in-person options), unique barriers to students completing their education, and less student connection and sense of belonging with the institution (Schroeder & Terras, 2015; Yang, Baldwin, Snelson, 2017).

Tangible, specific training and practice are critical components to a successful advising experience (McGill, Ali, & Barton, 2020). Students' needs during an advising appointment may require an advisor to reference several skills and school, university, or community services. Without training or a common model of advising, advisors may feel unprepared to

handle some student issues or questions. Additionally, advisors working with online students may need to develop their skills for identifying a student in distress and appropriate counseling for a student who is facing a persistence barrier.

A bi-annual advisor training should be required at the beginning of each fall and spring semester. The training should be delivered in a workshop style format which blends instructional components with time for faculty to talk with peers and student affairs professionals about student support needs. During the training, advisors should review any curriculum revisions or registrar requirements that impact their programs or students. Faculty should share student needs they have observed during advising interactions and learn strategies for supporting and retaining students. Faculty are not mental health professionals, and it is imperative they learn about mental health issues and what a student in mental distress might look like in a fully online environment. Helping faculty practice handing off a student to receive the help they need is important and extracting themselves when a student needs more than academic advising is also a critical advising skill. Lastly, training offers an opportunity for school-wide adoption of advising supports, such as digital course planning tools, and training can ensure these tools are used properly and are regularly updated.

Recommendation Three: Require Academic Advising Participation

Findings for this study demonstrated that the SOE attracts high achieving students with a self-perception of their own high degree of self-efficacy, and provided examples of how their self-efficacy was demonstrated when they encountered significant personal and institutional barriers. Sample students were determined to complete the program. In some cases, self-efficacy meant advocating for themselves or asking for help. In other cases, students pushed forward

without the timely information and support they needed. Although all these students were able to persist, they all still would benefit from structured support and clear and reliable communication.

More general than self-efficacy, students who identify as adults have a belief that they should be able to act independently. In a world where they are balancing multiple demands from work, home, and school, these students may opt out of optional advising and/or relationship building experiences. They consider themselves self-sufficient. However, results indicated that students do not know what they do not know and approaching graduate study without regular advising support may result in enrolling in unnecessary classes or missing learning experiences they would have enjoyed, but where unaware would fit in their degree path. The advising relationship can serve as a vital source of information and tracking to ensure the student is most efficiently and successfully on target for timely graduation. Beyond staying on track, developing a relationship with an advisor can deepen the learning experience and connect students to other professional resources.

Other research on graduate students, whether online or in-person, confirms that the time spent in graduate school will most likely coincide with unpredictable, major life milestones in a graduate student's life (Koc & Liu, 2016; Rempel, Hussong-Christian, & Mellinger, 2011). This case study verified that this is a phenomenon that also occurs at the SOE research site. If institutions are aware that students are more likely to encounter major barriers, they can account for it in their planning of support resources and in the advising experience. In the past 10 years, higher education researchers have documented an unprecedented student mental health crisis and because of this it is even more paramount that students engage in checkpoints such as advising to allow them to self-reflect on their personal wellbeing (Allen, Lilly, Green, Zanjani, Vincent, & Arria, 2020; Barr 2014: Charles, Karnaze, & Leslie, 2021). While adding in strategic advising

touchpoints may feel intrusive or an additional burden on a busy student, in a fully online context, this could be an important review of the student's academic goals, available institutional supports, and the student's overall wellbeing.

In their research on graduate student mental health, Charles, Karnaze, & Leslie (2021) found that graduate students are more likely to experience anxiety and depression during their studies than undergraduate students. Here, I think of one of the students interviewed who shared that after her mother passed away "it was hard to feel joy." This student was clearly in distress as she grieved the loss of her mother, yet she was determined to persist in her graduate program. Personal issues like grief, compounded with the isolation that online graduate students sometimes feel in asynchronous online classes, illuminates that advising is a critical tool for building a sense of community and for establishing a personal relationship with a faculty member specific to the student's program. Advising translates to a specific point of contact who is focused on and invested in each student's success. Understanding that online graduate students need recurring, personal interactions with trusted program faculty and staff, requiring advising touch points four times a year is a strategic way to ensure the wellbeing and persistence of the students.

