Meaning-making in the academic advising relationship: Reflections on student success

by

Helena Elizabeth Cole

A.B., Bryn Mawr College, 1990
M.Ed., University of Maryland, 1995
M.A., Hood College, 2010

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2025

Abstract

This phenomenological study sought to explore how first-year exploratory majors made meaning of their academic advising experiences. Using the literature surrounding meaning-making framed within the relational component of NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising's core competency model, it interrogated the role that academic advising, and in particular the advisor/advisee relationship plays in a student's "successful" college experience. Significant to this inquiry was the challenge in defining "student success;" what may contribute to this challenge is the presence of two different, but at times overlapping constructs—that of student success and institutional success—creating a conundrum for any further exploration of what constitutes that "successful" experience.

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews and a reflective questionnaire, as well as a brief online document analysis, to explore the lived experiences of first-year students who were advised by primary-role advisors as exploratory major students in the first and second quarters of attending a four-year public university. Initial exploration and analysis of the data from the interviews did not reveal significant meaning-making experiences on the part of the participants (the focus being more on sense-making); however, answers to the reflective questionnaire indicated that the first interview may have caused participants to think more deeply about their advising experiences and the relationship they had with their advisors.

Reflections on the findings of this study, as well as the research process itself—the story of the story—reveal more questions than answers. This further challenges the academic advising community, and perhaps higher education in general, to continue to explore and yes, even make-meaning of, their approaches to the student success conundrum.

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to several people. My grandfather George and my father Tom, both PhDs, who wore the title quietly but who I know would be very proud of me—also quietly—for having achieved my dream. My mother Katherine, who left a PhD, and then a J.D., program to raise me and my sister in a time when it wasn't as easy as it is now for women to have it all, but who is one of the smartest, most PhD-capable women I know. And to my son George, who was born in a time when a woman could be a single parent, have a job, and pursue her dreams, and who travelled with me as I did so—twice over. When he was five, I dedicated my Master's capstone paper to him, thanking him for the time with me he sacrificed and hoping he would one day understand how grateful I was to him for the previous five years. Ten years later, as I began this latest academic journey, in the midst of a global pandemic, and as he was starting high school, I once again had to balance motherhood with not only work but school as well. I am proud of the young man he has become as he continues on his own higher education journey: George, may you also go as far as you want to in pursuing your dreams.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Student Success?

At a very rudimentary level, the benefits of achieving "success," would appear hard to debate. Even when the modifier "student" is added, it is reasonable to assume the term would have fully positive connotations, absent any pejorative contexts. Indeed, few would challenge an agenda where the intended outcome was student success. However, that modifier also puts the phrase firmly into the parlance of teaching and learning, and, in particular, that of higher education; the call for student success has become a consistent refrain, one that has received much attention over the past thirty to forty years. It is within this refrain that the construct of "success," and in particular "student success," becomes considerably cloudier and more debatable. Higher education itself, as both a business and educational enterprise (Thelin, 2019), has become progressively and exponentially complex, where nothing, not even a seemingly simple affirming expression like "student success" is without debate, or even controversy. Much of the disagreement that surfaces around any interrogation and inquiry around what connotates "student success" is due to the multiple and varied entities that have a stake in the success of students. These debates are further complicated by definitions of student success (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017) that can become so all-encompassing as to risk losing any meaning especially when taking into consideration the variety of opinions on the topic. Few would doubt that student success is a "good thing." What is often in question is the who, how, and even why, those in higher education are aiming for that ideal. Understanding these debates, however, first necessitates a clarification of their origins and evolution.

Student Success in Higher Education in the United States

The early years of higher education in the United States, offered by what came to be considered the elite institutions, were less about academics and more about an "education in manhood" (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016, p. 4) where character development was seen as an essential key to success. Even as the Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890, and the founding of the first female seminaries, further opened access to higher education (Cook, 2009), the focus was not always on *completing* a college degree (Thelin, 2019); indeed, the enrollment patterns at the start of the twentieth century indicate graduation rates not dissimilar from what higher education is seeing a century later. The experience of getting a college degree was often more important than the outcome, a rite of passage in which the *benefits* of attaining a post-secondary degree were not always touted (Thelin, 2019). Thus, defining student success by whether one *completed* a degree was not a concept on many horizons.

While the concept of "student success" as a functional area in higher education may have been some time in coming, as early as the 1880s, colleges and universities showed signs of recognizing the importance of designing programs that they would consider today to be driven by a desire to see students succeed, however that success was defined. From orientation weeks to first-year seminars, even to the establishment of formal advising systems, the years leading up to First World War were characterized by a proliferation of specialized services focusing on the personal, vocational, and academic "success" of students (Cook, 2009). Two pivotal documents published by the American Council of Education appeared a few years prior to and after the Second World War (ACE, 1937, 1949) focused on the *Student Personnel Point of View (POV).* Neither document addressed "student success" as a construct; however, both POVs reflected reactions on behalf of student personnel administrators to a rapidly changing approach to post-

secondary education in the United States—one that over the course of the next 75 years would develop into the perplexing student success conundrum that will be the focus of this study. Of particular interest and focus will be the schism the occurs as a result of two overlapping but yet distinct perspectives on what exactly higher education professionals, and in particular for the purposes of this study, those in academic advising, mean when they purport they are looking to achieve "student success."

Institutional Success versus Student Success

Several factors—greater access to higher education, increased pressures for students to graduate, rising costs and subsequent scrutiny on students' (or those funding their education's) return-on-investment (ROI)—have created "different and sometimes competing sets of priorities" (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017, p. 22) for higher education administrators. These competing priorities may suggest a new level of controversy—the idea of student success versus institutional success —the one a micro view, the other a macro view, respectively, of what should be considered the metrics of success. Thus, it is important to distinguish between student success as a construct which focuses on individual student outcomes—both measurable and not—and a different construct of student success, which could more aptly be deemed *institutional success.* The latter can refer to the larger, macro-level construct of how students succeed in higher education, the initiatives colleges and universities put in place to help them do so, and the metrics employed to track it.

While institutional success is more readily defined and agreed upon—frequently by quantitative measures such as retention, persistence at the university, and graduation rates--individual "student success"—how to define it and even how to achieve it—is oft debated. This could be because there are possibly as many definitions of student success as there are students,

where *individual* student success could actually become *individualized* student success. Indeed, it could be argued that it is only by an individualized approach that both students and institutions can achieve success. Academic advisors, similar to others in student-facing positions, work for the most part, with *individual* students, and often view "success" as the impact their work has on those students. More and more often, however, with today's hyper-vigilant focus on the metrics of retention and degree completion, an advisor's work is *measured* on the basis of an institution's aggregate success. What may be lost in all these efforts to define what success means is how students view their success. One way to explore how individual students succeed, as well as how institutions view and document that success, is to interrogate how students make meaning of their college experience, rather than simply understanding (i.e., making sense of) the components that constitute that experience. And as higher education professionals challenge themselves to strive for both institutional and student success, they also challenge themselves to consider not only how to get there but also if they understand what they are striving for: do they know what student success looks like and do they know how meaning-making plays a part in student success?

Meaning-Making in College

The concept of meaning-making has been explored in many different contexts including learning (Barber, 2014; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, Kegan, 1994), the college curriculum (Kurt-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015), and academic advising (Wei, 2022; Xyst, 2016). It has been linked to finding purpose (Kurt-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015; Nash & Murray, 2010), achieving self-authorship (Barber et al., 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2009; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Pizzolato, 2005, 2006, 2008) or developing one's identity (Abes & Jones, 2004, Abes et al., 2007). While much has been written about meaning-making and its significance, it is more challenging to conceptualize the process: what does meaning-making look like? Do

advisors/teachers/learners know it when they see it? What strategies are consciously and intentionally used to help students make meaning? Most importantly, how does meaning-making contribute to, and help clarify the more difficult-to-define construct of student success? Subsequently, what role do academic advisors and the academic advising relationship have in student success and institutional success? And could the meaning-making process have the potential to connect the two?

Academic Advising: "A Place at the Core"

Light (2001) suggested that "good [academic] advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. 81); although it is interesting that he did not include "academic" when he made this statement. *Academic* advisors have their feet in many institutional camps and thus are in a prime position to build bridges between various support functions on campus. Academic advising, as a functional area, is found on some campuses under academic affairs (White, 2024; Drake, 2011), in others, student affairs (Cate & Miller, 2015; McGill, 2019;White, 2024) and more recently, in enrollment management (Cate & Miller, 2015; Kapinos, 2021; White, 2024). It has been identified as having "the unique capability to reach all students enrolled in any particular institution" (White, 2015, p. 271). Whether the academic advising community accepts this statement, and/or the one offered by Light (2001) above, in their entirety, or challenges their somewhat hyperbolic undertones, the underlying message is that academic advising does have a "a place at the core" (White, 2015, p. 1) of higher education. And if those in higher education can agree to that slightly edited version of Light's (2001) statement, they can safely assume that *academic* advising, as it is currently structured, and by extension, academic advisors, also has a place at the core of both institutional and student success.

No fewer than 13 “academic advising approaches” are presented in NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising’s (NACADA) book, subtitled “strategies that teach students to make the most out of college” (Drake et al., 2013). This subtitle may best clarify the role academic advising has within the context of each student success construct. Creating and contributing to environments where students can “make the most out of college” could be viewed as institutional success when making the most is seen as a desired outcome; and as each student strives to make the most out of their individual college experience, academic advising also contributes to student success(es). On the other hand, the various “academic advising approaches” often try to distinguish between what can be referred to as transactional advising, where advisors help students make decisions that contribute towards degree completion, and relational advising where advisors challenge students to think about their educational choices beyond checking off boxes on a degree audit. This distinction can be viewed as sense-making (simply understanding the what) versus meaning-making (delving deeper into the why).

Sense-making versus meaning-making

Clarifying the role that academic advising, and academic advisors, play in the meaning-making process can prove to be challenging. Indeed, it is sometimes easier to define meaning-making in academic advising by what it is not: for example, meaning-making can be seen as different than sense-making (Schudde et al., 2021) where the former implies a deeper level of both thought and knowledge, or a more transformative or relational, rather than transactional approach. There are constructs within which the meaning-making process may contribute to a more positive outcome than if one simply made sense of it. On the other hand, sense-making in academic advising is also essential to student success, in particular the learning outcomes of academic advising, and an effective advisor needs to balance and integrate these two processes

within the advising relationship. Thus, academic advisors must be able to help their advisees make both sense and meaning of their experiences. For example, they must help them to understand not only the core curriculum itself (how it connects to a program of study) but also how it fits into each individual advisee's personal goals and purpose (Lowenstein, 2005). It is interesting, however, that Lowenstein (2005) wrote of "making sense of" the curriculum (p. 10) whereas the NACADA core competency language (NACADA, 2022) refers to meaning-making.

It can be argued that meaning-making (or constructing meaning) is a broad construct while sense-making is more specific to certain concrete actions, problems, challenges, or situations. Sense-making thus can be similar for each student, but meaning-making is individualized, which as discussed above, may be at the crux of student success. In addition, it is interesting to consider whether, developmentally, students may need to make *sense* of something before they make *meaning* of it. It would stand to reason that in academic advising, students must understand what the curriculum is before they make meaning of it or, on a more macro level, they must make sense of what advising *is* before they can grasp what it means to them or its impact on their success.

NACADA's Pillars of Academic Advising and Student Success

NACADA's Pillars of Academic Advising (NACADA, n.d.-b) are made up of the core values (NACADA, 2017b), core competencies (NACADA, 2017a, 2022), and a concept of academic advising (NACADA, 2006).

The Core Values, revised in 2017, offer that "academic advisors are committed to the students they advise, their institutions, their professional practice, and the broader advising and educational community" (NACADA, 2017b, para.2). Each of the seven values—caring, commitment, empowerment, inclusivity, integrity, professionalism, and respect—either directly

or indirectly reference the concept of student success. Under **Commitment**, the values stress that "advisors value and are dedicated to *all dimensions* of student success" (para. 5, emphasis added). Advisors **empower** when they "motivate, encourage, and support students and the greater educational community to recognize their potential, meet challenges, and respect individuality" (para. 6). Through **professionalism**, advisors work for "the greater good of students, colleagues, institutions, and higher education in general" (para. 9). They demonstrate **respect** by "maintaining a student-centered approach and mindset and treating students with sensitivity and fairness" (p. 10). Reflected in all these values is the relationships that advisors build with their advisees. Inherent in the language of the values is a sense of responsibility advisors have to their students, their institutions, the advising profession, and the higher education community. All dimensions of the Core Values thus could encompass both student success and institutional success reflecting further the challenges in defining these constructs.,

The Core Competencies (NACADA, 2022) offer three components—the conceptual, informational, and relational "often referred to conversationally as the 'three-legged stool' underlying all NACADA professional development activities and publications" (p. 5). The Core Competencies provide one of the conceptual frameworks for this study and will be discussed in detail in the next section and again when I outline the statement of the problem.

