ACCIDENTAL CAREER PATHS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC ADVISORS

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I dedicate this work to my favorite people, Jeff and Allison. Without your love, patience, support, and encouragement, this journey would not have been possible.
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ABSTRACT

ACCIDENTAL CAREER PATHS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC ADVISORS

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As colleges and universities face increasing pressure from policy makers to demonstrate undergraduate student success, campus leaders have turned to professional academic advisors to help achieve institutional retention, persistence, and completion goals. Even as academic advising is seen as critical to student success, the financial limitations facing many public institutions places academic advising programs in a situation where they must continually make a case to receive the resources necessary to provide quality advising services. The increased use of nonfaculty academic advisors—along with the expanding body of knowledge and skills they must have to support students despite limited resources—calls for an understanding of who professional academic advisors are, what motivates them, the knowledge and skills they bring to their work, and how they continue to grow and develop in their roles.

For this study, qualitative research methods were used to examine how the lived experiences of 21 professional academic advisors informed their work with students and their professional identity. Study participants had at least five years of advising experience and represented three different large, public, doctoral universities with the highest research activity in the Midwest. Semistructured interviews and focus groups were conducted with participants to explore how their personal experiences, educational
backgrounds, and work environments have influenced advising approaches, career aspirations, and professional identity. Narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) along with Dewey’s (1938/1955) theory of experience was utilized to inform the study design and data analysis.

Four main conclusions, grounded in the findings of this study, are offered and categorized as: (1) Advisors as Teachers and Learners, (2) The Missing Advisor Perspective, (3) An Institution of Silos, and (4) Professional Identity through an Institutional Lens. The findings of this study can help inform administrators as to the strengths and limitations in advisor experiences, programs, and practices. Additionally, the findings suggest opportunities to strengthen the professional identity of academic advising. Ultimately, this study highlights how attending to the lived experiences of professional academic advisors in the complex and changing context of the large university enables institutional leaders to enhance important educational and institutional outcomes.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The pressure colleges and universities face from state and national leaders to lower the cost of higher education while increasing retention and graduation rates has increased the need for quality academic advising. In January 2017, Complete College America (CCA) and NACADA, The Global Community for Academic Advising released a set of principles designed to highlight the importance of academic advisors in ensuring students graduate in four years as part of CCA’s 15 to Finish campaign. The principles call for institutions to “create strong advising systems that teach students how to be successful in college and graduate on time,” highlighting the growing importance of advising in supporting student success (CCA & NACADA, 2017, para. 3).

Research has shown that academic advising that is intentionally designed to help students stay on track and make timely progress toward degree completion is key to increasing retention and graduation rates and also helps reduce the institutional costs associated with excess credit accumulation and attrition (Wellman, 2010). When academic advisors help their students make intentional decisions about degree programs, course selection, involvement, and experiential learning opportunities, they are supporting student success and the purpose of a learning-centered institution (Hersh & Keeling, 2013). Advisors are also critical in creating engaging environments for students of all identities and therefore must actively engage their students instead of waiting for students to come to them for help (Harper & Quaye, 2015). The growing complexity of
academic advisor responsibilities has increased institutional reliance on professional academic advisors who devote the bulk of their time to supporting students, as opposed to faculty who must also balance their teaching and research responsibilities (Self, 2008).

Ask any undergraduate student, parent, faculty member, or administrator about the role of a professional academic advisor and you will receive a range of responses detailing any number of expectations. The academic advisor of today is expected to have a wealth of knowledge about resources, institutional policies, program requirements, career exploration, and student development theory—all of which extend beyond the scope of knowledge required of faculty advisors (Tinto, 2012). Advisors are also expected to have the time management, organizational, counseling, and communication skills necessary to support students and their families. Although mentoring and advising of college students have existed since the establishment of the colonial colleges (Frost, 2000; Habley, 2000; Kuhn, 2008), the idea of “advising as teaching” strategically supporting student success is relatively new. The responsibilities of today’s academic advisor began to take shape in the 1970s with the introduction of developmental advising (Crookston, 1972/1994/2009; O’Banion, 1972/1994/2009), establishment of a framework defining academic advising program models (Habley, 1983), and the founding of NACADA, the national organization for advisors (Grites & Gordon, 2009). As the use of professional advisors across campuses has grown, so have the questions about what advisors do and what constitutes effective academic advising.

Kuh (2008) states that an academic advisor is often the one person at an institution that a student interacts with regularly throughout the student’s academic career. Given this frequency of interaction, advisors must understand their students’
learning styles, personalities, and skill sets in order best to support, challenge, and guide their advisees. Advisors also support student retention through teaching their students the skills needed to make decisions, communicate, and become engaged with the campus community (Folsom & Scobie, 2010). As the population of students and their needs continues to diversify, institutions are placing more emphasis on establishing advising programs or centers designed to target populations of students who are deemed to be at risk, including undecided and first-year students (Tinto, 2012). Advisors must also strategically collaborate with their faculty, staff, and administrative colleagues from across campus units to develop systems and support structures that actively foster student engagement, especially for those students who have yet to be engaged (Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015).

Tinto (2012) argues that the ability of academic advisors to support any population of students effectively lies in how much institutional support has been invested in the advising program, especially around the training and professional development of advisors. Although the training and development of advisors is essential to ensuring they have the depth of knowledge and skills required for the role, there is no standardized training curriculum or minimum credentials required for advisors (Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, & Barkemeyer, 2015; Habley, 2009; Padak & Kuhn, 2009; Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010). A graduate program for academic advising exists at Kansas State University; however, Habley (2009) found that the program curriculum minimally focused on academic advising and instead broadly focused on higher education. Equally concerning is the lack of ongoing professional development opportunities for advisors. The 2011 NACADA National Survey of Academic Advising
found that only 56% of the institutional respondents offered two or more training and
development opportunities for advisors annually (Voller, 2011). The lack of consistent
training is concerning given how much institutions rely on academic advisors to support
student success and retention efforts.

The perceived value of advising as a component of student success is also
reflected in the number of institutions evaluating their advising practices and student
satisfaction with advising services. The 2014 National Survey of Student Engagement
(NSSE) reported that the academic advising topical module was the most commonly
selected module among all of the participating institutions and was used by 215 US
institutions. Although satisfaction surveys are helpful in collecting student feedback,
the increasing pressure institutions face to measure student learning and success have
resulted in calls for moving away from evaluating satisfaction and instead focusing on the
assessment of academic advising (He & Bryant, 2016; Hersh & Keeling, 2013; White &
Schulenberg, 2012). Advisors and advising administrators are being called upon to
develop student learning outcomes and assessment practices that can support and advance
student learning while improving academic advising programs, strategies, and delivery
(He & Bryant, 2016).

As the research on the relationship between academic advising and student
success continues to grow, the literature also magnifies the challenges to the credibility
of advising as a profession (Habley, 2009; Padak & Kuhn, 2009; Shaffer, Zalewski, &
Laveille, 2010). In a survey of past NACADA presidents, Padak and Kuhn (2009) found
that the former leaders believed that advisors should be required to have a master’s
degree for entry-level employment in order to establish credentialing and further advance
the profession. The past presidents also argued that advising programs must establish credibility with academic leaders through the use of data and research, and that more consistent training and development programs for advisors were needed. Habley (2009) and Shaffer et al. (2010) also argue for the establishment of minimum educational credentials for hiring and a curriculum for training advisors to help validate academic advising as a profession.

A study by Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, and Barkemeyer (2015) of academic advisor perceptions of the profession found that advisors were frustrated by the inconsistent educational and experiential credentials required for them, believing it contributed to the lack of credibility they had to effect institutional policy or curricular change. The advisors in the study also cited the range of job titles held by advisors—from dean to counselor—as equally frustrating in establishing credibility at their institutions. Aiken-Wisniewski et al. (2015) argue “if stakeholders considered academic advising a profession, they would acknowledge the inherent power of academic advisors to make decisions and form policy valued by campus-wide peers” (p. 67). The challenges posed by inconsistent job titles also reflect the differences in institutional human resource practices that have implications for advisor job classifications and salary ranges. This state of affairs only adds to the confusion about the professionalization of academic advising.

The differences in titling and classifications of advisors also can pose challenges to the profession as institutions navigate federal labor law changes. The proposed 2016 updates to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) required universities to examine staff classifications, duties, and annual salaries to ensure compliance with the law. The FLSA
updates included an increase in the minimum salary threshold for professional or white collar staff to be considered exempt (salaried) employees to $47,476 (United States Department of Labor, 2016). To remain exempt, positions were required not only to meet the minimum salary threshold but also to meet a standard duties test that examined the primary job responsibilities of staff to ensure that they met the executive, administrative, or professional duties standards as set by the law (United States Department of Labor, 2016). The updates posed a potential problem for academic advisors who had traditionally been classified as salaried employees but who no longer met the minimum salary threshold and the standard duties test.

The proposed changes to FLSA are an example of the outside pressures facing higher education and how these pressures can affect the work of university employees, including academic advisors. FLSA is also an example of how a particular law or policy can be applied differently based on an institution’s interpretation and practices. For exempt staff members who did not meet the minimum salary threshold but met the duties test, institutions could choose to increase salaries to meet the minimum threshold. Institutions therefore found themselves in a difficult situation, especially if they already faced funding limitations and were not adequately resourced to raise salaries to meet the minimum threshold. If an institution could not increase salaries to the minimum or if an employee did not meet the duties test, then exempt staff would be switched to nonexempt (hourly) classifications.

The updates to FLSA not only posed potential challenges to individual academic advisors classified as exempt who earned less than the $47,476 threshold but also further challenged the notion of academic advising as a profession. What does it say about
academic advising if advisors at one institution are exempt and advisors at another are nonexempt? Are academic advisors seen as having professional expertise in the eyes of faculty members and administrators if they do not meet government classifications of white collar? Though some institutions already classify their advisors as nonexempt, the larger question for NACADA is if job classifications and titling should be more standardized to help further professionalize advising and therefore establish a more universal understanding of the role of an advisor.

Albeit academic advisors and advising leaders express frustration about variations in job structures and preparation (Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, & Barkemeyer, 2015; Habley, 2009; Padak & Kuhn, 2009), they recognize that the work of academic advising can be done effectively through different conceptual frameworks, personal philosophies, and approaches (NACADA, 2005). As advising has evolved as a field of practice, scholars and practitioners have identified advising approaches that focus on student development (O’Banion, 1972/1994/2009), teaching (Crookston, 1972/1994/2009), customer service (Spicuzza, 1992), servant-leadership (McClellan, 2007), self-authorship (Pizzolato, 2008), appreciative practices (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2013), proactive interactions (Varney, 2013), and individual strengths (Schreiner, 2013). Educational preparation and professional development activities can expose advisors to advising approaches and relevant theories, allowing them to develop advising philosophies and strategies congruent with personal and institutional values. Researchers argue that the diversity of preparation, experience, and personal philosophies allows advisors to respond to complex student needs, learning and completion imperatives, and institutional missions (Jordan, 2016).
However, the absence of minimum credentials and training, inconsistencies in job titles and classification—combined with the lack of a normative theory of advising (Himes, 2014) and absence of a standard definition of advising (Habley, 2009)—are commonly cited as indicators of why advising cannot yet consider itself a true profession. While the debate continues as to the professional identity of academic advising, it is clear that research must continue to explore the role of academic advisors, the student experience in advising, the relationship between advising and student success, and the effect of training and development on advising outcomes. McGillin (2000) argues that the future of advising research not only lies in clarifying what advising is but also understanding the people who do the work. As the use of professional academic advisors continues to increase, it is important to understand the identities, experiences, and practices of the individuals doing the work to ensure that the larger institutional strategies, policies, and procedures are aligned to support quality academic advising practices. Who is the professional academic advisor? What informs how they work with students? If these questions can be explored outside of student satisfaction surveys, researchers might be able further to define the role of advisors, the difference in advisor type, and how best to prepare advisors to support student success. Understanding the experiences of academic advisors is also helpful to institutional leaders who face increased pressure to provide academic advising services that can support the completion agenda.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how the life experiences of professional academic advisors influence how they engage with and support undergraduate students. Were there specific leadership opportunities or mentors an academic advisor had as a student that inspired them to become an advisor? What motivated advisors to work in higher education in general and academic advising specifically? What advising experiences from their academic career have inspired practices or beliefs that they apply to their work with students? The concept of life experience is adapted from Dewey (1938/1955), who argues that experience and education are naturally connected and dependent on each other. From his perspective, experience is informed through the concepts of continuity and interaction. The concept of continuity means that experience informs what people know and their future experiences. Interaction is a combination of the external environment and contact with others as well as the personal needs and wants of the individual. Together, continuity and interaction “provide the measure for the educative significance and value of an experience” (Dewey, 1938/1955, p. 42). Dewey (1938/1955) notes that not all experiences are educative and therefore continuity and interaction are important in identifying which experiences result in learning. In his exploration of Dewey’s perspective on experience, Hutchinson (2015) argues that the concepts of continuity and interaction help make sense of the learning that comes from experiences and how that knowledge might shape future experiences.

This study explores how the upbringing, culture, education, work, environmental, and social interactions of professional academic advisors inform how they utilize
advising strategies, establish personal advising philosophies, and approach their overall work. The research questions guiding this study are:

**RQ 1:** What are the life experiences of professional academic advisors at a large public university with five or more years of advising experience?

**RQ 2:** How does the life experience of professional academic advisors shape their advising strategies, philosophy, and professional identity?

**RQ 3:** What are the consequences for the academic advising profession based on institutional response to the FLSA changes in 2016?

This study focuses on the life experiences of professional academic advisors who have worked as such for at least five years. The emphasis on advisors with at least five years working in the field is based upon the hypothesis that these advisors will have learned from their professional experience and may have adapted their advising style or approach to working with students based on those experiences. Although new advisors have their own set of life experiences to share, this study seeks to understand how personal and professional experiences inform the work of seasoned advisors. This study also will focus specifically on professional academic advisors from large, four-year, public, doctoral universities with the highest research activity in the Midwest (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). The use of this particular type of institution can help inform how professional academic advisors function and how their experience is shaped within a larger organizational context.

Although American College Testing (ACT) and NACADA regularly have conducted national surveys on academic advising, very little research has been done to understand how individual experiences inform the habits and future experiences of
professional advisors. Even as there is research on advising models (Habley, 1983; Habley & Morales, 1998; Pardee, 2000) and advising approaches (Crookston, 1972/1994/2009; Grites, 2013; He & Bryant, 2016; O’Banion, 1972/1994/2009), there is a lack of research on how professional identity and commitment may be shaped by internal and external pressures on the role. As institutions continue to rely upon professional academic advisors to support the completion agenda, it is critical for academic leaders to understand how advisors support students, are motivated to stay in their roles, contribute to the institutional mission, and are affected by institutional strategies to establish strong advising programs that support student success.

**Significance of the Study**

The increased use of nonfaculty academic advisors—along with the expanding body of knowledge and skills they must have to support students—calls for an understanding of who professional academic advisors are, what motivates them, the knowledge and skills they bring to their work, and how they continue to grow and develop in their roles. McGillin (2000) argues that future advising research must seek to understand the people who advise in order better to inform how they should be trained, how they support retention, establish a definition of the role, know what motivates them, and how their identity intersects with their work. This study of the life experience of professional academic advisors further explores the topics raised by McGillin and also seeks to understand how advisors are affected by larger institutional policies, such as responses to FLSA.
Through the exploration of life experience, this study identifies patterns in the educational backgrounds of professional advisors, including types of degrees earned, student involvement, advising experiences, and mentorship. In the absence of standardized minimum educational and experiential credentials for advisors, this study can help administrators understand the diversity of advisor backgrounds, gaps in advisor knowledge, and how these experiences inform advising practices. Beyond shared educational experiences, the findings from this study also can document the influential training and development experiences of professional academic advisors. Shared experiences can begin to inform academic administrators as to what training and development activities have meant the most to advisors, demonstrate what their personal preferences and motivations are to participate, and highlight topics that may require additional training. Given that the study focuses on the experiences of advisors who have worked in the field for at least five years, the findings may help advising administrators understand what motivates their professional advisors to remain in their positions for the long term and if human resources policies could be reviewed to support advisor retention.

Finally, as institutions across the country continue to manage funding cuts, campus programs must continually make a case for the value their services provide in supporting the institutional mission. Like other student services, academic advising must continue to conduct research and rely upon data in order to demonstrate to campus leaders that it is essential to supporting student success. Beyond establishing the role advising plays in supporting retention, advising administrators need to make a case for the use of professional academic advisors who can devote a majority of their time to working with students, especially those who have been identified as at risk or in need of
greater individualized support. The findings of this study can help inform administrators as to strengths and limitations in advisor experiences, programs, and practices and also serve to identify opportunities to strengthen the professional identity of academic advising. The exploration of institutional responses to FLSA also provides insights for other senior leaders into issues of equity and parity as well as employee engagement.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

As academic advising continues to evolve as a profession and explore new, innovative ways to support student success, it is important to understand the origins of academic advising and the foundational research that continues to propel the profession forward. Before educational standards and credentials can be identified for academic advisors, it is critical to acknowledge the complex diversity of today’s college students and the range of knowledge advisors need in order best to support each student. It is equally valuable to acknowledge the challenges that have arisen despite the advancements in the field and how these limitations are reflected in the use of professional standards along with the training and development professional advisors receive. To understand fully just how far advising has come and how much work is yet to be done, we must start at the beginning and explore the role of advising from the establishment of the colonial colleges in the US.

History of Academic Advising

Historians break down the evolution of advising into three distinct eras, which overlap with the growth of higher education across the country from the founding of the colonial colleges to the present (Frost, 2000; Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Kuhn, 2008). The first era of advising, from 1636 to 1869, was not really a period of advising at all and more a reflection of the growing divide between students and the faculty (Habley et al., 2012). Students generally studied the same courses, and their interactions with
adults were either in a teaching or disciplinary capacity. The highly structured and rigid environment at the colonial colleges led to strained relationships between students and faculty (Frost, 2000; Kuhn, 2008). The introduction of the elective system in the 1870s not only expanded curriculum offerings at colleges and universities, but established a need for individuals to help guide students through course selection (Frost, 2000; Kuhn, 2008; White & Schulenberg, 2012).

The second era of advising from the 1870s to 1970s was the period when the advisor role started to take shape (Frost, 2000; Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Kuhn, 2008). Albeit early advising interactions usually were led by a faculty member or dean of students, institutions found a need for students to have formal guidance in course and program selection. Johns Hopkins University is credited as one of the first institutions formally to use the term “adviser,” establishing the advisor’s role in helping students with academic and personal concerns in 1889 (Kuhn, 2008, p. 5). Even as the early definitions of academic advising included helping students with personal needs, the role of the advisor was still primarily one of tracking degree progress, course selection, and requirement completion (Kuhn, 2008; White & Schulenberg, 2012).

The 1970s ushered in the establishment of the professional academic advisor and was the start of the third era of advising (Kuhn, 2008). Self (2008) defines professional academic advisors as “individuals who have been hired to focus primarily on academic advising activities that promote the academic success of students, with additional attention to general student development at the institution” (pp. 267–68). The evolution of this definition has clear origins in the growth of the advising field during the third era. Frost (2000) describes this period as the time when advising became an examined
activity, which is represented by the first wave of published research articles about academic advising and the creation of the NACADA.

In 1972, two seminal pieces of research conducted by O’Banion and Crookston introduced higher education to the concept of developmental advising, which is still used as a framework for advising practices. O’Banion (1972/1994/2009) defines a process of advising, which details five topics academic advising programs should cover when working with students: “(1) exploration of life goals, (2) exploration of vocational goals, (3) program choice, (4) course choice, and (5) scheduling courses” (p. 83). He argues that only once students have been guided through the process of exploring their life and career goals can they then be helped with choosing the appropriate major (program choice) followed by course selection and scheduling. O’Banion places responsibility on colleges and universities to help students explore their goals by providing counselors or academic advisors who are not only knowledgeable about institutional and program policies but equally skilled in areas including student development, counseling, career exploration, and decision making. He also states that academic advisors should be able to foster an environment where students feel appreciated and supported regardless of their identity, interests, or academic ability (O’Banion, 1972/1994/2009).

Despite the amount of knowledge and skill O’Banion (1972/1994/2009) believes an advisor should have to guide students in their exploration of goals, he argues that academic advising is a team approach, meaning that responsibility is shared by both the student and advisor. Though the student bears the primary decision-making responsibility, the advisor is responsible for providing the information and resources that the student needs to make an educated decision. O’Banion established this new approach
to advising primarily for the two-year college setting, which relied on faculty advisors at the time, yet his argument for institutions to offer nonfaculty advisors and to hire advisors with a counseling background is applicable to institutions of all sizes (O’Banion, 1972/1994/2009).

In a similar vein to the work of O’Banion, Crookston (1972/1994/2009) utilizes student development theory to argue that academic advisors serve in a teaching function because they help students develop the skills to problem-solve, make decisions, and evaluate options. He defines the traditional advising style as prescriptive, meaning that the advisor imparts information to the student and, in turn, the student learns from the information. Crookston argues that prescriptive advising is based on an authority-subordinate relationship instead of a partnership, which makes it easy for the student to place blame on an advisor for negative outcomes during his or her college experience. For instance, a student who is prescribed a schedule of courses for a semester could blame the advisor for poor performance because that advisor told him or her to enroll in the courses. Instead of an advisor dictating what a student should do, he offers the concept of developmental advising as an alternate approach in which the student and advisor work together to review options and make decisions. In a developmental advising relationship, the advisor and student learn from and teach each other (Crookston, 1972/1994/2009).

The work of O’Banion (1972/1994/2009) and Crookston (1972/1994/2009) establishes a foundation for the knowledge and skills academic advisors should possess that extends beyond understanding degree and program requirements. The authors clearly outline and define the responsibilities held by the advisor and advisee, and make it clear
when the two parties need to work together to make decisions. The frameworks established by O’Banion (1972/1994/2009) and Crookston (1972/1994/2009) have informed a variety of advising approaches and strategies used by today’s advisors, including appreciative, proactive, strengths-based, coaching, full-range, and servant-leadership advising (Grites, 2013). The introduction of developmental advising is often correlated with the rise of professional academic advisors in the field (White & Schulenberg, 2012), which is supported by the establishment of a professional organization for academic advisors seven years after the publication of O’Banion and Crookston’s work.

The groundwork for NACADA was laid at a gathering of 275 professionals at the first National Conference on Academic Advising in 1977 (Grites & Gordon, 2009; NACADA, 2016). The advising conference was designed to establish a network for advising professionals to come together and share best practices. It was such an overwhelming success that a group of conference attendees and planners came together to organize a second national conference and discuss plans for establishing a formal organization for academic advising professionals. NACADA was officially incorporated in 1979 and started with 435 dues-paying members (Grites & Gordon, 2009). From the beginning, NACADA has been dedicated to promoting high-quality advising services for students as reflected in the organization’s vision statement:

The Vision of NACADA is to recognize that effective academic advising is at the core of student success. NACADA aspires to be the premier global association for the development and dissemination of innovative theory, research, and practice of academic advising in higher education. (NACADA, 2016)
As NACADA has grown from the original 435 members to now more than 11,000 worldwide (NACADA, 2014a), so has the number of resources and developmental opportunities provided by the organization. Now known as the Global Community for Academic Advising, NACADA is relied on by advising professionals to be the source of information on professional standards, advising best practices, serving diverse student populations, and emerging research in the field. The organization has kept pace with the growing needs of its community through the development and expansion of advising-focused conferences, webinars, handbooks, and the *NACADA Journal* (Grites & Gordon, 2009). As NACADA approaches 40 years of existence, the organization continues to serve as a key player in educating advisors and advancing the profession to meet the rapidly expanding needs of students (Grites & Gordon, 2009).

Even as the establishment of NACADA creates a foundational support for the profession and developmental advising lays the groundwork for working with students, the third era of advising also introduced a framework for identifying and understanding advising organizational structures. Habley’s (1983) organizational models for academic advising define the most common advising structures used at institutions and outline the different roles held by faculty, staff, and administrators. The seven models are identified as faculty-only, supplementary, split, dual, total intake, satellite, and self-contained advising. The models are best differentiated by identifying how centralized, decentralized, or shared the advising services are for each structure (Pardee, 2000).

The self-contained advising model is the only true centralized model, as it is designed for all students to be advised through one advising office during the entirety of their academic career at an institution (Habley, 1983; Habley & McCauley, 1987; Habley
& Morales, 1998; Pardee, 2000). In a self-contained model, all advisors are centrally supervised, trained, and coordinated by a dean or advising administrator. Students in this model benefit from the consistency of working with the same academic advisor regardless of how many times they may change their major and are afforded the opportunity to build a relationship with their advisor during the course of their time at the institution (Pardee, 2000).

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the decentralized advising structures, which include the faculty-only and satellite models (Pardee, 2000). In the faculty-only model, faculty members advise students who are related to the student’s major or who volunteer to work with a specific population of students (i.e., undeclared) (Habley, 1983; Habley & McCauley, 1987; Habley & Morales, 1998; Pardee, 2000). Supervision of advising is department-specific, and faculty members are the only type of advisors at an institution. In the satellite model, offices specific to academic departments or programs advise all students. For instance, academic advisors through the business school advise all business majors, and an office specifically designed to help students explore major options advises undecided students. In the satellite model, students may work with a combination of faculty and professional advisors. In both decentralized models, supervision and coordination of advising is left to the individual unit, which often leads to inconsistent advising experiences for students who transfer between majors or programs at an institution (Habley, 1983; Habley & McCauley, 1987; Habley & Morales, 1998; Pardee, 2000).

The supplementary, split, dual, and total-intake models are considered shared advising services because responsibility for working with students is shared in some
capacity between a central advising unit and departmental faculty advising (Pardee, 2000). In a supplementary-advising model, departmental faculty members advise students and also have access to a central advising office for information about campus policies and resources (Habley, 1983; Habley & McCauley, 1987; Habley & Morales, 1998; Pardee, 2000). In a split-advising model, specific populations of students work with a central advising office as others are assigned to faculty advisors. For instance, undeclared or first-year students might be advised through a central office whereas upperclassmen or students with declared majors are advised by faculty members. In the total-intake advising model, all students are assigned to work with an advisor within a central advising office until they meet a specific requirement (i.e., specific number of hours or general education requirements completed). Students then transition to working with a departmental advisor once the minimum requirements have been met (Habley, 1983; Habley & McCauley, 1987; Habley & Morales, 1998; Pardee, 2000). In a dual-advising model, faculty members and the central advising office share the responsibility for advising students throughout the entirety of the student’s academic career (Habley, 1983; Habley & McCauley, 1987; Habley & Morales, 1998; Pardee, 2000). In this model, a professional advisor is often responsible for being the resource on institutional policies and procedure, whereas the faculty advisor oversees the student’s major specific requirements. Though shared advising models allow for tailored advising services for specific populations (i.e., undeclared), they can make students feel as through the advising structure is overwhelming and confusing given the number of individuals involved and their varying roles (Pardee, 2000).
Habley and McCauley (1987) found that certain types of institutions (i.e., two-year, four-year, public, or private) utilized different advising models more frequently. For instance, the faculty-only model was used more at institutions with enrollments less than 1,000 and was nonexistent at the institutions in their study with enrollments of more than 20,000. The findings supported the widely held assumption that larger institutions utilize a central advising office in some capacity and smaller institutions primarily rely on faculty members to advise (Habley & McCauley, 1987). Despite these initial findings, a later study by Habley and Morales (1998) argues that the successful use of models in supporting advising program goals is highly dependent on the overall fit of the model being used. The authors explain that there is no one model that will work for a specific institutional type and that institutions must consider their mission, culture, student profile, and faculty member responsibilities when selecting an advising model (Habley & Morales, 1998). Habley’s (1983) seven organizational models not only have defined the different advising structures at institutions but have demonstrated that effective advising is connected to the larger purpose of the institution (Habley & Morales, 1998; Pardee, 2000).