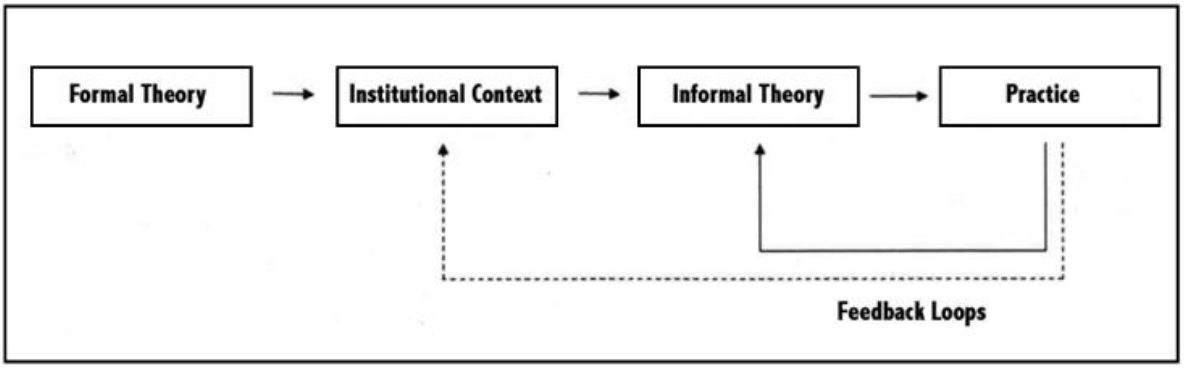
Recommendation Four: Conduct Regular Advising Program Evaluations

The scope of this study focused on understanding the current advising experiences of faculty and students. It did not include examining the effectiveness of advising on student persistence and on-time graduation. As academic advising can influence student success, it is important to collect additional data on advising and to regularly measure the impact, if any, academic advising has on student persistence and timely graduation.

To begin a program evaluation cycle for academic advising, I would adopt the Reason and Kimball (2012) theory to practice model (see Figure 3). In this model, they detail a five-step approach for adopting formal theory to impact practice and then using a feedback mechanism to continue to make interactive improvement. Using this model, the SOE should review formal theory on academic advising. Understanding their context and using informal theory, such as understanding of their current population needs and service gaps, the program evaluation would collect qualitative and quantitative data on the student advising experience at SOE and the impact advising has on students' timely graduation. Analyzing the data collected will inform feedback loops to support SOE in making program revisions and improvements with the goal of increasing the advising program's impact on timely graduation.

Figure 3

Reason & Kimball (2012) Theory to Practice Model



Implementing a program evaluation is time and resource intensive. A three-year evaluation cycle would be an appropriate time frame to measure the impact of advising and the benefits aligned with any changes to practice applied from formal theory, informal theory, and the feedback loops captured in the collection of data on the student advising experience. SOE needs to adopt a transparent process for sharing program evaluation findings with its student and

faculty stakeholders and must be clear with the community about how changes will be enacted, supported, and measured. One approach to this would be updating the SOE community about the project and outcomes as a part of other regular communication channels such as newsletters or emails from school leadership.

Recommendation Five: Adopt a Professional Advising Model for Online Programs

Currently, the SOE only uses faculty advising models for all programs, regardless of modality. The findings from this case study demonstrated that faculty participants find advising demands to be time intensive. Additionally, the previous research substantiates the finding from this case study that high quality online teaching is also more time intensive than in-person instruction (Roddy et al., 2017; Sun & Chen, 2016). However, the student support needed, such as degree planning and institutional resource referrals could be conducted by a professional advising staff. Professional advising staff are trained in student support and basic counseling skills, and thus, may be better suited to meet the diverse support needs of online graduate students (Benshoff, Cashwell, & Rowell, 2015; Cross 2018). Professional advising staff may also be able to better support quick referrals to non-academic advising needs, such as financial aid questions, as they could work closely with student support offices as part of their advising responsibilities.

Critics of a professional advising model may argue that academic mentorship, particularly during graduate study, is an important part of the degree process. However, the findings for this study demonstrated that student advising needs were often more logistical (degree pathways) or personal support intensive and not academic. For example, three students discussed in the findings section had issues with their degree plan due to unavailable or filled classes. A professional advisor could maintain a list of reasonable, approved alternatives in the

event of filled classes and would be better positioned to respond to a student quickly for them to complete their registration. Additionally, both students and faculty interviewed shared that academic questions, concerns, or advice were requested more often from instructional faculty than advisors. To alleviate concerns about academic mentorship, when considering a professional advising model, it is important to also consider how academic mentorship would be available to students through other mechanisms beyond academic advising. Examples of this include faculty sponsored writing groups or faculty mentorship during the capstone experience.