The Concept of Academic Advising (NACADA, 2006), similar to the Core Competencies (NACADA, 2017a, 2022) contains three components—"curriculum (what advising deals with), pedagogy (how advising does what it does), and student learning outcomes (the results of academic advising)" (para. 1). The Concept states that the curriculum "ranges from the *ideals* of higher education to *the pragmatics of enrollment*" (para. 2, emphasis added) while the pedagogy "incorporates the preparation, facilitation, documentation, and assessment of

advising interactions" (para. 3, emphasis added). Four of the six student learning outcomes reflect many of the relational components of the core competency model and by extension student success: "craft a coherent educational plan," "set goals, reach decisions, and achieve these goals," "assume responsibility for meeting academic program requirements," and "articulate the *meaning* of higher education and the *intent* of the university's curriculum" (para. 5, emphasis added).

Thus, the Pillars of Academic Advising, "documents that champion the educational role of academic advising in a diverse world" (NACADA, n.d.-b, para. 1) all point to the idea that since advisors and their advisees must interact in a substantial way—one that goes beyond simple transactional activities to those that could be seen as more relational—the academic advising relationship should be key to student, and by extension, institutional success.

The Academic Advising Relationship

The academic advising relationship, with its potential to impact college students' development on multiple levels, may offer insights into the factors that shape the meaning-making process. Important to understanding this phenomenon are the interactions, the steps or means to build that relationship, which may *lead* to a "successful" outcome, rather than simply the outcome itself. The type of interactions (e.g., conversations, behaviors) that make up and/or influence that relationship are also important. The relational component of NACADA's core competency model (NACADA, 2022) has seven individual competencies ranging from respectful and inclusive communication to helping students understand "the logic and purpose of the curriculum" (p. 32). The competencies focus on areas that directly and indirectly relate to building an advising relationship but also address concepts such as developing an advising philosophy and "engag[ing] in on-going assessment and development of self and the advising

practice" (p. 36). Neither student success nor institutional success is addressed specifically; although it could be argued that either or both are implied. But then that begs the question of is academic advising, success advising? What is the role of the faculty advisor who may be teaching, conducting research, sitting on committees, and advising scores of students? What is the role of the primary-role advisor with an equally large caseload of advisees? Interrogating that relationship beyond a broad superficial level, defining which specific interactions contribute to meaning- versus sense-making, or to student versus institutional success, could help academic advisors, as well as other higher education professionals, begin to answer the more perplexing questions regarding how to achieve the complex construct of student success.

Statement of the Problem

Statements such as the one made by Light (2001) discussed earlier—namely that "[g]ood [academic] advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experiences" (p. 81)—make those in the (academic) advising field feel that that the work they do is important, worthwhile, and beneficial to the students they are passionate about serving. The concern, however, may be that the academic advising community does not always challenge itself to look beyond such grandiose statements to interrogate what they really mean. For when Light (2001) wrote his statement, what did he mean by "good" advising? Did he leave out "academic" as a modifier for a reason? What did he consider to be advising? Light's work focused on the advisor and even the advisor-advisee relationship, but it concentrated on normative tasks—what advisors could/should do—and did not delve into specific processes or *how or why* that experience was as significant as it was *to and for the student*.

In the two decades since Light (212001) made his assertion, much has changed in higher education, while much has remained the same (Thelin, 2019). Scholars have reflected on the

criticisms aimed at higher education as well as the role that academic advising can play in addressing those challenges (McGill & Nutt, 2016; White, 2015), while others (McGill, 2021; Troxel, 2022) have reflected on academic advising's need to prove its "worth and influence" (Troxel, 2022, p. xii).

Muddying the waters along the way is the growing emphasis on the construct of student success and how it, in turn, is defined; for often the measures of success or its outcomes are different for student and institution, or even diverse types of students and institutions. Light's (2001) statement mentioned advising's contribution to the "*successful* college experience" but even that "experience" may vary depending on *who* is doing the defining, or *what* is being defined. A student's college experience is both academic and non-academic. Academic advising can serve as the bridge between academic and student affairs (Miller, 2016) which may be in part why advising has "the unique ability to reach all students enrolled in any particular institution" (White, 2015, p. 271). For regardless of whether advising is mandatory, the experience may help students realize connections between their academic and non-academic endeavors. But what is less clear is how far academic advising, or even the advisor/advisee relationship, has come in the last twenty years to become any less "unrecognized" as the most essential characteristic of students' "*successful* college experiences" (Light, 2001, p. 81, emphasis added). Part of this uncertainty could be due to the lack of clarity (Troxel, 2022) of the construct of student success; part of the lack of clarity could be that those in higher education are actually dealing with two constructs—the more macro level institutional success and the more micro level student success—the former being defined by institutional measures such as retention, completion and the latter by student measures such as persistence towards a college degree, satisfaction, and meaning-making.

Higher education scholars discuss building bridges, both within and beyond the institution (Dale & Drake, 2005; Glass-Starek, 2013; Levy & Polnariev, 2016; Miller, 2016). With a good amount of understanding, collaboration, and know-how, it is even possible to build a bridge between student and institutional success, one that could provide clarity to both constructs. But whatever the bridges, and whomever or whatever they connect, those in higher education also must shore up, maintain, and sustain them. To do so, they need not only to walk them (with students) but also ask themselves, through their students, what is happening on those bridges to contribute to both student and institutional success. For in exploring what occurs in these connections, they can begin to find the answers to the question of how students make meaning of their academic advising experiences and how that meaning-making contributes to student success and even, by extension, institutional success. Nash and Murray (2010) in exploring how faculty and administrators help students "find purpose" suggest that current college students expect their experiences to address issues of meaning and purpose as well as what it means to be successful. They suggest that university staff are uniquely poised to help students on this quest. The subtitle to Nicholas Bowman's (2022) edited volume on "How College Students Succeed" is "*Making Meaning* across disciplinary perspectives" (emphasis added). The connections between these broader constructs merit further interrogation and require a framework within which to do so. One such framework may be the competencies developed by NACADA to guide advising professionals in their work.

As described above, in 2017, NACADA developed core competencies for its members and institutions. According to NACADA (2022) the core competencies serve as the "foundational element of effective advisor training programs and advising practice" (p. 5), and fall under three broader components: conceptual, informational, and relational. The conceptual

component addresses ideas and theories in academic advising and provides a context for effective academic advising. The informational component covers the "'knowledge that advisors must gain to guide the students at their institution'" (Folsom, 2015, p. 8, as cited in NACADA, 2022, p. 5). The relational component allows advisors to deliver aspects of the other two components to their advisees (NACADA, 2022, p. 5). The informational component could be said to be more about sense-making, with the relational component clearly about meaning-making, and the conceptual component straddling the two. While all three components are equally important to the delivery of (meaningful) academic advising, the relational component is unique in that its competencies address specifically the actual *act* of advising, where academic advisors interact with advisees, and where student meaning-making of that experience is most likely to occur.

Under the relational component, the Core Competency model lists the following seven core competencies:

1. Articulate a personal philosophy of academic advising.
2. Create **rapport** and build academic advising **relationships.**
3. Communicate in an inclusive and respectful manner.
4. Plan and conduct successful advising **interactions.**
5. Promote student understanding of the **logic and purpose of the curriculum.**
6. Facilitate **problem solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning, and goal setting.**
7. Engage in on-going assessment and development of the advising practice (para. 3, emphases added).

McGill et al. (2020) found that the relational component was the least stressed in one advisor training and development program. This is a perplexing finding if it is true that the competencies within this component are essential to meaning-making, and meaning-making is essential to both institutional and student success. If other advising training programs follow a similar pattern, it subsequently could cause advising professionals to wonder how this component plays out in advising practice—those advising interactions that are so central to both success constructs.

The beginnings of an answer to this puzzle may be in the specific competencies that fall under the relational component itself. Indeed, several of the competencies touch on aspects of sense-making and/or meaning-making, with one mentioning the latter explicitly. Unlike the other two components, the relational component focuses primarily on *advisees.* That being the case, delving into *advisee* perceptions of the competencies—viewing them through a student lens—could shed further light on the role meaning-making in academic advising may play in both institutional and student success within the context of the advisor/advisee relationship.

It is this lens that could bring clarity to the murkiness of the constructs of both individual and student success. Whether it is trying to reframe the construct (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017), linking a "successful college experience" to advising (Light, 2001, p. 81), discussing "strategies that teach students to make the most out college" (Drake et al., 2013), exploring the role of academic/student affairs connections in enhancing student success (Dale & Drake, 2013; Glass-Starek, 2013; Levy & Polnariev, 2016), looking at connections between meaning-making, purpose, and success (Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Francini, 2015; Nash & Jang, 2013; Nash & Muray, 2010; Pizzolato, 2008; Schudde et al., 2021), or analyzing "*How College Students Succeed"* by exploring "meaning making across disciplinary perspectives" (Bowman, 2022),

advising and other higher education scholars have weighed in on "what is student success" and now to achieve it for decades. Yet it eludes them. What is needed is to view those same concepts and questions through a student lens. How do students view the relationships they have with their advisors and the meaning-making that occurs therein? How do they think their advising experiences contribute to their success? Ultimately, what is institutional success or student success to them? This study attempts to answer these questions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore how first-year students interpreted the role of academic advising interactions in helping them succeed and make meaning of their college experiences. Through semi-structured interviews and a reflective questionnaire as well as a brief document analysis, I explored the lived experiences of first-year students who were advised by primary-role advisors as exploratory major students in the first and second quarters of attending a four-year public university. These analyses interrogated connections between meaning-making and both institutional and student success and how the advisor/advisee relationship served as a catalyst therein. This study also informs the role that meaning-making within the advisor/advisee relationship plays in the successful college experience. While studies have found that participants typically reach higher levels of meaning-making, e.g., self-actualization, several years post-graduation (Baxter-Magolda, 2008, 2009), I expected the additional element of students in my study being in the position to explore their majors, with advisors tasked to engage in more relational advising, to allow for additional aspects of meaning-making to surface.

Leaders in academic advising will be able use this study's findings to challenge themselves to look more closely at the academic advisor/advisee relationship and what it means to say that this relationship is integral to either institutional, student success, or both.

The following research questions, the wording of which is partially reflected by the language of NACADA's (2017a) core competencies, guided this study:

RQ1 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe **the interactions** they have had with their academic advisors in their first and second quarters of college?

RQ2 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe **the rapport and relationship** they have built through interactions with their academic advisor in their first and second quarters of college?

RQ3 How do first-year students in exploratory majors express **their knowledge of the logic and purpose of the curriculum** [sense-making] as a result of their advising experiences in their first and second quarters of college?

RQ4 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe experiences with **problem solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning, and goal setting** as a result of their advising experiences in their first and second quarters of college?

I used the research questions to guide my conversations with participants. The responses revealed different and, at times, deeper challenges to the constructs that I had not anticipated.

Research Rationale: Making Meaning of Meaning-Making

The search for "meaning" may be the quintessential human endeavor. To wonder why we are human and what it means to be human is, essentially, a part of being human. To avoid this

logical fallacy, one might want to ask not "what *is* the meaning of life" but how do we, as humans, the one known species with the capacity for critical thought, *make* meaning of our lives. As human as the concept of meaning-making is, it is not always clear when, and how, and if, human beings get to the point where they can use critical thinking skills in tandem with meaning-making to arrive at more complex levels of thought that would lead to their success. Although it is possible to start this search for how meaning is made at any point in the human life cycle, it can be argued that it is when one is first significantly challenged to think critically, that this process is first seen. Therefore, it is in college, and by association, the experiences students have in college, where these processes are more intentional and thus first begin to fully germinate.

Thus, while previous research has focused on the meaning-making process in general as well as how the advising experience enhanced students' capacities for meaning-making, and while scholars have called on the advising and other higher education communities to create opportunities to promote meaning-making (Nash & Jang, 2013; Nash & Murray, 2012), it has not interrogated specifically how students make meaning of the advising experience and advisor/advisee relationship itself.

Important Terms

Advising administrators: Advising administrators are full-time employees who supervise advisors and/or oversee advising departments. They may or may not have faculty status.

College students: For the purpose of this study, college students refer to that subset of students who are enrolled full or part-time at a college or university in the United States in the pursuit of a bachelor's degree.

First-year students: First-year students are students who are matriculated for the first time in college.

Mandatory advising: Mandatory advising is advising that is required in order for students to register for the subsequent term.