The third era of advising established three of the most instrumental components of the advising profession to date with the foundation of NACADA, developmental advising, and the organizational models for advising programs. Even as NACADA continues to support and encourage scholarly inquiry in the field, academic advising has struggled to establish itself as a profession with the absence of a formal definition of advising (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012) along with arguments for and against the creation of a normative theory of advising (Hagen & Jordan, 2008; Himes, 2014;
McGillin, 2000). The loose interpretations and fuzzy definitions of academic advising make it very easy for the layperson to assume that the role of the advisor is still one of picking courses and verifying degree progress. There is also no single style, approach, or philosophy for academic advising that has been identified as the key to effective advising (Spicuzza, 1992). On the other hand, researchers have begun to establish connections between quality academic advising and student success that continue to add credibility to the field of advising (Habley et al., 2012).

**Sociology of Professional Work**

Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, and Barkemeyer (2015) and Shaffer, Zalewski, and Laveille (2010) utilized sociological frameworks to examine the status of academic advising as a profession and argue that advising does not currently meet the requirements to call itself a profession. The terms *profession, professionalization,* and *professionalism* represent distinct concepts within the sociological study of the professions. Although there is no singular definition of a profession, it generally represents a category of occupations associated with prestige and a shared occupational identity among its workers. Professionalization is the process an occupation takes to move toward a professional identity, and professionalism is both a discourse and normative value held by workers (Evetts, 2014). Albeit there is no universal framework to determine whether or not an occupation is a true profession, Gorman and Sandefur (2011) argue that the frameworks popularized in the 1930s through the 1960s all focus on the four main themes of “expert knowledge, autonomy, a normative service orientation supported by community, and status, income, and rewards” (p. 281). Each of the four
themes highlighted by the authors uncovers the complex nature of professionalism and explains why not all occupations can be considered professions.

The concept of expert knowledge offered by Gorman and Sandefur (2011) centers on how workers establish, share, and utilize the knowledge needed to conduct their work. Expert knowledge separates the professional from the layperson, as Goode (1957) explains: “The problems brought to the professional are usually those the client cannot solve, and only the professional can solve” (p. 196). Traditionally, the expert knowledge of a professional worker must be learned through a formal postsecondary education, years of experience in the field, and be based in theory (Freidson, 1989; Goode, 1961; Merton, 1960). Law is an example of a profession with expert knowledge based in theory that is shared with its professionals through a specific postsecondary educational program (law school), a formal licensing process (bar exam), and continued learning through experience in the form of professional development (continuing legal education). Goode (1961) argues that professionals are responsible for not only learning expert knowledge, but should “help create” knowledge (p. 308). Knowledge is developed through scholarly inquiry conducted by the faculty experts who formally educate emerging professionals or by professionals in the field (Freidson, 1989; Merton, 1960).

The level of control an occupation has over its knowledge is tied to autonomy, which is the second theme of professionalism (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). Professional autonomy is exemplified by how a profession controls access to its expert knowledge, including which individuals are admitted into formal educational programs along with the hiring and training of new professionals (Freidson, 1989; Goode, 1961; Merton, 1960). Given that professionals are seen as experts in helping solve issues or problems related to
their field, the layperson grants authority to professionals to exercise their expert opinion (Merton, 1960). Professionals are also deemed to be the only individuals qualified enough to oversee and assess their work based on their expertise (Freidson, 1989). Autonomy is held by both the individual and the community of professionals. Therefore, a professional association is critical in controlling and advancing expert knowledge as well as establishing and monitoring ethical practices to prevent abuses of power (Goode, 1957, 1961; Merton, 1958, 1960).

The need for a professional code of ethics along with the role of professional associations in enforcing these codes exemplifies the third theme of a profession, which Gorman and Sandefur (2011) describe as a normative service orientation supported by community. Goode (1961) defines a service orientation as one in which the needs of the client are placed before the needs of the professional, suggesting that professionals are willing to make personal or career sacrifices in order to honor the best interests of the client. He argues that being service-oriented also means that professions should not only establish and follow codes of ethics, but also seek to hire and train the strongest new professionals. Goode (1961) explains that establishing a service orientation is critical to a profession because “only to the extent that society believes the profession is regulated by this collectivity orientation will it grant the profession much autonomy or freedom from lay supervision and control” (p. 308). To prevent abuses in power that could decrease public trust in the profession, professional associations or communities establish and monitor ethical practices of professionals. Goode (1961) argues that, in order to encourage ethical practices, associations should also ensure that its practitioners are “handsomely rewarded” for observing ethical guidelines (p. 308).
The concept of rewards and recognition for professionals is representative of the theme of elevated status, income, and rewards (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). According to Goode (1957), professions are granted elevated status by society because of the autonomy they are afforded over the formal education, expert knowledge, and adherence to ethical guidelines of their practitioners. It is because of these standards that members of professions typically earn higher wages and are able to influence public policy at the state and national levels (Freidson, 1989; Goode, 1957). Merton (1960) argues that occupations desire professional status because of the high wages associated with professionalism, along with the “sense of reward” gleaned from helping clients (p. 662). The elevated status, income, and rewards afforded to professionals allows professions to hold its practitioners to higher standards in terms of education, training, skill, and ethical practices (Goode, 1957).

The four themes presented by Gorman and Sandefur (2011) highlight how traditional frameworks commonly measure the professionalization of an occupation. Contemporary sociologists argue that these traditional frameworks neglect the changing nature of the workplace and the influence of larger organizations over professions (Evetts, 2011, 2014; Leicht, 1997). Professional workers are now commonly employed as part of larger bureaucracies and organizations, such as universities and corporations, which hire workers from a variety of professions (Leicht, 1997). Evetts (2011) argues that when professionalism is controlled by the organization or “from above,” the onus of occupational control shifts from the professional worker to organizational leadership (p. 408). The professional worker is no longer making decisions based solely on his or her professional opinion, but instead must also make decisions based on the mission,
accountability standards, and financial implications as set by the larger organization (Evetts, 2011, 2014; Leicht, 1997). The end result is that professional workers lose some of the control they have over their expert knowledge, autonomy, and status—all of which were believed to be the defining characteristics of a profession (Evetts, 2011, 2014).

The aspects of a profession as defined by traditional and contemporary sociologists provide insight into the strengths and limitations of the professional identity of academic advising. Researchers argue that the challenges to the professionalization of academic advising include inconsistencies in credentialing, training, position titles, and job responsibilities (Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, & Barkemeyer, 2015; Padak & Kuhn, 2009; Shaffer, 2015; Shaffer, Zalewski, & Laveille, 2010). Habley (2009) maintains that academic advising needs to expand its expert knowledge through research in order to be recognized as a profession. Researchers also have examined the professionalization of several other fields within higher education—including student affairs (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007), advancement (Caboni, 2010), and enrollment management (Hodum & James, 2010)—and argue that their fields are in various stages of professionalization. In an effort to continue to advance the profession, NACADA has made an effort to promote professional standards and values, as well as recommendations for training and development, in order to lay a foundation for effective academic advising practices at both the program and individual levels.

**Professional Standards in Academic Advising**

As NACADA started to establish itself in the 1980s and 1990s, the organization began adapting a series of standards and statements to help provide “consistency in
expectations, responsibilities, and behaviors” among the growing number of advising professionals (Grites & Gordon, 2009, p. 44). The first of these standards came when NACADA joined the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) and had its standards for academic advising programs approved in 1986. The Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising was the next standard adopted by NACADA in 1994, followed by the Concept of Academic Advising in 2006 (Grites & Gordon, 2009). Together, the CAS Standards and Guidelines for Academic Advising Programs, the Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising, and the Concept of Academic Advising are what NACADA refers to as the three Pillars of Academic Advising. The NACADA Board of Directors officially endorses the pillars; they are the three statements of standards that solidify the valuable role advising plays in supporting student success and institutional mission (NACADA, 2006). Albeit application of the pillars to advising programs and professionals provides integrated guidance, it is important to understand how each informs advising standards and practices independently.

The CAS Standards and Guidelines for Academic Advising Programs (AAP) lists 12 areas of general standards that AAP must address regardless of student population(s) served or institutional affiliation:

1: Mission
2: Program
3: Organization and Leadership
4: Human Resources
5: Ethics
6: Law, Policy, and Governance
7: Diversity, Equity, and Access
8: Internal and External Relations
9: Financial Resources
The standards begin by firmly stating that AAP, at its core, must have a mission that supports student success, retention, and learning while staying true to the institution’s mission. The Program Standard specifically details the broader steps AAP must take to support its mission statement and outline specific student learning and development competencies to be addressed, including knowledge acquisition, cognitive development, and interpersonal skills. Standards three and four outline the roles and responsibilities of advising leaders in supporting the AAP mission through the hiring and training of academic advisors and by establishing an environment to foster student success and development (CAS, 2014).

The CAS statement also clearly details the ethical responsibilities of academic advisors, the legal standards that must be upheld through the everyday AAP office practices, and the importance of establishing safe and equitable environments for all students and staff regardless of individual identities (CAS, 2014). The remaining standards highlight the monetary and physical resources AAP needs in order to support its mission and best serve the needs of students. The statement argues that AAP must utilize technology not only securely to maintain student records but also to “enhance the delivery of programs and services for all students” (CAS, 2014, part 10, para. 2).

Similarly, the CAS standards highlight the importance of a physical office space for the AAP that is not only accessible to students but designed to foster private conversations between students and advisors. Finally, the standards underscore the importance of
ongoing evaluation and assessment of practices to ensure that the AAP mission is upheld and student educational outcomes are being measured (CAS, 2014).

Though the statement clearly outlines the standards that AAP must meet, the understanding and use of the standards among advising professionals has been mixed. Keeling (2010) found that while advising practices generally aligned with the CAS standards, there was no consistency in how standards were applied. In some cases, the AAP practices just happened to align with the standards. The study argues that AAP, which intentionally applied the CAS standards to practice, benefited from having an administrator or advising leader who promoted the use of the standards. Keeling (2010) argues that the intentional use of the CAS standards provides credibility to advising practices, which is essential in times of financial pressures and budget cuts across higher education. The inconsistent use and understanding of the standards in AAP is concerning, given how they are viewed as setting the foundation for supporting the importance of academic advising in higher education and student success. Although the CAS standards are just one component of the three Pillars of Academic Advising, they provide a framework for a team of advisors and their work environment as opposed to the Core Values and Concept of Advising, which focus primarily on the individual advisor.

The Core Values of Academic Advising were designed by a NACADA task force to establish a list of six statements that emphasize the importance of academic advisors in fostering student success (NACADA, 2005). Advisors are encouraged to understand, practice, and adopt these values as part of their personal advising philosophy. The values highlight the responsibility advisors have in supporting their students, in collaborating with institutional peers, to their institutions, to the larger mission of higher education, as
educators, and to themselves as professionals (NACADA, 2005). The first version of core values was adopted in 1994; the revised versions continue to reflect the value of advancing student success through quality academic advising—the concept upon which NACADA was founded in 1979 (Grites & Gordon, 2009).

Similar to the Core Values, the Concept of Academic Advising was created through the work of a NACADA task force. The group was convened after years of repeated attempts to establish an official definition of academic advising (Grites & Gordon, 2009; NACADA, 2006). In 2006, the task force determined that the complex roles of an academic advisor—along with the wide range of types of advisors utilized across institutions—warranted a purposefully broad statement of what advising is rather than a singular definition (Grites & Gordon, 2009). The Concept of Academic Advising defines the three main components of advising as “curriculum (what advising deals with), pedagogy (how advising does what it does), and student learning outcomes (the result of academic advising)” (NACADA, 2006, para. 6). The large, overarching concept statements reflect both the breadth and depth of an advisor’s role in supporting all types of students.

When the Concept of Advising is reviewed with both the Core Values and CAS standards, the pillars come together to tell a detailed story of how significant the responsibilities of academic advisors are in fostering student success and supporting the institutional mission. Utilizing the three Pillars of Academic Advising is important in establishing effective academic advising and building the required institutional support needed to develop and fulfill AAP mission, vision, goals, and objectives (Campbell, 2008; Darling, 2015; King, 2008). The Pillars of Academic Advising are also important
in establishing a framework for educating new advisors and guiding the work of experienced advisors. Even as the pillars outline the standards and values of the profession, they only briefly unveil the breadth and depth of an advisor’s knowledge and skill that he or she must possess in order to support students successfully.

**Academic Advisor Roles and Responsibilities**

Academic advisors are responsible for not only having a broad range of knowledge about institutional policies and procedures, but are expected to have the interpersonal and communication skills necessary to help educate and guide their advisees through the college experience (Frost, 1991; Hughey, 2011). Advisors must be prepared to work with and support diverse populations of students who come to college with varying levels of preparation and expectations for their academic career (Kennedy & Ishler, 2008). Additionally, advisors must balance the range of expectations placed upon them by different constituent groups. For instance, campus administrators rely on advisors to support the retention efforts of the institution; students look to advisors to be available to address their needs quickly (Bultzman, Vowell, Harney, & Smarrelli, 2008). Kuh (2008) argues that advisors are important to student success because they are often the first person to engage with new students and typically have the most frequent contact with students throughout their academic career. At the heart of all these responsibilities is an advisor having the skills and knowledge to apply developmental advising practices and the concepts found in the Pillars of Academic Advising to advancing student success.

Academic advising is rooted in helping people, meaning that a primary responsibility of an advisor is working to establish and build a relationship with his or her
advisees. The ability to develop professional yet nurturing relationships with students is an example of one of the many interpersonal skills effective academic advisors are expected to utilize in order to build strong advisor-advisee partnerships (Hughey, 2011; Spicuzza, 1992). One of the first obstacles in establishing this relationship is helping students understand the advisor’s role. Students often associate it with what they knew of guidance counselors from high school, and they can translate the experience—positive or negative—they had with those guidance counselors to their expectations of an academic advisor in college (Ellis, 2014). Advisors should work to understand what perceptions about advising their students bring to the relationship and clearly communicate their expectations in order to begin building a solid working relationship.

It is equally important for an advisor to understand what expectations their advisees have of them in the partnership in order best to meet the individual needs of the student and make him or her feel supported in the relationship. Students value an advising experience that is based on clear expectations (Barbuto, Story, Fritz, & Schinstock, 2011), is encouraging based on individual needs, offers multiple options to resolving issues, and provides clear rationale when there are no options (Sheldon, Garton, Orr, & Smith, 2015). Students also want an advisor who is knowledgeable, nurturing, communicates well, approachable, available, and organized (Davis & Cooper, 2001; Harrison, 2009; Sheldon et al., 2015; Spicuzza, 1992). The 2014 National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report for four-year institutions highlighted advisor knowledge about major requirements and approachability as strengths (Noel-Levitz, 2014). At the same time, students cited frustration with course registration, feeling as though the institution was not concerned about their well-being, and having to run around
to multiple campus offices to resolve issues. The Noel-Levitz (2014) results highlight the expectations students have that their advisors should be able to help them navigate campus or to serve as a one-stop shop of information. Although all of the expectations students have of their advisors seem fairly straightforward, students sometimes have expectations that are in conflict with the learning or knowledge advisors want students to take away from their advising experiences. The conflict of expectations can make it challenging for an advisor to employ developmental advising strategies or to feel as though he or she is engaged in a true advisor-advisee partnership (Ellis, 2014; Frost, 1991). To address this disconnect, advisors must clearly communicate the rationale for their decisions and restate the expectations they have of their advisees. Advisors should anticipate that each of their students will learn and communicate differently, meaning that advisors must work to adapt their advising style to fit the needs of their students.

Understanding the multiple identities of the student populations being served is also essential to building strong, supportive advisor-advisee partnerships (Frost, 1991; Pardee, 2000). The changing demographics of the United States has led to a more diverse population of students attending college, which requires institutions to be prepared to support students with a variety of needs (Frost, 1991; Kennedy & Ishler, 2008). Students are diverse in terms of their race, ethnicity, religion, ability, socioeconomic status, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, and overall life experiences. Each of these identities requires an advisor not only to understand the differences between groups but how to support the needs of these unique populations. When these identities intersect, the needs of students become even more complex. Advisors who have learned student development theory will have an easier time understanding how and why their students transition
through different phases of identity development throughout the course of the advisor-advisee relationship (Ellis, 2014).

Advisors must not only understand and appreciate different identities; they must know how diverse student populations are represented and typically fare at their specific institution (Kennedy & Ishler, 2008). Research exploring the role advisors play in supporting the success of underrepresented ethnic minority students enrolled at predominately white institutions found that academic advisors who fostered student success invested time in building relationships with their students, which allowed students to see them as more than just another staff member on campus (Museus & Ravello, 2010). Additionally, these advisors understood that the problems students encountered were rarely singular but rather often connected to multiple factors, including finances, academics, or personal life (Museus & Ravello, 2010). In addition to understanding different student populations, advisors must be able to understand how their own identities and worldview informs how they work with students (Coll & Zalaquett, 2007). Advisors must be aware of how their own personal beliefs or experiences might guide how they react or support a student, and be able to keep those perspectives in check. Regardless of a personal opinion or view about a student, an advisor should always treat students with dignity and respect.

Advisors are tasked with understanding the needs of and supporting special populations, including first-year, undecided, international, transfer, and at-risk students (Tinto, 2012). Advisors must be aware of the institutional obstacles that can hinder these groups from being successful. For instance, how do academic policies make it difficult for transfer students to graduate within two years of starting at the institution? What is the
first-to-second-year retention rate for conditionally admitted students and what support mechanisms are in place to help prevent these students from becoming academically ineligible? It is not simply enough for an advisor to build a relationship with students. Advisors need to be able to understand how their students’ behavior, and the institutional culture, connect or disconnect to support student success (Kuh, 2008). Knowledgeable academic advisors are also key in informing policy and practice within an institution. Folsom and Scobie (2010) describe an “advising perspective,” which is an advisor’s in-depth understanding of how the institution operates and what drives decisions and the advisor’s ability to use this knowledge to advocate for change to support the needs of students (p. 16). Advisors are only able to gain this detailed understanding of their institution’s culture and behaviors if they understand how advising supports the overall mission and retention efforts of the campus (Folsom & Scobie, 2010).

Even as extra attention should be paid to students from populations with low retention rates, advisors must also pay attention to the role that the quality of advising services plays in retaining all students. Tinto (2012) argues that students who leave in their third or fourth year often do so because they have been unable to make progress toward a degree, have to transition out of a major, and have not received guidance from an advisor as to how they can establish a realistic academic plan. Advisors who employ an advising-as-teaching strategy can help students gain the confidence to form their own ideas and recognize that there are multiple ways to understand a situation or idea (Pizzolato, 2008). Developing these skills is essential in helping students develop realistic goals and paths, from selecting majors to careers. Additionally, students who regularly seek out and engage with an academic advisor are more likely to exhibit knowledge or
behaviors indicative of student success and more likely to have a positive perspective about academic advising (Smith & Allen, 2014). Given that not all students are going to make the effort to engage in the advising process, advisors must make an intentional effort actively to engage their students (Harper & Quaye, 2015). At the very least, an advisor has to send a clear message that he or she is available and willing to help whenever the disengaged student might be ready or need help.

An underlying factor in supporting student success is having well-trained advisors who have the skill and ability to juggle multiple responsibilities and the organizational skills needed to manage their advising loads. According to the NACADA 2011 National Survey of Academic Advising, the median student load for a professional advisor at a small institution is 233; the median load at a large institution is 600 advisees (Robbins, 2013). The larger the advising load, the more important it is to be organized and have strong time-management skills. At any given time, an advisor is juggling student appointments, emails, checking on student performance, following up with parents or faculty members, and addressing student emergencies. Advisors who struggle to stay on top of their email, are unprepared for meetings, or have limited availability will have a more difficult time earning the trust of their students and establishing advisor-advisee partnerships. Though technology has made it easier for students and advisors to communicate regularly through email, online chats, text messages, and online appointment scheduling, technological advancements also have added another layer of complexity to advising.

Institutions are now utilizing online registration systems, degree audits or maps, predictive analytics, and early-alert technologies to help support student retention
initiatives. *What Works in Student Retention*, the fourth national survey conducted by ACT (2010), found that advising-related practices were most commonly reported as part of retention efforts at public four-year institutions. Advising practices utilized by institutions with the top retention rates from the first to second year include increasing the number of advisors (43% of top-quartile institutions), targeted advising interventions (96% of top-quartile institutions), and training for nonfaculty advisors (84% of top-quartile institutions) (ACT, 2010). As institutions acquire technologies and employ advising interventions, advisors expand the tools and resources they have in order to monitor a student’s progress. Advisors must be well trained in order to utilize these technologies effectively, but they also must build time into their schedule to incorporate these tools into daily practices. An early-alert system is of no use to an institution if their advisors do not utilize the technology to support how they work with their students. The increased responsibility, larger advising loads, and daily tasks associated with advising are a prime example of why the number of professional advisors being utilized is on the rise (Self, 2008).

Unlike faculty advisors who must balance teaching and research responsibilities with advising, professional academic advisors are ideally able to focus more time and energy on their craft to support their students (Self, 2008). The wide array of knowledge professional advisors are expected to have, especially those who work with specialized populations (i.e., first-year or undecided students), requires special attention to the training and development these advisors receive throughout the course of their careers. The professional advisors who are able to devote more time to working one on one with students can often manage more complex student issues quickly and effectively (Self,
Although professional advisors are not the same as licensed counselors, they should be trained to recognize and refer students who might benefit from the assistance of a professional counselor (Fox, 2008). The ability to refer students appropriately and recognize warning signs is easier if advisors know their institutional resources and have developed working relationships with professionals from other student-support offices on campus (De Sousa, 2005; Pizzolato, 2008).

One of the other distinctions between the knowledge base of faculty and professional advisors is that faculty advisors are considered to be experts in their field, which can provide advisees with a deeper level of guidance and connection to their coursework. Therefore, professional academic advisors who work with students in a specific major or program of study must learn about the field and profession for which they advise (Goodner, 2010). Professional academic advisors may never have the same level of expert authority in the field of study as a faculty advisor; however, they can be taught about the major themes or areas within the field, fundamentals of the introductory courses, why certain course prerequisites support the foundation of the program, and related career or graduate school paths (Goodner, 2010). Students already expect their advisor to have the knowledge about their academic program of interest and its related career opportunities. Hence, advisors must learn these specifics in order to be prepared to answer questions and fulfill their responsibilities in the advisor-advisee partnership.

Focus on training and development of academic advisors is beneficial not only to the students they support, but also serves to foster the personal and professional growth of the advisor (Paul, Smith, & Dochney, 2012). Jackson, Moneta, and Nelson (2009) argue that professional development opportunities also can be critical in engaging and
retaining staff, especially when opportunities for promotion are limited. Training and development is also important given the absence of standard minimum credentials required for new advisors. Even for new advisors who have completed a higher education or student affairs preparatory graduate program, their knowledge and expectations of a career in the field are heavily influenced by mentors (Mertz, Strayhorn, & Eckman, 2012) and the curriculum of their graduate programs (Ortiz, Filimon, & Cole-Jackson, 2015). Advisor positions are filled by individuals with a variety of knowledge about their roles and the various populations of students they serve, which leads to an expansive amount of information that needs to be covered in new advisor training and professional development activities (Goodner, 2010).

**Training Programs**

Training and development programs for academic advisors must be thoughtful and intentional in their design in order to begin to address the wide range of knowledge and skills an advisor is expected to master. Folsom, Shultz, Scobie, and Miller (2010) argue that a training coordinator or advising director must consider his or her intended learning outcomes, target audience (i.e., new versus experienced advisors, undeclared advisors), and plan for post-training assessment of both the program and advisor. Additionally, it is important to understand the difference between a training program and development activity. Training programs should be designed either to serve in a pre-service capacity, meaning the program prepares advisors to do their work, or in an extended training capacity where new advisors are able to build upon their foundational skills. Development programs, on the other hand, are intended for experienced advisors
and should focus on expanding upon preexisting skills and introducing new knowledge in the field (Folsom, Shultz, et al., 2010). Outside of participation in formal training activities, advisors of all experience levels should be encouraged to develop a personal academic advising philosophy statement and periodically revise the statement throughout their career (Folsom, 2008).

Training and development programs should be well planned out and consideration should be given to the audience being served, timing of the training (i.e., what else is going on during this time of the school year), frequency of the training, and the anticipated learning outcomes (Folsom, Shultz, Scobie, & Miller, 2010). Training participants appreciate programs that vary in format to include both formal and informal learning opportunities along with the ability to network with other professionals on campus (Dean, Saunders, Thompson, & Cooper, 2011). Trainers should consider the role of advising at the institution along with the skills and knowledge required of advisors to support students successfully when identifying learning outcomes (Folsom, Shultz, et al., 2010). Academic advising researchers argue that a strong training or development program should incorporate Habley’s (1995) framework for an advisor-training program (Beres, 2010; Folsom, Scobie, & Shultz, 2010; Higginson, 2000; King, 2008). The original framework calls for the balanced use of three component areas when designing training and development programs for advisors:

1. Conceptual: What does it mean to be an advisor? Why is it an important role?
2. Informational: What are the institutional policies, procedures, resources, and services an advisor needs to know in order to disseminate correct information to students?
3. Relational: How should an advisor use counseling, problem-solving, listening, and decision-making skills when working with students? (Habley, 1995)
The original framework was designed to help faculty advisors learn a range of information that might normally fall outside their area of expertise (Habley, 1995). Although the framework could be applied to training any type of advisor, it has since been expanded upon to encourage content knowledge for a broader range of advisors and skill sets (Higginson, 2000). The evolution of the framework includes the need for advisors to understand the types of students served by the institution (conceptual), know the philosophy of advising at the institution (conceptual), the ability to identify student needs (informational), make the appropriate student referrals (informational), have self-awareness and personal-bias identification (informational), understand student-development theory (relational), and develop cultural competencies (relational) (Higginson, 2000). Utilizing the framework and being able to identify which of the component areas are being addressed is one step in designing a balanced training and development program.