Enrollment growth is the strongest argument for adopting a professional advising model. Online program enrollments at SOE have been increasing in the past five years and are projected to continue to increase as more students are interested in completing graduate programs online (DePauw & Gibson, 2022). Increased teaching demands do not leave time for faculty to deeply engage in the advising process. Additionally, as online offerings increase program availability to a diverse student body, studying from different time-zones, the complexity of student needs is quickly outpacing a faculty advisor's ability to successfully serve and support students. Professional advising allows faculty to focus more on instruction and academic mentorship. For students who enroll in classes year-round, professional advisors also serve as a constant point of contact when most faculty are on a nine-month contract and are historically less available during summer months.

If a professional advising model is adopted, it is important that SOE determine the right form of professional advising model to align with their context and student needs. For example, from the findings it was clear that students felt a responsibility to self-sufficient because they are high-achieving, adult learners. Understanding that this student population may struggle with asking questions or seeking support, a proactive advising model that emphasizes building early

relationships with students, may be the right approach for this context and population (Cannon, 2013; Varney, 2012). To best identify and implement an advising model, it is important for faculty, staff, and students to collaborate to inform both the selection of the model, but also the training and support that faculty, staff, and students would need to make a successful transition to a new approach to advising.

Considerations for Future Research

This study contributed to the literature on online graduate student advising by opening the black box and revealing what happens during an academic advising experience. Acknowledging that this study had a limited sample size and scope, additional research on online graduate student advising experiences in different online educational contexts is an important next step in continuing this work. And while understanding the experiences of both advisees and advisors is important, it is also critical to better understand the direct impact that academic advising has on online graduate student persistence and timely graduation. It may be challenging to untangle academic advising as an independent variable from the many supports offered to students, but further understanding of what specifically about the academic advising experience positively impacts persistence and graduation is necessary if institutions wish to use academic advising as a retention tool.

The research questions for this study were focused on student and faculty experiences, but future study on the role and function of staff on the advising experience is also important to understanding how students are fully supported during their studies. Several students interviewed made reference to valuable interactions with staff, especially pertaining to institutional barriers or persistence challenges that were beyond the scope of what a faculty could address. Similarly,

it is important to document the staff experiences with advising to understand the ways staff are supplementing or replacing the faculty to student advising experience.

It is also important for future research to examine student background characteristics more closely, such as race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, and first-generation status and the influence of academic advising on minoritized students. Research has indicated that minoritized students may need and benefit from academic advising services more than majoritzed students (Jury, Smeding, Stephens, Nelson, Aelenei, & Darnon, 2017; Lawton, 2018). As higher education institutions seek to attract and retain a diverse student body, it will be important to understand the different needs of new and emerging populations of students.

A delimitation of this study meant focusing on currently enrolled online graduate students. However, students who had elected to pause or withdraw from their studies also hold valuable information on the advising experience and barriers to persistence. Future research focused on students who were impacted by breaks in their time to graduation will continue to build the literature on how advising can support persistence.

Lastly, this study touched upon the challenge of using university websites to support advising. Current students use institutional websites as a source of information for degree planning. However, institutional websites are more catered towards a perspective student audience that is not ready for the curriculum detail needed to help define and implement a degree plan. The mismatch of content and audiences is a problem that plagues many institutions and is a form of institutional barrier that can be addressed through additional research.

Conclusion

Academic advising is an important touchpoint for online graduate students. It provides them with a personal anchor to the institution and helps them navigate complex institutional

systems that are often not designed for online consumption. At the same time, online graduate students are also a diverse and complex student population who range greatly in background characteristics, academic preparation, and self-efficacy. On-campus and undergraduate advising models, which encompass the vast majority of academic advising literature, do not translate to meet the needs of an online graduate student audience. New models and additional research on academic advising experiences and effectiveness will be critical to meeting the needs of this evolving and growing population. As higher education sits on the edge of a paradigm shift, and online learning continues to become a larger part of brick-and-mortar institution portfolios, it is imperative that we continue to advance in how we serve and retain these students.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Messages

IRB-SBS Protocol 5453
Student Messaging
Title: Research Participation Opportunity on Advising - $10 gift card for study participants

As part of my EdD capstone, I am conducting a research study on student and faculty experiences using academic advising resources available as a part of the online MEd program at the Mid-Atlantic University School of Education (SOE). Eligible participants must be 18 years old or older and currently enrolled in a fully online MEd degree program.