Meaning-making: Meaning-making is a constructivist term that refers to the epistemology used to create meaning out of "all those interpretations, narrative frameworks, philosophical rationales and perspectives, and faith or belief systems that each of us brings to the various worlds in which we live, love, learn, work, and worship" (Nash & Murray, 2010, p. xx). This construct, however, is fluid and subject to interpretation itself. Indeed, it may not be definable. Note: in the literature, both meaning-making and meaning making are referenced. For the consistency purpose, in this study meaning-making will be used throughout as it puts greater emphasis on meaning-making as a unique construct.

NACADA: NACADA**:** The Global Community for Academic Advising (NACADA) is the "leading global association" dedicated to advancing student success through "excellence in academic advising in higher education" (NACADA, n.d., para 1). Its mission states that it is an inclusive, global, and scholarly community, "based on mutual respect, encouragement, and support" (para. 3).

NACADA's Core Competency model: The core competency model is a comprehensive model developed by NACADA's Professional Development Committee designed to be used by faculty and primary-role advisors, advising administrators, supervisors, managers, and mentors, as well as those conducting teaching, training, and research in the academic advising field. The model states that "all advisors must understand all three

components and be able to synthesize and apply them as needed in advising interactions" (Folsom, 2015, p. 8, as cited in NACADA, 2022, p. 5).

Primary-role advisors: Primary-role advisors are full-time employees at a college or university for whom advising is their primary function.

Student success: For the purpose of this study, the term student success will be used as a measure—both quantitative and qualitative—of student engagement and outcomes, as determined by institutional and individual students. Many definitions of student success (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017), however, can become so all-encompassing as to risk losing any meaning. This study addresses a distinction between two constructs: institutional success and student success. The former is a macro view, the latter a micro one, each capturing what matters overall in student success. While individual student success—how to define it and even how to achieve it—is oft debated, institutional success as a construct is more readily defined and agreed upon, perhaps because it relies on more objective measures, e.g., retention, persistence at the institution, and completion data.

Theoretical Perspectives and Framework

Constructionism, Bhattacharya (2017) offers, is "the epistemology that informs **MOST** qualitative research" (p. 11, emphasis in original). As constructionism is focused on how people create meaning based on their interactions with others around them, this study, exploring how that meaning is made, would follow that epistemology. Crotty (1998) distinguishes between creating meaning and constructing meaning; in constructionism, we are not "creating" because "we have something to work with—that is the "world [of advising] and objects in the world [advisees and advisors]" (pp. 43-44). This distinction is in line with RQ3 and RQ4:

RQ3 How do first-year students in exploratory majors express **their knowledge of the logic and purpose of the curriculum** as a result of their advising experiences in their first and second quarters of college?

RQ4 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe experiences with **problem solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning, and goal setting** [sense-making] as a result of their advising experiences in their first and second quarters of college?

Constructionism is a useful framework from which to approach research on meaning-making in that it assumes a process where "subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning" (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). In this process, I not only wanted to explore meaning-making in the context of the advisor/advisee relationship, but I wondered if meaning would also be constructed in the context of the study itself where, based on what I observed, I would also make my own meaning of the experience.

Furthermore, my study proposed to explore how meaning was made within the context of a specific experience, i.e., advising, and in particular, the advisor/advisee relationship. Thus, it followed that phenomenology, which asks us to "find new ways of understanding…experiences through making new meanings and gaining new insights" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 46) would be the theoretical framework that would inform this study. For if advising professionals wished to truly explore what was happening on that bridge between academic and student affairs, "examin[ing] the everyday [lived] human experience…[and] discover[ing] the meaning people place on their lived experiences" (deMarrais, 2014, p. 56) would be key.

Digging deeper, however, it is interesting to consider what phenomenology asks of us, as researchers, and how that impacts our research design choices. In discussing bracketing, the

need to set aside what we already "know" to "let the experience of a phenomenon speak to us at first hand" (Crotty, 1998, p. 79), Wolff (1984) writes that "[p]henomenology invites us to call our culture into question, not to accept it, but not to reject or abolish it either, but to suspend or bracket it" (p. 192). As practitioners, advising administrators have a vested interest in advising; as scholars and researchers then, they must consider what of their prior understandings they might need to suspend, or bracket, to be able to "see and/or understand the phenomenon in new and undiscovered ways" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 64) and conduct their research honestly and effectively. This is a unique position for those professionals doing research in their own fields where their participants are also those who they serve: they are both an insider and an outsider (Naaeke, et al., 2011), for while they are a member of the advising profession, they are not the ones being advised.

Two additional frameworks also informed this study: the c23ore competencies under the relational prong of NACADA's core competency model (2017a), and the debate over how to define advising.

The Relational Component's Core Competencies

Four of the core competencies within NACADA's (2022) relational component provided a theoretical framework for my study. Competency two within the relational component stresses that advisors must "create rapport and build academic advising relationships" (p. 27); competency four offers that advising interactions should be intentional and "successful" (p. 30); competency five touches on sense-making in stating that advisors should "promote student understanding of the logic and purpose of the curriculum" (p. 32); and competency six delves deeper into student success suggesting that advisors need to "facilitate problem solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning, and goal setting" (p. 34). The language of these

competencies is reflected in my research questions and also guided my interview question protocol (see Appendix A).

Defining Advising

The debate over "what is advising" continues to resurface; as Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) remarked "academic advising has been described as counseling, learning, mentoring, guiding, encouraging, advocating, navigating, educating, teaching, and even as friendship" (p. 43). Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) argue that the advising field needs to rely less on metaphors to describe itself and more on "the scholarship that underlies its practice" (p. 43). At the time of this writing, NACADA had just released a draft version of its *Definition of Scope of Practice for Academic Advising,* which could offer insight into how the profession seeks to define itself. Thus, this study was also explored from a hermeneutical perspective. Crotty (1998) writes of hermeneutics as having been brought out of the realm of written texts to "bear on unwritten sources also—human practices, human events, human situations—in an attempt to 'read' these in ways that bring understanding" (p. 87). As mentioned earlier, advising is often seen as the bridge between classroom and out-of-the classroom learning: research is needed to see what happens on this bridge, specifically within the context of the advising relationship, or experience, to contribute to student's meaning-making capabilities. Thus, part of this study was as much a hermeneutical exploration of the meaning of advising as well as the meaning of the advising experience and the advisor/advisee relationship. This approach was reflected in RQ1 and RQ2.

RQ1 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe **the rapport and relationship** they have built with their academic advisor in their first and second quarters of college?

RQ2 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe **the interactions** they have had with their academic advisors in their first and second quarters of college?

Chapter 1 Summary

In this chapter, I discussed how academic advising, and the relationship formed between advisor and advisee, has been identified as being rich in meaning-making, particularly in its potential to be a bridge between classroom and out-of-the classroom experiences where integrated learning can occur. What happens on that bridge, however, has not been as thoroughly studied. If the advising community consistently argues that advising is a meaningful experience, and if "student success" continues to be a construct, however unclear, on which academic advising is called upon to prove itself (Troxel, 2022), the advising community should be able to explain the how and why of this experience as well as its impact on institutional and student success. I proposed that exploring the student lens on the advisor/advisee relationship, a key component of NACADA's core competency model (NACADA, 2017a, 2022), may be essential to this understanding and clarification, and presented several research questions to guide my inquiry. I presented the purpose of this hermeneutic qualitative study to be to discover and understand the phenomenon that is the academic advisor/advisee relationship in a college or university setting and its role in the meaning-making process and ultimate impact on both institutional and student success. I offered that subsequently the advising community should be able to use findings from this study to further explore how the phenomenon of advising itself can help explain any connections between meaning-making in the advisor/advisee relationship and both institutional and student success. I also suggested that leaders in academic advising could use this study's findings to look more critically at the advisor/advisee relationship.

The literature informing this study, focusing on the historical context for this study, the research surrounding student success versus institutional success, the role of academic advising in student success, and meaning-making among college students including theoretical and practical perspectives, will be addressed in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature

In this chapter, I explore the literature as it relates to student success in higher education clarifying, when appropriate, distinctions between student success and institutional success. To challenge what is student success, to question its inherent meaning, entails first taking a broad perspective of the history of higher education as a whole, and the myriad of roles that the construct of student success may have played in that history. I then move to interrogate what the literature says about the role of institutional success in higher education—particularly with respect to the qualifications of persistence and retention versus other definitions. This naturally leads to an examination of the distinctions between the constructs of institutional success and student success, whether these are immediately present in the literature or not. After I delve into and draw out these differences, I move to examine more specifically any scholarship related to the role of academic advising, and the academic advisor/advisee relationship, in institutional and/or student success. Lastly, I explore the concept of meaning-making as it appears in the literature through several distinct approaches. As issues relating to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and justice are integral to any phenomenological study, I address these concepts throughout this review as they surface in the literature.

Historical Context

In this section, I explore the various histories that provide the contextual background for my study. To understand the evolution of the constructs of both institutional success and student success, I first explore the history of higher education in the United States, followed by a review of how student success has been addressed in the literature. I then look at how the shifting priorities of higher education and demographic trends of students coming to college may have influenced the student success movement. Recent trends in major choice are also explored as

they relate to my choice of participants. Finally, I examine how academic advising evolved until it emerged as a distinct field in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Higher Education in the United States

Much of the literature around history of higher education is the form of broad survey texts (Bok, 1986; Brubacher, 2017; Cohen & Kisker, 2009; Dorn, 2017; Geiger, 2015; Hutcheson, 2019; Lucas, 2016; Thelin, 2019; Westmeyer, 1985) with others exploring specific populations or issues, for example: African-American studies (Rooks, 2016), HBCUs (Roebuck & Murty, 1993), philanthropy (Sears, 2023) and religious institutions (Carpenter & Shipps, 2019, Rizzi, 2018). Research has focused on disability services (Madaus, 2011), native Americans (McClellan, 2005; Wright & Tierney, 1991), and women (Graham, 1978; Parker, 2015; Solomon, 1985) among others. C. F. Thwing's (1906), *A History of Higher Education in America* may have been the first to look at the burgeoning institution and there has been no dearth of interest or publications in the almost century and a quarter that has followed. Any history of higher education naturally mirrors the history of the United States itself, including the challenges that arose as demographics shifted and the idea of who should get an education, and how they should receive one, evolved along with the nation. It stands to reason then, that the history of the constructs of institutional and student success within higher education would follow a similar pattern.

Student Success: Origins and Evolution

Student success, as a construct, is usually explored within the context of a larger issue or topic, perhaps because it is not always as clear or distinct as it would appear to be. Higher education itself, as both a business and educational enterprise (Thelin, 2019), has become progressively and exponentially complex, where nothing, not even a seemingly simple affirming

expression like "student success" is without debate, or even controversy. These debates are further complicated by definitions of student success (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017) that can become so all-encompassing as to risk losing any meaning.

While the concept of "student success" as a functional area in higher education may have been some time coming (Renn, 2020), as early as the 1880s, colleges and universities were beginning to acknowledge the importance of having programs to help students be "successful," even if "success" was not full defined or simply looked different from how it would look today. From orientation weeks to first-year seminars, even to the establishment of formal advising systems, the years leading up to the first World War reflected higher education professionals' growing interest in the "doctrine of individualism" (Cook, 2009, p. 19). This, coupled with the increase in the breadth and complexity of college and university curricula lead to the proliferation of specialized services focusing on the personal, vocational, and academic "success" of students (Cook, 2009).

Two documents, on the "*Student Personnel Point of View (POV)* published in 1937 and 1949 (ACE, 1937, 1949) articulated the need and relevance of these specialized services to student success. In the later document, "success" was mentioned three times: the first, "the student succeeds in his [sic] studies" (ACE, 1949, p. 6) is listed as a condition the attainment of which will lead to "a student's growth in personal and social wisdom" (p. 5); the second referred to post-graduation efforts on behalf of the university to "determine the success of their graduates" (p. 7); and the third alluded to the recruitment process' need to "interpret the institution['s] requirements for success" to the prospective student. Following the first reference, the POV elaborates on the institution's need to provide services to students who "fail, or do not achieve up to maximum capacity" due a lack of proficiency, motivation, ability to budget time,

or personal challenges (ACE, 1949, p. 6). It is interesting to see "personal and social wisdom" as a product, as opposed to a metric, of success. Student success as a specific, stand-alone, construct, however, is not mentioned.

Flash forward to the close of the first quarter of the twenty-first century and the idea of student success as being "critical for institutional success" (Chronicle, 2023a, p. 4) is paramount. Indeed, it has become a "higher-education buzzword" (Chronicle, 2023b). An online survey of presidents, chancellors, vice-presidents, provosts, and deans conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in the summer of 2023 showed that student success is better funded and appears more often in strategic plans, with its importance being recognized also at the trustee level. According to follow-up interviews to the survey, "leaders said they felt heartened by the results, which show that a strong majority of institutions are making student success a priority" (Chronicle, 2023a, p. 5). Yet, the authors of the report also mention that the "meaning of the term 'student success'…is slippery" in that only about a third of those responding strongly agreed "that their institutions had a definition of success that their staff members understand" (p. 5). Even so, 70% of the survey respondents indicated that funding for student success initiatives was on the rise with 74% indicating those funds were being directed towards academic advising. In addition, 36% saw academic advising as needing a "better strategy to advance student success" (p. 19).