In addition to establishing learning outcomes and determining which population of advisors is being served by the training or development program, it is equally important to determine what the delivery mode will be for the information. Habley (1995) argues that trainers often forget one of the most important rules of instructional design, which is to “select the instructional technique that is most likely to bring about the accomplishment of the desired learning outcome” (p. 78). Trainers should understand the pros and cons of specific delivery methods and determine which would help their advisors best learn (Beres, 2010). Factors including group dynamics, physical space, and technology usage are also equally important to determine appropriate delivery method.
The end goal for trainers and supervisors should be to establish a culture where advisor training and development is the norm (Folsom, Shultz, Scobie, & Miller, 2010).

Regardless of program design or population served, all training and development activities should be subject to regular evaluation to ensure the intended learning outcomes are being met. Advising trainers and supervisors need to ask themselves, how do I know the skills taught in this session are being used by advisors? (Folsom, Shultz, Scobie, & Miller, 2010). In order to answer this question, training and development programs should have measurable outcomes and be assessed on multiple levels. There is no one right way to evaluate a program, but trainers should understand that the best assessment comes from good data (Folsom, Scobie, & Shultz, 2010). Assessment can and should include feedback on the specific training or development program from participants, learning outcomes, and the students served by the trained advisors. Ideally, a training program will be updated or redesigned based on the feedback and measured performance outcomes (Folsom, 2008; Folsom, Scobie, & Shultz, 2010).

In addition to being intentional about how an advising training and development program is designed and implemented, the CAS standards (2014) should be considered as they provide a guideline for academic advising programs, which includes the areas of professional development and training of new and existing advisors. The standards state eight areas that professionals and student employees must receive training or resources on, including institutional policies, privacy and confidentiality laws, and technology-use policies. CAS recommends a list of 12 additional areas that should be covered in training or development, including student-development theory, advising strategies and approaches, and advising assessment and research (CAS, 2014). The CAS standards
highlight a disparity in the literature about the competencies and skills an advisor must possess. If a trainer were to follow only the required standards, as listed by CAS, and develop a training program around those areas, an advisor would be lacking several of the competencies that support student success and retention. It could even be argued that following the CAS minimum standards for training and development would encourage a prescriptive advising approach over a developmental approach.

The questions raised about what advisors must know versus what they should know is just one example of several of the challenges facing academic advisor training and development. The 2011 NACADA National Survey of Academic Advising found that only “40% of institutions provide pre-service training to new academic advisors” (Voller, 2011, para 8). Robbins (2012) further highlights the inconsistencies in training and development, and explains that training is often limited to an annual one-day session, if it is offered at all. If advisors are not being provided with preservice training, then how are they learning to perform their job functions? NACADA currently does not endorse a specific method of training for new advisors and has not designated that new advisors must meet specific educational or experiential credentials in order to be employable. Habley (2009) argues that one of the many obstacles academic advising faces to its credibility as a profession is how few graduate education programs have academic advising as part of their curriculum. He even calls out the two academic advising programs offered through Kansas State University by noting that a majority of the courses are broadly focused on higher education and college student development (Habley, 2009).
Ortiz, Filimon, and Cole-Jackson (2015) found that while the number of higher education or student affairs preparatory programs has almost doubled from 1999 to 2014, program curriculums have gone relatively unchanged. The authors further explain that the curriculums for these programs traditionally center on student-development theory and social justice. Albeit these topics are important to the work of an academic advisor, Ortiz et al. argue that preparation programs need to expand their curriculums to better prepare practitioners to work in an array of roles in both academic and student affairs. The broad focus on higher education and student affairs preparatory graduate programs further supports the significance of training and development in bringing on board and retaining competent new professionals (Dean, Saunders, Thompson, & Cooper, 2011). Although NACADA offers a multitude of resources and has established professional standards to help guide areas of training and development, the choice of how to interpret and utilize those resources is up to the advisor or that person’s supervisor.

The lack of consistent training for new academic advisors is alarming and further highlights the conflicting messages being sent about what skills and competencies are valued by the profession but not required. The training limitations also raise questions as to just how well students are being served and how institutions are measuring the role advising plays in their retention efforts. Although NACADA has been key in establishing professional standards and strategies to support students, it must continue to develop clear definitions of the advising role and implement training programs and standards that can be easily adopted across all institutions. Academic advising will continue to fight the perception that it is simply about helping students select courses until all advisors are
afforded equal access to the minimum training needed to uphold the standards of the profession and meet the expansive needs of a diverse student population.

**Summary**

The rapid growth and development of the role of academic advisors in higher education has led to the creation of different types of advisors, advising program models, strategies for advising students, a national organization, and an expanding catalog of literature exploring the field. As the role of advisors has been established at colleges and universities, so has the responsibility advisors have in supporting the retention and success of undergraduate students. Even as advising has increased its prominence in supporting students, the field struggles to establish itself as a profession and must continue to battle the stigma that advisors exist only to help students pick classes. In order to continue to gain credibility, academic advising needs research focused on understanding who their academic advisors are and the work that they do before establishing any minimum credentials, curriculums for training, a normative theory, or standard definition of the profession.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the life experiences of professional academic advisors and understand how those experiences inform how they approach their work with undergraduate students. Given that the focus of the study requires exploration into the personal experiences and perspectives of individuals, I will use qualitative research methodologies. Qualitative methods allow for the exploration and interpretation of how people understand or interpret experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Dewey’s (1938/1955) theory on experience and education suggests that people learn by making meaning from life experiences, exploring the continuity of experiences and the feedback gleaned through interaction with others and the external environment as well as self-reflection. Not all life experiences of academic advisors are relevant to this study, but as participants tell their stories, they make associations among their experiences, knowledge, and perceptions (through lenses of continuity and interaction) that enable them to identify those life experiences that were significant and valuable to them, and therefore relevant to the study. Dewey’s (1938/1955) work on experience and education serves as inspiration for narrative inquiry research methodology (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which will be the method of choice for this study.

Narrative Inquiry

The qualitative approach for this study is narrative inquiry, which Clandinin (2013) describes as the exploration of “the stories people live and tell” (p. 17). The use
of narrative inquiry is ideal in understanding the personal stories and experiences of professional academic advisors because this approach allows for a deep exploration of the “social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 18). Using narrative inquiry, this study focuses on the life experiences of experienced academic advisors. The purpose of the study is to identify experiences and other factors that have influenced advising approaches, career aspirations, and professional identity. The study also explores how professional academic advisors navigate university and work environments characterized by increased accountability and complexity. Study participants were asked questions to elicit stories from their experiences at various stages of their educational and professional journey. It is through these unique experiences that we can understand how professional academic advisors are prepared for their work, interact with their advisees, and navigate institutional dynamics.

Narrative inquiry permits the researcher to understand more than just the stories shared from the participants through the use of what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe as the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place. The three commonplaces link to Dewey’s (1938/1955) theory of experience and provide a “frame for thinking about experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). Exploring temporality in shared stories means that the researcher must consider the story as it relates to the past, present, and future for both the storyteller and researcher. Temporality represents Dewey’s concept of continuity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Hutchinson, 2015). Understanding sociality means considering the larger role culture, family, social, and institutional experiences have in informing the contexts as shared by the research
participant and researcher. Sociality, both social and personal, reflects Dewey’s concept of interaction where the “personal dimension reflects the internal conditions of interaction and the social dimension reflects the external conditions of interaction” (Hutchinson, 2015, p. 11). Finally, place must be considered in understanding the story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Where did these stories take place? What was the institutional or social environment in which these experiences occurred? The concept of place is linked to Dewey’s concept of situation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Hutchinson, 2015).

By understanding a life experience from these three commonplaces (temporality, sociality, and place) and Dewey’s (1938/1955) theory of experience, we can see the story from multiple dimensions (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which is what makes narrative inquiry different from other qualitative methods. The three commonplaces also can help the researcher understand how and where academic advisors learn how to build relationships with students and how advisor experiences and environments shape that knowledge from multiple perspectives.

**Site and Participant Selection**

Utilizing narrative inquiry methods requires interviewing and engaging with study participants, ideally in a setting comfortable to the participant. For the purposes of this study, professional academic advisors with five or more years of experience in the field were selected to participate in individual interviews and focus groups. The choice to select advisors with five or more years of professional experience allowed for research participants to have developed a preferred advising style, strategy, or philosophy.
Although newer academic advisors already may have a strategy or style they use when working with their students, an experienced advisor is more likely to have chosen, and possibly changed, strategy based on multiple years of working with students in an academic advising capacity.

The study focuses on professional academic advisors from three different four-year, public, doctoral universities with highest research activity in the Midwest (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). The fall 2015 undergraduate enrollment for the institutions represented in the study ranged from approximately 20,000 to 45,000 students (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Institutional type and size was important to ensure that participants worked at similar types of institutions and to support transferability of study findings, which is important to establishing validity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In 2015, NACADA reported that 45.7% of its membership was employed at public doctorate universities and that two of its three largest regions represented states in the Midwest (NACADA, 2015). In fact, the largest region in terms of percentage of the overall membership was Region 5—Great Lakes (16.5%) (NACADA, 2015). Not only are large, public, doctoral universities in the Midwest represented in the NACADA membership, but the institutional structure of these universities allowed for a greater representation of advisor perspectives from different types of advising units. The advising units at these institutions are affiliated with specific academic units (e.g., business, arts, and sciences). Each campus also has an advising unit that supports students still deciding on a major (e.g., undecided) or transitioning between academic programs. The identity of the institutions represented in this study is
intentionally withheld to provide an additional layer of confidentiality for study participants. The universities will be identified as institution A, B, and C.

I employed convenience sampling to ensure that participants were professional academic advisors with five or more years of experience. The advisors selected to participate in the study did not need to have five years of experience working at their current institutions or have all of their experience at the same institution. In order to find potential study participants, I made contact with a professional academic advisor in the office supporting undecided students, requesting that person’s assistance in sending out an email about the study on their campus-advising listserv. (See Appendix B.) Potential study participants contacted me directly via email and were sent additional details about the study, including the time commitment and confidentiality. (See Appendix C.) Once participants confirmed their willingness to participate, they were asked to complete a personal information form that inquired about personal demographic information (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender), educational background, as well as past and current advising experience. Advisors were also asked to provide a brief summary of their current job responsibilities. (See Appendix D.) Participants were directed to complete as much of the information form as they were comfortable sharing and to answer questions to the best of their ability. The information forms were collected prior to the individual interviews either via email or in person, depending on the preference of the participant. Advisors who agreed to participate in the study were offered confidentiality and assigned pseudonyms.

Table 3.1 provides an overview of the study participants. Participants represented a range of educational and professional experiences. More than half of the participants
had 10 or more years of experience as academic advisors. The three least experienced advisors met the minimum to participate in the study with five years of experience. The most experienced advisors had 21 years of experience (a male) and 30 years of experience (a female), respectively. A majority of the participants (14) had all of their advising experience at their current institution, as opposed to the seven advisors who held advising roles at more than one institution during the course of their career. Participants also served as advisors for a variety of undergraduate academic programs, had different reporting structures, and worked on advising teams of various sizes.

Table 3.1

Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
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<td>Master's</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Departmental</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Exploration</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>A</td>
<td>Departmental</td>
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</tr>
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<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cathie</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Departmental</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Departmental</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>Highest Degree Earned</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Unit</td>
<td>Years of Experience</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>PhD/JD</td>
<td>C</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>White</td>
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<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>C</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Departmental</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the purpose of this study, advisors were categorized as either departmental or exploration advisors. Departmental academic advisors were those who worked with students for a specific academic department or a small group of related departments at their university. Departmental advisors were either the sole professional academic advisor for their program or part of a smaller team, but ultimately reported to the department chair or an undergraduate dean for their school or college. Exploration advisors were those who worked specifically with undergraduates still deciding on a major, working toward admission into a degree program, or transitioning between majors.

Unlike departmental advisors, exploration advisors typically only worked with students until they were able to declare their major. Exploration advisors were also usually part of a larger academic advising team, given that they served such a large percentage of the undergraduate student body. At all three of the campuses selected for this study, the unit that housed exploration advising fell within academic affairs and reported through a vice provost. Though only six of the 21 study participants were
exploration advisors, I interviewed at least one exploration advisor from each institution. It is also worth noting that several of the departmental advisors worked as exploration advisors at some point in their career. The distinction between departmental and exploration advisors is important in not only acknowledging which types of students these advisors typically support but also in recognizing the differences in advising-unit structures and resources allocated to advising.

Participants also represented a range of educational backgrounds from bachelor’s degree to doctorate. Fifteen of the participants earned a master’s degree with a majority (12) of the degrees focused in education, counseling, or social work. Three participants earned a PhD in a subject other than education, one earned a PhD and a JD, and one earned an EdD. Of the advisors with only a master’s degree, one was currently completing coursework toward a PhD in education, one had completed coursework toward a PhD, and four indicated that they were considering pursuing some type of doctoral program in the future.

Demographic information about study participants is equally important to consider in combination with professional and educational experience. A majority of the study participants identified as female (66.7%); six of the participants identified as male (28.5%), and one identified as genderqueer. There was a greater representation of the male perspective in the study when compared to the overall percentage of male NACADA members. According to a 2015 NACADA report, 73.9% of members identified as female and 20.8% as male (NACADA, 2015). Although genderqueer is an identify that was not formally categorized or measured by NACADA, the organization reported that 1% of members declined to answer the gender question and 4.3% left the
question blank (NACADA, 2015), indicating that there could be other members who identify elsewhere on the gender spectrum or did not feel comfortable answering the question.

In addition to including a diverse range of gender identities, I sought participants from a broad range of racial and ethnic identities. Although I made the effort to recruit a racially and ethnically diverse group of study participants, all but one of the individuals who agreed to participate identified as white. The sole nonwhite participant identified as multiracial. NACADA membership was also predominately white, non-Hispanic (64.4%) (NACADA, 2015). Additionally, 11.3% of the membership identified as black, non-Hispanic, 6.8% Latino/Hispanic, 3.1% Asian, and 1.8% multietnic (NACADA, 2015). Although unintended, the lack of perspective from nonwhite professional academic advisors is a limitation of the study.

**Data Collection**

Twenty-four individuals initially expressed interest in the study, with 21 of these individuals ultimately agreeing to participate. I visited each campus to host one-hour interview sessions with each participant. The interview protocol was semistructured to allow me to guide the conversation when needed but also allowed for flexibility and customization based on the flow of the interview (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A copy of the interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. I audio-recorded the interviews, transcribed them verbatim, and took field notes of observations made during the interview. Participants had the option to have the interview conducted in their personal office or another private meeting space of their choice. Observation is a key component
of narrative inquiry, as it allows researchers to attend to the aspect of place as part of Clandinin’s (2013) three commonplaces. Whenever I was unable to conduct the interview(s) in the advisor’s working space, I visited the interviewee’s space, if possible, to observe the office environment and to seek to understand the intentionality behind office setup in the context of the advisor’s role in working with students.

After the initial round of interviews were completed, interviewees were invited to participate in a one-hour virtual focus group scheduled for the week after the site visit. The focus groups were only open to study participants from the same campus. Krueger and Casey (2015) explain that focus-group participants are “more likely to share when they perceive that they are alike in some ways” (p. 5). Given that participants from the same institution were familiar with each other as colleagues, they were able to express their feelings and thoughts in a conversational manner. The focus groups also allowed me to gain perspective on the sociality commonplace of the advisors in the study (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By examining sociality, I was able to explore the ways in which colleagues, the institutional culture, and advising community help shape the lived experience of study participants.

The questions asked during the focus groups centered around the implementation of the FLSA on their particular campus as well as their perceptions of what it might mean for advising as a profession. (See Appendix A.) Krueger and Casey (2015) argue that focus groups are an effective method in collecting insight into organizational issues, including morale, employee satisfaction, and engagement. In total, I conducted three focus groups using the video-conferencing technology BlueJeans. Participants could join the focus group over the phone or video-conference through a private conference
invitation. Focus groups were recorded via BlueJeans and transcribed verbatim. Out of the 21 advisors in the study, 10 participated in the focus groups. Follow-up conversations after the individual interviews and focus groups were held as needed via email, video chat, or phone call. Notes from these conversations were kept as part of my field notes.

Clandinin (2013) uses the term *field texts* to describe the data collected during narrative inquiry. These field texts include “field notes, transcripts of conversations, and artifacts, such as photographs and writing by participants and researchers” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 46). For the purposes of this study, field texts include the interview transcriptions, notes from observations and informal conversations, and artifacts shared with the researcher during the course of the study. The latter include written advising philosophies, job descriptions, and resumes. The broad array of possible data sources aligns with the nature of qualitative research data, including anything seen or spoken as well as physical objects such as photos or documents (Maxwell, 2013).

**Data Analysis**

I employed the three commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as a conceptual framework in this study to ensure that the research questions were being rigorously answered through narrative inquiry. Use of this framework also allowed me to understand the stories shared by each participant from multiple perspectives and connect how each commonplace has shaped their stories. I employed the framework to analyze the field texts, including interview transcriptions, artifacts shared by the storytellers, and field notes that encompassed observations and follow-up conversations.
Given the large number of interviews being conducted for the study, I maintained a detailed filing system to keep field notes and interview transcriptions separated by study participant. I conducted coding and data analysis using the computer-assisted, qualitative, data-analysis software (CAQDAS) NVivo 11. I utilized precoding after interviews and follow-up conversations to help familiarize myself with the field texts. I deductively designed precodes to align with the research questions and framework. During the first round of coding, I employed inductive codes using the process and in-vivo coding methods. Both process and in-vivo codes allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of the storyteller (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). I used the axial coding method for second-round coding to understand any patterns or themes that emerged in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). I utilized analytic memos, process maps, and word frequency throughout the coding process to explore data themes.

The range of field texts used throughout the study helped me ensure validity through the use of thick description, participant validation, and triangulation. Thick description is important in a research study to provide the reader with a detailed description of the participants, interview setting, and context of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I kept extensive field notes to document observations, personal thoughts, reactions, and informal conversations with the participants. The field notes became part of the analyzed field texts; I used them to provide a broader context to the lived experiences of the participants during the study.

I utilized participant-validation strategies throughout the research process to challenge and support my assessment of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Validation
strategies also ensure that the researcher is not misinterpreting what has been said and can assist with identifying any researcher biases that might misinform an interpretation (Maxwell, 2013). I employed a transcription service to transcribe verbatim the audio from all interviews. I read over all transcriptions while reviewing the recorded interview audio prior to coding. I shared transcriptions with the research participants to allow for commenting or feedback, which is an example of the use of validation strategies.

I triangulated data from individual interviews and focus groups to help validate findings. I related questions in both the individual interviews and focus groups with the intention of gaining as many perspectives as possible from the participants. The use of multiple methods also helped me ensure that there are enough quality data to answer the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Triangulation through methods and data analysis is typically conducted to “seek convergence” of themes and ideas, but Ravitch and Carl (2016) argue that “the goal of triangulation is not always to seek convergence” (p. 195). For this study, triangulation of data provided insight into which lived experiences were shared among study participants and which were unique to that individual.

**Ethical Issues and Limitations**

The relational component to narrative inquiry means that the researcher becomes a part of the lives of the study participants (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As the researcher begins to understand the stories being told by the participant(s), they start to relive the experience with the storyteller and begin to formulate their own retelling of the story. When the researcher relives the experience, he or she begins to
make interpretations or recite memories that are elicited by the story. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that the relational nature of narrative inquiry requires that the researcher and study participants become a part of each other’s lives and evolving stories, which also means that the researcher is part of the larger study as well. The relational nature of narrative inquiry and the prominent role the researcher plays in the process of hearing, understanding, and retelling stories requires constant awareness of the role of the researcher throughout the entire study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

It is also important that I, as the researcher, understand and acknowledge any biases I may bring into the study and how I might react to the very personal stories shared by the participants. Although it was impossible to predict the depth of information a participant may share, I needed to be prepared to receive highly personal information and determine how to share that information in a way that did not cause harm to the participant, especially with colleagues and supervisors. I also knew some of the academic advisors who were employed at the institutions represented in the study. It was equally important for me to consider and examine any biases I had toward these individuals or that they had toward me as the researcher.

I served in a professional academic advising capacity for a portion of my professional career and therefore had to consider how my lived experience has informed the way I work with students. By beginning to identify my own story, I was able to recognize when I was overlaying my personal experience on that of the story being told by the participants in the study. I was also aware of any preconceived notions I had regarding academic advising at the institutions represented in the study. Though I was not
a professional advisor at any of the institutions represented in the study, I had to be aware of any perceptions or assumptions I had already formed about the advising community at each institution.

The highly personal nature of narrative inquiry requires that the researcher play a critical role in observing his or her reactions as well as protecting the information being shared throughout the study. It was important that I regularly wrote memos to document my thoughts and reactions to the stories and experiences being shared throughout the study. The use of critical thought partners who were not involved with the study but who had expertise with academic advising and training with qualitative research methods was also helpful as I made sense of what I experienced, heard, and observed throughout the process. Conversations with thought partners did not identify campuses or participants, but still allowed me to process what I was hearing and observing throughout the study.

As with all research studies, there are limitations that must be considered when interpreting the data. The relatively small sample size and focus on large, four-year, public, doctoral universities with highest research activity in the Midwest makes it difficult to generalize the findings and apply them to all advisors across different institutional types. Similarly, the nature of qualitative research means that it cannot be generalized to a population. Instead, the thick description of data support the transferability of the findings to similar populations (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As previously mentioned, the study participants primarily identified as white, which resulted in the lack of perspective from racially and ethnically diverse professional academic advisors. Finally, the reliance on a gatekeeper at each institution to assist with recruiting
study participants is also a limitation because I could not completely control when recruitment materials were distributed and to whom.
CHAPTER 4

Study Findings and Analysis

The stories and life experiences shared by the 21 different professional academic advisors who participated in this study underscored how the career path into advising is often accidental, the role of on-the-job training, evolution of advising styles, and motivators for advisors to remain in the field. Participants also described adapting to the changes to the FLSA that were being applied at each institution and the challenges those changes posed to their future career plans and the profession. Albeit no two lived experiences were exactly the same, the study findings revealed several distinct patterns that help answer the research questions and emphasized continued challenges to the professionalization of academic advising.

As described in chapter three, the overall demographic, educational, and professional backgrounds of the study participants provided only a small glimpse into the range of life experiences shared during the course of this study. The personal identifiers underscored the complexities of each experience, but also revealed patterns and shared identifiers among study participants that are invaluable in helping shape recommendations for advising policy, practice, and future research. The data alone are not enough to understand the role of life experiences in the career of professional academic advisors; however, they are important to consider when examining the individual and collective stories of the study participants, beginning with their journeys to become academic advisors.
Accidental Careers

The advisors interviewed explained that they “fell into,” “didn’t plan for,” or moved into an academic advising role by “accident.” Not all of the participants began their careers in the same manner, but two patterns that emerged from the advisors’ stories were that they accidentally found their way into academic advising through an undergraduate student experience or while trying to establish their career as an educator. The educational background of the advisors also played an important role in understanding how they moved into advising, as some earned a master’s degree after they decided to pursue a career in higher education while another group already had earned a master’s or doctorate prior to becoming an advisor.

For approximately half of the participants, their advising career started with a student experience or a mentor encouraging them to consider a job in higher education. Student experiences were typically student leadership positions, including roles in residential life and new student orientation. Three of the advisors specifically referenced their time as an undergraduate resident advisor, and three additional advisors spoke about the encouragement from their academic or student organization advisor as the influence to consider moving into higher education. Tyler explained how his involvement as an undergraduate student not only peaked his interest but also how a former supervisor helped him make the connection to a career path in higher education:

So when I was a senior in college . . . I worked for the summer advising conferences, like the orientation leader-type people. And so I got to thinking about how much I enjoyed that job and happened to be talking to one of my previous supervisors from that job that I ran into on campus one day before I left, you know, just telling her how much I loved that and I just wished that could be my job. And she said, “You know, there are jobs on campus that are pretty much that at a professional level.” (personal communication, September 15, 2016)
Participants referenced the importance of the conversation with a mentor as a key factor in coming to realize that a career in higher education was even a possibility. In Tyler’s instance, once he came to the realization that a career in higher education was an option, he pursued a master’s degree in education and positions in graduate admission and managing a research project before finally transitioning into academic advising. Tyler’s pathway from an undergraduate student experience to a graduate program in education to a position at a university was similar to the stories shared by six other advisors.

Rachel was also inspired by a mentor, her academic advisor, to move into higher education. Similar to Tyler, her decision to pursue a career in higher education led her directly to a graduate program. Rachel recalled how her persistent academic advisor helped her come to a realization about her future career path:

I had a great advisor . . . and she passed an application across the table and said, “Have you thought about being a peer advisor?” And my response was, “I work at a pool in the summers.” You know, like, “I have a thing. Thanks, though. That was really sweet.” Then she did it again the next year, and so I applied during my sophomore year and I became a peer advisor and had a moment of, “Wait, you can do what with people? And you can work with families and this thing called orientation?” And it [was] just like everything, like the puzzle pieces just came together for me of, I could get paid to do this. (personal communication, September 1, 2016)

Rachel was the only participant who had a student leadership position directly connected to academic advising, which ultimately led her into a job as an academic advisor upon completion of her master’s degree. For the advisors who started their career in higher education after graduate school in a role other than academic advising, there was a specific event or situation that caused them to consider moving out of their role and into
advising. According to Melissa, the challenge of working and living in the same
environment through her work in residential life prompted her to consider a change:

[I] had a great experience in res life until I got married and my building caught on
fire, and I had a suicidal student, and I had awful things happen in my building,
and I had that moment where I was like, “I’m married. I don’t wanna live in the
residence halls anymore.” . . . To move up to area coordinator, you still had to
live on, so it was like, “All right, new game plan. What do I like?” What I really
liked was judicials, but they were kind of depressing, so it was like, where can I
have intentional conversations with students but not have the behavioral, “You’re
getting in trouble all the time” side? It was like, “Oh, academic advising,” so I
started applying for academic advising positions. (personal communication,
September 14, 2016)

Similar to Tyler and Rachel, Melissa’s role as resident advisor led her to work in
residential life during and after graduate school. Her work in residential life provided
her with insight into what types of experiences she wanted in her next position in higher
education, which ultimately led her to consider academic advising.

The stories shared by the advisors who were influenced by their student
involvement support the findings of Mertz, Strayhorn, and Eckman (2012) in their study
of students in two College Student Personnel programs and their reasoning for pursuing a
career in higher education. According to their study, the students whom they interviewed
consistently referred to learning about a career in higher education “almost accidentally”
(Mertz et al., 2012, p. 8). Similar to several of the participants in this study, the graduate
students that Mertz et al. interviewed were influenced to pursue their graduate studies and
a career in the field by an existing student affairs staff member.