Study participants will be asked to participate in a 30-45 minute interview via Zoom that will be scheduled at a time convenient for the participant's schedule. Your participation will be kept confidential, and data collected for this project will help support future improvements to the current advising resources. As a thank you for participating in the interview process, participants can elect to receive a $10 gift card to either Starbucks or Amazon.

If you are interested in participating please contact me via email, jap7ze@virginia.edu.

(This project is IRB-SBS Protocol 5453)

Thank you,
Jenny Quarles
EdD Student
UVA EHD

Faculty Messaging

Title: Research Participation Opportunity on Advising

As part of my EdD capstone, I am conducting a research study on student and faculty experiences using academic advising resources available as a part of the online MEd program at Mid-Atlantic University School of Education (SOE). Eligible participants must be 1) 18 years or older, 2) a faculty member in the fully online MEd program, and 3) must advise at least one student per semester.

Study participants will be asked to participate in a 30-45 minute interview via Zoom that will be scheduled at a time convenient for the participant's schedule. Your participation will be kept confidential, and data collected for this project will help support future improvements to the current advising resources.

If you are interested in participating please contact me via email, jap7ze@virginia.edu.

(This project is IRB-SBS Protocol 5453)

Thank you,
Jenny Quarles
EdD Student
UVA EHD

Follow up message (2 be sent after 2 weeks of initial message if not enough participants)

On XXXX date, I sent the following message about a research participation opportunity about advising resources at SOE. There are still research participation slots available.

(This project is IRB-SBS Protocol 5453)

(Copy of original student message)

As part of my EdD capstone, I am conducting a research study on student and faculty experiences using advising resources available as a part of the online MEd program at Mid-Atlantic University School of Education (SOE). Eligible participants must be 18 years old or older and currently enrolled in a fully online MEd degree program.

Study participants will be asked to participate in a 30-45 minute interview via Zoom that will be scheduled at a time convenient for the participant's schedule. Your participation will be kept confidential and data collected for this project will help support future improvements to the current advising resources. As a thank you for participating in the interview process, participants can elect to receive a $10 gift card to either Starbucks or Amazon.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me via email, jap7ze@virginia.edu

(This project is IRB-SBS Protocol 5453)

Thank you,
Jenny Quarles
EdD Student
UVA EHD

(Copy of original faculty message)

Title: Research Participation Opportunity on Advising

As part of my EdD capstone, I am conducting a research study on student and faculty experiences using advising resources available as a part of the online MEd program at Mid-Atlantic University School of Education (SOE). Eligible participants must be 1) 18 years or older, 2) a faculty member in the fully online MEd program, and 3) must advise at least one student per semester.

Study participants will be asked to participate in a 30-45 minute interview via Zoom that will be scheduled at a time convenient for the participant's schedule. Your participation will be kept confidential and data collected for this project will help support future improvements to the current advising resources.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me via email, jap7ze@virginia.edu