In a collection of essays titled *Radical Reimagining for Student Success in Higher Education*, Arney et al. (2023) call upon higher educational professionals to ask themselves what their "institutions would look like if students really mattered" (p. xii). The editors suggest that "radical" means centering "the voices, needs, and experiences of *all* students we serve in the fundamental reimagining of the university" (emphasis in the original) as well as engaging in

"root-cause thinking when beginning to address a challenge related to student success. In other words, we must know what problems we are trying to solve before we attempt to solve them" (p. xiii). The essays in part one—"Reimagining Institutions"—address the need for all leaders to "adopt a change mindset and embrace risk" (p. xvi) when it comes to tackling issues of improving student success; encourage institutions of higher education to conduct audits of their policies and procedures that could impeded students' progress towards graduation; and call upon the need for institutions to rethink how they collect, measure, and analyze data as well as how resources are distributed and ROI is measured. In "Reimaging the Student Experience," the essays focus on designing more "purposeful, interesting, engaging, collaborative" learning experiences which are "connected to the larger curriculum and cocurriculum" (p. xvii); and encouraging higher education institutions to reimagine how they hire, promote, and reward faculty and staff to create a culture of student success. The final three chapters of the volume focus on reimaging higher education itself: what to reimagine, how to reimagine, and why it's essential to do so. The editors suggest that this type of "radical change" is necessary not only for the future of our students but also for the future of higher education and the county (p. xx).

Shifting Priorities

Starting with the GI Bill in 1946, the second half of the twentieth century saw multiple pieces of legislation, as well as privately funded initiatives such as those by Complete College America (completecollege.org) designed to increase student access to college. These efforts dramatically changed the landscape of higher education in the United States on both an immediate and long-term basis (Thelin, 2019). In 1950, just under 2.3 million students were enrolled in post-secondary education; by in 2023-2024, that number had risen to over almost twenty-five million (IPEDS, 2023),

While the cost of college has steadily increased over time, between 2002 and 2021, it more than doubled for both the public and private sectors (NCES, 2021). More students coming to college, coupled with pressures for students to graduate, along with rising costs and subsequent scrutiny on students' (or those funding their education's) return-on-investment (ROI), created a perfect storm of conditions in which enrollment management became success management. This also impacted the interactions and distinctions between institutional and student success.

Demographic Trends

Data from the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES, 2023) do not always paint a pretty picture for the immediate success of higher education. The Damasclean sword of the "demographic cliff" that has being hanging over the heads of colleges and universities for years (Barshay, 2018; Schroeder, 2021) showed itself early during the COVID-19 era (Boeckenstedt, 2021; Doyle, 2020; Jaschik, 2020; June, 2021; Kafka, 2020) with the dangers of an impending second dip in enrollment (Schroeder, 2021) causing further alarm among college and university enrollment managers. The numbers for both first-time in college (FTIC) and overall student enrollment declined steadily between 2010 and 2020. While FTIC numbers have risen since a pandemic low in 2020 back to where they were in 2017, overall student enrollment continued to decline between 2020 and 2022, rising slightly in 2023. During this time, retention rates and six-year graduation rates have mostly been on the rise (NCES, 2023). These metrics could reflect that institutions are taking heed of the message that with falling enrollment rates, retention and completion will be key to both institutional and student success

Efforts at expanding access to higher education have resulted in increased numbers of historically underrepresented populations enrolling in degree-granting post-secondary

institutions. Between 1996 and 2006, Hispanic and Black students saw increases in their numbers of 68% and 51% respectively, although White students still accounted for the majority of students enrolled. By 2012, however, Hispanic students made up the largest majority of students in post-secondary education. Similar trends are expected over the next five years (NCES, n.d.), while the *overall* population of students in both public and private sectors is expected to decrease. This has implications for how advising programs are addressing the needs of underrepresented populations.

Major Choice and the "Exploratory" Student

There has also been a move away from liberal arts toward STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) degrees. Recent studies have shown that STEM fields receive the majority of both internal and external financial attention (Cohen, 2016; Jahnke, 2020; Saxena, 2016). Many students choosing STEM majors, however, may have unrealistic expectations of what those major fields require (Radunzel, et al., 2017; Rask, 2010; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Snyder & Cudney, 2017). Over the last 20 years, the estimate of how many students change their majors has risen from 50-70% (Steele et al., 1993) to as many as 75-85% (EAB, 2016). In terms of the students who do not matriculate with a major, Virginia Gordon and George Steele (2015) defined these "undecided" students as ones who are "unwilling, unable, or not ready to make a major choice" (p. x). Mayhall and Berg (2002) suggested that undecided majors actually fall into three separate groups: the undeclared, the declared but not decided, and the formerly decided.

Over twenty years ago, Danis (1989, cited in Lewallen, 1993) suggested eliminating the term "undecided "in favor of "exploratory." However, his recommendation does not appear to have been followed by many scholars; in addition, the confusion over "undecided" versus "undeclared" still remains. In searching for the different terms in the Academic Search Premier

database, “exploratory majors” yielded no results while “undecided majors” found 15 sources, and “undeclared majors” one; in JSTOR, the findings were mostly reversed: “undeclared majors” yielded 53 articles, “undecided majors” 39, and “exploratory majors,” four. On the other hand, in practice, a Google search for “exploratory major” finds that institutions including North Carolina State University, Indiana University at Bloomington, Catholic University, Purdue University, University of Northern Iowa, and Texas State University all have exploratory major programs that are identified as such.

It has been suggested that because undeclared students show a propensity to being unable to make decisions, they “may benefit from additional advising support” (Workman, 2015, p. 5) and a study of six exploratory students led the author to suggest that “undecided students typically present with more developmental needs than other students” (Workman, 2015, p. 10). However, this could raise the question of whether these students have more developmental needs because they are undecided or are undecided because they are not developmentally ready to declare a major.

Carduner et al. (2015) argued that being undecided should not necessarily be viewed in a negative light; deciding without accurate information and choosing the incorrect major may have worse outcomes. Spight (2020) questioned data that portrayed undecided students as more attrition prone and criticized deficit-based models, which looked at reasons for attrition, in which undecided students were perceived as bored or uncertain. He, similar to Carduner et al., felt that a more problematic situation may be students who make the wrong decision at the start. Carduner et al. (2015) cite Mitchell et al. (1999) who suggested that to be undecided is really to be open-minded. They offered the model of planned happenstance which entails “being open to chance, taking action to create and find opportunities through exploration, and being prepared for

these opportunities by developing skills so when they arise, the individual is ready to take advantage of them" (p. 15). Interrogating how exploratory students make meaning of their advising experiences thus will provide multiple avenues for examination.

Academic Advising in Higher Education

While the construct of student success in higher education may not be as well-defined in the literature, academic advising has a clearer presence. Himes and Schulenberg (2016) map out the growth of academic advising from its first invisible era (prior to 1870), to being more noticed in the late-nineteenth to late-twentieth centuries (1870-1971), to an era of greater examination in the final quarter of the last century (1972-2002), and finally to its present day iteration where "the role of advising, including that of advising as a profession" (p. 2) is being consistently and intentionally clarified and redefined. NACADA's forthcoming definition of the scope of practice of advising may offer additional clarification and definition. These last two eras, following closely on the heels of a greater focus on issues related to student personnel (Student Personnel Point of View, 1949) and the proliferation of student development theories (Chickering, 1969; Kohlberg, 1976; Perry, 1988; Super, 1957), were characterized by an emphasis on the role of *academic advising* in contributing to students' growth outside the classroom, which could be deemed student success. In the early 1970s, commencing with the seminal works of Crookston (1972) and O'Banion (1972), academic advising began to adapt theories in its sister fields of psychology, sociology, and student affairs, to its own work with college students. The adaption of these theories resulted in advisors beginning to define certain *approaches* to their work guided by their values, beliefs, and assumptions, which were further defined by strategies and techniques designed to deliver those approaches to students (Kimball & Campbell, 2016).

In particular, Crookston's (1972) work brought the idea of *developmental* advising into the lexicon of both faculty and primary-role advisors where advising began to be seen as more than simply the prescriptive tasks of class selection and checking off boxes towards degree completion. Building off these works, other approaches have been promulgated and practiced over the decades, including those foundational to academic advising, those drawing from other perspectives, and those borrowing theories from other disciplines and applying them to the academic advising field (Drake et. al, 2013). Indeed, no fewer than 13 "academic advising approaches" are presented in NACADA's *Academic Advising Strategies*, subtitled "strategies that teach students to make the most out of college" (Drake et al., 2013). It is this subtitle that may help clarify the role academic advising has within the context of both student success constructs. Creating and contributing to *overall* environments where students can "make the most out of college" (whichever metrics are used to define "most") can relate to institutional success; and as each student strives to make the most of out their *individual* college experience, academic advising also contributes to student success(es). Exploring how the literature treats institutional and student success in *academic advising* is addressed in a later subsection in this review. For now, I return to the literature as it relates to the role of institutional and student success in higher education, in terms of specific processes and outcomes.

Student Success: Process and Outcomes

In this section, I discuss the literature on student success, focusing on the processes—how students and institutions work to achieve student success and outcomes—however that "success" is defined or ultimately measured. I also review literature related to the student experience. When referring to "student success" in the literature, I do not address the separation

of the two constructs but rather maintain the original language and inferences of the authors themselves as well as my interpretations.

Student Success Processes

In focusing on processes, the literature looks at who students are, what they bring to their chosen college or university, and what happens to them once they arrive. Kuh et al. (2006) challenged practitioners to take a

> cumulative, longitudinal view of what matters to student success, recognizing that students do not come to postsecondary education *tabula rasa.* Rather they are products of many years of complex interactions with their family of origin, and cultural, social, political, and educational environments (p. 3).

One way better to understand what happens to students in college is through student development theory which can help higher education professionals understand how students successfully navigate college, and experience growth and development as a result. Jones and Stewart (2016) posit three "waves" of theories from "first wave" (foundational, primarily psychological, and developmental) theories to more contemporary "second wave" theories (reflecting a focus on diverse populations, social identities, and holistic theories) to "third wave" theories that "apply critical and post-structural perspectives to an understanding of student development" (pp. 17-18). Further inquiry (Burress, 2019) proposed the idea of creating "fourth wave student development spaces" focused on "convey[ing] the importance of equity and social justice; model[ing] what equitable, socially-just spaces look like; [and] provid[ing] opportunities for students to build their own tools related to equity and social justice" (para. 1).

Scholarly inquiry has suggested that students from underrepresented groups and high-risk students might demonstrate higher levels of development on some of the second and third wave

theories' models, as they have been forced to confront adversity prior to coming to college, especially if they navigated those challenges successfully (Abes & Jones, 2004; Pizzolato, 2003,2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). In a sense, even "navigating the college decision process may thus catalyze [student development]…because these students may be forced to develop their own formulas…for becoming successful college students" (Pizzolato, 2003, p. 800). The studies suggest, ironically, that what higher education professionals assume to be a disadvantage, a barrier to success, may actually be an advantage. A challenge for these students, however, may be that once in college they have to find new formulas for student success and may not even fit the model of institutional success, or the paths to get and remain there, that the institution expects. Indeed, Pizzolato (2004) discovered that when forced to seek more formulaic means of success, many students opted to try to "fit," and not always successfully, instead of relying on any strategies they possessed when they entered college. This would relate to Williams and Murphy's (2022) observations that while advantaged students may construe—or make sense of—of any challenges they face as simply part of a typical transition to college, students from disadvantaged backgrounds "tend to construe such challenges that their group may not be valued and may not belong or be accepted by others in college" (p. 130). Finally, they emphasize that to help students succeed, higher education professionals should not focus on getting students to change their negative construals of themselves but rather should question what features of the institution are leading students to have these construals and what changes need to be made as a result.

Among Kinzie and Kuh's (2017) nine commonly agreed upon propositions regarding student success are several that pertain to who has a role in a students' transition into higher education as well as their continued success. Their proposition that "[s]tudent success is a

process that begins long before students first enroll in secondary education" (p. 22) reflects the idea not only that students are not the *tabulae rasae* that would make institutional and student success easier to measure and even to achieve, but also that there are many bridges to success, the end points of which academic advisors are not always able to see, but which they may need to cross with students, no matter how long or difficult the walk may be to get there. Their reference to the "proverbial village [that] is needed to help a student succeed" (p. 22) suggests that all bridges need to have free access with no barriers to cross. Their admonition that "[t]he notion that when students succeed it is due to institutional policies and practices but when students do not persist it is because of something the student did or did not do lacks empirical support and should be questioned" (p. 22) challenges higher education faculty and staff to build new and stronger bridges rather than assume the ones they have are solid.