Although some advisors learned about a career in higher education while still
undergraduates, the other half of study participants were considering careers as teachers
at the K–12 level or as college faculty before they became advisors. According to
Bridget, she tried several jobs working with high school students and then college students before she came to the conclusion to work as an academic advisor:

I actually did some volunteer hours in a high school library and realized, “Yeah, no, this isn’t what I want to do either.” And I was still trying to figure things out. I knew I wanted to work with students. I really kind of liked that place between high school and college, like I really loved working with the high school freshmen, and the writing courses. . . . I found a job posting for an academic counselor position . . . and I was like, “Oh, that’s a job, that’s a career, like I could do that.” (personal communication, September 14, 2016)

At one point, Bridget even considered pursuing a doctorate and a career as a faculty member, but changed her mind when she realized she did not want to have her career more focused on research and publications than working with students. Although Bridget found the idea of pursuing a PhD and a career teaching at the college level unappealing, Kevin started his PhD with the intention of becoming a faculty member. He discovered his passion for working with students through a graduate assistantship as an academic advisor. When Kevin stopped his doctoral studies, he decided to pursue the opportunity to work as a departmental academic advisor full time and has been advising ever since.

Unlike Kevin and Bridget, five of the participants earned a PhD, EdD, or JD and had some experience teaching at the college level before becoming academic advisors. All these advisors had some experience serving as a faculty advisor, which was typically one of their responsibilities in addition to teaching. For Ellen, who had earned her PhD and taught at the college level, it was with the help of a family member that she came to realize what she liked best about teaching:

It was actually my sister had encouraged me to look at advising positions because that was the part that I liked in my visiting position. Even though I wasn’t supposed to do it, they had such an influx of students. They asked if I would be willing to help with some of them. Plus, I had an open-door policy and students
would come in with all sorts of stuff, and I enjoyed that part of the job. (personal communication, September 13, 2016)

Similar to Ellen, Sandra spoke highly of her time advising while a faculty member in management. Her decision to move into a departmental academic advising role was based partially on her previous faculty advising experience but also as a testing ground to determine the next steps in her career:

I always wanted to be a [science] teacher, so at that time I thought, you know, it’s hard to go back to get a [science] degree, but if I get a doctorate degree I can teach management, so that’s what I did. And I went to [another university] and taught there for six years. But that interest in teaching [science] resurfaced . . . so I saw the [science] advising route as a kind of inroads to explore whether to go to the higher education route, or whether to continue on with [science]. (personal communication, September 13, 2016)

Sandra ultimately decided not to pursue another doctorate and determined that being an academic advisor was a better fit for her interests and career path. The advisors who left a faculty track all referenced academic advising as another way to work with students or to be an educator. The advisors with previous faculty-advising experience, like Sandra, did not identify as faculty or faculty advisors despite their past and advanced degrees. All five advisors with doctorates were departmental advisors, and three of these individuals worked for a department related to their area of expertise. Two of these three advisors also taught courses in their subject. A majority of the advisors in the study taught, typically being responsible for leading an orientation or introduction to the university course.

Although academic advising was a career that study participants came into “by accident,” they found aspects of the profession appealing enough to remain in the role for at least five years. Participants all agreed that advising was an opportunity for them to
work with and educate students in a manner that suited their interests. If academic advisors do not intentionally move into the career path, it becomes important to understand what training, skills, knowledge, and competencies helped prepare them for their roles. Equally important is understanding why these individuals have remained in an advising role for five or more years given that the move into the career was not planned.

Advisor Training and Style Development

Knowing that a majority of the advisors in the study became academic advisors “by accident,” it is not surprising that they began their positions with a range of knowledge about academic advisor job responsibilities. Advisors also reported receiving various levels of training, and several referred to their learning curve as “baptism by fire” or “being thrown into the deep end.” Regardless of their training process, study participants commonly spoke about learning how to be an advisor through “on-the-job training,” observing their peers, asking questions, and continuing to refine their skills and knowledge over time.

First impressions about academic advising responsibilities ranged from advisors like Josh, who had to “google” what an advisor did, to Abby, who had extensive preparation for the role through her graduate assistantship. Regardless of how aware the advisors were about their job responsibilities, they consistently talked about being surprised about different elements of the advising role. For Ann, who moved into her departmental advising position after serving as an assistant to the dean of her college, she believed that advising would be fairly straightforward: “I just thought it would be helping students do the right thing. I mean, there’s the check sheet—just follow that and you can
graduate. And that sounds so easy, and obviously it’s not” (personal communication, September 2, 2016). Ann was not the only advisor who quickly realized that there was more to being an academic advisor than picking classes. For Josh, who had been an instructor at four other colleges and universities, he learned about the range of student services available on campus and how they connected to his work as an advisor:

I never had any awareness of the complexity of the resources and everything else that was available at any of the previous institutions I had worked in. It was always very siloed in the sense that I go to do this [academic department] thing, and that’s kind of where I am, and the idea of interacting on a daily basis with everyone from [the counseling center], to student legal services, to the registrar, to [disability services], to all of the other wonderful offices that are around, I suddenly started to get a richer appreciation for what this thing called higher education was. (personal communication, August 31, 2016)

Though Josh and Ann were surprised by the complexities of academic advising, other advisors used their undergraduate advising experience as a frame of reference for what to expect. Alexis shared just how much was learned from observing advising colleagues:

When I started at the [exploration advising office], almost all of the advisors that were working there did have this holistic approach. And they really cared about students and the more that I hung out with them as colleagues and saw that, the more I was like, “Oh, okay. My experience was sort of isolated maybe in a way.” I think that was the biggest surprise of it’s not just give them their courses and let them go. It’s asking questions and making sure that they’re okay outside of the classroom, too. I think that surprised me. (personal communication, September 26, 2016)

For Alexis, who had been an undergraduate at the same institution, there was a realization that there was more to advising than Alexis had personally experienced and an opportunity to work with students in a more relational way. Alexis was not the only participant who spoke extensively about learning from peers. In fact, all participants spoke to how they learned, or continued to learn, aspects of their job from their fellow advisors.
Peer learning happened for advisors either through a formal shadowing process that they had to participate in as part of training or through their willingness to ask questions of advising colleagues throughout their career. Mark described how the shadowing process helped him develop his own advising style:

I shadowed some of my peers and I tried to gather, you know, “What does this person really do well?” without telling them or critiquing them. And try to mimic that, and then learn something from this person, you know, what did they do well and try to blend their strengths into my own toolbox. (personal communication, September 28, 2016)

Shadowing was the most commonly referenced form of training by study participants. The shadowing process typically lasted anywhere from a few days to weeks, but advisors explained that they continued to learn new techniques from fellow advisors. Rachel spoke to how she was always learning something new by observing colleagues:

Even at [my previous institution] there were advisors there that I thought, “Oh, that’s so good.” You know, like I want to do that. How did you learn that? Or I would just watch and I would find myself in meetings, not just taking notes about the meeting or my to-dos, but writing quotes down that they had said, or ways they had framed a student experience, or worked with a student or quotes that they were sharing. You know, “I think students will say this more than this,” and I think I learn a lot by watching other advisors, but I also learn from our grad assistants still. You know, I think I’m open to “I can be taught.” I am not a finished product. (personal communication, September 1, 2016)

For the advisors who stated that they received little or no formal training, they referenced the importance of being able to ask advising colleagues questions or for help. According to Cathie, the ability to get advice from a veteran advisor was a helpful supplement to training:

When I first got here, I started like a week or two before summer registration started and there was a summer registration kind of training workshop for advisors that all the advisors went to, and I sort of went to that and I was like, “Okay, I don’t know. What am I doing?” And one of the seasoned advisors kind of pulled me aside and said, “Let’s get coffee.” And so we got coffee and we
talked about some things and he sort of said to me, “This is what you need to figure out. You need to figure out what you’re going to do during your group meeting. You need to figure out what you’re going to say here.” And he gave me a lot of really important tips on like how to get through the immediate crisis of summer registration, and he’s been a good friend since then and a mentor. (personal communication, September 22, 2016)

The support advisors received from one another was especially important to the departmental advisors, who were one of only a handful advisors—or the only advisor—in their unit, like Cathie. The advisors in the study regularly referenced the importance of being able to call advisors in other units on campus and having a good rapport with the other advisors in their office as a way to get information and questions answered. As Mark explained:

[The] environment has always been very team-oriented, so if questions come up about, for example, study abroad opportunities and I’m not as familiar with those, I could bring someone else into the conversation or make a referral. And so I guess being comfortable with that, I don’t have to be the expert in encyclopedic knowledge of everything. I just kind of need to know which volume to pull off the shelf at which time and who to talk to for that information. (personal communication, September 28, 2016)

Mark’s comfort with not being the expert on every subject was also echoed by several study participants, who also spoke to the importance of learning how to say “I don’t know, let me get back to you.” By seeking out answers to student questions, advisors stated that they were able to increase their level of knowledge and understanding of resources on campus that they could call, email, or refer students directly to in the future. According to Josh, he recognized his limitations as an advisor but also understood what responsibility he still had to his students: “I’m not an expert in every single area, but it is my responsibility to be very well versed on what’s happening within the institution, so if I’m not the person, certainly I know who is” (personal communication, August 31, 2016).
The continued learning of academic advisors extended beyond answering questions for students and included how the participants developed their personal advising styles and philosophies.

Josh began his advising career as an exploration advisor and explained how much his advising style developed in his first year and continued to evolve through the years. He believed he went from being a “horrible advisor” to one who was able to have very intentional conversations with students about developing alternate major plans or “Plan B.” According to Josh, his style changed once he began to learn about student-development theory:

Student development theory. I had never seen a word of it. And so a lot of that was fantastic people who could recognize that, “Hey. I’ll bet you have a lot of thoughts on Paul Hoover’s postmodern American poetry and still have no idea what Chickering’s Vectors are.” And the answer was, “Yup,” and they were very nice and encouraging me to look at some of this literature. . . . But that started to bleed into this notion of like moving laterally with students, as in this doesn't have to be a “No. You will not take this accounting class because no.” It instead moved into the direction of where I have the capacity to start like seeing things, particularly over the course of like four years, and so I was very quickly able to see. . . . So those two pieces started coming together in the sense of, “I can’t figure out your life for you,” as an advisor to the student. But what I can do is basically get some manufactured walls in place, so that you’re moving in a direction where if you bump this way or that, there isn’t going to be that much damage. (personal communication, August 31, 2016)

Similar to Josh, Blair did not earn a master’s degree that focused on student-development theory. She spoke to her experience participating in an advising book club on her campus where they read articles from the professors in the campus higher education degree program to learn more about student-development theory.

Blair also shared how a recent advising workshop by Jennifer Bloom on Appreciative Advising made her realize that some advisors were not doing some of the
things that she believed were second nature and also caused her to shift how she talked with students:

I think Jennifer Bloom even says that, “This is common sense.” Like, to me, the second nature [is] you walk someone back, you say “How was your day?” But I went, “Oh, people aren’t doing that.” So that’s the common sense part, but the parts that I really like about her approach . . . starting with the positive. And so, that’s something I’ve really been trying to integrate. Like, because we have a GPA requirement, for example. Maybe I would just say “This is what your GPA is, this is where we need it to be,” and so now, it’s more like “Okay, I see that you got a B, that’s so awesome. Can we talk about that?” and then moving to the “Okay, well, we’ve got to get a few more A’s, too, to get the 2.75 [GPA],” or even just the difficult, “That’s gonna take you 40 hours a day, to get to this GPA threshold. I know this is what you really want to do, can we talk about other ways that we could get you to that place?” (personal communication, September 7, 2016)

The study participants had mixed feelings about the traditional advising styles or approaches described in the literature such as appreciative, developmental, and intrusive advising. Some advisors strongly identified with a particular advising approach, yet others believed their style was a blend of different approaches that they would individualize depending on the student and his or her needs.

In addition to the literature and trainings on advising approaches, some advisors argued that their personal values or prior work experience outside of academic advising provided them with a level of knowledge or skillset that informed their advising style. Alexis explained how personality and values shaped how they worked with students:

I think it has to be a personal thing. I think it has to come from your own beliefs and values. I’m a very empathetic person. I’m a very sensitive person. I don’t always show that to my students or to anyone really in general right away. But once you get to know me, I’m really sensitive and empathetic. And so, I feel a need to find out why a student isn’t coming in. Or, oftentimes, I think I’m always, telling my colleagues, “Well, let’s not jump to conclusions. We don’t know what’s going on with this student and we need to find out. So, can we call? Can we email?” I’d call housing to check in on a student, do a wellness check on a student that hasn't been showing up to my class for several days. I think it comes
from just genuinely being concerned about people and wanting to know how they’re doing and how they’re developing. (personal communication, September 26, 2016)

Alexis also valued advocating for students and believed that a willingness to go above and beyond for students came from the personal experience Alexis had being surrounded by supportive faculty and staff as an undergraduate student.

Similar to Alexis, Melissa was an academic advisor at her alma mater. For Melissa, the institutional knowledge and network of connections she had built up from her time as both an undergraduate and graduate student had been helpful to her as a professional. According to Melissa, this knowledge helped her better serve and connect with her students:

I think I’m more knowledgeable about what the university has to offer because so many other people who were here as a student are still here, so I have a really good network of referrals. I know a guy in everything. I think I understand the largeness of the university better than some of my colleagues, even if they came from comparably-sized institutions. I understand the overwhelming feeling of trying to navigate it on your own, from a personal experience, but then I also understand how quickly it becomes small if you ask, and how to advocate for yourself at [institution B]. So I understand that piece, I think, a little bit better. From a graduate student experience, because of the assistantship, I also think that I’m able to communicate to our students who the helpers are a little bit better, like I trust our campus police so much, and I think that when you’re able to talk personally about your experiences with them, it makes them seem a lot less threatening. And that, I think, is helpful for our students. (personal communication, September 14, 2016)

Even as Melissa used her institutional experience to help connect with and refer her students, other advisors found themselves influenced by institutional or unit-specific culture. In the case of Megan, she found that the culture of her unit caused her to be more “service oriented” as opposed to focused on building deep relationships with students:

I think one thing that’s always in my brain is that I know that the organization I’m in is [you’re] rewarded for getting it right, and so that’s always in the
forefront. Like, I’ve gotta get this right. I would love to talk to the student and get to know them and chat about their life, but today they came for this and we’ve gotta get it right. I’ve gotta get the full picture of the credit hours, the degree plan, all the rules and the policies. I’ve gotta get it right ’cause that’s rewarded. . . . I think when it’s incorrect there’s a little bit of . . . Sometimes there’s a little bit of shaming. If someone got something wrong and the student needs to petition something it’ll say like, “advisor error caused this,” and you’re like, “Ahh!” I’m on record as that student’s advisor and now there’s a document out there saying I made an error and it might be accurate, it might be true, but that still makes you feel . . . you don’t want that. I’ve kinda came up in advising through that organization, so I think I know the reward for getting it right is good and feels good, so that’s part of that style I think on business and service. (personal communication, September 13, 2016)

Participants also described how certain advising units at their institution were more open and flexible to student needs through their willingness to meet with students from programs outside of their unit or their openness to seeing students on a walk-in basis.

Sandra explained how differences in advising procedures and policies caused challenges for her and the students:

In [my] department, any student can basically walk up the street any day of the week and see us, whereas other departments are not as open. [That] probably has to do with staffing and numbers, resources, perhaps, and maybe priorities, and so it’s something that your students have to deal with and we have to deal with because we have students that are not admitted to other colleges, and so they’re camping in [my] department because we take all comers. So we’re advising students who want to go into business, who want to go into engineering, who just haven’t gotten in yet, and I think it does a disservice to the students because if they’re with us for more than a year, more than a term, that’s probably not in their best interest. (personal communication, September 13, 2016)

Advisors attributed these different unit practices to both the advisors and overall culture of the units. Participants often also had strong opinions about which units on campus were least helpful to students and which units were therefore more heavily relied upon to help students, especially those transitioning between majors. In addition to being
influenced by institutional culture, advisors detailed learning to adjust their styles based on the population(s) of students they were assigned.

For Tyler, who began his career as a departmental advisor, he found that he needed to adjust his style when he moved into an exploration advising position. As an exploration advisor, he was no longer able to develop a relationship with a student over four years, so he needed to get to know his students during their first year. He also had to learn to be more “individualized” in his approach, as the undecided nature of exploration students meant they have a wide range of interests and are at various stages of selecting a major. Kevin shared a similar experience about learning to adjust his style to work with a specific population of students. He explained how an interaction with an international student who was having difficulties understanding that the terms *credit* and *hour* were synonymous made him rethink the language he used and the assumptions he made about what students understood about the higher education process. Kevin and Tyler were not the only study participants who shared stories about advisees who caused them to rethink or change how they communicate or address specific situations. Participants consistently referenced how they learned from their experiences and interactions.

Advisors also referenced utilizing the prior knowledge they had gained from other roles in higher education. Mark explained that his past experience as an admission recruiter made him more comfortable in answering questions students asked about using their financial aid for courses. For Nancy, her previous job working as a counselor made her more comfortable and prepared to work with individuals with mental health needs above and beyond the basic training an advisor might receive on the topic. Advisors such as Cathie, Phil, and Karen—who advised in their areas of expertise—were able to talk
with their students about selecting courses that not only fulfilled degree requirements but also supported their interests. Phil explained why advisors with expertise in the subject area they advise were more advantageous compared to advisors who had earned a master’s degree in a higher education or college student personnel program:

They don’t know the field they are advising in. They don’t see how the parts of the field fit together in quite the same way. For them, courses are a series of numbers on a sheet of paper. And, the problem is, you know, unless some piece of paper says these courses overlap or cover the same material, they don’t know. And if you don’t know, you won’t know to ask. They just know less about the content of the courses in which they are advising typically. (personal communication, September 21, 2016)

Phil also explained that he continued to learn about trends in his field by reading and keeping up with current events, which was also helpful in making course or extracurricular recommendations to students who were interested in certain areas of study or career paths.

In addition to learning from past experiences or student interactions, advisors also referenced learning from formalized professional development activities through their campus advising organization or NACADA. Not all of the advisors were actively involved in NACADA; nonetheless, they all indicated that they had some level of involvement with their campus advising organization. For some advisors, the involvement was as minimal as going to the occasional meeting or event, whereas others were current or past organization leaders. Study participants generally spoke highly of their campus advising community. When participants shared common experiences or frustrations, it was often in reference to what was happening on their campus. Participants explained that the campus advising association was an opportunity not only to socialize but to learn about changes to policy, procedure, and programs specific to their
institution. Several of the study participants referenced learning a skill or concept that they applied to their work. For instance, advisors from two of the three campuses referenced a workshop about advisor physical space and what subliminal messages the space sends to students during advising appointments. Advisors on another campus spoke about a recent appreciative advising workshop and how they were incorporating that approach into their work.

When asked about their participation in national organizations, including NACADA, several advisors cited the lack of funding to participate in national organizations and attend conferences. Participation in NACADA varied by campus, with minimal involvement from institution A, a fairly active group at institution B, and mixed interest from institution C. Participants from institution A explained that their advising community used to participate actively in NACADA conferences, but that a recent wave of new advisors and campus leadership had caused a rebuilding of the campus advising organization. Participants from institution B indicated that they were fairly active in their campus advising organization, with several participants currently or formerly on the leadership team for the organization. Advisors at institution B also spoke to their level of involvement in NACADA, with several having been regular presenters at regional and national conferences or actively involved with NACADA commissions. Advisors from institution C spoke highly of their campus advising organization. In sum, many of these advisors had attended a NACADA regional or national conference in the past, but very few identified as actively involved with NACADA.

For the advisors who explained that their participation in NACADA had waned through the years, they often argued that they felt as though NACADA was better suited
for new professionals. Several also argued that as they had increased their work responsibilities, they found they had less time to devote to professional development.

Tyler explained why he has been unimpressed with his experience at NACADA regional conferences:

> I feel like, at least as far as the presentations and posters and everything go, I have yet to go there and see anything that was like “Wow! This is going to revolutionize my life in the office.” . . . I have yet to leave a NACADA regional conference feeling like I had any kind of epiphany that really changed what I do on a daily basis. Or, you have those ideas that come up that seem really cool in the moment and then you get back to work the next week and it’s 10 appointments a day, and I don’t have time to change much about what I’m doing here. I feel like it ends up being more of a social event than anything else. (personal communication, September 15, 2016)

Tyler was not the only participant who referenced that NACADA conferences, whether regional or national, had become more of social opportunities for them as opposed to developmental.

The advisors who found NACADA conferences to be helpful beyond a social context reported finding takeaways and resources that they applied to their advising style. Cathie talked in detail about a wellness check sheet that she adapted from one she learned about at NACADA to fit her advising style. According to Cathie, students completed the sheet prior to their appointment, which gave her a sense of what else might be going on with her students:

> It says . . . “What are you coming in for?” And then, it asks if you missed class, why you decided to major in [the program]. . . . Are you sleeping? Do you go to office hours? . . . then I just kind of check in and follow up on those things. Yeah, ’cause those are things that give you some insight into how they’re doing with their performance, you know? Like I say, “How many days have you missed class in this week?” and if they’ve missed five days of class, then, that’s something you need to talk about. If they’re getting zero or two hours of sleep, or they’re getting 15 hours of sleep, that’s something you need to talk about. So it’s just a quick little check on those things. (personal communication, September 22, 2016)
Cathie explained that she had been asking students to complete the worksheet for years and that it led to several interventions about wellness issues and behaviors that may have been missed otherwise.

Study participants received varying levels of training, yet they all referenced their ongoing learning and development as an important component of developing their advising approach. For some advisors, their past experiences as students or working in jobs outside of academic advising helped shape how they work with their advisees. For other advisors, they continued to learn and develop their approach through asking questions, observing other advisors, and from their everyday work with students. There was no single experience that the study participants identified as the best way to learn how to be an academic advisor or that was definitive in how they developed their approach. If academic advising is a position individuals find “by accident” and learn through “on-the-job training,” then what motivates advisors to stay in their roles after five-plus years? It is equally important to understand what factors have caused participants to consider making a career change and where they envision their career will be in the future.

**Challenges and Motivators**

When asked to identify what motivated study participants to remain in the field, several advisors jokingly mentioned that it was not “the pay” or “the money.” Although said sarcastically, the low salaries for some academic advisors, combined with the financial limitations of each university as a publicly funded institution, was a source of frustration for several of the study participants. Each campus represented in the study
managed a variety of financial challenges related to its respective state. Nevertheless, the end result across the campuses was that advisors either had gone multiple years without raises or had received 1% to 3% increases only when funding permitted. Figure 4.1 lists participant salary ranges by institution.

![Figure 4.1 Participant Salary Ranges by Institution](image)

**Figure 4.1 Participant Salary Ranges by Institution**

A majority of the study participants (13) earned salaries in the $36,000 to $50,000 range annually. Participants at institution A and B earned anywhere from $36,000 to $55,000 annually. The two lowest salary ranges primarily consisted of advisors from institution B. Advisors at institution C earned higher salaries, with half of their participants in the $46,000 to $50,000 salary range and the other half in the $56,000 to $85,000 range. Albeit the three highest advisor salaries came from institution C, these advisors were not the three most senior in title or advising experience, nor did they all possess terminal
degrees. What the three highest-paid advisors had in common was that they were all departmental academic advisors.

When salaries were compared by advisor type, there was a difference in the salary ranges for the exploration and departmental advisors. Figure 4.2 lists participant salaries by advisor type. The exploration advisors earned salaries in the $36,000 to $55,000 range, and the departmental advisors’ salaries were spread across the full range from $36,000 to $85,000. Of the 15 departmental advisors in the study, nine earned salaries in the $36,000 to $50,000 range. Exploration advisors’ salaries were on the lower end of the scale regardless of which institution they represented. All exploration advisors had earned a master’s degree and had seven to 12 years of experience advising.

![Figure 4.2 Participant Salary Ranges by Advisor Type](image)

**Figure 4.2 Participant Salary Ranges by Advisor Type**

Several study participants commented on their low salaries, but they also stated that they did not expect to make a lot of money as an educator and instead found value in other
aspects of their work. Mark explained that he was realistic about how much money he would make working in higher education and stated, “Education is not the road to riches. That’s never really been my primary motivator” (personal communication, September 28, 2016). Mark stated that he was content with the lower pay he received as an educator as long as his family could be financially comfortable and had access to some discretionary funds. Given that high salaries were not the norm for advisors, they instead were motivated to remain in their roles because they had flexible work schedules, worked in positive environments, and were trusted by the leadership to do their jobs. Advisors also stated they found value in helping their students and appreciated the cyclical nature of the academic year.

Study participants, including Mark, held in high regard having a flexible work schedule. Several of the advisors referenced the need to have some level of flexibility to accommodate taking care of families or attending to personal needs. According to Mark, the ability to adjust his schedule was important to him personally, but he also viewed it as a strategy used to retain him in his position:

[We] are somewhat able to flex our schedules. You know, I’m here in the evening sometimes, but not every day. My lunch doesn’t have to be from noon to 1:00 p.m., if I needed it to be later I could. If I needed to flex my schedule to accommodate a child home or whatever, that sort of flexibility helps me feel valued. It’s one of those things that they grant us that makes us feel they are willing to be flexible with us because they want to keep us here. Or they value us enough to understand that sometimes my priority has to be somewhere else, and that I won’t forget about my role here. (personal communication, September 28, 2016)

Kim also found value in the option to have a flexible work schedule, even if she did not personally need to adjust her hours. Kim explained that her supervisor offered the flexible schedule as another way to recognize the staff, especially when funds were limited:
I do think our supervisor tries, I think he makes an effort, and it’s hard, obviously you can’t do much financially. Like this fall he’s trying to have a varied schedule, so it’s like “Okay, we’re open for students from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. So as long as you’re here from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., you can work 9:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., you can work 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., you just have to be here during those hours.” And, you know, even that little half hour of flexibility, that’s very helpful. I’m keeping to the same hours because it works for me, but I felt that was nice that [it] was something that was offered to help people with their lives and their work balance. (personal communication, September 21, 2016)

Although some advisors found the flexibility of their roles to be an added perk or a way for their supervisor to demonstrate their value, other advisors stated that their flexible schedule was what they needed in any job to balance their personal responsibilities.