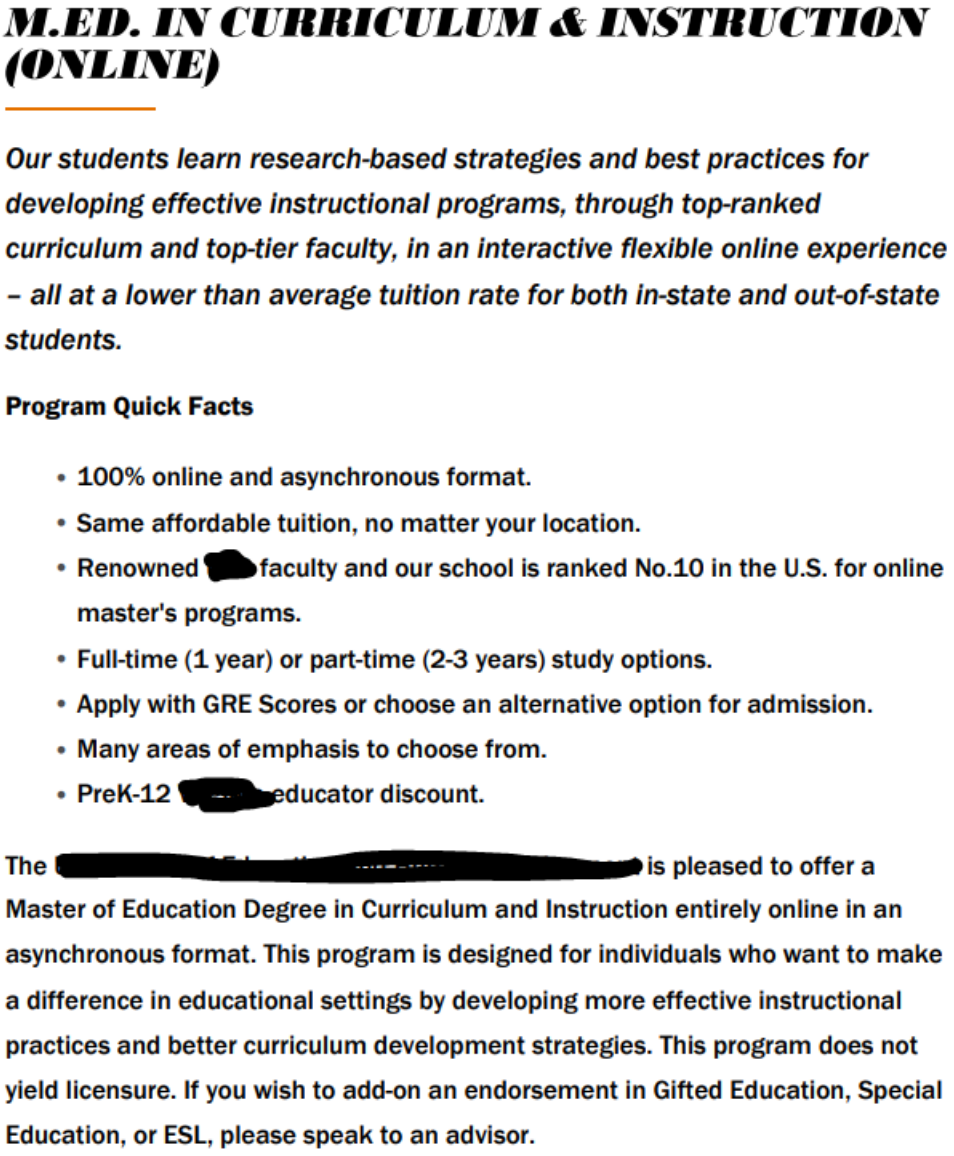
(This project is IRB-SBS Protocol 5453)

Thank you,
Jenny Quarles
EdD Student
UVA EHD

Appendix B

Document Analysis Samples

Website Example



M.ED. IN CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION (ONLINE)

Our students learn research-based strategies and best practices for developing effective instructional programs, through top-ranked curriculum and top-tier faculty, in an interactive flexible online experience – all at a lower than average tuition rate for both in-state and out-of-state students.

Program Quick Facts

- 100% online and asynchronous format.
- Same affordable tuition, no matter your location.
- Renowned [redacted] faculty and our school is ranked No.10 in the U.S. for online master's programs.
- Full-time (1 year) or part-time (2-3 years) study options.
- Apply with GRE Scores or choose an alternative option for admission.
- Many areas of emphasis to choose from.
- PreK-12 [redacted] educator discount.

The [redacted] is pleased to offer a Master of Education Degree in Curriculum and Instruction entirely online in an asynchronous format. This program is designed for individuals who want to make a difference in educational settings by developing more effective instructional practices and better curriculum development strategies. This program does not yield licensure. If you wish to add-on an endorsement in Gifted Education, Special Education, or ESL, please speak to an advisor.