Bowman and Garvey (2022) offer that "having high quality experiences within college environments is strongly associated with student success" (p. 37), stressing that quality can refer both to students having positive experiences or not having negative ones. They also posit that the quality of students' interaction with their environment is more important than the quantity, with students choosing to repeat their interactions "within certain environments and contexts if their early interactions were positive" (p.37).

Williams and Murphy (2022) discuss the idea of student "*construals*—their sense-making of themselves and their environment" where "students' construals of themselves and their environments shape their behavior, which ultimately influences their success in college" (pp. 117-118). This approach to student success eschews both the person-centric approach—focusing on individual student deficiencies, and the situation centric approach—focusing on environments that do not support student success—in favor of a "social psychological approach" that

"prioritizes understanding student construals, which are shaped by the personal characteristics and characteristics of the environment" (p. 118). Williams and Murphy (2022) suggest that how college faculty and staff communicate their belief in students' abilities will impact students construals of themselves and their abilities as well.

From the *Chronicle's* 2023 survey and follow-up interviews, it is also clear that "the meaning of the term 'student success' has broadened far beyond academic success to include students' social, emotional, and physical well-being" (Chronicle, 2023a, p. 7). Kinzie and Kuh's (2017) last proposition, that "[a]n institution's total learning environment—its context and culture—matter to how student success is defined, addressed, and achieved" (p. 22) is prescient of the survey's findings. It is also indicative not so much of any bridges that need to be built or maintained, but rather of the influence that faculty and staff have on that learning environment, and in particular the constructs of student learning and development. While these last two outcomes clearly measure student success, institutional success is often measured by more easily measurable outcomes such as retention and completion metrics.

Retention and Completion

As mentioned earlier, defining student success by whether one completed a degree was not always salient. Today, however, a standard, and easy, way to measure institutional (if not student) success is through metrics such as retention and completion rates. Indeed, Kinzie and Kuh (2017) remark that students and their families, as stakeholders, may latch onto these initial success indicators as evidence of students "reaping the promised benefits of the post-secondary experience…a combination of institutional and student actions to realize [these] desired outcomes" (p. 19). Institutions, as inanimate or collective stakeholders, also tout these statistics and gravitate to them as measures of "quality assurance and institutional effectiveness" (p. 22).

But using these "bare-bones" metrics, "a student could fly through college and graduate on time, but still have a poor academic experience, feel no connection to the institution or other students, and leave with little idea of how to pursue a fulfilling future" (Chronicle, 2023b, p. 6), what one respondent to the *Chronicle*'s survey indicated amounts to a "zero-sum game" where the needle is "not going to move not matter what you do" (p. 30).

While defining student success may be challenging, the *Chronicle*'s survey of upper-level administrators also showed that "colleges are struggling to gain much ground in achieving it" (p. 7). In the last few decades, the idea of "strategic enrollment management" (SEM) has become synonymous with *institutional* success and, in the literature, is often conflated with definitions of *student* success. SEM, or using a coordinated set of strategies to recruit, retain, and graduate students, has been a *defined* concept in higher education for almost fifty years. Adding "strategic" to "enrollment management" meant not looking simply at demographic trends, marketing practices, or new ways to recruit and retain students, but rather developing a comprehensive plan to integrate multiple university functions to give "college and university administrators *greater control* over the factors that shape their enrollments" (Hossler et al., 2015, p. 8, emphasis added). As the overall make-up of who is coming to college continues to broaden, institutions now more than ever must carve out and corner their market niches (Kalsbeek & Zuker, 2015), as well as consider how to "shape the class" (Hossler et al., 2015, p. 5). Kuh et al. (2006) refer to the increasing consumerism in "virtually all aspects of college experience, with many colleges and universities 'marketizing' their admissions approach to recruit the 'right' customers—those who are best prepared for college and can pay their way" (p. 2). A research brief published by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Chronicle 2023b) suggested that "all too

often, [student success] doesn't seem to encompass much beyond increasing retention and graduation rates" (p. 4).

Robert Zemsky et al.'s (1997) seminal work on the higher education market proposed a horizontal continuum, with the well-known, well-endowed, prestigious, and thus highly selective institutions on one end, and the lesser known, less selective, and less expensive institutions that cater to "part-time, adult, and intermittently enrolled and non-degree students" (Kalsbeek & Zucker, 2015, p. 80) on the other. Between these two ends can be found the larger number of institutions all attempting to corner the middle market: to do so they must strive for the reputation of those at one end of the continuum while catering to and meeting the needs of students who attend institutions at the other end (Kalsbeek & Zucker, 2015), an, at times, daunting task.

Also impacting retention and completion are new government-driven initiatives, such as performance-based funding, or PBF (Kelchen, 2018: McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017), ostensibly designed to hold institutions accountable to their success—defined by how many students complete a degree—by basing state allocations on a set of student success markers. The downside to these measures, according to McKinney and Hagedorn (2017), is that they may encourage colleges and universities to admit students who are more likely to succeed; those who enroll more at-risk students will underperform and lose funding. Certain groups of students thus become "most valuable to recruit" (p. 176) as enrollment quickly becomes a function of which students have the greatest potential to earn the college the most points. More than two-thirds of states were using PBF in 2015 with seven "tying at least 10% of all higher education appropriation to outcome metrics" (Kelchen, 2018, p. 703) resulting in some colleges recruiting more high achieving students to gain more funding. As counter measures, however, many states

responded by adding incentives for institutions to enroll "low-income, minority and other at-risk students" (Kelchen, 2018, p. 719). With the US Supreme Court decision in 2023 to declare race-based admissions practices unconstitutional (*Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard University*, 2023) and the increased defunding and/or elimination of DEI programs and initiatives (Exec. Order No, 14151, 2025; Exec. Order No. 14,173, 2025; Exec. Order No.14,279, 2025), the future of these programs and their ability to enroll students from under-represented backgrounds remains uncertain.

On the other hand, the literature indicates that quantitative markers such as retention and completion do not tell the entire student success story and could be considered by some stakeholders to measure institutional, rather than student, success. Renn (2020) argued that they neglect the more qualitative aspects of student success beyond earning a credential—"learning, growth, and development of individual graduates or equity of opportunity and outcomes in a campus aggregate" (para 2). These latter measures are higher order aspects of student success, ones that are harder to assess, yet overlap with and contribute to the more quantitative ones. Thomas and McFarlane (2018) acknowledge that faculty and staff invested in these ideals may indeed see them as stronger indicators of success and view the more quantitative measures simply as "healthy [success] by-products" (p. 100). Scholars of student development (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Perry, 1988) maintain that students, depending on their own cognitive development, may not immediately acknowledge this type of experiential success.

Finally, there is the distinction between persistence and retention where students persist (i.e., graduate from any college not necessarily the one where they started), and institutions retain (Hagedorn, 2005; Shapiro & Dundar, 2015) and the challenges of defining student success considering that distinction. That these two constructs are linked is evident in the *Chronicle's*

(2023a) survey where 93% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their "institution sees *promoting* student success as key to enrollment and recruitment" (p. 10, emphasis added), as opposed to being *defined* by those two metrics. This contrast is just one of the ways that institutional success (retention) versus student success (persistence towards a college degree) surfaces in the literature, even if not explicitly addressed as such. Troxel (2019) suggests that there is a challenge in looking at a binary construction such as retention as a learning outcome; a student's persistence is based on many different factors other than whether or not they are enrolled at the end of a given period.

Institutional Success versus Student Success

In this section, I explore elements of the literature where the constructs of either institutional and student success may be emerging in the background, even if not readily apparent or defined as such. I interrogate whether or not the literature acknowledges the differences between institutional and student success either implicitly or explicitly.

In an article for *HigherEdJobs.com*, Renn (2020) remarked that when they first started their career in higher education "student success, if we used the term at all, was a stand-in for 'transfer rate' at community colleges and 'graduation rate' at four-year institutions" (para. 1). They laid out the evolution from looking at success as an issue of access to seeing it more as one of completion and then to the emergence of "student success" as a field merging academic and student affairs, where multiple professionals, from entry to senior level, join together to provide student support services. Renn (2020) challenged readers to define what student success looked like at their institutions. While a 2023 survey by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Chronicle, 2023a) proved that this might be challenging to do, one college president responding to the survey referred to higher education as "'an immersive supportive environment'" where "students

don't just graduate, but thrive—by a wide set of parameters—personal, social, and career readiness" (p. 32). The authors of the research brief wrote: "the student success movement is redefining higher education" to be this place (p. 31). This work is indicative of the conflict in the literature on what constitutes student success.

In looking at reframing the idea of student success in college, Kinzie and Kuh (2017) refer to the "different and sometimes competing sets of priorities" (p. 22) that guide stakeholders in their student success efforts. Although they do not define it as such, this statement alludes to the dual construct of institutional and student success. Reframing this construct for the twenty-first century involves stressing institutional responsibility, championing both equity and equality, and critically interrogating ways to increase student success on campuses (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). It entails looking at bigger picture issues such as how the university is delivering on their promise to educate students. While Kinzie & Kuh (2017) offered nine propositions about "how to define and what affects student success" that "most stakeholders more or less share" (p. 22) the propositions are largely focused on institutional success.

One of the debates that surfaces in the literature is over the idea of the long game of success versus the short game (Thomas & McFarlane, 2018). The short game, a deficit-based paradigm, relies on detecting problems and suggesting "interventions that may be efficient in the short term but, in and of themselves, may not produce sustainable results" (p. 97). In contrast, the long game "turns the lens back on the institution and barriers to student learning and progress" and focuses not "on narrow metrics of student performance" but rather on "an honest appraisal of how students are performing within an institutional learning community where day-to-day operations may produce their own barriers to student success" (p. 97). The long game, based on prevention initiatives, rejects the idea of "fads" such as client resource management (CRM)

systems as the sole, or even most important methods of creating "lasting student success" (p. 97). It suggests rather that academic advisors operate in a learning-partnership paradigm where technology is only one strategy or pathway to use to realize both institutional and student success. According to the authors, both students and institutions are harmed in the long run by the short game.

Those who responded to the *Chronicle*'s survey (Chronicle, 2023a) also cautioned against playing the short game stressing that "institutions need to commit to institution wide change and not just quick fix add-ons" (p. 7). It also found that while "72% of respondents…said their institution had defined metrics for leadership to measure whether student success was improving . . .thirteen percent were unsure if they had such metrics" (Chronicle, 2023a, p. 30).

Academic Advising's Role in Student Success

In this section, I explore the literature as it relates to the role of academic advising in student success. As in previous sections, I focus on "student success" as one construct, pointing out when the authors may be referring more to a certain aspect of institutional or student success rather than the other. This literature reviewed in this section focuses on defining advising; the advisor's role in student success; the college student experience; teaching, learning, and student development in academic advising; assessment and learning outcomes of advising vis-à-vis student success; the advisor/advisee relationship as it pertains to student success; and the role that technology plays in student success.

Defining Advising

Past literature indicates that academic advising has been in an identity crisis. While this may change with NACADA's *Definition of the Scope of Practice of Advising* (in press), in the past there has been a lack of clarity over who advisors are (Carlstrom & Miller, 2013; Freitag,

2011; Zarges et al., 2018), and what advisors do/what advising is (Burton, 2016; Campbell & McWilliams, 2016; Larson et al, 2018; Lowenstein, 2014; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008; White, 2015). In addition, scholars debate both what is success (Basco, 2016; Hagedorn, 2012; Kuh et al., 2006; Thomas & McFarlane, 2018; Wallace & Wallace, 2016), and who is responsible for it (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Renn, 2020; Steele, 2018). Others have argued that these debates make it hard for advisors to advocate for the profession and themselves as shepherds of institutional and student success (McFarlane & Thomas, 2016; Messia, 2010).

Academic advising is also a structure of multiples: multiple types of advisors (Zarges et al, 2018), multiple definitions of advising (Campbell & McWilliams, 2016; Larson et al., 2018, Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008), multiple advisor roles and responsibilities (Freitag, 2011; Carlstrom & Miller, 2013; Zarges et al., 2018), and multiple advising models (Habley, 1982; Miller, 2013; Zarges et al., 2018). At many institutions, combinations of these multiples exist, indicating that the structures of academic advising in the twenty-first century are becoming increasingly complex. For example, Habley (1983) offered seven potential models for academic advising from faculty only to self-contained: all of which still exist, in some form or other, some forty-years later. In addition, new technologies, changing student demographics (including where students themselves are located, e.g., online), advisor preparation, and an increased focus on accountability, assessment, and benchmarking, have served to shake up how advising is viewed within these structures (Miller, 2013). Ultimately, all of these "multiples" add up to multiple approaches to advising (Drake et al., 2013), with academic advising structured slightly differently within each.