According to Megan, the flexible schedule was so important to her that it was one of her main motivators to continue in her position:

One of my primary decisions [to stay in my job] is because of the balance with my personal life. It’s not like I have preferred balance, but what I have right now works. I will look at other positions, they could be career services, with the registrar, or anything like that [and] the first thing that comes to mind is I don’t wanna change my schedule. My schedule works for raising my kids and keeping this job right now, and I don’t wanna rock the boat on either right now. So I feel like I’m at a place where I know what I need to know for my job, I’ve mastered the content, I like supervising and being there for other people; though I’m starting to see that wane. But really it’s about where I am with the other parts of my life. (personal communication, September 13, 2016)

Megan, who also supervised advisors, allowed her staff to have flexible work schedules as long as they communicated their plans to her and did not disservice their students. The definition of a flexible work schedule varied by campus, but was generally described as being able to adjust when an advisor started and ended the day as needed or to accommodate needing regularly to start or end at a different time outside of an 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. schedule. Having a flexible schedule was also described as a privilege that varied on each campus by advising unit and supervisor.
When advisors described valuing the flexibility of their schedule, they also referenced how it was something their supervisor allowed as a way to support or recognize the staff. Several advisors referenced how they valued their supervisor and how supervisor quality correlated to their willingness to remain in their position. Melissa spoke highly of her supervisor, who not only supported her flexible scheduling needs but also her professional development interests:

[My supervisor] is a fantastic supervisor, and she inspires a lot of loyalty. What she can’t give us in salary, she makes up for in appreciation and perks, like I currently work 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. because my husband’s doing a grad program and working full time, so somebody’s gotta pick up our kid. When I asked her about it, there was no hesitation. She’s just like, “Yep, that’s fine. Figure it out. Forty hours a week. We can do it.” Family comes first, and that’s so huge right now for me. . . . [Our supervisor] lets us do whatever we want professional development-wise as long as there’s room in the budget or we’re willing to pay for it ourselves. She sees that time spent as bettering our office, so being [the campus advising association] president for three years and doing more than had been done in the past in that role took up a lot of time, but she saw that it was making a positive impact and was like, “All right, you do you. Go for it.” (personal communication, September 14, 2016)

Study participants spoke highly of supervisors who were supportive of individual staff interests or needs, including flexible work schedules and professional development involvement.

Advisors indicated that they also felt valued in their roles when their supervisor gave them feedback, consulted or included them in decision-making processes, and trusted their ability to do their jobs. Tyler explained how he valued the autonomy he was given in his exploration advising role to develop his own advising style:

We’re given a lot of latitude in how we can do our jobs. We’re basically told, “You need to work with your students, advise them, get them into their majors, [and] have them be successful.” The way that happens is completely up to us. So here we have a lot of latitude in how we can work with students, and I think that’s the biggest strength we have. We have so many advisors; every one of us does our
job differently and nobody’s approach is looked at as better or worse than another one. I have worked in places where that wasn’t the case, and that can be really hard when you’re told to fit a mold of how to interact with students or whatever the procedure may be, and when it’s just not your work style . . . it’s hard. I think the biggest support that I have is just our individuality is supported so well. And the fact that we’re supported personally. (personal communication, September 15, 2016)

As a member of a larger advising team, Tyler valued having a supervisor who respected the uniqueness of each advisor and who also understood the complexity of working with deciding students. Several of the departmental advisors, who typically worked on smaller advising teams, also stated that they valued being trusted to do their jobs by both their supervisor and the faculty members they interacted with on a regular basis. Jo explained how she felt valued by both her supervisor and the faculty:

They entrusted us to do our job, and they let us do it, and we do it well. Maybe, that’s part of it. I mean, also, I do a good job, but they come to us to elicit our opinions. They want our feedback on things. [My coworker] and I serve on the committee to give awards, scholarships to our undergrads, [and] we help with graduation. We are part of the department; we are not separate from the department. We are all integrated together. They rely on us to do certain things, and they just assume that we’re doing that. They don’t need to double-check us, and I recognize the uniqueness of that situation, because . . . I had it the other way where they don’t value [our work], they double-check everything, and so I do appreciate the uniqueness of that. We are very much part of the department, and I think that what [the] faculty and our undergraduate studies director understand is in an institution like this, where the faculty are so focused on research . . . they understand that we know the undergrads really well because that’s all we do is undergrad, so they will come to us and say, “What’s your sense on this? What’s your sense on that?” I like that. That’s how they show us [we are valued]. (personal communication, September 22, 2016)

Study participants commonly referenced the importance of working in a positive environment. The individuals who made up the work environment varied, though, especially when comparing departmental and exploration advisors.
As a member of a small advising team, Ellen commonly referenced her interactions with the faculty in her department, whereas many of the exploration advisors talked about their interactions with the other advisors in their office. Several advisors also mentioned that through the course of their career they came to realize that certain work environments were a better fit for their personality over others. For Abby, who started her advising career as a departmental advisor, she found the switch to an exploration advising role and working on a team to be a better fit:

The work environment that I was in at [my previous] campus, I was the only advisor who worked with that specific population of students. Physically, my office space was kind of in a separate part of the building compared to the office suites, just for space issues, so I felt very kind of isolated. And I had some really great coworkers, but I think there were also some challenges to that. So, the opportunity came up for the position that I’m currently in and I already knew almost everybody on staff. I was friends outside of work with a couple of the people and just really felt like, “Okay, that’s gonna be a much more supportive environment.” (personal communication, September 19, 2016)

Similar to Abby, Kim made the switch from being the sole departmental advisor for a program to working in an exploration advising unit. She also found working in a team environment to be a better fit, not just because she enjoyed having other advisors to work with but because they supported each other by answering questions and offering advice. Josh shared a similar sentiment, stating that it was during his time as an exploration advisor when he realized how much he valued and needed to “be around people who [he] like[d] working with” (personal communication, August 31, 2016). Mark also explained how the personal connections he had with his coworkers outside the office had motivated him to stay in his job:

My interest in remaining here over time is also a reflection of the nature of our team here. It’s a team of experienced people generally speaking. . . . On a personal level, some of us go play golf together and we see each other outside
of the office sometimes, birthday parties, sporting events, baseball games, soccer games, you know. We go to these things together on our own time, and so we are a group of friends as much as we are a team of staff members. . . . A lot of us are of that age where we have kids in local schools and stuff like that, so we have that in common. (personal communication, September 28, 2016)

Mark’s experience was unique in comparison to most of the other study participants because he worked in an advising unit with other departmental advisors, but they each represented different academic units and worked with students pursuing different areas of study. His work environment also highlighted that advising colleagues did not have to work with the same programs or students in order to build relationships or find common ground.

In addition to a positive work environment, study participants explained that their students motivated them to continue in their roles. Participants stated that they enjoyed building relationships with their students, helping students problem-solve, and watching students accomplish their goals. As Kim explained, the ability to work on an individual basis with her deciding students made her feel valued:

I really like meeting with students one on one; I think I’m very comfortable in that environment, [and] I think it makes students very comfortable in that environment. I know I’ve helped students, and obviously we all make mistakes, I know that [I’m] not perfect, but I know I’ve had students tell me like, “Hey, I didn’t even know about that major that you told me about,” or, “I still use that resource you’ve sent me and it made a big difference.” So I feel like I am making a difference in students’ lives and that’s probably the biggest thing, you feel like you’re actually making a difference in your job. (personal communication, September 21, 2016)

Advisors stated that they did not always enjoy having “difficult conversations” with students, yet they acknowledged the importance of those conversations in helping students make realistic academic plans. Blair explained that although there were times
that she felt like a “dream crusher,” she found value in helping her students pick the best academic plan for their individual needs:

I’ve learned that I just really derive a lot of fulfillment from helping other people to get to where they want to go. Whatever that is, even if it’s, “[This university is] not actually the place for me” or, “This degree’s not the right thing but this other degree, somewhere else at [the university] is.” . . . But, I think, to me, the most important thing is to get them where they’re supposed to be and where they want to be and where they’ll be successful. (personal communication, September 7, 2016)

Blair was not the only advisor who referenced that they were sometimes in a position with students where they had to “crush dreams.” The sentiment was typically referenced when the participants talked about working with students who had unrealistic goals or expectations about getting into a degree program for which they did not meet the requirements for admission. The advisors explained that while these conversations were difficult, they were important in helping a student pick a new major or, in some cases, a new university that would be a better fit for the student’s academic goals. Jo shared a similar perspective and argued that “making a difference” in her students’ lives was what motivated her to continue her work:

I love coming to work. I mean, I have kids, I’d love to be studying, I’d love to be sitting at home, cleaning my house while my kids are at school, and cooking and baking. . . . I would love that but, if I can’t do that, and I can’t financially do that, this is where I want to be, period. Because I have seen, over and over and over again, that what I do matters and, to me, that makes a difference. Because, if I’m going to have to be away from my kids, and my home, and my school work, I damned well better be doing something that matters, and I venture to say, every single day, I see that what I do makes a big difference. And those times when you have a conversation with someone and you realize, “I’m glad I caught them now. They’re not in a good place. This is bad.” Or I think, “I sparked something right there. I think they’re going to research this a little bit and come back,” and I think “They’re excited about this now,” or giving them permission to change their mind. It’s the best, ever. (personal communication, September 22, 2016)
Study participants consistently detailed stories about memorable student interactions, times when students thanked them for their help, or when a difficult conversation with a student ended on a positive note.

Outside of the individual relationships advisors built with students, several participants mentioned how much they enjoyed the “cyclical nature” of their work. Bridget explained how she appreciated the “cycle of advising” from when students started, excited and nervous at orientation, to helping students during the fall semester as they experienced the transition to college, until they finally felt comfortable and in control (personal communication, September 14, 2016). Kevin echoed Bridget’s appreciation for the “flow of the semesters” and explained that this was unique to higher education: “When I talk to other people who are in the real world . . . there’s not the changes in the seasons” (personal communication, September 21, 2016). Though the participants stated that they felt busy year-round, they enjoyed the variety that the cycle of the academic year brought to their work.

Even as most study participants referenced multiple factors that motivated them to stay in their advising roles, Nate shared the frustrations he had with his department leadership and work environment. As Nate explained, he was realistic about the limitations of his department and found value in his work elsewhere:

I’ve had good supervisors that will be generous with praise, because otherwise, that’s all that you’re ever gonna really get out of it. And so the students, that’s why you stay with it, is because the students make your day and they genuinely appreciate what you do. (personal communication, September 22, 2016)

Nate believed that his department did not understand the role of a professional academic advisor and therefore did not know how to use him. He attributed the lack
of understanding to the fact that his academic program recently had begun directly admitting freshmen; hence, his role was new, so there was no history of undergraduate student services in his department. Nate was aware of the limitations of his supervisor and faculty in not only understanding his role but also in finding value in it. He spoke highly of his student interactions and became frustrated with the lack of resources his department allocated to undergraduate student services.

Nate’s story highlighted how poor leadership and negative work environments can push advisors to a breaking point. Nate was able to find solace in working with his students; however, Rachel shared the details of working in a negative environment and the lasting impact it had on the advising community. According to Rachel, when leadership set a tone that became more numbers-driven, advisors started to feel as though their values were being challenged.

The students mattered in a different way. They mattered because a number was achieved, or it was sought after as opposed to [their] development, progress, inspiration, success, celebration, failure, triumph. . . . The thing we measured completely shifted and so doing good work at a depth was a ding against you because you could have seen two more students in that time. You know? And it’s that moment of, “Ew, but I don’t do this work so that I can see more.” (personal communication, September 1, 2016)

Rachel ultimately ended up leaving that advising position and just recently came back to that unit after being away for a few years. She was surprised by how quickly the energy of the advising office adjusted after a leadership change:

It has taken a while, but you can rebound so much faster than one imagines if you have the right people stepping in at the right times saying, “We do different now.” There’s quiet celebration that you didn’t know would erupt, which is kind of cool. And reminders that, you know, jeans aren’t bad. You know, like just hysterical things, that you’re like, “How did we ever start thinking that you couldn’t have things on your window? What was that thing you were thinking about for so long?” You know your mind ended up going to just completely random places
‘cause your professional work was not supported, rewarded, or talked about. So all this other stuff started to matter. (personal communication, September 1, 2016)

Rachel’s story also underscored how issues compounded in her advising unit and started to distract the advisors from their work. She was not the only advisor from her campus who referenced the negative leadership of the past and the residual effects of that situation. Rachel and Nate talked about overcoming their individual leadership and work environment challenges, but other advisors may have responded differently and left the profession as a result.

The stories shared by the study participants indicated that there were a variety of factors that motivated the advisors to continue in their positions. Although low pay was not a concern for every participant, a majority of the advisors referenced that they had to be motivated to do their work by something other than their salaries. Although a majority of the participants felt valued or found motivation in multiple aspects of their work, there was one advisor who found value solely through the work with his students, which underscored the challenge and consequences of poor leadership. In general, the advisors spoke highly of their work and experiences except when the conversation turned to the pending changes to the FLSA and what those changes meant for their students, salaries, and job classification as well as the broader implications on the profession.

**FLSA Implementation Challenges**

Study participants communicated a range of knowledge, thoughts, and concerns when asked about how their campuses were planning to address changes to the FLSA, which were scheduled to go into effect December 1, 2016. Participants were concerned that the FLSA changes ultimately would hurt their students because advisors would be
restricted to supporting their advisees within a 40-hour work week, and an advisor’s work was difficult to limit to business hours. The pending changes also stirred up past frustrations advisors had with campus leadership, institutional funding limitations, inequities between academic departments, and lack of an advising career ladder. Participants voiced their concern that some faculty and administrators still thought advisors only helped students schedule classes and therefore had unrealistic expectations about advisor workloads. Albeit not all study participants were directly affected by the law change, they all had opinions about what the changes would mean for academic advising as a profession.

**Sacrifices**

The participants worried that if some or all advisors on their campuses were switched from exempt to nonexempt positions, the quality of service to students would be sacrificed. Several participants speculated that advising might become more “prescriptive” or “transactional” because advisors would be limited in how much time they could spend with an individual student or would feel pressure to serve as many students as possible in their 40-hour work week. Josh believed advising would revert back to old, unsuccessful methods:

If their responsibility is to help a student navigate the resources that exist, then that could be done in a fashion that could be reduced to a very prescribed half-hour appointment. Now ultimately what that also looks like is telemarketing, and that the advisor essentially would be reading from a script that essentially the student would then be signing off [on], and the onus of that information that just had been communicated within that script is now on the student, it’s officially documented. Anything that deviates from that is the student’s responsibility. My concern with that is in the past that’s not been a wholly successful methodology. (personal communication, September 7, 2016)
In addition to being concerned with how students would be served during individual appointments, some advisors expressed worry about being able to respond to emails. Several advisors spoke at length about checking emails on the weekends and evenings as a way to get caught up on work or to follow up on any unresolved issues from the previous week.

Advisors were uncertain as to how they would be required to handle working with a student whose individual situation might extend beyond the end of a working day or require follow-up on the weekend. Nate shared how he responded to emails afterhours and how he felt it could change in a nonexempt role:

So I make personal sacrifices for a lot of students. So if the student emails me . . . Every email is hooked to my phone, right? And the student emails me at 8:00 p.m. freaking out about something, I don’t have an issue triaging the email and saying, “Hey, no problem, just calm down. I have this space available, I’ll see you tomorrow at this time.” Right? Every email that comes across my way, though, I read it to see if it’s something that I should react to. Most of the time, it’s not. The students just are fine. If I had to cut that out . . . that’s insane. That’s insane to me. Because then essentially what I would do is I would come into work every day, and I would sit and have to triage and make priorities of a hundred emails. Before I could even do anything. That would be crazy. (personal communication, September 22, 2016)

Participants had different opinions as to how institutions would handle an advisor who needed to work more than 40 hours in a given week. As public institutions, the universities had the ability to grant compensatory time to nonexempt staff as an alternate to overtime pay (United States Department of Labor, 2016). Some advisors believed that overtime or compensatory time would be available, while others argued that this would not be an option given the financial limitations of their institution.

Another subset of participants believed that truly dedicated advisors would work “off the clock” or “volunteer” their time in order to help students resolve their issues.
During a focus group, Abby wondered aloud to her peers what would happen if advisors were paid for all the hours they worked:

> What if people actually logged those hours that they were really working? I’m not saying that I would be in that situation, [and] this goes kind of counter to what we’ve been saying, but shouldn’t people be paid for the work that they’re doing? And if we’re all used to working 46 hours a week, shouldn’t we get paid? (personal communication, September 19, 2016)

Although Abby’s peers argued that not all of the academic units at their university would be able to accommodate overtime, their statements about advisors working off the clock demonstrated a lack of understanding of the law. Sandra, who was familiar with FLSA from her work outside higher education, explained that advisors who worked over their 40-hour week without approved overtime would put the university in violation of the law and responsible for back pay. In her opinion, the university and supervisors needed to be strict about advisors not working on the weekends or evenings, even if that meant projects went unfinished, because it was better than violating the law.

Advisors also expressed concern as to the status of their additional responsibilities in a nonexempt role. They had a range of responsibilities outside of meeting with students, which included the coordination of new student orientation, educational programming, recruitment, and teaching. Participants worried that flexibility they were afforded to balance their evening or weekend commitments would be reduced or eliminated for nonexempt advisors. Nate explained that the culture of his department would require him to change what work was happening after hours if he was switched to hourly:

> My department expects me to be in the office from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and I do a lot of weekend and evening things, and so immediately those weekend and evening things are either going to go away or my office hours are gonna have to
change. Other than that, I think with the amount of students that I have, a lot of the students will typically not get the information they need. . . . I mean, there is a point here I will just have to go home and quit working because I know that overtime there is definitely not something that [my department] is going to be interesting in doing. So it just means that the students are going to have to wait a lot longer than they might normally have to. (personal communication, September 26, 2016)

Several participants expressed a general concern that some level of their work would need to be sacrificed in order to move to an hourly position because it was difficult to fulfill their job responsibilities in a 40-hour work week. Advisors also were worried that they would be forced to sacrifice some of their additional commitments and responsibilities outside of advising, which included teaching, working with student organizations, and professional development. Josh shared that he enjoyed being able to teach in addition to advising and wondered if leadership would question the need for advisors to teach and ultimately require him to stop.

Even as many participants were worried about work that would go unfinished if they had to switch to a nonexempt position, a small subset argued that they were capable of completing their work in a 40-hour week already. They believed that a switch to a nonexempt position would cause little to no change in how their work was conducted. Kim explained that she worked efficiently in order to maintain a good work-life balance:

I tend to be very efficient; I think that has just come from the two previous jobs I had on campus, where I had to be efficient. I can get a lot of things done in a short period of time, which has really come in handy. I still occasionally do have to do grading and stuff, and everyone is different on this. My e-mail [is] not on my phone; I have a very strict work-life balance. So I will maybe work till 5:30 p.m. to get some emails done, or I’m willing to do stuff like that, but then when I get in the car and go home, I go home. I tell my students I’m not in faculty. I’m not up at 2:00 a.m. doing research, I’m in bed, because I have to be here every day all day long. So, they are like “okay.” And they seem to get it. I respond to pretty much almost all my e-mails within one business day. I mean I’m very fast about
it so they appreciate that, so I maintain that balance. (personal communication, September 21, 2016)

For the advisors such as Kim, who believed that their job could be completed in a 40-hour work week, they attributed their efficiency to establishing clear boundaries, maximizing their work day, and limiting evening or weekend commitments. Kim acknowledged that the FLSA changes would not affect her job, so she was not as informed as others about the implications, but she understood the concerns of her colleagues who would be affected. All the study participants were able to speculate about how they would handle being switched from an exempt to nonexempt role, but it was clear throughout the interviews that some were not speculating as much as they were bracing for what was to come.

**Awareness and Communication**

Of the 21 study participants, 13 earned salaries under or near the new $47,476 salary threshold. Advisors who indicated that they had some knowledge of the law explained they had learned about it from a supervisor, colleagues on campus, or by reading an article or news report. Participants who supervised advisors indicated they had a basic understanding of the law change, despite the fact that they were not part of the decision-making process. Supervisors at all three institutions indicated that the FLSA decisions lay with a combination of individuals from human resources, campus leadership, and academic unit leadership.

Though advisors at all institutions had varying levels of knowledge about FLSA, the advisors at institution B not only knew the most about the law but also had some sense of who among their advising community might be affected by the changes. Five of
the seven advisors at institution B stated they were concerned that they were going to be switched from exempt to nonexempt positions because their units lacked the funding to increase their salaries. Participants from institutions A and C did not believe they would be directly affected by the updated law. Of the 14 advisors from institutions A and C, three had salaries below the $47,476 threshold. Given that participant salary data were collected from their respective state employee databases, it is possible that these three advisors recently had received salary increases or that they were unaware of how they would be affected by the law. Not every study participant earned a salary below the threshold or believed they would be affected; nonetheless, they were concerned about how little information had been communicated about the law, the decision-making process, and the timeline for implementation.

Advisors who had received information about FLSA indicated that it typically came from a supervisor, but lacked details or specifics. Blair stated that she learned about FLSA changes through her role on a staff organization the previous semester, during a presentation from the director of human resources. She explained that the director communicated that certain staff groups, such as advisors, would be switched to nonexempt if they did not meet the minimum salary and were not given a salary increase to meet the salary threshold. At the time of the presentation, the salary threshold had not been finalized, so the human resources director had to speak generally about the changes. Blair explained that the only other information that she had seen about the FLSA changes was a short reference in a campus newsletter from human resources. In other words, the implications and outcomes had not been widely talked about on campus. Blair expressed concern with how little discussion there had been about the FLSA changes:
I think for the advisors that aren’t aware of this change that’s coming, I think it’s going to be kind of a big deal on campus. . . . I just think that it’s going to be a big change and if they’re not aware of it, it’s going to come as a pretty big shock to what they’re used to especially if they’ve worked as a salaried employee for many years. (personal communication, September 7, 2016)

Blair feared that as advisors learned about the change, there would be a decline in morale in the advising community. She shared concerns that there would be inequities in how advisors were classified, despite having the same responsibilities within the same advising units, and that some quality advisors might consider leaving their roles. Ellen was equally worried and was afraid work quality would decline, or worse:

Advisors advocate for the students but they won’t advocate for themselves. I’m afraid that the advisors who are going to be treated on the hourly basis are either going to [be] disengaged with their work and not care, or they’re simply going to do the work and not put the time in to be paid for it so they’ll be exploited. (personal communication, September 13, 2016)

Both Blair and Ellen stated that they would not be affected by the FLSA changes, but were still very concerned about what the changes would mean for their colleagues, students, and the advising community as a whole. Their worries were echoed by the participants who believed they would be affected.

The absence of communication about FLSA implementation on the campuses represented in the study exacerbated the frustrations some advisors felt about overall campus communication. During the focus group with participants from institution B, several of the advisors voiced their annoyance with the lack of communication across the university. As Melissa explained, her frustration extended to the lack of communication from university leadership:

I think that we struggle with that with way more than just FLSA. There is no university communication. It is really and truly so decentralized that we usually only get college-level communication about issues like this. So I wouldn’t expect
anything to come from the university as a whole. (personal communication, September 19, 2016)

Melissa’s colleague, Ellen, argued that there were problems with communication even between departments in the same academic college. Abby added that any type of explanation as to how units were guided or directed to determine which staff members would be moved to nonexempt or given salary increases would have been appreciated:

I think it would be helpful, though, to understand like how those options were given. I mean, we know that a lot of decisions get made based on which colleges have money. . . . And so how were those decisions made? How were the administrators guided in terms of their decision? Is it purely from a finance perspective? (personal communication, September 19, 2016)

When the advisors in the focus group for institution B were asked which unit should be responsible for central messaging about issues such as FLSA, they responded that academic affairs was an option. Advisors from the other two institutions were asked a similar question, and they also responded that they would look to academic affairs, whether it was from a vice provost or the provost, for central communication. Yet advisors from all three campuses argued that the culture of their university was one where information was hard to come by because of the decentralized nature of their institutions.

Decentralized Institutions and Human Resource Challenges

As advisors talked about the implementation of the FLSA changes on their campuses, the decentralized nature of their institutions became an area of concern. Advisors wondered how much leeway each academic unit would be given to make decisions about salary increases. During the focus group with institution B, the study participants from that campus received confirmation that one of the units had decided to raise the salaries of their advisors to meet the threshold. Several of the other advisors in
the focus group earned salaries that fell under the threshold and knew that their unit did
not have the funding to raise their salaries. Melissa shared her frustration about the salary
increases in the other unit:

I’m not going to lie. I’ve had little rage-y moments about it because I knew about
the proposal from [another academic unit] but wasn’t sure if it would get passed.
It basically means a first-year advisor will make more than I do as an eight-year
advisor with an assistant director title, so it totally changes the career progression
game. Why do assistant director responsibilities when I could totally just be a
first-year advisor and make more money? (personal communication, September
19, 2016)

The advisors at institution B explained that human resources gave the academic units the
responsibility to decide which staff members under the minimum threshold would receive
salary increases and which would be moved to nonexempt. Megan shared that even
though decisions were by unit, it also meant that decisions could be made differently by
departments within the same unit:

As a supervisor of advisors where some are being switched and some aren’t,
it’s stressful because I have to handle people that do the same exact job, have
identical position descriptions, differently. And that’s difficult for me to handle
. . . because of the way their salaries are funded by different departments. . . . So
it’s leaving me feeling as a supervisor very kind of out of control and just waiting
for information to hit and it’s hard to manage. I have three advisors [that] I
supervise, one is salaried [and] two will be switched to hourly. (personal
communication, September 19, 2016)

As the study participants discussed FLSA implementation on their decentralized
campuses, they also highlighted other inequities between academic units and
departments. Advisors spoke to how certain units or departments had access to more
financial resources than others and how those units were able to support their advisors
differently. For Nate, who was the sole academic advisor in his department, he
recognized that his workload and responsibilities were different from some of his colleagues in more resourced units:

We’re one of the few colleges that does mandatory advising, so every single student has to see me every single semester to even register. I teach the freshman seminar class. Some other departments, they don’t have mandatory advising. They have the GAs or juniors or seniors teach freshman seminar classes. The fact that there’s only one person that does all recruitment and all advising and also is the advisor for two in-house student groups, it’s just like . . . It’s a lot of things. And there’s a lot of other departments that will separate some of those duties out. (personal communication, September 22, 2016)

At the same time, Nate also recognized that even he had access to certain opportunities that some of his peers in other units did not. He was able to attend the annual NACADA conference every year and knew that not every advisor on campus was afforded the same opportunity. His family obligations kept him conscious of his income, and he was very aware of how much he made in comparison to his advising colleagues. Nate explained that he had to remember that not all advisors made as much as him, even though his salary was still well below the salaries of other advisors on campus:

So [the exploration advisors] will tell me, “Nate, you just need to shut up because no one in [exploration] makes that much as an advisor.” But then other colleges on campus, the [senior] academic advisor in [another department] I think he’s [making] $74,000 or something like that. It’s these huge differences across . . . I have a buddy, he works in [a different unit on campus] as an advisor and he makes in the high 30’s. Like, really low. He’s been doing it for years and years and years, but because there’s no raise structure put into place because of the budget, and he’s exactly the same way. He really likes his job. He really likes his students, and he's living well below his means because he likes [his work]. (personal communication, September 22, 2016)

The stories that Nate and the other study participants shared about how their job responsibilities, salaries, and resources compared to advisors in other departments highlighted the perceived and real inequities among academic units. Advisors were well
aware of how different units treated their advisors with regard to compensation levels, advising loads, and overall supervision.