Program Worksheet Example

Recommended Plan of Study
Literacy Area of Emphasis

Recommended Plan (Coursework Only)	Offered	Requirement(s) Filled	Credits
Suggested plan: Please see your advisor for specifics. Students need to check their SIS Advising Reports to verify program completion progress.			
Semester 1 (Fall)			
EDIS 5025: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Fall, Spring, Summer	C&I Core: Instruction (required)	3
EDIS 7700: Reading Foundations for Diverse Learners	Fall, Spring, Summer	Focus: Literacy	3
Semester 2 (Spring)			
EDIS 6200: Principles of Curriculum Design	Fall, Spring, Summer	C&I Core: Curriculum	3
EDIS 7720: Understanding the Code: Phonics, Phonological Awareness and Orthography	Fall, Spring, Summer	Focus: Literacy	3
Semester 3 (Summer)			
EDIS 7710: Reading in the Content Areas	Fall, Spring, Summer	Focus: Literacy	3
EDIS 5422: Cross-Cultural Education for Diverse Learners	Fall, Spring, Summer	C&I Core: Diversity	3
Semester 4 (Fall)			
EDIS 6220: Assessment of Curriculum: K-12	Fall, Spring	C&I Core: Assessment	3
Elective Choice #1	Fall, Spring, Summer	Focus: Literacy	3
Semester 5 (Spring)			
EDIS 6880: Master Comprehensive in Curriculum and Instruction	Fall, Spring, Summer	C&I Core: Culminating Class	3
Elective Choice #2	Fall	Focus: Literacy	3
Total Credits			**30**

Advisor Email Example

Dear MXXXX,

Welcome to the M.Ed. for Fall ’22! I look forward to getting to know you as you complete the reading education program! Thanks for reaching out to set up your initial advising appointment to introduce yourself and to discuss your M.Ed. course schedule.

If you applied via the alt-GRE process, then you will need to take our first two courses: **XXXX 7700 and XXXX 7720**. If you have not taken those introductory classes, then you will need to do so before taking any additional coursework. I will need to know how many courses you plan to take per semester, in order to help form your schedule.

During initial advising appointments, I will discuss your plan for the M.Ed. and answer your program questions, e.g., 1 vs. 2 courses per semester, sequence of courses, comprehensive exam, clinic locations/requirements, etc.

I’m available for appointments M-F, 9-5pm EST. I also have open office hours (no appt needed) every Wed from 4-5pmEST in case you want to pop in with advising questions. You can reach me in the following ways:

- Office hours – every Wednesday 4-5pmEST

    - Zoom Link:
- Email:
- Phone:

Fall courses will run August 23 – December 6. You can enroll for fall ’22, beginning in early July. If you are a returning student, fall enrollment is already open.

If you live in a different time zone, let me know, and we can either arrange a different day/time or plan to do email advising! Let me know a few day- times that would work for you to talk virtually. I look forward to hearing from you!

Finally, I like to keep track of my advisees so I’m better informed when you contact me. **Please fill out the Course Inventory form (attached) –I’ve started a draft, and we can complete it together during our initial advising session.** Link: Advising Course Inventory

I look forward to meeting with you!

Regards,

Appendix C

Interview Protocol (Student Interview)

Interviewee:
Date:
Time:

Script:
Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. My name is Jenny Quarles and I am an education doctoral student. I'm interviewing you today to obtain some information on the advising process for online graduate students in the SOE. The data I am collecting today are for a capstone research project and (will have) received IRB approval. I would like to record today's session. If you are okay with recording, know that the recording and notes I make today will be destroyed at the completion of this capstone project. Additionally, I will keep your responses confidential to protect your identity and privacy. Would you be okay with me recording our interview today? (Pause for response)

Interview Questions:

1. Please tell me a little about yourself and your background?

2. Briefly tell me about your progress in your online graduate program?
    a. Probe: Did you feel prepared to be successful in online graduate study? Why or why not?
    b. Probe: How are your classes going?
    c. Probe: When are you hoping to graduate?

3. Tell me about your advising experience as a student at the SOE?
    a. Probe: How did you first learn who your advisor was?
    b. Probe: How were you advised before you applied to the program?
    c. Probe: How were you advised before you registered for your first classes?
    d. Probe: How have you interacted with your advisor since you've started your program?
    e. Probe: How do you meet with your advisor?

4. What are some questions that arise when you are talking with your advisor?
    a. Probe: Do you feel comfortable talking with your advisor?
        i. Why or why not?

   b. Probe: Do you feel your advisor is able to answer all of your questions?

5. What types of concerns or stressors have you shared with your advisor?
   a. Probe: Are these concerns or stressors unusual for you?
      i. Why or why not?
   b. Probe: Did you feel your advisor was able to address your concerns or stressors?