White (2015) identified academic advising, as having "the unique capability to reach all students enrolled in any particular institution" (p. 271) while Light (2001) wrote that "good

advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. 81). To accurately consider the expectations and scope of advising work, it is important to define the elements that factor into that work. A review of the academic advising literature revealed 12 functions of academic advising under five broader categories: 1) facilitating integration of coursework, major and degree choice, and out-of-class activities to academic, career and life goals; 2) making referrals; 3) explaining processes and providing accurate information; 4) getting to know advisees both as students and individuals; 5) and sharing responsibility with students by "[e]ncouraging them to assume responsibility for their education by helping them develop planning, problem solving, and decision-making skills" (Smith & Allen, 2006, p. 58).

Advisors' Role in Student Success

The literature vacillates when it comes to the expectations and scope of work for primary-role and faculty advisors partially becomes there is no one clear definition of what it means to advise. In addition, the field itself was not "defined" or "examined" until the 1970s (Kuhn, 200max8; Himes & Schulenberg, 2015) when the seminal works by Crookston (1972) and O'Banion (1972) placed academic advising firmly within the domain and purview of student development theory and practice.

Reference to the first faculty advisor, however, is found as early as 1841 and over the years, primary-role advisor positions have surfaced under a variety of names from "deans of women" to "student personnel staff" (Cook, 2009). The breakdown today of faculty versus primary-role advisors is dependent on voluntary responses to surveys sponsored by NACADA. A 2004 ACT survey found that "advising continues to be part of the role of most faculty, with faculty responsible for 75% to 90% of…advising" (Allen & Smith, 2008, p. 397) while the 2011

NACADA national survey found that "approximately 18.4% of U.S. institutions rely on full-time faculty to advise students and approximately 59.7% use a combination of full-time faculty and professional advisors' (Hart-Baldridge, 2020 p. 10).

Part of the reasons for this disparity in percentages could be faculty perspectives on their role in academic advising (Allen & Smith, 2008; Hart-Baldridge, 2010). For faculty advisors, for whom advising is typically a tertiary responsibility, after teaching and research, there exist "exacerbate[d] stereotypes of uninterested, unconcerned, and unskilled faculty advisors" (Allen & Smith, 2008, p. 398). Concerned over the negative impact of these stereotypes and the dearth of research on exploring the "advising attitudes and experiences of faculty," (p. 397) Allen and Smith (2008) surveyed faculty regarding the 12 functions of advising they had identified previously (Smith & Allen, 2006) in terms of their importance, their responsibility for, and satisfaction with, each function, using a six-point Likert scale. What was significant about their findings was that all 12 functions were deemed important with the lowest—"assisting students with choosing extra-curricular activities" (p. 406)—still receiving a mean score of 4.51. Not all, however, were viewed as equally important even within the five broader categories. Also of interest was the finding that "ratings of responsibility for providing a particular kind of advising were not always commensurate with the faculty's perception of its importance for students" (p. 406). This points to a disconnect between what faculty feel their role in advising should be (or is) and what they know to be important to successful (for students) advising. Finally, "advising functions that involve helping students integrate their academic, career, and life goals" in curricular and co-curricular activities were rated low in importance as well as responsibility. This could indicate that not only did faculty advisors view these functions as outside their purview but also that they did not necessarily see the connections between the various components of

advising that might, to others, seem critical to student success. Interestingly, although the authors had originally conducted their survey (see below) with *students* to see which advising functions were most important (Smith & Allen, 2006), when they chose to replicate it with *advisors* two years later, they focused solely on *faculty* advisors. This could indicate that within the advising community, the role of faculty advisors is less defined, examined, or interrogated; thus, the research filled the void they had identified.

Looking at faculty advisor perspectives with a qualitative lens, Hart-Baldridge (2020) explored how faculty advisors experienced the phenomenon of academic advising "in order to understand faculty advisors' views and experiences with advising in addition to how their experiences may affect their practice and student success" (p. 12). The study looked at success itself from a qualitative viewpoint defining it as "a student integrating to the institution, understanding polices, and navigating processes successfully" (p. 12). Four major themes clustered around faculty responsibilities were identified from interviews with faculty members: 1) the nuts and bolts of advising; 2) advising for the future; 3) helping students navigate systems (pp. 14-15); and 4) challenges associated with academic advising—technology, advising as isolating, and unclear expectations (pp. 15-16). Findings from these themes both confirmed and challenged results from Allen and Smith's (2008) study. While all participants saw "helping students fulfill academic requirements" as well as connecting students' academic interests to "career or graduate school goals" as primary responsibilities (pp. 16-17), contrary to Allen and Smith's (2008) results, data from Hart-Baldridges's (2020) study showed that the majority of participants identified functions such as "helping students navigate the institution and other societal systems beyond campus departments" (p. 17)—the lowest rated in Allen and Smith's

(2008) study—also as being important to their role as advisors. These two studies taken together demonstrate that the faculty role in advising is, like advising itself, being "actively examined."

Perhaps one of the difficulties in defining faculty advising is tied to the multiple overlapping roles faculty play in "advising" students. In a discussion with four academic leaders including faculty members, senior academic affairs staff, and an advising administrator, many of whom wore more than one hat at their institution, Troxel (2018) facilitated a conversation surrounding "how the advising role of faculty can be acknowledged, understood, improved, and rewarded" (p. 83). One topic circled back to the question of advising as teaching and whether faculty advisors approached academic advising the same way in which they approached teaching or mentoring, blurring the lines between the roles, or if they viewed it as something more akin to prescriptive advising. Another interesting distinction was that faculty advisors who engaged in conversations regarding "networking and career preparation" (p. 89) did not see themselves as actually doing *academic* advising indicating a challenge in terminology that may further muddy the waters.

With so much focus on retention and completion, the fear that faculty advisors might advise a student incorrectly, potentially resulting in a delayed graduation, was also raised in the conversation, calling back into question the idea of where advising should be housed. Eric White (2024) who almost a decade earlier had offered that 'academic advising had the unique capability to reach all students enrolled in any particular institution" (White, 2015, p. 271), questioned where academic advising belonged in the collegiate structure. White argued that the "link between faculty-developed curriculum and academic advising is crucial to understanding where academic advising should fit with the structure of [the]. . .institution" (p. 3). He discussed the evolution of academic advising's place in the academe: originally housed in academic affairs

with faculty as advisors—due to faculty's role in creating the curriculum about which they were advising—it later shifted to being located in student affairs as advisors took on a more developmental approach. White (2024) saw this move as placing "an artificial, yet palpable wedge between the faculty advisor and the staff advisor" (p. 4), which could possibly create barriers to both student and institutional success. The solution, he argued is to create a "new US paradigm for academic advising" (p. 5) where the success of the interaction between student and advisor is based on learning outcomes rather that satisfaction with the experience. He suggested a fusing of the role of primary-role academic advisors and faculty advisors where both teach, do research, and engage in service, with the ultimate shared goal of student success.

Returning more specifically to the role of primary-role advisors, NACADA, the professional advising organization for all advisors, "endorses four documents that champion the educational role of academic advising in a diverse world" (NACADA, n.d.-a): The Core Competencies (NACADA, 2017a, 2022), the Core Values (NACADA, 2017b), the Concept of Academic Advising (NACADA, 2006), and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education: Standards and Guidelines for Academic Advising (CAS, 2023). Each provides either direct or indirect insight into the expectations and scope of work for NACADA members, the majority of whom are primary-role advisors or advising administrators (Carlstrom & Miller, 2013), with the Core Competencies (NACADA, 2017a, 2022) the most directly relevant to a discussion of student success.

A 2011 NACADA survey which addressed NACADA members' views of upper-level administrators' perceptions of academic advising (Carlstrom et al., 2011) found that respondents believed upper-level administrators viewed academic advising to be "assisting with course enrollment" more often than "'facilitating student development'" or "'teaching and facilitating

student learning'" (Menke et al., 2020). As the survey looked at perceptions of perceptions, Menke et al., (2020) sought to clarify these data by surveying chief academic officers (CAOs) on the NACADA core competency areas and sub-areas, asking both how important each sub-area was to academic advising on their campuses as well as how present the areas were. The findings suggested that "CAOs valued items that are congruent with the core competencies…with conceptual competencies being valued the lowest and informational competencies considered most important" (Menke et al., 2020, p. 91). In delving more deeply into individual items, three of the five top mean ratings for *importance* items were from the relational category while none of the items in the top five mean ratings for *presence* were in the relational category. This is intriguing considering findings from an earlier study that found the depth of the advising relationship to be the most important cue from the literature (Mottarella et al., 2004) when assessing successful advising relationships. Another earlier study interrogating how *students* viewed the 12 functions of advising mentioned above in terms of importance and satisfaction (on a six-point Likert scale) revealed importance means between 4.21 and 5.64, and satisfaction ratings between a 3.21 and 3.87 with "academic aspects of the educational experience…preeminent…[and] advising functions rated least important" (Smith & Allen, 2006, p. 62). On the other hand, receiving accurate information was rated as most important and also had the highest satisfaction rating.

Scholarly inquiry has shown that academic advising (defined as contact with an advisor) has *contributed* to student success (Young-Jones et al., 2013) not only in terms of quantitative measures such as grade-point averages but also to behavioral measures such as "student responsibility, student self-efficacy, student study skills, and perceived support." The authors also focused on "student expectations of academic advisors. . .as predictive" of these same

outcomes (p. 12). The choice of the word "contributed," however, is important here. Much of the literature around "success" could be said to be about assessing those contributions—student learning (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Martin, 2007; Robbins, 2016; Schuh, 2008), advisor effectiveness (Cuseo, 2008) or advising programs (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Robbins, 2012; Troxel, 2008)—to institutional and student success. It is normative in nature in that in takes academic advising from where it believes itself to be to where it knows it ought to be, "collecting and interpreting evidence…with the goal of continuous improvement" (Zarges et al., 2008, p. 47).

On the other hand, "success" as its own distinctive outcome is not always injected into the analysis, research design or paradigm. Indeed, in looking at the index of *Academic Advising: A Comprehensive Handbook* (Gordon et al., 2008), the word "success" does not even appear as its own heading. In Kuh et al.'s (2006) exhaustive review of the literature, *What Matters to Student Success,* "academic advising" is listed along with "early warning systems," and "student success initiatives" each as separate categories (p. iv).

Data from the *Chronicle*'s 2023 survey of upper-level administrators found that 91% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their "institution does a good job making success a priority with faculty and staff members" but only 13% strongly agreed and 49% agreed that "every faculty member at our institution understands how we define student success and what is their own role in achieving student success" (Chronicle, 2023a, p. 24). A similar survey (Chronicle, 2023b) of "academic and administrative leaders, faculty members, and students" attempted to ascertain how they "view[ed] their own institutions' accomplishments and challenges in the area of student success" (p. 4). While overall all groups were optimistic in their beliefs about their institutions' ability to retain and graduate students, academic and

administrative leaders and faculty identified academic advising as the top area that needed improvement when it came to helping retain and graduate students, while students identified advising as second to financial aid in their answer to that question. Exploring how *students* make meaning of their advising experiences might help answer some of the questions raised in the *Chronicle*'s report or begin to address its suggestions.

Also contributing greatly to how student success is addressed in the literature is the idea of the college student experience, particularly how students transition into and through their years in post-secondary education.

The College Student Experience

Bean and Eaton (2001) suggested that once matriculated at their chosen college or university, students then experience college through their interactions with people and processes in "bureaucratic, academic, and social realms" while still having contact with those outside the institution (p. 75). Not all these interactions result in social integration or success. Students will develop adaptive strategies as a result of "emotional reactions to college environments," the purpose of such strategies is to become more comfortably integrated, academically and socially, into their new environment (p. 75). In addition to this sense of belonging, Bean and Eaton (2001) suggested that having a high degree of self-efficacy, an ability to cope/adjust to new situations, and an internal locus of control are factors that contribute to student success. Williams and Murphy (2022) remarked on research that posits that paying attention to "students' construals of belonging" (p. 129) as they transition to college can also be critical to helping them succeed. Kuh et al. (2006) offered that "the college experience…includes two central features *students' behaviors* and *institutional conditions*"….the intersection of which is *student engagement*" and suggested that the latter is something that "college and universities can do something about, at

least on the margins" (p. 8, emphases in original), unlike students' pre-college student characteristics which are beyond their control. On the other hand, Bean and Eaton (2001) offered that that these processes are not linear but rather circular and reciprocal, where success in one area can lead to motivation in another which can then lead to greater overall student success. Kinzie and Kuh's (2017) statement, mentioned earlier, that "[a]n institution's total learning environment—its context and culture—matter to how student success is defined, addressed, and achieved" (p. 22) could reflect the influence that faculty and staff, as subsets of that context and culture, have on that learning environment, and in particular the constructs of student learning and development.