The experiences shared by the advisors demonstrated the challenges of a decentralized system, but also highlighted the lack of consistent pay scales, job descriptions, and position titles that frustrated advisors at each institution. Several participants spoke about how the human resource classifications at their institution limited their job titles and salary ranges. Mark explained that while he had worked with his supervisor to adjust his working title, his job classification still equated him to his colleagues who held a different level of responsibilities:

My position description has never really felt like it fit all that well, and so we’ve sort of tried to modify things as we go. That has affected new positions created after mine. And so I guess being a guinea pig is good in that sense. It honestly gets under my skin sometimes because the way I’m classified according to HR doesn’t make sense to me. And no offense to HR and no offense to my colleagues, but you can judge the book by the cover and the appearances aren’t necessarily indicative of what’s really going on. And I still very much perceive myself to be like my counterparts but the turbo version, and sometimes [I’m] jealous that, “Oh, they don’t have the same ancillary responsibilities that I do.” . . . The way I’m classified in the system, it makes us look like mirror images or copies of one another, and I don’t think that’s a fair representation. (personal communication, September 28, 2016)

Advisors argued that it was difficult to get job titles and classifications to reflect accurately the full range of their responsibilities, and so it was not uncommon to use working titles. The use of working titles and limited advisor job classifications made it difficult for more experienced advisors, or those with more responsibilities, to earn salaries outside the range associated with their classification. The limited classifications were also problematic if an institution applied the FLSA changes to advisors by classification and not solely by salary level. An application of the law by classification
level meant that the institution decided that the job duties associated with that classification did not meet the standard for exemption under FLSA, even if the salary range was above the threshold.

The conversations about FLSA with study participants raised concerns about the absence of an advising career ladder. Advisors argued that the lack of a career ladder made it difficult for advisors to get raises, promotions, and advance their careers without leaving advising altogether. Josh and Blair explained that, at their institution, there had been no differentiation in the academic advisor classification until a few years ago. Blair argued that the campus culture for promotion prior to the addition of an academic advisor senior role was, “Either you stay in that same position and maybe get more responsibility but your title stays the same, or you get a different role at the university” (personal communication, September 7, 2016). Josh added that when he first started at the university, he did not realize that the academic advisor job was seen as a stepping stone:

I think that I, in some ways, start feeling as though at the front line of something, of somebody who didn’t get the memo that “Be an advisor for three years and then move on.” And within this scenario, that’s pretty much kind of how that trajectory has gone. What I saw most traditionally was that ultimately people who were moving on to other positions were either moving into administrative, directors and associate directors of offices, or moving into other institutions. (personal communication, September 7, 2016)

Josh and Blair argued that while their institution now had two academic advisor classifications, there still is no real career ladder.

Participants explained that the limited job classifications available through human resources were not the only problem; there were also disparities in how academic units were able to utilize other classifications or working titles to create different roles and
opportunities for advisors. Melissa explained how her supervisor worked not only to create a working title for her, but fought to get her a salary increase:

I’ve been in my assistant director role for four years now. Again, this is kind of how different the departments are. When [my director started], she created two academic advisor and staff assistant roles, and [my fellow assistant director] and I both interviewed and got those roles. But we were titled academic advisor and staff assistant. When she then did a market value adjustment after doing research and kind of winning her way, she discovered that was not an appropriate title or an appropriate salary band for where she wanted us to be, so that’s when she created assistant director. But we’re actually classified as program managers or program coordinators. But, that piece of it and understanding how I got the title of assistant director and how that upward trajectory moved within our office speaks to the decentralization and the lack of career ladder across the campus for advisors. (personal communication, September 14, 2016)

Kevin explained that providing staff with an opportunity for advancement and the ability to make more money was difficult, especially for a smaller staff. He shared how one of his advisors recently left for a new position in order to make more money, which prompted him to explore the creation of career ladders or tracks. The goal of the tracks was to attract new advisors right out of graduate school and to train and retain them, with the opportunity for them eventually to move into one of the more senior roles in the office. Kevin warned that there is a downside to getting promoted in academic advising:

The difficulty of ladders and things like that is I always tell these guys, “All right, if I make you an academic advisor and program director, all of a sudden you’re not doing as much academic advising.” (personal communication, September 21, 2016)

Kevin was not the only advisor who referenced the lack of student contact as academic advisors advanced their careers. Several advisors explained that their hesitation or disinterest in being an advising director was because they would have limited student interaction and would be in a more administrative role. Nate was one of the advisors who
was hesitant about having less student interaction and explained how that affected how he looked at other jobs:

Every job that I’ve applied for currently is all been lateral moves, because I don’t want to go much higher. Like, different departments on campus can pay a little bit more money, but those next levels, I don’t know if that’s what I want to do. So, there’s a couple jobs that I have my eye on right now that people have left, and I know they’ll be hiring soon, and I know that they still have a decent amount of student interaction. (personal communication, September 22, 2016)

Despite the hesitation that advisors had about becoming advising directors, they were still interested in working in advising. The participants felt that the addition of a career ladder would provide opportunities for advancement but also encouraged advisor retention.

Advisors argued that a career ladder would have prevented salary compression, which had become an issue with the FLSA changes.

As advisors shared their feelings about the FLSA changes, several expressed that they were at a career “crossroads” or a “transition” point where they needed to think about where their next job or opportunity would lead their career. For some advisors, the FLSA changes magnified their frustration with low salaries. Bridget shared her low salary breaking point:

It kind of hit close to home when I was filling out paperwork for my kids for school and realized that for a family of four, the qualification level for free school lunch is only about $1,000 less than what I make a year. Which means that, you know, according to the school district, we’re not making enough, we’re not on a sustainable income for family, like this couldn’t be a sustainable single family income. . . . I kind of feel like for somebody with a master’s degree in a profession that requires a master’s degree, this shouldn’t be a conversation we should have to have. Particularly when I do see jobs for people with bachelor’s degrees with starting salaries that are higher than what I make after 12 years. (personal communication, September 14, 2016)

Bridget went on to explain that she would stay in advising if her institution could pay her just “a little bit more.” The advisors who considered leaving or who had started job
searches explained that they would stay in advising if the financial situation was improved or if there were an opportunity to get a promotion and broaden their skills that did not eliminate student contact.

The comments advisors made about why they considered leaving the field exemplified Blair and Josh’s concern that FLSA would cause a “brain drain” of strong, experienced advisors. Study participants worried that moving advisors from exempt to nonexempt would be seen as a demotion and signal that an advisor’s level of education and work were not valued. Nancy believed that moving advisors to nonexempt positions devalued their work as professionals:

> I do think there is a sense that a salaried position is considered . . . more respected, in terms of professionalism. So I think switching it to hourly takes some of that away and I think that would be hurtful to a profession where a lot of people are doing it because they love it, not because they’re not gonna make a lot of money doing it anyway. So to have that piece, you work hard a lot of times, you have to have a bachelor’s degree or a master’s, and then to suddenly bounce back into an hourly position, that was probably something you had when you were in college or high school, might not feel so wonderful. (personal communication, September 22, 2016)

Advisors were also concerned that nonexempt advising positions would be hard to recruit new advisors into because of the perception that hourly positions were not professional. Mark even wondered: if nonexempt positions became difficult to fill or could only be paid up to a certain level, would that result in positions being filled by advisors without master’s degrees? Alexis explained that moving advising positions to nonexempt sent advisors a message about how much they are valued:

> The perception of hourly versus salary has an impact on how people perceive the importance of your job. And I think that advisors would feel like it [their job] was less important to make a change like that. Like it devalues what they do. What also bothers me about that is that it implies that this is something that we only do
The challenges described by advisors regarding disparities in job titles, classifications, position descriptions, and salaries were compounded by what they described as a lack of understanding of academic advising by most faculty members and administrators at their institutions. Participants argued that many of their faculty members and administrators did not understand the complex nature of academic advising, which only fueled advisor frustrations with the FLSA changes.

**Advising Misconceptions**

Advisors argued that they were still viewed by faculty and administrators as “schedule builders,” “guidance counselors,” or “administrative assistants.” Several advisors believed that some faculty members did not respect an advisor’s level of knowledge or work because of the lack of a PhD. Even as Megan’s faculty understood that she was there to help students, they made her feel she was limited in her knowledge:

> They value some of the technical know-how that the advisor brings, but they definitely are like, “But you’re staff and I’m faculty and I know this major, and I know what gets taught in the classes, so I want the students to talk to me, too.” I wouldn’t call it a power struggle, but there’s tones of that; kind of like they wanna make sure I’m sharing the students that I see with them so that I’m not the only person they go to; and I’m absolutely fine with that. I want those students to talk to those professors, and when they’re there I do talk to them, but sometimes I get the feeling that, like, just because the student presented the concern to me first and I share it with the faculty, they’ll be like, “Oh, they should come to me,” like it’s not my thing to deal with. When really, I feel like, “Well, it’s my thing to be aware of.” So sometimes I feel like you get put in that, “You’re just staff; you don’t have the knowledge or the experience or the rules that we have.” And I’m fine recognizing that difference, but I don’t like the impression that it’s like lesser than or somehow the student isn’t getting the right experience because I think we all bring something to it. (personal communication, September 13, 2016)
Megan further explained that there were advisors in her academic unit who had earned a PhD, and she perceived the faculty to be more comfortable with those individuals. She argued that their comfort was not about a shared knowledge of teaching, but that they had shared interest in the discipline whereas she was just a “generalist” in those subjects.

Albeit five of the study participants had earned a doctorate, they did not all advise in their area of expertise. Phil argued that advisors with advanced degrees or expertise in the area they advised had declined in popularity and that the number of advisors with master’s degrees in higher education had increased:

Compared to 10 years ago, advisors with a substantive background in the field in which they advise are more rare. It used to be that if you advised in chemistry, you have [a] degree in chemistry. If you [advised] in economics, you have a degree in economics. That’s not selling anymore. That’s much less so now than it was several years ago. Still true in a few areas . . . political science . . . the social sciences, I’d say it’s more common, but in most of the sciences, very few of the advisors have a degree in science. . . . I would say that’s a big change. (personal communication, September 21, 2016)

Study participants who had earned doctorates had a range of interactions with their faculty. Ellen believed that she was able to be more vocal and was supported in her department because she was perceived to have more “clout” by virtue of her doctorate, whereas Cathie had some faculty who appreciated her work and others who felt differently. Karen’s department chair had a better grasp of her role because his son was a college student, but she was still not convinced that faculty understood that her work extended beyond making sure students graduated.

Not all the participants were frustrated with their faculty member’s knowledge of advising. Kevin has seen many of his faculty members become more confident in the work of the advisors through time. He attributed that growth in confidence to the length
of time he had been in his role and the ability to build trust with the faculty members. Jo argued that given her years of experience as both an exploration and departmental advisor at her institution, she did not need the faculty to appreciate or understand her work. All she cared about was having a department chair who understood her role as an advisor:

Now, if my department head didn’t think what I did was important that would be different, and I’m in a situation where that’s not the case. She really values us, and respects us. Now, if I was in a situation that I wasn’t getting that, I would probably have a much different view of things. (personal communication, September 22, 2016)

Though participants expressed a range of feelings about how well faculty members understood the role of an academic advisor, several advisors argued that the bigger concern was the lack of knowledge administrators had about their work.

Study participants generally believed that most campus administrators had only a basic or minimal understanding of what the role of an academic advisor entailed. Some advisors argued that there were vice provosts—or, in one instance, the provost—who had a stronger understanding of academic advising. Nevertheless, the general sentiment of study participants was that there were still misconceptions about their work. Karen argued that the fact that campus leaders even had considered moving advisors to nonexempt meant that they still did not understand the importance of academic advising:

I think when you hear [that advisors are being moved to nonexempt roles], that the indication is that the nature of this profession still has this sort of an “anybody can do it” [perception]. “Anybody can tell a kid what to take.” Well, that’s not all we do, and that’s why I strongly feel that there are those who make decisions who don’t get what we do. And that makes me sad. I think there’s this huge unknown. They’re just not seeing the big picture of you want advising [for the students]. It’s not just getting them through a degree and assuming that they can read a catalog that we don’t even have in paper anymore. It doesn’t work that way. It just does’t work that way. Those kids come to college now with way more baggage than they ever did. (personal communication, September 21, 2016)
Several advisors felt that their institution took advantage of the fact that advisors loved working with students and did their jobs without expecting high salaries. At institution B, the advisors felt frustrated by the fact that their institution had great success in filling advising vacancies because people were attracted to the brand name of their university. As Melissa explained, it felt as if the university had a “next man up” mentality because it knew it could hire another person to take an advisor’s place.

Study participants also believed that campus leaders did not truly understand the value of advising because leaders were unable to see the depth of advisors’ institutional knowledge and what that meant for students. Abby explained that she wished campus leadership had shared how academic units were directed to make FLSA changes and that decisions needed to consider more than the financial implications:

You also have to think about morale, longevity, [and] institutional knowledge, and how that is important to the work that we do. And, how when you have people jumping ship because they can make $8,000 more in another college for the same position [with] even less responsibility, it doesn’t set us up well to serve the students in the best way possible. (personal communication, September 19, 2016)

Advisors generally believed that faculty and campus administrators did not understand the depth of academic advisor responsibilities, which led to the mindset that anyone could advise and advisors were replaceable. The sentiments advisors shared about the level of understanding faculty and administrators had about their work was one of the many frustrations participants voiced as they talked through the potential implications of FLSA to academic advising.

Even as a majority of advisors believed that making advisors nonexempt jeopardized advising’s status as a profession and further diminished advisor credibility
in the eyes of faculty members and administrators, there were some who argued that their colleagues needed to look at the situation from a different perspective. Phil, who was once an attorney, explained that he saw two arguments:

I could see that some people might feel, “Oh, I’m just punching a clock now.” On the other hand, practicing law, you had to keep your time to tenths of an hour. So, on one hand, there’s a model for saying, tracking time is very professional. Right? Engineers do that too, sometimes on projects. On the other hand, I could see the blue-collar perspective saying, “I was white collar, now I am blue collar and I may not like that as much.” So, I can see both perceptions, sort of reasonably held. (personal communication, September 21, 2016)

Like Phil, Nancy came from a profession that billed hours. She explained that in her past role as a counselor, she was responsible for tracking the time she spent with a client. Phil and Nancy were able to relate their lived experience, as former professionals in their respective fields, to interpret the FLSA changes through a different lens. For the advisors who had worked only in education or knew little about the time-keeping nature of other professions, their perception of what was considered professional was limited to their experiences.

Still, there were other participants who viewed academic advising and higher education in general with a level of skepticism. Nate understood why faculty members and administrators might think academic advising on its own was something that could easily be taught and learned. He explained that individuals had to look beyond just the basics of advising to see that it was more than just helping students stay on track for graduation:

I think if you look just at academic advising, I could be swayed, and I could say maybe it’s not a profession. If we can show students how to run a degree audit, and if we can instill in their heads to be on point and to be mature about their decisions about their classes, and to just be on top of their own degree, as far as academic advising is concerned, I can be swayed to say students can do that on
their own now. But I think so much of what we do has nothing to do with academics, and that’s the hard part. I don’t feel like as much of a conversation happens about guidance counselors in high school being not a profession, right? Because I think there’s an understanding that you talk about classes with your guidance counselor, but you also talk about everything else. And they’re the ones that create goals for you and push you to do this and that and are there when you’re having a bad day, when you can’t cope in class and you need someone to talk to. That’s what we do all day long. Obviously, you can’t call yourself a counselor, a therapist, or anything like that, but most of what I do, that’s what it feels like. (personal communication, September 22, 2016)

Nate’s core argument—that the work of an academic advisor extended beyond academics—was echoed by all the study participants and highlighted the frustration participants felt when trying to encapsulate the range of work and responsibilities they had to those outside of advising. Even when advisors spoke of administrators who had a better understanding of academic advising, they were individuals who previously had been advisors or worked closely with an advising unit, which demonstrated how much work still needed to be done to educate campus leadership about the dynamic and sometimes complicated role academic advisors play in supporting retention and graduation rates.

Discussion

Using narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013), the life experiences of professional academic advisors were examined to assess their influence on professional development, work, aspirations, and identity. The data included participants’ past, present, and future experiences (temporality); their personal needs and feelings (sociality); the interactions with those around them (sociality); and their physical environment (place) (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Hutchinson, 2015). Although study participants detailed different paths and experiences that led them to advising and have informed their
work in the field, there were also a number of shared or similar experiences among the participants. As advisors explained their growth and development in the profession, their stories reflected a responsiveness and reaction to their campus community, including students, colleagues, and leadership. As I explored the advisors’ narratives using the three commonplaces, it became clear that the past and current experiences of the advisors, as well as what they believed their futures held, were connected to the overarching issue of the state of academic advising as a profession.

**Lived Experiences and Advising Strategies**

The lived experiences of the study participants highlighted the highs and lows of their careers in academic advising. The absence of consistent advisor training and development, combined with their various educational backgrounds, led advisors to look to other sources to inform their work. Participants referenced distinct past experiences or interactions that helped shape their particular advising strategy or philosophy. Although the lived experiences were specific to each advisor, their stories had similar themes and commonalities.

For some participants, their lived experience as an undergraduate student informed how they wanted to work with their students. Participants who spoke to their undergraduate experience often referenced the type of support they received from faculty members and staff, both good and bad, and how those interactions caused them to seek to support students in a certain manner. Study participants vividly reflected on their experiences getting lost trying to find their classes or having a staff mentor who helped guide them through a rough patch and how those experiences informed how they wanted to work with their students. Advisors also referenced having to adjust or learn to work
with student populations that they had a hard time relating to from their personal experience. Abby talked about working with students who were struggling in coursework that she personally found easy from her time as a student and how she learned to consider her students’ experience separate from her own. She detailed how, with some coaching from advising colleagues, she was able to learn how to work with students in academic difficulty (personal communication, September, 19, 2016). In their study of college admission officers, Hicks and Shere (2003) argue that how individuals make meaning of behaviors they observe of their peers when in high school and college can influence how they interpret behaviors of the students they work with in their jobs. The assumptions made by a university staff member based on their lived experience then can influence how students are treated, unless the staff member is aware of his or her attitudes and beliefs (Hicks & Shere, 2003). Similarly, for academic advisors—whether consciously or subconsciously—the assumptions and beliefs they developed about college student behaviors throughout their academic and professional careers informed how they supported their students.

For the participants who worked as advisors at their alma mater, they often explained that they had the advantage of institutional knowledge based on having been a student and staff member. Advisors noted that the experience of being a graduate of their current institution helped provide a different frame of reference to the student experience because they remembered what it was like to be an undergraduate student at the university. The participants who worked at their alma mater also were more aware of the institutional culture, which helped them support their students as they navigated the university but also provided perspective on decisions made by campus leaders. The
importance of institutional knowledge was echoed by many of the study participants. For advisors who were not alumni of their institution, they cited their years of experience as the key factor in developing their institutional knowledge. Folsom and Scobie (2010) describe this in-depth understanding of the institutional culture and how to use it to support students as the “advising perspective” (p. 16). Participants described their institutional knowledge or advising perspective as something that was developed through time and critical in helping students navigate institutional policies and resources. Kim valued her institutional knowledge and commented on how much time it would take to rebuild should she ever leave the university (personal communication, September 21, 2016). Institutional knowledge was not viewed as something that could be quickly learned through training, but instead was something slowly developed through the advisor’s lived experience working at the university.

Other participants called upon their past work experience, even in careers outside higher education, to influence their advising style. In most instances, the topics or areas related to their prior work experience were ones the advisors were more comfortable calling upon in their support of students. For instance, advisors with expertise in undergraduate recruitment described having more confidence in working with prospective students and their families, even on issues related to financial aid. Participants with expertise related to the program in which they advised expressed more comfort in talking students through course subjects and career paths for the program. Even when advisors did not articulate their comfort with a subject or topic directly—like Alexis and Melissa, who talked about their residence life backgrounds—it was evident that they were more comfortable working with students through crisis situations and
advocating on behalf of their students based on the stories they shared. The experiences advisors had through past work, from their time as students or through building institutional knowledge, contributed to their individual advising philosophies and styles.

The development of an individual advising philosophy is considered a best practice in the NACADA literature (Folsom, 2008), yet study participants made it clear that they had varying opinions about the importance of having a set philosophy. When asked, all participants were able to describe their personal style, values, and expectations they had of their working relationship with students. The advisors who indicated that they had written out a philosophy explained that it had been required as part of a job application or nomination for an award. Most participants also referenced a particular advising approach when describing their philosophy. The developmental advising approach was most commonly mentioned and in some cases was referenced in combination with another approach. Advisors explained that they learned about advising approaches through different sources, including professional development opportunities, classes, training, and advising literature. Although advisors were able generally to reference advising approaches, they did not mention the Pillars of Academic Advising as informative to their philosophy. The absence of the pillars in reference to personal advising philosophies is supportive of the research arguing that documents like the CAS Standards are not being used intentionally to guide the work of advisors (Keeling, 2010). If advisors are not deliberately using the pillars or advising approaches to inform their advising styles or approaches, the findings suggest that participants instead are relying on lived experiences to guide their work.
FLSA and Professionalization

The importance of lived experiences for study participants extended beyond the boundaries of working with their students. Participants also spoke at length about how their work environments, institutional culture, and personal needs were important factors when they considered whether or not to remain in their roles. Albeit some participants were content to remain in their positions long term, another subset described facing a crossroads in their career and felt obligated to make a decision about how much longer they would remain in academic advising. Very few participants expressed eagerness to leave, and many appeared frustrated to be at the point where they might be forced to leave a career they enjoyed because of low pay, no raises, or minimal opportunities for promotion.

The frustrations of some advisors appeared to be made worse with the pending FLSA changes, especially if they believed their role would be switched from exempt to nonexempt because of the updated law. For these participants, the realities of FLSA seemed to heighten advisor frustration with challenges and situations they encountered throughout their advising career, including institutional funding limitations, the decentralized nature of campus, perceived inequities between academic units, and misconceptions of advising held by faculty members and administrators. A majority of the study participants expressed some level of concern about what FLSA would mean for the credibility of advising and how it would affect the retention and recruitment of quality academic advisors in the future. The study findings suggest that the proposed FLSA changes present a challenge to the identity of academic advising as a profession.
Concerns about the professional status of academic advising and recommendations to address these challenges often focus on standardizing a process or requirements for all advisors. Scholars have argued that in order for academic advising to be recognized as a profession, the field must increase the quality and quantity of advising research and also establish minimum educational credentials, a developmental training process, a graduate-level advising curriculum, career ladders, and standardized advisor job descriptions (Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, & Barkemeyer, 2015; Habley, 2009; Padak & Kuhn, 2009; Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010). The fact that a number of the lived experiences of study participants align with the recommendations to further professionalize advising demonstrates how much work is still needed but also validates the recommendations that have been suggested.

Although there are a variety of theoretical frameworks available to examine the professionalization of an occupation, Gorman and Sandefur (2011) argue that the research on the sociology of professions from the mid-20th century to present day all focus on four central themes: expert knowledge; autonomy; a normative orientation grounded in community; and high status, income, and rewards. When the lived experiences of the academic advisors are applied to Gorman and Sandefur’s (2011) four central themes, the areas of growth still needed to establish advising as a profession become clear. The narratives shared by study participants also provide some insight into the experiences of professional academic advisors at three different large, public, research universities in the Midwest.

*Expert Knowledge.* Gorman and Sandefur (2011) explain that “professional and expert work involves the creation, communication, and application of expert knowledge”
The study findings raise several concerns as to how academic advisors obtain and apply expert knowledge. First, the “accidental” way in which so many of the participants began their academic advising careers signals that there was little to no expert knowledge required to apply for positions in advising. Though several participants attributed their eventual interest in advising to their student leadership positions or a mentor’s intervention, there were other participants who pursued a career in advising because they wanted an education-related job in higher education. The reasons for entry into academic advising by participants parallel the findings that both academic advisors and student affairs practitioners often do not intentionally pursue a career in higher education and continue to come into their career paths accidentally (Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, & Barkemeyer, 2015; Mertz, Strayhorn, & Eckman, 2012).

The ease of entry into advising positions varied for participants as well. A small subset of participants at institution B referenced having to apply for multiple advising positions at their institution or needing to gain advising experience before they applied. Although a majority of the participants did not express any difficulty in obtaining their first advising role, the experience of some of the advisors at institution B highlights another challenge to the notion of expert knowledge in advising related to advisor credentials. Even as 20 of the 21 participants earned a master’s degree or higher, only 13 earned a degree in education, counseling, or social work. Participants shared that even when an advising position required a master’s degree, a candidate with a degree in higher education or related preparatory program was a preferred, not required, qualification.

It might seem that the advisors with a master’s degree in higher education or a related field would have been better prepared to advise, yet very few of these individuals
referenced specific coursework that prepared them for their roles. In fact, the only common reference made by these advisors about their preparation in graduate school was if they completed an internship or assistantship in advising. For the advisors without the master’s degree in higher education, there were mixed opinions about the importance or value of the knowledge possessed by their colleagues with a formal background in education. A few advisors argued that they missed out on learning about student development theory and had to learn it on their own. Even then, one advisor in particular felt that student development theory did not necessarily inform or reshape the way they advised. Although study participants minimally referenced the application of their knowledge from their master’s degree programs to their work in advising, this does not imply that these participants did not learn anything from their graduate programs. It is possible that these advisors apply their knowledge from graduate school instinctively and therefore do not recognize the application of said knowledge.

The lack of reference to knowledge applied to advising after completing a master’s program in a higher-education-related subject does raise the question of which components of the curriculum are designed to educate and prepare future academic advisors. Though the number of higher education–related master’s programs doubled from 1999 to 2014 (Ortiz, Filimon, & Cole-Jackson, 2015), academic advising is not a core part of the curriculum and is instead typically an experiential component for students who participate in an advising-related internship or assistantship. Kansas State University created both a certificate and master’s program in academic advising in the early 2000s, but there is still an absence of a standard academic advising curriculum to develop coursework or expand academic advising–related graduate programs (Habley, 2009;
Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010). Until a standard curriculum is developed, it will be difficult to ensure that graduate students in higher education programs have access to any course content specific to academic advising outside of an internship experience.

Several participants also referenced the practice of advisors being hired with an area of expertise specific to the program they advised, which was reflected by three of the study participants who had earned PhDs. Phil was one of the advisors who had expertise in his program and argued that his knowledge helped him guide his students through the coursework in a different way from his colleagues because he understood what was being taught in the courses, not just the course description or what requirement it fulfilled. Very few of the study participants worked with an academic program or subject related to their personal academic background, and they did not express any concern with that lack of expertise.