6. Have you ever considered reducing your academic load or reduced your academic load during your time at SOE?
   a. Probe: What were the reasons you wanted to or reduced your load?
   b. Probe: Did you take fewer credits or did you take a break?
      i. How long of a break did you take?
   c. Probe: Was there any type of support or encouragement that may have helped you avoid reducing your load or taking a break?
   d. Probe: Did you discuss the idea of reducing your load or taking a breaker with your advisor?
      i. Why or why not?

7. How would you describe your relationship with your advisor?
   a. Probe: Do you feel comfortable asking your advisor for help?
   b. Probe: Do you feel comfortable sharing personal information with your advisor?
   c. Probe: Do you feel supported by your advisor?
      i. Why or why not?

8. How do you think our School's current advising resources are meeting your needs?
   a. Probe: Specifically, what do you think is working well?
   b. Probe: Specifically, what do you think is lacking in our current resources?

9. Graduate students often have very busy lives. Would you be able to share any personal challenges that make participation in your program more difficult for you?
   a. Probe: Do you feel you have a support community to help you manage these challenges?
      i. If yes, who is in this community?
         1. How does your community support you?
      ii. If no, what type of support do you think would be helpful to you?
   b. Probe: How do you manage or overcome these challenges to be successful?

10. Is there anything I didn't ask today that you feel it would be helpful for me to know?

Appendix D

Interview Protocol (Faculty Interview)

Interviewee:
Date:
Time:

Script:
Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. My name is Jenny Quarles and I am an education doctoral student. I'm interviewing you today to obtain information on the advising process current in place for online graduate students in the SOE. The data I am collecting today are for a capstone research project and (will have) received IRB approval. I would like to record today's session. If you are okay with recording, know that the recording and notes I make today will be destroyed at the completion of this research activity. Additionally, I will keep your responses confidential to protect your identity and privacy. Would you be okay with me recording our interview today? (Pause for response)

Interview Questions:

1. How would you describe your understanding of the role of a graduate student advisor?
    a. What makes a good advisor?

2. Briefly describe your role as an advisor at SOE.
    a. Probe: How often are you advising students?
    b. Probe: What percentage of your time do you spend advising students?

3. What training or supports were provided to you before you took on an advising role at SOE?
    a. Did you feel the training or support prepared you for your advising role?
        i. Why or why not?
    b. What (additional) training or support would you have liked to see offered?

4. Briefly describe a typical advising appointment for an online graduate student?
    a. Probe: How do you meet?
    b. Probe: How long do you typically meet?
    c. Probe: What percentage of your time is spent discussing academic concerns?
    d. Probe: What percentage of your time is spent discussing other questions/concerns/personal information?

5. What are some common questions that arise when you are advising students?
    a. Probe: Do you feel prepared to answer all of the student's questions? Why or why not?

6. What types of concerns or stressors do students share with you during advising appointments?
    a. Do you feel prepared to address student concerns or stressors? Why or why not?

7. If a student asks you about taking a break in their academic progress, how do you address that question with the student?
    a. Probe: Do students usually end up taking the desired break?
    b. Probe: If a student takes a break, do you connect with them during the break?
    c. Probe: If the student takes a break, when do you re-connect with them?
    d. Can you share any common reasons that students wish to take a break during their studies?
        i. How common would you say this reason is among students who take breaks?

8. Have you referred students to any support services before (ex. CAPS, student programming, Student Affairs team, Dean of Students)?
    a. Probe: What types of support services have you referred students to?

9. How do you interact with advisees outside of advising appointments?
    a. Probe: Do you find these interactions meaningful?

10. Do you think our School's current advising practices are meeting the needs of online graduate students?
    a. Probe: Specifically, what do you think is working well?
    b. Probe: Specifically, what do you think is lacking in our current process?

11. Is there anything I didn't ask today that you feel it would be helpful for me to know?

Appendix E

Example Field Memos:

- 3rd student describing significant personal barrier – note when reviewing data to consider proper coding
- Students describes positive life events that also delayed their registration in a course. Is this a barrier or something else?

Example Field Notes:

- Student offered very short personal introduction. Had to prompt them to provide more details.
- Student initial responses to questions are very brief. Using substantial probes to receive a full answer to the question. During analysis consider if this impacts how this data needs to be reviewed/coded.

Example Analytic Memos:

- Breaking barriers code into positive and negative categories to understand differences in impact of barriers.
- When faculty describe observed barriers that student faced, code with a faculty observed barrier to differentiate between felt barrier.