Teaching, Learning, and Student Development

The potential for faculty and staff who work in higher education to have an influence on student learning and development is undeniable. They are the people who are not only charged and entrusted with these two key elements of student success, but they also are the ones who perhaps understand best the impact that student learning and development also have on institutional success.

Students interact and engage with faculty and staff daily in academic and social situations. Extensive inquiry has demonstrated the positive impacts of these interactions (Schreiner, 2011), in both curricular and co-curricular areas, where the "research on student development indicates that students learn more and deeply when their experiences inside and outside the classroom are complementary and mutually reinforcing" (Kuh et al. 2006, p. 104). Studies also showed that students reported "greater gains in cognitive development" when their faculty were perceived to be invested in teaching and their development (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 79)

as well as found that "faculty who display a genuine interest in students also positively influence the academic and intellectual development of students" (Braxton et al., 2014, p. 210).

The role that staff members have in student learning and development may be harder to assess as the term "staff" can encompass a large variety of positions and functions on campus. Nevertheless, Kuh et al., (2006) suggested that if "student affairs staff *and others* who routinely interact with students outside the classroom" were to engage in similar behaviors [to those experiences in the classroom] with students and show an equal amount of interest, "out-of-class experiences would make a greater contribution to students' learning and personal development" (p. 67, emphasis added). This is evidence of accepting perhaps that all learning is learning and all development is development, where any person has the potential to positively impact students in these areas.

In 2015, Eric White addressed some of the criticisms facing American higher education and reflected on the role academic advising could take in addressing those criticisms while meeting the challenges of a changing landscape. He suggested that the time had come for academic advising to

> assert its own centrality and acknowledge that a new paradigm, based on a unifying vision of educational purpose, is needed to guide American higher education out of its current circumstances….This new paradigm should be based on a view that educational goals and purposes need to be extended beyond acquiring knowledge to include the development of individual students' capacities for personal empowerment as autonomous intellectual agents (p. 271).

Fifty years ago, the introduction of the concept of developmental advising (Crookston, 1972; O'Banion, 1972)—the psychological model of retention (Bean & Eaton, 2001)—as

opposed to prescriptive advising, invigorated the academic advising community, partially because it aligned itself with the growing field of student development theories of the time. While those approaches were sufficient to guide a young but growing profession, current scholarship questions whether they are still relevant to the needs of today's students (Hemwall & Trachte, 2005; Lowenstein, 2005; White 2015).

In presenting "10 Organizing Principles" for "Academic Advising as Learning," Hemwall and Trachte (2005) challenged the then prevailing developmental model of academic advising that they saw as more steeped in counseling and self-actualization goals, which to them were "problematic because they stood outside the core academic and curricular missions of higher education" (p. 74). They suggested that a learning paradigm for academic advising would more effectively reflect advising's place in that mission. Building on the ideas of Strommer (1994)—who suggested that advisors think in terms of "structuring ways to actively engage students in learning and doing" (p. 93), Hagen (1994)—who argued that we should view advising as dialectic, a "two-way street" where advisors serve as "interlocutor, a sounding board for [student's] ideas" (p. 87), and Lowenstein and Stockton (1999)—who challenged the idea of developmental advising as a counter-reaction to prescriptive advising and proposed instead what they called "academically centered advising" (para. 12), Hemwall and Trachte (2005) offered the idea of a new learning paradigm. In this approach, learning becomes the "central concept for a new organizing framework" based on 10 principles under two overarching questions: what the students should learn—the curriculum, and how might the learning take place—the pedagogy (which are also reflected in NACADA's Concept of Academic Advising (NACADA, 2006). Each of the 10 principles reflects the role of academic advising and advisors as facilitators of student learning and co-constructors of knowledge within the context of the greater educational

environment. Advising as learning also serves to merge the sometime disparate roles of faculty and primary-role advisors where "faculty see academic advising as…a seamless part of their teaching and scholarly roles…[and] primary-role advisors . . .see how they are working towards the same mission as the faculty" (Hemwall & Trachte, 2005, p. 82). White (2024) would suggest a similar paradigm almost 20 years later reflecting perhaps the cyclical nature of the advising profession.

In 2020, the *NACADA Journal* reprinted Marc Lowenstein's seminal article from 15 years earlier entitled "If Advising is Teaching, What do Advisors Teach" (Lowenstein, 2005, 2020) where he also offered the idea of a learning-centered paradigm for academic advising in the place of the prevalent developmental one. Suggesting that the "excellent advisor" acts as teacher of the logic of the curriculum in much the same way an instructor demonstrates to their students an entire course's content, Lowenstein (2005, 2020) posited that the learning paradigm of advising situates the advisor's role as one of the "utmost importance" in higher education, providing a unique service that no other can provide" (p. 5, emphasis in original). He argued that learning happens when students "make sense of" the curriculum which is entirely within the purview of the advisor or the advising system (p. 10). The advisor can also help students construct relationships between courses, which will differ for each student. In a learning paradigm approach to advising, both the advising relationship and advising itself are constructed to meet these goals.

White (2015) also referenced the move away from developmental advising as "orthodoxy" when he remarked that scholars "now examine and purport other approaches to advising drawing from theories of how relationships are constructed and how students learn" to a point where "a new practice has taken root on American campuses to fulfill a need in response to

curricular and institutional developments" (p. 274). Hart-Baldridge (2020) posited that the data from their study of faculty advisor perspectives on academic advising "support the use of an organized learning paradigm, which situates advising as a place for teaching and learning" (p. 17).

Learning-centered advising entails active learning where students are challenged to think about what they are learning (Reynolds, 2013), a meta-learning process where students learn what it means to learn, and where the outcome is less important than that process. Advising becomes more meaningful to the student as they understand the purpose behind and meaning of what is being advised.

Finally, a constructivist approach to academic advising, like one to learning, would suggest that advisors help students learn by situating them in the context of their advising experiences. Here "learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge" and advising, like learning "is a process of supporting construction of knowledge rather than communicating information" where advisees "must construct their own meaning" of the information given to them (Musser & Yodder, p. 181). Constructivism, thus, suggests an extension of the learning paradigm to the use of learning partnership models, which also can be translated to the advising experience.

Student Success and the Advisor/Advisee relationship

The Core Competencies Model (NACADA, 2017a, 2022), developed by NACADA's professional development committee, was designed to "identify the broad range of understanding, knowledge, and skills that support academic advising. . .to guide professional development, and to promote the contributions of advising to student development, progress, and *success*" (NACADA, 2022, p. 4, emphasis added). It clarified three broad "content categories—

the conceptual, informational, and relational…an understanding [of which] provides advisors the knowledge and skills to be effective guides for students" (para. 2). It has been suggested that it is the relationships that advisors form with their advisees that are most important to student success (Higgins, 2017; Mottarella et al., 2004; White, 2015); thus it is surprising that some research has found that the relational component was the least often addressed in advisor training and development (McGill et al., 2020; Robbins, 2012).

Champlin-Schraff and Hagen (2013), in laying out a hermeneutic approach to academic advising, discussed advising as "construction of an education, the product of work done by both advisor and advisee" (p. 223) where the advising relationship becomes one of symbiotic interpretation, understanding, and meaning-making. Advising within a hermeneutic approach is structured around the assumption that "good advice is based on an understanding of what is important to and what makes sense to the individuals being advised" where advisors "probe for context" through two-sided conversations and self-reflection (p. 237).

Assessment and Learning Outcomes

Much of the literature discussed herein has sought to interrogate the influence of advising on institutional and/or student success. However, as Troxel (2022) also offered, the data advising administrators have to do so are often "simplistic and incomplete" (p. xii). Assessing how academic advising contributes to institutional or student success can be challenging. Troxel (2022) expressed that academic advising is "challenged to *prove* our worth and our influences on fuzzy constructs like 'student success'" (p. xiii, emphasis in original) and Young-Jones et al. (2013) raised the question of whether the focus on student *satisfaction* with advising had overshadowed any attempts to assess academic advising's impact on student success. White (2024) raised similar concerns regarding the focus on assessing whether students were satisfied

with their advising experience rather than on what they learned from their interactions with their advisors.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) not only provided guidance for assessing academic advising in its *2023 CAS Standard and Guidelines for Academic Advising Programs (AAP)* but also addressed the influence of academic advising in its introduction (CAS, 2023). In Part Three, "Student Learning, Development, and Success," the CAS stated that Academic Advising Programs (AAP) must "contribute to student learning and development by offering programs and services that support curricular and co-curricular experiences" (p. 7) and offered several "musts" for AAPs. In the section on Assessment, CAS stated that "Academic Advising Programs (AAP) must create and sustain a culture of assessment that is transparent and valued by its constituents" (p. 8). In the section on "Gathering Evidence and Data" CAS stressed the need for "multiple methods and measures of data collection" including "persistence and outcome metrics . . .effectiveness and contact metrics . . .learning focused metrics . . .behavioral metrics . . .[and] student development metrics" (p. 9), thus addressing both institutional and student success.

Assessment activities focused on improving teaching and learning have been prominent in academe over the last 25 years; at the same time, teaching and learning "have become the global focus for academic advising due to a paradigm shift within the profession" (Zarges et al. 2018). Assessment in academic advising addresses both what students learn from advising as well as how effectively advising is delivered (Zarges et al. 2018), both of which have implications for institutional and student success and the advisor/advisee-relationship. Critical issues in the assessment of academic advising include not only "student success, retention, and persistence to graduation. . .the structure and delivery of academic advising . . . embedded

assessment, accountability, and accreditation. . .training and professional development. . .[and] technology" but also "a culture of assessment. . .that recognizes the value and importance of weaving assessment of student life into the everyday life of the institution" (Zarges et al., 2018 pp. 48-53). Zarges et al. (2018) offered that effective assessment depends on colleges and universities having a "genuine interest in knowing what students are learning from the advising process and making changes based on the findings rather than just collecting data about student satisfaction" (p. 53). While assessing meaning-making is not specifically mentioned, doing so would seem to address both student learning outcomes as well as advising-delivery outcomes.

The importance of assessing academic advising in terms of how its programs and outcomes align with the institutional mission, as well as strategic and overall enrollment plans, is also key (Robbins et al., 2022b). The assessment cycle includes foundational elements, stemming from the identification of intended learning outcomes (Robbins et al., 2022a). Academic advising programs assess impact through indirect measures, including "information resulting from recall of past events and behaviors or opinions and perceptions" (Robbins et al., 2022b, p. 17) and direct measures, involving "firsthand observation of or access to the outcome information of the original experience" (p. 17).

In assessing student learning and development, however, it is also important to reflect upon the role that power and privilege play in creating other barriers to success. For example, students with fewer financial means will continue to struggle to make ends meet and enjoy college in the same way as their more affluent fellow students (Hornak et al., 2018; McClure & Ryder, 2018). Social and economic capital can impact a student's ability to be successful, not only academically but interpersonally and intrapersonally as well. The CAS Standards and Guidelines for Academic Advising Programs (CAS, 2023) included a section on "Access,

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice" under the guiding principle of "Advocating for Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Communities" (p. 10) where specific mandates are offered for addressing the needs of underrepresented student populations. Despite this, research has shown that academic advising is not always set up to be race-neutral in terms of physical space, nor were advising offices meeting the needs of diverse students, particularly when students from underrepresented groups were advised by white advisors (Lee, 2018).

The Role of Technology in Student Success

The literature also has explored the issue of the use of using data and technology to inform and improve student success programs (Steele, 2018). The Wilcox (2017) model (cited in Steele, 2018) offers that an advising program must contain "'both technology-mediated and in-person interventions if it is to have a measurable impact on student performance and progress'" (p. 61); good advising should both "push" information to students (a service approach) as well as "pull" information from students through active two-way communication. The Steele (2018) model, alternatively, proposes using Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) to "assist students in centering their academic and career plans within their developing ethical and moral framework…[and] to use technology to more effectively develop their plans" (p. 63).

In making the case for strategic academic advising management (SAAM), Joslin (2018) also cautioned against relying on either commercial student success products or the support of the many "non-profit, philanthropic, and equity and access-based organizations" (p. 12) working to help move the needle on student retention, persistence, and completion rates. Rather, student success depends on designing "new and strategic approaches to *academic advising management"* (p. 13, emphasis in original) as opposed to allowing student success strategies to be diffused across multiple functional areas on campus. Using SAAM, which draws its principles

from SEM, addresses both "the core of what advising is"—i.e., relationship building [student success]—while also "keep[ing] in mind the needs of institutions in meeting larger and sometimes mandated goals" [institutional success] (p. 14).