When advising is compared to professions such as medicine, nursing, or law, where a formal educational background and certification is necessary for employment, it is clear that the same level of expert knowledge is not required for new advising professionals. In fact, one of the many recommendations to strengthen advising as a profession is to require a master’s degree for employment (Padak & Kuhn, 2009; Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010), although the literature is unclear if the degree must be in an education-related field of study. One study participant summarized the lack of standardized credentials for new advisors, explaining, “It’s not like I ever had to pass a certification exam or demonstrate to my supervisor some level of proficiency. They eventually were comfortable with me seeing students one on one” (Mark, personal communication, September 28, 2016).
The absence of standardized or minimal advisor credentials also relates to the “on-the-job” nature of training new advisors. Study participants referenced similar training exercises, which included shadowing and observing; however, there was no standard or formalized training they were required to complete. Even more concerning was the number of study participants who argued they had little to no training and explained that they learned their job as a “trial-by-fire.” The study findings confirm the continued challenges that academic advising and student affairs face in preparing new professionals. The sentiments shared by participants about the lack of formal training and the prevalence of on-the-job training echo the findings of prior studies (Dean, Saunders, Thompson, & Cooper, 2011; Robbins, 2012; Shaffer, 2015). In a study of the orientation experiences of new student affairs professionals, Dean et al. (2011) found that of their 312 survey respondents, 42.6% indicated that they did not participate in a formal orientation; and of those who did, 31.2% found their orientation to be of minimal help. The lack of formalized training provided to advisors is concerning given the depth of knowledge they are expected to have in order to support a range of student needs and given the number of resources available to advising supervisors on how to develop training programs.

Albeit NACADA has published several advising-related handbooks and monographs focused specifically on training, study participants did not reference a training experience that mirrored the best practices suggested through these publications. Advisor training and development researchers have advocated for the use of Habley’s (1995) framework for an advisor-training program (Beres, 2010; Folsom, Scobie, & Miller, 2010; Higgenson, 2000; King, 2008), which calls for the use of a balance of
conceptual, informational, and relational components. Study participants explained that when they received training, it focused primarily on institutional policies and procedures, which fulfills the informational components of the training framework. The other two components—conceptual (purpose of advising) and relational (how to work with students)—were most commonly learned by participants through time and on their own.

Study participants spoke in detail about how their advising style and preferred approaches to working with students evolved. Advisors were able to reflect upon significant student interactions and moments, and how they learned from those experiences and applied that learning to future student interactions. Participants also referenced continuing to learn and refine their practice by working with others and informally observing their work. Albeit study participants were able to identify different academic advising approaches, they used broad definitions and talked about approaches interchangeably. The lack of a common language, especially in terms of the advising approaches, indicates that advisors lack a depth of knowledge about the approaches, possibly related to the lack of training they received. Nonetheless, some participants purposely did not base their practice in a single approach and took issue with the way some approaches were defined and applied. Carpenter and Stimpson (2007) recommend that student affairs practitioners “should be able to articulate theoretical and research-based reasons for their goals and actions. Doing what ‘seems’ to be the ‘right thing’ out of good intentions or out of a lack of other ideas is simply not good enough” (pp. 279–80). The absence of consistent advisor training, coupled with the self-taught nature of advising, only perpetuates the misapplication and lack of understanding about advising approaches that Carpenter and Stimpson argue is concerning.
The lack of advisor training also can be connected to the decentralized nature of the institutions represented in the study. Participants did not identify a formal training process that was used across all advising units on their campus. Instead, advisors indicated that training processes were unit- and supervisor-specific. The lack of formal and coordinated trainings also could be related to the variety of individuals on campuses who advise. In his article explaining the role and function of academic advising, Robbins (2012) explains that advising functions are performed by a wide variety of individuals in a college setting with any number of titles that may or may not include academic advising. Given this wide range of possible advisors, Shaffer (2015) argues that it is difficult to make any generalizations about advisor training and responsibilities. Indeed, even as all participants identified as academic advisors, they held a range of job titles, many of which were working titles that had been created more accurately to reflect their work and responsibilities. Participants also seemed unsure of exactly who was advising across their campus and were often unfamiliar with the number of academic advisors at their institution, which is a reflection of the lack of centralized control or monitoring of academic advising on each campus.

Shaffer, Zalewski, and Leveille et al. (2010), citing Goode (1960), argue that “no occupation that sociologists classify as a profession can be learned on the job,” in reference to the lack of consistent and widely implemented training programs for academic advisors (p. 73). The fact that the work of an advisor is learned on the job and not through standardized training, common educational backgrounds, or required credentials devalues the notion that advising as a profession has expert knowledge. It is important to note that the lack of expert knowledge does not mean that study participants...
did not see themselves as experts or believed that anyone could do their work. Instead, the advisors’ stories magnify the need for the establishment and standardization of minimum credentials as well as curriculum development for training and graduate-level education, in order to help strengthen advising as a profession.

_Autonomy._ The second theme introduced by Gorman and Sandefur (2011) is autonomy, which focuses on the level of control professionals have over their expert body of knowledge and their individual work. The authors argue that societal changes and the nature of professionals working as part of larger organizations has shifted the focus in this theme to the amount of autonomy individuals are granted within organizations and how it relates to employee retention (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). Given that a case has been made, using participant experiences, to argue the weakness and lack of expert knowledge in academic advising, the theme of autonomy will be examined by specifically focusing on the control advisors have over their individual work and how it relates to their motivation to remain in the field. Autonomy will also be explored in reference to the role NACADA has in overseeing and regulating its membership.

The notion of autonomy elicited a range of responses from study participants. Several of the advisors spoke highly of the individual autonomy they were afforded in their work, especially as it related to how they supported their students and the flexibility of their schedules. Yet the same advisors often became frustrated with how autonomous advising unit operations were across their campus. At times autonomy was valued, but in other instances it was perceived to create inequities and division within the advising community.
Study participants expressed their satisfaction with the flexibility they had to perform their advising responsibilities. They indicated that they were able to establish their own personal advising style and adjust it based on individual student needs. Some advisors described having similar advising styles even though there was no mandate or requirement to have a common approach. Advisors also valued the flexibility they had in maintaining their schedule and work hours and perceived this flexibility as a reward and marker of their status as professionals. Flexible schedules were particularly of value for the advisors with recruitment or programmatic responsibilities that required them to come in on the evenings or weekends. Although some of the flexibility was associated with having good supervision and leadership, even the advisors who indicated that they received poor supervision seemed to have some level of autonomy in how they conducted their day within departmental parameters.

The autonomy study participants had in managing their weekly schedules and determining the appropriate manner in which to work with their students was commonly equated to advisors’ feeling trusted to do their work and do it well. Albeit the feeling of trust was primarily referenced by advisors when speaking about their supervisors, advisors who worked on a team also expressed the value of trust among their peers. Several participants spoke about feeling comfortable taking a day off to be with sick children or being able to leave for part of the day for a doctor’s appointment. They did not feel guilty about doing so because the supervisor and peers understood and trusted that their work would get done. The participants who described feeling trusted and having the autonomy to do their work cited these as not only reasons why they continued in their work, but these were also the exact things that made them feel valued as advisors.
As the advisors learned about the pending FLSA changes, they became concerned about how their work would be changed and what sacrifices would be made to accommodate a 40-hour work week. Not only were advisors concerned that they would lose the scheduling flexibility that they had come to value; they also feared that the way they worked with students would be altered. Several participants worried that advising would become more “prescriptive” or “transactional” in order for advisors to be able to accommodate their already significant workloads in a structured work week. Even though participants did not explicitly state that they would be required to adopt a new advising approach, they implied that it would be difficult to practice their current advising approaches under restricted schedules.

Participants who were responsible for administrative tasks in addition to working with students often argued that those administrative tasks would be the first thing they would cut from their workload if they became nonexempt employees. Even when some participants referenced students being harmed by advisors being shifted to nonexempt roles, it was typically because of having to wait until business hours to get assistance from their advisor or finding that it would take longer to meet with an advisor. The range of advisor responsibilities appears to be normalized on each campus. Participants were aware of the range of responsibilities they each had and that their workload might look different from that of another advisor on campus or in the same unit. Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, and Barkemeyer et al. (2015) argue that the absence of clearly defined advisor priorities, along with a wide range of job duties, raises concerns about how much time is being allocated to advisors to accomplish their work.
The range of advisors’ responsibilities, along with their autonomy and feeling of obligation to their students, raises concerns about advisor well-being. A subset of study participants spoke of not only answering emails on the weekend, but feeling as though it was difficult to “shut off” their role as an advisor. One participant talked about a student she was working with and how she likely would think about that student’s concern and spend some time trying to troubleshoot the issue while at home. For this advisor and several other participants, they expressed a feeling of responsibility to their students that made them feel personally obligated to address the needs of students even outside their workday. As participants considered how this would change in a nonexempt role, several argued that it would be so difficult for some advisors to walk away from their duty to see a student through an issue that some might be compelled to work “off the clock.”

Although all advisors expressed some level of responsibility to their students, not all participants believed that their work had to extend beyond business hours. A handful of participants explained that they had very strict practices about responding to student emails afterhours. They believed that they worked efficiently enough during the week that work should not follow them home. Although these participants did not explicitly state that they believed their colleagues inefficiently used their time during the workday, they did imply that there was some level of personal choice on an advisor’s part about how and when they completed their work.

Study participants generally did not express concerns with the size of their advising load, job responsibilities, or ability to get their work completed during normal business hours unless they were referencing how their work might change if they were switched to hourly. Though a subset of participants argued that they rarely carried their
work over into evenings or weekends unless absolutely necessary, there was a separate
group of participants who regularly checked and responded to emails afterhours. The
concern advisors shared over the possibility of being restricted in when they conducted
their work relates to the value participants placed on their autonomy and the flexibility
they had to work when needed and to follow up on issues they deemed important. When
advisor autonomy is viewed through this lens, it becomes clear that a majority of the
participants in the study had some level of control over their work and how it was
conducted.

Participants appreciated their individual autonomy, but were frustrated by the
autonomy afforded each advising unit due to the decentralized nature of their campuses.
They avoided making generalizations about advising practices across their campus and
often explained that each unit was run differently. Participants were typically aware of
departmental cultures, including communication styles, supervision, collaboration
between advisors, and the general job satisfaction of their colleagues in those units.
Advisors referenced differences not only in policy, procedure, and staffing but also in
overall resources at the disposal of each unit. Participants from all three campuses spoke
about the inequities in resources across units. In some instances, the advisors were
speaking to limited resources allocated to their units, whereas in others they were
recognizing that their unit was not as poorly resourced as others. The most common
source of frustration for participants who cited inequities between departments related to
compensation and job titles.

Participants who expressed concern about salary inequities were aware of how
much their colleagues made, what latitude they were given by supervisors, and job
responsibilities. At institutions with limited job classifications for academic advisors, some participants voiced their frustration with having the same classification as other advisors who were not responsible for the same amount of work. In other instances, advisors shared their displeasure that some units were creatively able to use working titles or job classifications to give staff members more money or increased responsibility. In their study of advisor perceptions of the profession, Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, and Barkemeyer (2015) argue that academic advising needs standardized job descriptions to stop colleagues with the same job title from having to explain how their work is similar or different. The authors also encourage individual institutions to review advisors’ job descriptions to ensure they align not only with the work being done by advisors but with institutional mission as well (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015).

As study participants talked through the pending FLSA changes, it became clear that the advisors who believed they might be switched to nonexempt roles were also the advisors considering leaving academic advising. Several of these individuals expressed frustration with their low salaries, but seemed to rationalize it as long as they perceived that their work was being valued and rewarded in other ways, including having a flexible schedule. Although advisors did not know for sure if flexible schedules would be eliminated, the perception that they would be difficult to continue gave them reason to consider a career switch.

Gorman and Sandefur (2011) argue that autonomy also focuses on the control that exists over the expert body of knowledge and the members of professional groups as a whole:
If members of a given profession have control over a body of knowledge—that is, if society recognizes their expertise and accords them the right to determine what is correct or true in this area—then no one outside the profession can legitimately dictate what those professionals do or how they do it. (p. 278)

The role of NACADA presents a challenge in knowledge and member control. For tax purposes, NACADA was chartered as a 501c3 nonprofit educational association, meaning it is not officially a professional association (Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010). Padak and Kuhn (2009) further explained the founding purpose of NACADA and how it carries into the organization’s work today:

> From the beginning these leaders were committed to improving the process of advising with less emphasis on advisors. They accomplished this purpose by offering conferences, workshops, and publications. In this way, the primary purpose of NACADA has always been to improve the purpose of advising rather than to improve the welfare of advisors. (p. 56)

If NACADA’s purpose and focus is not as a professional association to support advisors, then it becomes difficult to argue that NACADA is the body that controls or regulates academic advisors as a group of professionals. Even as some participants indicated that they were still actively involved with NACADA, others had dropped off their participation in the organization altogether. Unlike medicine or law, which requires membership in their respective professional associations, academic advising does not have a membership requirement. Given that not all advisors are NACADA members, how can the organization speak on behalf of and regulate all advisors? Additionally, academic advisors are employed by individual institutions and therefore are subject to the policies and regulations specific to that entity. NACADA could still establish standards and recommended guidelines, but it would be difficult for the organization to enforce or hold its membership accountable for observing.
Normative Orientation Grounded in Community. Gorman and Sandefur (2011) describe the third theme of the sociology of professions as the sharing of experiences by professionals, which informs both group identity and professional ethics. Shared experiences included “training and socialization, conditions of work and pathways of career progression, expectation of lifelong affiliation with the chosen profession, and standing in broader society” (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011, p. 286). For study participants, shared experiences were commonly referenced in terms of what was happening at their particular campuses. Albeit NACADA was seen as a resource for advisors, it was an organization that advisors interacted with and connected to differently.

The inconsistent participation in NACADA by study participants highlights how disconnected some advisors grow from the organization in the course of time. The shift away from NACADA involvement is also compounded for some by the lack of funding for them to participate in professional development opportunities. A NACADA membership does not require participation in any conferences, yet study participants seemed to correlate the two. The range of interest and involvement with NACADA also highlights the difficulty NACADA faces in sharing knowledge with advisors and getting said knowledge applied to advising practices. If some participants believed they no longer needed NACADA to inform or guide their work, then how can it be seen as the foundation and authority of the advising community?

NACADA has established a wide variety of resources for academic advisors, including ethical guidelines in the form of the Statement of Core Values and the CAS Standards and Guidelines for Academic Advising. Though NACADA members may be aware of these guiding documents, the question becomes how they reference and apply
these documents to their everyday practice. This study did not explore the use or understanding of advising ethical guidelines, but advising could benefit from future research on this topic. When study participants did reference ethical guidelines, they often originated from the individual beliefs or practices. For instance, several advisors spoke about responding to emails in a set amount of time and how it was important for them to be timely in how they got back to questioners. Advisors who worked on a team also referenced the importance of having a shared value system with their colleagues. As one participant referenced, she did not realize how important shared values were to her until those values were threatened. Advisors in team settings appeared aware of each other’s strengths and weaknesses and were comfortable relying on each other for support. For the advisors who worked alone in their units, several spoke about their ability to connect with their advising colleagues across campus whether through the advising organization or through their shared work in academic units. Regardless of the setting advisors worked in, they consistently referenced the importance of having access to a peer group that could support and guide them as needed.

It is clear that the study participants identify as part of a community, yet the boundaries of the community appear to be restricted to individual campuses. The mixed levels of involvement with NACADA also pose challenges to how the organization can regulate not only its members but the profession of advising and the ethical standards of advisors. Outside of NACADA, study participants did not consistently reference another organization or professional association as the source of their development. Even as academic advisors have established a normative community through their campus advising communities, the community through NACADA still has room for growth.
High Status, Income, and Rewards. The final theme described by Gorman and Sandefur (2011) focuses on the status, financial gain, and reward associated with membership in a profession. Although study participants often referenced their low salaries in a joking manner, advisors were strongly aware of not only the low pay associated with working in the field but the wide range of salaries earned by advisors on the same campus. Study participant salary trends were differentiated by institution and advisor type. Participants expressed interest in making more money, but explained that they had realistic expectations of what their institutions could offer given financial limitations. Advisors also argued that they did not have expectations for high salaries when they entered higher education because that was not a trait associated with the field. The perception of low salaries held by academic advisors is counter to the high-income status associated with an established profession. Advisors explained that they found value and reward in helping their students, which does not support the argument for prestige and high income associated with professions such as medicine and law.

According to an April report in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2016), the median salary for academic advisors or counselors at research universities in 2015–2016 was $45,074, and the median salary for a head student academic counselor was $80,726. When comparing the salaries of study participants with the data provided by *The Chronicle*, only six of the participants had salary ranges near or below the academic advisor average of $45,074. It is also of note that the median salary reported for research university academic advisors in 2015–2016 is also below the new FLSA minimum salary of $47,476. Given the financial limitations of the public research universities, it is unrealistic to expect that all advisors at these institutions with salaries below the new
FLSA threshold would be able to receive salary increases to meet the minimum. Albeit the published median salary for the head student academic counselor role is significantly higher, it is unknown how common this type of position is and what other advisors’ titles are included in the calculation. When the range of study participant titles are considered, there are any number of titles that could be argued as equivalent to the head student academic counselor role. Yet, when participant salaries are considered, only three advisors earned salaries near $80,726, and they all held different titles.

Low salaries were a concern for some advisors; however, the larger challenge to their status related to the inconsistent job titles and lack of a career ladder, which only seemed to add to the lack of understanding about what an advisor’s job entails. Several study participants voiced their concern about the lack of commonly defined advisor responsibilities and titles. Some participants spoke primarily of the discrepancies in titles, job descriptions, and responsibilities between advisors on their own campuses, yet these inconsistencies have been found to exist across a range of institutional types (Aiken-Wisniewski, Larson, Johnson, & Barkemeyer, 2015). The lack of consistent language used to describe advisor responsibilities, along with the broad range of titles, only compounds the confusion and lack of understanding of academic advising held by those outside the community. In their research on advisor perceptions of the profession, Aiken-Wisniewski et al. (2015) argued that even advisors do not always understand other advisor job titles and responsibilities. The authors found this concerning and argued for the creation of standardized descriptions of advisor responsibilities (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015).
Campus human resource policies also seemed to complicate advisor job titling and descriptions because of the limited number of job classifications associated with academic advising. As the advisors at institution A explained, until recently their university only had one job classification for advisors. Even with two classifications, advisors at the institution spoke to the challenge of having the same title as a colleague who did not have the same level of responsibility. If advisor X and advisor Y both have academic advisor as a job title, how would a faculty member or administrator be expected to know that they have different responsibilities? To help minimize some of this confusion, several advisors referenced the use of working titles that were used to help clarify or differentiate the responsibilities of advisors with the same job classification. The frustration advisors expressed regarding titles and job descriptions that did not adequately identify their work parallels the findings of Aiken-Wisniewski, Larson, Johnson, and Barkemeyer (2015), who argue that inconsistent advisor titles only further complicate an advisor’s sense of authority and professionalism in an environment that values credentials.

Study participants commonly referenced their sense of worth and authority when talking about working with faculty and administrators. They felt that faculty and administrators either did not know or had limited knowledge of what the work of an advisor entailed. Advisors argued that they were still seen as “schedule builders” and that their jobs were perceived to be so easy that anyone could do it. One source of the confusion and lack of understanding could be attributed to the range of academic job titles and the variety of advisor responsibilities (Robbins, 2012) within the same institution and even the use of undergraduate peer advisors, which could signal that
advising is so easy that even a student can be trained to do the job (Shaffer, Zalewski, & Laveille, 2010).

Participants also expressed frustration with having their expertise and opinions command less respect because they lacked a doctorate. Though not all advisors expressed this, several argued that they knew they would be treated like they were the expert if they had a PhD. For the participants who had earned a doctorate, several explained that the faculty probably treated them differently because of their credentials. Although there were some advisors who were bothered by faculty members’ lack of understanding about their role, there were others who argued that they had faculty who respected and appreciated their expertise. The advisors who were bothered by this status differential felt as though they did not have a voice or that their expertise in supporting students was acknowledged. The research by Aiken-Wisniewski, Larson, Johnson, and Barkemeyer (2015) echoed a similar perspective:

Participants described a need for a “title or some type of authorization that gives you credence.” These realizations especially frustrated participants who described themselves as the only people at their institution involved in all aspects of a student’s education and [who] know more about the students than anyone else. (p. 65)

Although not all the study participants worked closely with faculty, the general sentiment expressed by a majority of the group was that their responsibilities were misunderstood. Habley (2009) acknowledged the disconnect between academic advising and faculty members, and recommended that advisors seek out opportunities to work alongside faculty and help them better understand the role of an advisor. He went on to argue that without buy-in from faculty, advising will continue to struggle to be recognized as a profession (Habley, 2009).
In addition to frustrations voiced about job titles, descriptions, and an understanding of the work of academic advisors, study participants were concerned about the lack of an advising career ladder. Although the most senior of the study participants, in terms of years of experience, indicated that they planned to remain in advising for the foreseeable future, many of the other participants indicated that they had come to a point in their career where they were thinking about their next steps. Several participants indicated that they were moved to this breaking point given the FLSA changes and what it meant for their job classification; others argued that they had just reached a point where they realized that the only way to gain more experience was to move up into an advising leadership role or transition out of advising altogether.

What was interesting is that several of the advisors who argued for a career ladder were also the same participants who indicated that they had little interest in becoming an advising director. Participants wanted to be recognized for having more experience, in terms of both work and years in the position, and did not want to have the same titling as a newer or less experienced advisor. Some participants also saw the career ladder as an opportunity to earn more money. Padak and Kuhn (2009) found that several past NACADA presidents wanted to see the establishment of an advising career ladder to avoid advisor burnout and attrition. Participants who did not want to ascend to an advising director role wanted a career ladder that would allow them the ability to continue to develop skills and expertise, be promoted into roles that could pay higher salaries, and permit them to continue to interact with students. In some instances, advisors appeared happy to remain in advising positions as long they could get paid more. For other participants, there seemed to be a tension between remaining in an
academic advising position and transitioning into a nonadvising role. The advisors who spoke to the possibility of leaving indicated that it was time for them to find a new opportunity or come to terms with staying in advising, which seemed to imply that they were settling for their roles.

The absence of high income paired with the lack of status expressed by a majority of the participants indicates that academic advising lacks the prestige associated with other professions. The challenge advising faces in improving status is tied to the preexisting perception that teachers do admirable work but make no money. Though advisors are not teachers in the same capacity, they are also not faculty members. Advising will need to be able to overcome the perception of status associated with the role of an educator while at the same time working to establish its own identity, which seems like a difficult task given how little outsiders know about advising. Although a layperson does not know everything a nurse, doctor, or lawyer does for a living, he or she generally can explain the role and understand the credentials required to ascend into the profession.

Of the four themes identified by Gorman and Sandefur (2011), the final theme of high income, status, and reward seems the most difficult for advising to overcome because of how much salaries would need to change in order to be perceived as high income. Additionally, salary levels are controlled by the institution, which may or may not be in a situation to pay advisors more money. Even as there is also a significant amount of work to be done to meet the standards of the other three themes, the steps that could be taken to improve the status of the profession in these areas appears to be slightly more attainable. When the occupation of academic advising is considered in relation to
the four themes of a profession (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011), it is evident that advising is still in a phase of professionalization and is an emerging profession.

**Changing Nature of Professions**

The concept of professionalism is another lens through which to view the lived experiences of academic advisors and how their professional identity relates to their roles both within the university and the professionalization of the field. Evetts (2014) argues that “the concept of professionalism has an appeal to and for practitioners, employees and managers in the development and maintenance of work identities, career decisions, and sense of self” (p. 34). Study participants typically viewed themselves as professionals because of the nature of their work—which requires a broad base of knowledge—the need to adapt to a variety of student needs, and their exempt employment status. Advisors also rooted their professional identity in the larger advising community, whether through NACADA, the campus organization, or their advising unit.

The concept of professionalism helps explain why study participants valued the sense of community provided by their fellow advisors and how that community helped to establish a shared sense of identity among the advisors (Evetts, 2014). The shared work identity of study participants helps clarify why academic advisor styles and philosophies were similar despite their varying experiences with training and development. If academic advisors learn and continue to adapt their style based on the observed behaviors of colleagues, then it should also not be surprising that their philosophies are situated in experience instead of theory. Even when study participants referenced the application of theory to their work, it was often via an advising approach or student development theory they had learned about through a campus development opportunity. The shared work
identity also clarifies why some advisors were more concerned with being acknowledged as professionals by certain campus populations.

Advisor professional identity was often referenced in the sense of their campus community, as opposed to the larger network of advisors through NACADA or another professional organization. Study participants appeared less concerned with people outside their institution who did not know or understand the responsibilities of an academic advisor, and instead measured their identity against how they were perceived by faculty members and administrators. Advisors often equated being identified as an expert to being a professional. When participants felt that their faculty and administrators treated them like experts, they expressed feeling respected and trusted to do their jobs. The valued placed on faculty and administrator impressions of advising also demonstrated how an advisor’s concept of professionalism was affected by the larger organizational structure.

Evetts (2014) argues that occupational groups, such as advisors, who are employed as part of a larger organization often lack autonomy and control over their work. Both autonomy and control are viewed as two important factors in professional identity, but are difficult to have when part of a larger organization because the vision and strategies are driven by the larger needs of the institution (Evetts, 2014). Albeit study participants felt that they generally had autonomy over their everyday work schedules and how they worked with students, they often lacked influence over larger policy and procedural issues, thus signaling their minimal control. The influence of the larger organization is demonstrated through the frustration voiced by advisors who felt that institutional leaders made decisions without thought as to how it would affect academic
advisors, their work, and students. Advisors who expressed concern about losing the autonomy and control they felt they have because of FLSA implementation immediately correlated the loss of their autonomy to a loss of their professional identity, indicating the importance of even perceived autonomy to professionalism.

The concept of professionalism as part of a larger organization also helps explain why academic advising as a field has struggled and will continue to face difficulty in fitting the traditional definitions of a profession (Evetts, 2014; Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). The nature of academic advising positions—that is, being part of a larger college or university community—means that many of the concepts of a profession, such as autonomy, are controlled by the larger organization and not the professional. Evetts (2014) argues that the changing nature of organizations and the roles of professionals within them calls for a shift in how the concepts of a profession are viewed. She believes that some of the concepts were never operational with certain occupational groups and therefore calls for an increased focus on professionalism within organizational contexts over the traditional concepts of a profession (Evetts, 2014). If academic advising were to consider professionalism in the context of the organization, then the onus of developing professional identity lies with the academic advisors and their organization, as opposed to NACADA.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how the lived experiences of professional academic advisors informed how they worked with undergraduate students. Using the FLSA as an example, the study also examined how institutional policies and procedures can affect how advisors conduct their everyday work and view their professional identities. The stories shared by the 21 study participants highlight the growth of academic advising as an occupation during the past 30 years and the challenges advisors face working at large, public, doctoral universities in the Midwest. In this chapter, I offer four main conclusions grounded in the findings of this study.

Advisors as Teachers and Learners

Professional academic advisors are teachers. Advisors equate their work with students to teaching and strive to work collaboratively with their students to make educated decisions based on students’ individual needs. Advisors also believe that it is important to hold their students accountable and that difficult conversations are sometimes necessary to help students realize their situation and begin to take steps to move forward. Not only do advisors spend a great deal of time teaching their students, but they also teach each other. New academic advisor training, whether formal or informal, typically centers on a shadowing or observation component. New advisors are required to watch experienced advisors work with students not only to learn institutional policies and procedures, but also to begin to understand the culture of advising for the
institution. In some instances, experienced advisors are then asked to observe new advisors as they work with students to help ensure the rookie advisor is advising appropriately.

The process of shadowing and observing continues well beyond a new advisor’s first few months on the job, as experienced advisors report learning new ways to approach their work by watching their colleagues in action. The ability of advisors to continue to gain new knowledge despite their years of experience in the field demonstrates how advisors are also learners. Advising styles and office cultures are learned behaviors and are represented through how advisors use similar language or approaches when working with their students. Advisors also learn from their interactions with students and take pride in their ability to continue to learn, as they believe it is what helps them be better advisors. When an advisor does not know an answer to a student’s question, it is an opportunity to learn something new. At the same time, advisors are comfortable with telling a student they do not know an answer to a question, as they do not believe it is their responsibility to be the expert on everything. The willingness of advisors to ask questions and seek out answers is also indicative of their inclination to learn.

**The Missing Advisor Perspective**

As one of the study participants eloquently stated, “Advisors advocate for the students, but they won’t advocate for themselves” (Ellen, personal communication, September 13, 2016). Academic advisors are willing to speak up on behalf of their students or will go above and beyond to help address a student need, but rarely will they
speak up on their own behalf. As individuals who work every day alongside students, advisors are subject-matter experts on student behavior and academic policy. Yet advisor perspectives are often missing from institutional conversations about topics in which their expertise would be informative and helpful, including retention and graduation efforts. Advisors often argue that their lack of representation in larger conversations is because they lack the credibility or the proper credentials to be taken seriously by faculty and administrators. Even advisors with terminal degrees acknowledge that their credentials make them more credible in the eyes of faculty and administrators. Advisors also struggle with voicing their concerns when policy changes, such as FLSA, are implemented, given that they often do not know who within the administration can or will advocate on their behalf.

Unfortunately, many advisors are unprepared for and sometimes uncomfortable with interacting with faculty members and administrators. Advisors who are unprepared to engage with their faculty and administrative colleagues can leave a negative impression by speaking inappropriately, trying to engage in a topic for which they are uninformed, or by not interacting at all. The inconsistent training and development of advisors, combined with the lack of standard educational backgrounds, make it difficult to prepare advisors to understand and navigate institutional politics. Advisors also have varying levels of understanding as to how their role relates to organizational mission and vision. Some advisors even lack a basic understanding of the roles of senior administrators, including the ones who directly support and influence academic advising and other student service programs. In some instances, advisors look to their directors and supervisors to speak on their behalf, but if these individuals lack the political capital
to voice their opinions and be heard by the appropriate administrators, then they are ineffective in advocating for change.

**An Institution of Silos**

The decentralized nature of large, public, research universities affects how advisors interact with each other, their colleagues in other campus units, and their students. Academic units on decentralized campuses are often given the autonomy to implement policies and function independently of the other units because of variances in resource allocation, student populations, and leadership. The result is that academic units operate in their own silos, which leads to different academic advising practices between units. Advisors become frustrated by these differences, especially when they perceive that they are being asked to do the same amount of work or more as similarly experienced advisors while making less money. When policy changes, such as FLSA, are under consideration, advisors often see policies implemented differently between the academic units because of the autonomy and discretion provided each unit. Decentralized campuses also can perpetuate the misconceptions faculty, administrators, and other student services staff have about academic advising, especially if they only interact with advisors from one advising unit.

When advising units are allowed to operate independently, the overall retention and graduation of students may not be considered in decision making. The individual practices of advising units also can lead to differences in policy implementation and office procedures, from practices as simple as how students schedule advising appointments to what types of questions advisors will answer through email. Though
these different practices are frustrating for advisors, they are even more confusing for students, who do not understand the decentralized nature of the institution and expect that procedures are consistent across campus. The end result is that students on the same campus can have very different academic advising experiences, which can lead to dissimilar learning outcomes. If one advising unit is very intrusive in its advising practices but another chooses to wait until the student initiates a concern, not only are students being held to different expectations; they are also learning unevenly. Albeit some students may have the cultural and social capital to navigate different advising-unit cultures, other students may become disengaged with advising and leave the institution altogether. Advisors generally understand that their students enter college with varying levels of academic preparedness, major and career planning, engagement, and understanding of higher education norms and systems. Therefore, advisors must also consider how institutional advising policies and procedures affect the learning, expectations, and personal needs of a diverse population of students.

Professional Identity through an Institutional Lens

When the characteristics of advising as an occupation are applied to the traditional frameworks used to define a profession, it is clear that academic advising is still an emerging profession. Advisors argue that because their work requires a large base of knowledge about their institution—including recruitment, financial aid, major exploration, involvement opportunities, and career counseling—they should be seen as professionals. Advisors also believe they are experts in their line of work, given the complexity of student issues they have to manage. As advisors consider their role as
professionals, they often do so in the context of their identities within their specific universities, based on their interactions with faculty members, administrators, and colleagues.

How faculty members and administrators interact with and recognize the work of advisors is critical in the development of their professional identity. If advisors perceive that faculty members and administrators understand the nature of their work and value their expertise, then advisors feel as if they are treated as professionals. When advisors feel like professionals, they are more likely to be retained, which helps establish continuity for their advisees and allows for the development of a long-term advisor-advisee partnership that can foster student success. Advisor retention is also critical in reducing the institutional costs associated with advisor turnover and helps establish a team of professionals with the depth of institutional knowledge needed to support student retention and graduation.

Interestingly, advisors are often less concerned with being perceived as professionals by individuals outside their institution. When a friend or acquaintance outside the institution equates their role to that of a guidance counselor, they are less bothered than when a faculty member or administrator makes the same correlation. Advisors who are sought out for their opinion or expertise by administrators and faculty appreciate the recognition. The simple act of asking for an advisor’s opinion often results in the advisor having a positive perception of the advisor-administrator or advisor-faculty member relationship. Positive relationships are critical for encouraging communication and collaboration, which reassures advisors that they are supported and empowers them to serve the best interests of students and the institution.
Advisors also rely on the campus community of professional advisors for support. The campus advising association is the only organization in which study participants were consistently involved. They often stopped participating in NACADA once they believed they were no longer learning new information or because of limitations in funding to support professional development. The ideal campus advising association provides advisors with the opportunity to come together multiple times throughout the academic year for professional development, socials, and business meetings. Associations provide formal leadership opportunities for their members through an executive board or leadership committee, but are also member-driven in the type of programming implemented throughout the year. The campus advising association is also often the only consistent source of professional development, information, and representation for the advising community on campus. Inviting leadership and other student-serving units from across campus to present major policy or procedural updates at association meetings is not only critical in communicating with the advising community, but helps to solicit advisor feedback and support.

Recommendations

As institutions continue to rely upon academic advisors to help support their completion agenda, it is imperative that institutional leaders pay close attention to the academic-advising culture and structure on their campus to ensure that advising helps fulfill the strategic needs of the institution. If academic advising is a key component in supporting retention and graduation, then adequate resources—both financial and administrative—are needed to support advising equitably across the entire campus. Given
that advisor professional identities are primarily situated at the institutional level, there is
an opportunity for administrators to cultivate an advising culture that is reflective of the
advising needs of a diverse student body but also supportive of developing, fostering, and
retaining quality academic advisors who are learning-centered and engaging. Although
study participants expressed varied interest in NACADA, the organization is still a key
player in establishing and disseminating resources and knowledge that can continue to
enhance academic advising services. Based on the findings of this study, the following
recommendations are offered for consideration by academic advisors, advising
administrators, senior campus leaders, and NACADA.

Recommendations for Academic Advisors

- Learn about how the institutional mission, vision, strategic priorities, and
  organizational structure relate to academic advising. Seek to understand which
  senior campus leaders are ultimately responsible for academic advising. Learning
  this information is essential in understanding where advising ranks among
  institutional priorities and who makes decisions that affect how resources are
  allocated to advising. By being aware of these details, advisors may be able to
  identify when larger campus decisions or issues might affect advising and better
  prepare for the possible outcomes.

- Seek opportunities to collaborate with faculty, staff, and administrators through
  committees, volunteer opportunities, or professional development. Involvement
  with different constituents from across the institution not only helps those
individuals become more aware of the role of advisors, but helps ensure that the voice of the advisor is represented in different spaces.

- Attend campus town halls or office hours with senior administrators to listen, voice your opinions, and help educate others about the work of advisors on campus. Take advantage of the opportunities to be seen and heard, but do so only when informed and able to speak in the larger context of institutional priorities and mission.

- Ask the campus advising association to establish cross-training or annual updates from other student-serving units, including financial aid, housing, athletics, student activities, multicultural affairs, and student conduct. Not only do these opportunities encourage communication across decentralized campuses; they ensure that various campus units hear advisor voices. The advising association should also create opportunities to interact with the faculty council or senate, to educate new faculty members and update experienced faculty on the work being conducted by advisors.

- Document your knowledge about academic advising, institutional policies, procedures, and campus resources. Your recorded knowledge can serve as a personal resource, be utilized to establish a training manual, and help advising or senior administrators understand the complexities of academic advising.

- Get involved (formally or informally) with a variety of higher education–related professional organizations. Organizations such as NASPA and ACPA provide a range of conferences, online resources, and publications that highlight trends and
hot topics in higher education, including policy changes like FLSA and their implications for practitioners.

**Recommendations for Advising Administrators**

- Develop a centralized training program for new advisors. Identify topics that should be applicable regardless of department affiliation or student populations served, including institutional mission, campus strategic priorities, learning outcomes, diversity and inclusion, student development theory, advising approaches, mental health awareness, and higher education law.

- Create advisor training and development opportunities to explore and discuss student cultural and social capital in the context of higher education. Evaluate campus advising policies and procedures to understand what hidden expectations exist for students; and advocate for changes or implement strategies for advisors to help students navigate hidden expectations.

- Develop formalized training programs for new advisors in collaboration with the campus human resources office to ensure that training is formally aligned with larger university-wide staff competencies and to encourage consistency in what advisors are trained on across campus.

- If the campus human resources office uses an online system or database to track staff development or training programs, employ this system to set goals and track advisor professional development annually. Hold advisors accountable for seeking out development opportunities and encourage them to think creatively to find opportunities that meet their individual interests and needs.
• Establish a regular meeting for all advising administrators from the campus to come together to discuss the individual needs and issues facing advising units but also to look for opportunities to decide on policies, procedures, and requests of senior administrators collectively.

• Examine the use of advisor working titles, classifications, and job descriptions within your unit. Work with other advising administrators on campus to compare and contrast their use of working titles, classifications, and job descriptions to understand commonalities and differences. Seek opportunities to develop and agree upon common usage across campus.

• If a campus advising association does not exist, work with fellow advising administrators to help establish an association that brings all professional academic advisors together from across campus at least quarterly. Help advisors develop leadership opportunities within the organization through committees or formal positions (e.g. chair, president, treasurer). Provide the organization with ideas for professional development programs and meeting topics based on trends in higher education, issues facing the campus community, and advisor needs. Encourage the involvement of guest speakers from other student-serving units on campus (e.g. registrar, financial aid, counseling services) to help broaden advisor knowledge and networking.

• Foster an advising office culture that encourages and allows advisor involvement within the campus advising association by attending events with your advising team, asking advisors about what they learned at the last meeting, and discussing
association-related topics at staff meetings. When possible, supervisors should
adjust office hours to ensure advisors are easily able to attend association events
or meetings. Encourage advisors to take on formal and informal leadership roles
with the organization, and provide them with the flexibility to work on
association-related activities during work hours.

- Highlight the campus advising association programs and initiatives when meeting
  with senior administrators to help establish awareness of the advising community
  overall. Invite senior administrators to speak at or attend association events,
  provide regular updates about association events related to advising assessment,
  professional development, and recognition. When opportunities are available to
  seek additional resources for advising, consider what resources would be needed
  for the advising association as opposed to a singular advising unit, to ensure that
  a broader base of advisors could benefit from additional resources.

- Evaluate the culture of advisors working afterhours, including their participation
  in evening and weekend events as well as their response to emails outside the
  business day. If advisors are feeling compelled to respond to student issues after-
  hours, why? How does advising leadership support this behavior? What needs to
  be changed in order to establish an environment focused on advisor well-being
  that still provides quality and timely advising services to students?

**Recommendations for Senior Administrators**

- Conduct an audit of the academic advising structure and culture of the institution
to understand areas of strength as well as areas in need of improvement. How
many professional versus faculty advisors are being utilized? What is the
difference in advising models between academic units? How are advisors
classified? What are their salary ranges? What are the hiring practices for new
academic advisors? How are academic advisors rewarded or recognized for their
work? Is there a campus advising association and, if so, what is its role?

• Actively engage with the campus advising association by attending an event at
  least once an academic year. Take the time to talk to the association about your
  vision for how academic advising supports the institution’s overall student-
success strategy. Utilize the organization to solicit advisor feedback, especially
  about policy or procedural changes that will affect their work. Encourage the
  application of a similar association or network for other staff roles that are
decentralized on campus but serve a common function (e.g., graduate programs
  admission staff, diversity program coordinators) to encourage communication,
collaboration, and a support network.

• Ask advising administrators for annual updates about advising units and the
  campus advising association, including a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses,
opportunities, threats) analysis to gain a sense of the needs of the advising
  community from both a macro and micro perspective. Regularly inquire about
  advising “wish list” items or essential needs to understand how advising could
  benefit should additional resources become available and allocated to advising.

• Establish a formal connection between academic affairs and academic advising
  leadership. Consider the creation of an academic advising executive director or an
assistant vice provost responsible for advising, so senior leadership can be kept in the loop of advising community needs and practices. Advising leadership would still report to their deans or department chairs but have a dotted line in reporting to the executive director or assistant vice provost. Through this position, senior leaders formally can support advising needs, including assessment, policy changes, professional development, and communication.

- Require the involvement of a balanced team of faculty, staff, and administrators on committees, task forces, and working groups. Academic advisor involvement should be considered on committees charged with discussing academic policies, procedures, and curricular changes.

- Allocate the necessary financial resources needed to support academic advising while paying special attention to the under-resourced units. Keep in mind that hiring more advisors is not always the answer. In some instances, management issues or the “other duties as assigned” given to advisors are barriers to adequate time spent on advising.

- Implement an annual academic advising assessment process that evaluates how individual units meet student learning outcomes and the larger completion agenda for the campus. Note that assessment is not the same as conducting evaluations or student satisfaction surveys.

- Establish a communication protocol that supports the sharing of information through multiple channels. Do not rely solely on deans, department chairs, or unit directors to relay information about major policy or procedural changes. Utilize
networks, such as the campus advising association, to send out announcements or ask to speak at an upcoming event. Send email messages directly to staff or utilize existing staff newsletters to ensure communication with staff is wide-reaching. When possible, host town halls or informational sessions about major changes to ensure consistency in the information shared but to also provide a space for staff to ask questions.

**Recommendations for NACADA**

- Expand the support offered to campus advising associations through the NACADA Allied Membership program. Actively campaign at the regional and national levels to encourage campus advising associations to register as allied members. Solicit feedback from institutions in regions with low allied membership registrations to seek to understand why institutions are choosing not to register.

- Enhance the resources available to allied members to include opportunities for campus association presidents or chairs to convene at regional and national conferences. Develop a leadership seminar to help campus association executive teams learn how to develop strategies, programs, and find the resources needed to strengthen their campus advising communities. Provide best practices or talking points for campus advising associations to advocate for the work of academic advisors in supporting student success when speaking with senior administrators.

- Continue to develop partnerships with other higher education organizations to provide a wide range of professional development opportunities and to help
members see the transferability of skills to other occupations within higher education. Encourage members to present or submit research on academic advising for publication with other organizations. Partnerships with organizations such as the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) can not only broaden academic advisor knowledge of financial aid and recruitment, but also expand the understanding of the role of academic advising in supporting student success among other higher education practitioners.

- Establish resources for senior administrators to understand the role of academic advising in supporting student success. Include information that highlights the range of advising program models, approaches, and advisor responsibilities. Showcase the pillars, research, and professional development opportunities available through NACADA. Encourage advising administrators to share these resources with their senior leaders. Highlight senior leaders who champion academic advising at their institutions and create a video series to highlight their support of advising.

- Partner with higher education and student affairs preparatory master’s degree programs to create a curriculum that helps graduate students understand academic advising approaches and the role of academic advising in supporting student success. Assist graduate programs in partnering with academic advising units to develop graduate assistantships or internships in academic advising.
This list of recommendations is not designed to be exhaustive, but the overarching theme is for decentralized campuses to think with a collective mindset whenever possible. By thinking collectively, decentralized institutions may be able to move toward commonly observed practices that can help eliminate some of the inequities and challenges facing advisors. Thinking centrally also encourages advisors and advising leadership to think and act in the best interest of the larger advising community, which can only help improve the advising experience for students, strengthen the presence of advisors on campus, combat misconceptions about advising, and improve the argument for improved resource allocation for advising. Having a shared foundational base of knowledge and broader network of resources also enables advisors to be more responsive to the various needs of the different university departments, units, and stakeholders they serve.

The study findings indicate that advisors have been able to support their students successfully despite the differences in their educational backgrounds, training, financial support, and collaboration among advisors on campus. Just imagine what advisors could do to support student success if the appropriate resources were allocated to train, develop, and foster their work. Finally, the study findings reveal that participants situate their professional identity within their institutional context. Perhaps the time has come to stop debating whether academic advising meets the traditional definitions of a profession and instead focus on cultivating professionalism within advising communities.

**Future Research**

The findings of this study highlight opportunities for future study that can continue to explore the lived experiences of professional academic advisors. Future
studies should consider the experiences of new academic advisors, advising administrators, and campus leaders who support academic advising, as it is possible that they would provide a different perspective compared to the advisors represented in this study. This study focused on advisors situated at large, public, doctoral universities in the Midwest. Given that advisor identities are informed by, and situated in, particular institutional contexts and cultures, future research should explore the lived experiences of professional academic advisors at different institutional types, sizes, and regional locations. The study findings only begin to touch on the role of institutional culture and organizational structure in relation to advising. Future research exploring institutional culture or structure could help advising administrators and campus leaders understand how advising programs and practices are influenced by the larger organizational component. Finally, academic advising could benefit from further exploration of contemporary frameworks designed to identify professions, professionalization, and professionalism. Further exploration of professionalization and professionalism should take place in settings that value identification with the employing organization, accountability, and collaborative, interdisciplinary student services. The increasing corporatization and regulation of higher education, technology-enabled service options, shared work cultures, and growing expectations for academic-program completion and demonstrated learning outcomes warrant further explorations of how professional advisors work within contemporary workplaces and might help officially move beyond the advising-as-a-profession debate.

Academic advisors are uniquely situated where they can influence student development, engagement, retention, curriculum, and collaboration across student-
serving units. Quality academic advising is essential to student success and valuable to institutional efforts to demonstrate performance and learning outcomes. Attending to the lived experiences of professional academic advisors in the complex and changing context of the large university enables institutional leaders to enhance important educational and institutional outcomes.
APPENDIX

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your path to becoming an academic advisor.
   PROMPT: What people or experiences influenced your decision to become an advisor?
2. What expectations did you have about the academic advising role when you first started?
   PROMPT: What experience or individuals influenced these expectations?
   PROMPT: Tell me about your experience with academic advising as a student.
3. What motivates you to continue in your advising role?
   PROMPT: Tell me about a specific event or interaction that has motivated you to stay in your role.
   PROMPT: How has your experience at your current institution influenced you to continue in your role?
   PROMPT: How does academic advising fit into your future career plans?
4. Tell me about your advising philosophy.
   PROMPT: How has your advising style evolved throughout your career?
   PROMPT: Give me an example of when your style or philosophy worked particularly well with one of your students.
   PROMPT: How do you envision your philosophy will evolve in the future?
5. If you could tell your dean or nonadvising colleagues one thing about your work, what would you tell them?
   PROMPT: What is the most misunderstood aspect of your role?
   PROMPT: What other constituents or stakeholders misunderstand your work?
6. What frustrates you about your work as an advisor?
   PROMPT: How has the advising role changed over the years in ways that displease you?
7. Tell me about an interaction that you’ve had with a student that has been influential or significant in your career.
PROMPT: How has the experience changed or motivated you?
PROMPT: What did you learn from this experience? How do you apply this knowledge to your work?

8. Give me an example of a time when your advising style or approach did not work with a student.
PROMPT: What did you take away from that experience?
PROMPT: What do you think the student took away from that encounter?
PROMPT: Tell me about your follow-up or next interaction with that student. If you didn’t have one, how do you think you would’ve handled that meeting?

9. What have you heard about the recent changes to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)?
PROMPT: If you did have to flip from a salaried to hourly position, how would that affect your work as an advisor?
PROMPT: Which of your current responsibilities would have to change in order to stay within a forty-hour-a-week schedule?

10. From your perspective, what are the consequences of the FLSA changes to the advising profession?
PROMPT: How does the FLSA help or hinder the hiring of new advisors?
PROMPT: How does the FLSA help or hinder the retention of veteran advisors?

11. How do you feel about the FLSA changes?
PROMPT: What will change for you, if anything, with the new FLSA regulations?

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS
1. Tell me about how your institution is addressing the changes to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA).
PROMPT: How has the updated FLSA been communicated to advisors?
PROMPT: What was the process to determine how to apply the new FLSA regulations?
PROMPT: Who was involved in these conversations on your campus?

2. What, if anything, will change for professional academic advisors because of FLSA updates?
   PROMPT: How do these changes affect the advising culture on campus?
   PROMPT: What worries you about these changes?
   PROMPT: What is exciting about these changes?

3. How have the FLSA changes been received by the advising community on campus?
   PROMPT: How does the FLSA help or hurt the advising career ladder at your institution?
   PROMPT: What is being done to address the concerns advisors may have about the changes?

4. If professional academic advisors at most institutions are switched to nonexempt (hourly) roles, what does this mean for the future of the advising profession?
   PROMPT: How do you continue to attract quality new advisors?
   PROMPT: What current advisor responsibilities need to phased out to meet the demands of a 40-hour work week?
   PROMPT: How do advisors fit in training and professional development in addition to their other responsibilities?

5. What could your institution do to better support your work?
   PROMPT: What could NACADA do to better support your work?
   PROMPT: What is the most commonly misunderstood aspect of your advising work by your nonadvising colleagues?
   PROMPT: What could your institution do to encourage professional academic advisors to stay in the advising profession?

6. Any final remarks or points you would like to discuss before we conclude?
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Colleague,

I am writing to tell you about my doctoral dissertation research study on the experiences of professional academic advisors at large Midwestern universities. The purpose of this research study is to explore the educational, work, and personal experiences of professional academic advisors and how those experiences may inform their advising style and perceptions of academic advising as a profession.

I am seeking your assistance in identifying professional academic advisors on your campus with at least five years of advising experience who might be interested in learning more about this study. Please note the five years of advising experience can be from previous positions held at other institutions and advising does not need to consist of 100% of a participant’s job responsibilities.

I plan to visit your campus on [DATES] and would appreciate if you would pass along this information to any of your colleagues who might be interested in participating in my study. If you or a colleague you know is interested in learning more about the study, please contact me:

Susan Klusmeier
Cell phone number (call or text): [###-###-####]
Email: [xxx@xxxx.xxx]

Participation in this study is voluntary and inquiries for more information about the study does not obligate anyone to participate. I thank you in advance for your consideration and assistance in sharing information about this study. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Susan M. Klusmeier
Co-Investigator
Doctoral Candidate
Executive Doctorate Program,
Higher Education Management
Graduate School of Education,
University of Pennsylvania

Eric Kaplan, Ed.D.
Principal Investigator
Director
Executive Doctorate Program,
Higher Education Management
Graduate School of Education,
University of Pennsylvania
Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Follow-up

Dear [Potential Participant]:

Thank you for emailing me about my research study. I am currently seeking professional academic advisors at [your institution] with at least five years of advising experience. Your experience does not need to be concurrent, solely at [your institution], and advising does not need to be your primary job responsibility.

Professional academic advisors who choose to participate in my study will be asked to:

- Complete a brief participant information form, which provides me with general information about the advisor’s job responsibilities, experience, and educational background.
- Participate in a 60-minute, one-on-one, face-to-face interview during my visit to campus on [dates]. (Interview will be scheduled on one of the two dates.)
- Participate in a 60-minute virtual focus group (held via video chat) on [date and time].

Advisors who choose to participate always have the right to leave the study at any time and can opt not to answer questions or stop an interview at any time during the study.

Questions in the one-on-one interview primarily will focus on your personal experiences as an advisor with regard to training, professional development, working with students, and personal career path. The focus group session will be a discussion about the upcoming Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) changes that will shift academic advisors on some campuses from salaried to hourly positions, and how these changes might affect the advising profession. No prior knowledge of the FLSA is required to participate in the study.

Please let me know if you have any additional questions. If you do wish to participate, let me know and we can move forward with scheduling the one-on-one interview for [dates].

Thanks again for your interest!

Sincerely,

Susan Klusmeier
Appendix D: Participant Information Form

Contact Information

Name: ______________________________________________________________________
Street Address: ______________________________________________________________________
City, State, Zip Code: ______________________________________________________________________
Work Phone: ______________________________________________________________________
Alternate Phone: ______________________________________________________________________
Email Address: ______________________________________________________________________

Background Information

Race/Ethnicity:
___ Asian  ___ American Indian/Alaskan Native
___ Black/African American  ___ Hispanic/Latino
___ White  ___ Other—please specify:_________________________

Gender: _____________________________

Highest Degree Earned:
___ Bachelor’s  ___ EdD  Program/Major:_______________________________________________
___ Master’s  ___ JD  Institution:_______________________________________________________
___ PhD  ___ MD  Year Earned: _________________________________

Are you currently earning or considering another degree? If so, what degree, program of study, and institution(s)?
_____________________________________________________________________________

Academic Advising Experience

How many years of experience as a professional academic advisor? ______________________

How many years of experience as an academic advisor at your current institution? ___________

What is your current title? ___________________________________________________________

How long have you held this title? _____________________________________________________

What is the size of your advising load? _________________________________________________

Which population(s) of students do you serve? (e.g., undeclared, first-year):
_____________________________________________________________________________
**Advising Program Structure**

How many professional academic advisors are employed at your institution? ______________

Does your campus utilize faculty advisors? If so, how? ________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

Describe the advising program structure at your institution. Is it centralized or decentralized? How are students assigned advisors?

What is the name of your advising office or unit? ________________________________

How many professional advisors work in your specific unit? ________________________

Do you supervise advisors? If so, how many? ________________________________

**Advising Job Responsibilities**

Using the space below, or by attaching a separate sheet, please describe your current job responsibilities.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