Most recently, a new player—that of predictive analytics and the new software programs (CRMs) designed to utilize them—has joined the academic advising field, one which brings its share of ethical challenges (Barshay & Aslanian, 2019; Johnson, 2014; Xyst, 2017). As of 2016, it was estimated that 120 companies were marketing CRMs with predictive analytics software to colleges and universities (Joslin, 2018). Given the increasing pressure on colleges and universities to retain students, the number is most likely much higher today. The focus of these processes—to pre-identify students who may be at risk or to steer students into certain fields—may result in students, particularly those from underrepresented populations, being stereotyped by algorithms into certain interventions (Barshay & Aslanian, 2019; Johnson, 2014). In 2013, Lowenstein (2013) envisioned a potential future for advising where advisors were replaced by a computer algorithm which helped students choose classes and determined whether course substitutions were possible. Whether they have come to fruition or not, ultimately, these processes could impact the academic advising relationship and the meaning-making that takes place as a result of that relationship.

Meaning-Making in College

This section examines the literature surrounding how students make meaning of their college experiences. Meaning-making is explored through the college curriculum, finding purpose, developing one's identity, and academic advising. The distinction between meaning-making and sense-making is addressed. Finally, I briefly explore the constructs of self-authorship theory and student learning as they relate to student meaning-making.

College Curriculum

Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Francini (2014) explored how advisors could help students make meaning of seemingly meaningless (to them) college curricula. They offered that "academic advisors…are in a prime position to help students make personal connections between their search for meaning and purpose and general education" (p. 99) which might make the benefits of these courses "more immediate and tangible" (p. 101). Although they suggest that academic advisors can help students make meaning, they do not interrogate how the process of that meaning-making occurs or how students make meaning of the advising experience itself.

Finding Purpose

Finding purpose has also been equated to meaning-making in the literature. Nash and Murray (2010) subtitled their book *Helping College Students Find Purpose,* "the campus guide to meaning-making." Although they acknowledged that they often conflated the two terms (purpose and meaning-making), they distinguished between purpose as a goal, and meaning as a process where "[m]*eaning* is all about those interpretations, narrative frameworks, philosophical rationales and perspectives, and faith or belief systems that each of us brings to the various worlds in which we live, love, learn, work, and worship" (p. xx, emphasis in original). To make meaning of a purpose makes that purpose "worthwhile or justifiable (or both)" (p. xx). They suggested there are theories and practices of meaning-making that can be applied to advising and presented several frameworks to guide this practice. They offered five "pedagogically sound and practical themes" (p. 130) that could be used inside and outside the classroom or in one-on-one meetings to help students make meaning and began to interrogate how that process might occur. The themes—tell stories, ask philosophical questions, create purposeful silence, tackle tough topics, and connect context and process—provide a guide for faculty and staff to explore

meaning-making with their students. In the section on telling stories, Nash and Murray offered that

> [p]rolonged advising or mentoring relationships have the potential to be immensely consequential in the lives of students. The safety of the one-on-one relationship affords students the mental and emotional space to tell their stories, to see themselves as authors of their own stories, and to re-author them as needed (p. 134).

The academic advisor/advisee relationship offers much opportunity for further exploration of Nash and Murray's (2010) findings.

The concept of meaning-making was seen as central enough to students' success for Nash and Jang (2013) to call upon colleges and universities to create "meaning-making centers" and employ meaning-making mentors to "contextualize learning experiences dealing with the universal, existential questions of life" (p. 2). The authors suggested multiple questions that mentors could ask students and identified nine sets of "meaning-making tasks" (p. 4) with which to challenge their mentees. Among these sets of tasks, two—"education and credentialism" and "career, vocation and finances" (p. 5)—relate directly to academic advising; once again, however, the advising experience itself is not explored.

Sense-Making

Meaning-making should be distinguished from sense-making. In an article regarding how students make sense of policies, Schudde et al. (2021) studied how students at a community college made sense of the vertical transfer process of moving from a two-year to a four-year degree program. Identifying lack of clear policy around transfer processes as an impediment to degree completion—one that adversely impacted the underrepresented groups that make up the majority of community college students—the authors explored sense-making theory "to examine

the policy signals. . .students. . . receive from state transfer policies and how these signals. . .shape students' approaches to understanding transfer and their subsequent behavior" (p. 922).

Drawing on the conceptual framework of sense-making as interpreted through the work of Spillane et al. (2002) and Weick et al. (2005), Schudde et al. (2021) wrote that "[s]ense making captures the cognitive aspects of policy implementation, including whether and in what ways actors understand policies, their related practices, and potentially, how their beliefs and attitudes change" (p. 926). The results of their study found that students "deliberated across received transfer policy signals using one of two primary patterns" (p. 944). Most students followed a set pathway of sequential steps while a smaller number focused more strategically on a path they customized to meet their individual needs. The authors concluded thus that "raw" policy signals are important to the sense-making process as "many students adopted a signal rather than adapting or combining signals" (p. 944). Receiving multiple policy signals, while confusing at first, may have spurred students to the more strategic approach to sense-making.

While there is not extensive literature on sense making versus meaning-making, there is overlap between the two constructs particularly in how they manifest themselves in the academic advisor/advisee relationship. It is possible to surmise that students make sense of policies and procedures—the information component of NACADA's core competencies—but make meaning of experiences, the relational component (NACADA, 2017a, 2022).

Self-Authorship Theory

Self-authorship theory (Baxter Magolda, 2008, Kegan, 1994) has been applied to academic advising generally (Schulenberg, 2013) and in specific practice (Pizzolato, 2003, 2004. 2005, 2006; Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007). It addresses how individuals make meaning of their experiences across cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal domains. As a constructivist

theory, self-authorship assumes that knowledge is constructed through consistent interpretation and re-interpretation of life experiences. Its three phases—following formulas, crossroads (where dissonance occurs), and becoming the author of one's life (Baxter Magolda, 2008)—represent a path along which advisors can shepherd students. Pizzolato (2005) posited that advisors can create opportunities for "provocative moments" in advising appointments which would help advisees move from the crossroads into the final stage, defined by a strong self-concept and the ability to act on one's own belief system. Learning occurs through the process of being challenged to shed formulaic ways of thinking for more individual, contextualized ones.

The self-authorship journey in the context of meaning-making was explored by Barber et al. (2013) responding to studies that found that "students' approach to interpreting and understanding their experiences (in other words, their meaning-making capacities) was strongly related to what they learned from experiences" (p. 868). Understanding what helps students "adopt increasingly complex forms of meaning making" that lead them toward self-authorship, "could help faculty design more powerful learning experiences, could help administrators make decisions about supporting educational initiatives, and could help scholars understand sources of variability in the slow pace of [student] development" (pp. 868-869). Using longitudinal data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNS), Barber et al. (2013) sought to explore what types of student experiences would lead to "substantial growth in meaning-making capabilities" (p. 870) within the theoretical framework of self-authorship. An overarching finding woven through all themes they identified was that substantial shifts in the development of self-authorship (and hence high levels of meaning-making) are associated with "engagement in meaningful roles and experiences that demand an internal voice" (p. 878). Thus,

looking for examples of that internal voice in students' advising experiences may be key to determining if and when meaning-making has occurred.

Developing One's Identity

Studies have explored the concept of meaning-making in relationship to identity development, particularly with respect to underrepresented populations. Abes and Jones (2004) explored lesbian student development and found that "the integration of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development" which "introduces the role of meaning-making capacity in the construction of sexual orientation identity" (p. 618) where more complex levels of meaning-making can occur, resulted in participants being better able to filter out contextual influences. The authors concluded that "the results of [their] study point[ed] to a relationship between meaning-making and identity development" (p. 627). Based on their results, Abes et al. (2007) looked at "the role of meaning-making capacity in the construction of multiple identities" (p. 1) incorporating meaning-making into Jones and McEwen's (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity. The authors stated that this new model "provide[d] a richer interpretation of not only *what* relationships students perceive among their personal and social identities, but also *how* they come to perceive them as they do" (p. 13, emphases in original) as well as "provid[ed] a lens to understand more clearly how students see themselves" (p. 19). These studies may provide a theoretical framework for how to view the meaning-making process in the advisor/advisee relationship.

Student Learning

Meaning-making may occur not only within certain college experiences but among those experiences as well. The concept of meaning-making in college has also been explored in the context of integrated learning or how students link "knowledge, skills, and information learned

in different contexts" (Barber, 2014, p. 7). Defining integrated learning as how students "put things together," Barber (2014) used both self-authorship theory and "the integration of learning constructs as components of [his] theoretical framework" (p. 8). Integrated learning was defined to be "the ability to make connections among life experiences, academic studies, and…accumulated knowledge" (p. 8). He cited a "lack of opportunity for reflection" (p. 12) as a key barrier to "making connections between learning across contexts" but remarked that "[a]cademic advising is one venue where this interaction [between students and faculty or staff] already happens" (p. 13) Barber's (2014) research was inspired by "anecdotal evidence related to [integrated] . . .learning [found while] advising undergraduates" (p. 7). Yet he did not focus on learning or meaning-making within the academic advising experience per se, despite his reflection that it is in this context that this type of activity most likely already occurs.

The learning partnership model (LPM) (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004), an application of self-authorship theory to practice, is an example of a process that has been used to inform academic advising (Baxter Magolda & King, 2008, Pizzolato, 2006; Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007). The three principles of the LPM involve validating students as knowers, situating learning in the student experience, and defining learning as mutually constructed meaning (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). The LPM can be used to meet the learning goals of student success, where advisors and advisees engage in mutually constructed meaning by making connections between advisees' knowledge and that of the advisor to arrive at more complex levels of understanding (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004); or, in other words, to move from simple knowledge acquisition to more transformational learning (Baxter Magolda, 2008), and perhaps deeper meaning-making experiences.

Chapter 2 - Summary

In this chapter, I explored the literature surrounding the construct of student success in higher education. I looked at the history of higher education, how student success came into the higher education lexicon, and the role that academic advising and academic advisors have played in that process. I also interrogated the various approaches to student success and the different ways in which the construct of student success is portrayed in the literature. Although not always apparent in the literature, I identified distinctions between the macro and micro levels of student success, as well as clarified when the literature may have been addressing institutional success as opposed to individual student success. This chapter brought together the literature surrounding academic advising, and in particular the academic advisor/advisee relationship, and the role that relationship might play in student success. Finally, I explored what the scholarship said about the concept of meaning-making in college to provide a framework for my study going forward.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Overview of Chapter 3

In this chapter, I present the purpose of the study, a rationale for the qualitative study, and the scope of my study—including researcher bias, choice of methodology, as well as my how my privilege impacts that work I do as a researcher. I also discuss my research design, how I selected the participants and site for my study, and my research methodology and instrumentation along with my data collection procedures. I discuss transferability or qualitative rigor as well as the data analysis/explication methods I used. I conclude with sections on the potential research bias involved in interpretation and what it means to make meaning of meaning-making.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to discover and understand the phenomenon that is the academic advisor/advisee relationship in a college or university setting and its role in the meaning-making process and both institutional and student success from a student perspective. Through semi-structured interviews, a reflective questionnaire, and a brief online document analysis, I explored the lived experiences of first-year students who were advised by primary-role advisors as exploratory majors in the first and second quarters of attending a four-year public university. First-year exploratory majors were an ideal group for exploring meaning-making as they are challenged by their advisors to consider not only the logic and purpose of the curriculum but also how that logic and purpose may relate to their choice of major. These analyses interrogated connections between meaning-making and both institutional and student success and how the advisor/advisee relationship served as a catalyst for those connections. As a result of this study, I expected that academic advisors would be able to explore

meaning-making within the advisor/advisee relationship and what it means to argue that this relationship is critical to student and/or institutional success.

The following questions guided this study:

RQ1 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe **the rapport and relationship** they have built with their academic advisor in their first and second quarters of college?

RQ2 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe **the interactions** they have had with their academic advisors in their first and second quarters of college?

RQ3 How do first-year students in exploratory majors express **their knowledge of the logic and purpose of the curriculum** as a result of their advising experiences in their first and second quarters of college?

RQ4 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe experiences with **problem solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning, and goal setting** as a result of their advising experiences in their first and second quarters of college?

Qualitative Rationale

Qualitative researchers do not enter the research process with a pre-determined hypothesis needed to be proven. Rather, they seek to discover aspects of participants' lived experiences, explain a previously unexplored phenomenon, or explore meaning-making processes. Qualitative researchers "want the opportunity to connect with their research participants and explore the world from their viewpoints" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 5). In so doing, they become "as much a part of the research process as the participants and data they

provide" (p. 4). Rather than trying to predict and test a quantitative hypothesis, qualitative researchers seek to explore and describe (Durdella, 2019) or understand "how people construct the world around them…what is happening in terms that are meaningful and offer rich insight" (Flick, 2018, p.4). These statements fit with my research questions as I was seeking to explore the meaning-making that occurs during the academic advising experience by listening to how students describe and interpret their advising experiences, in particular their relationship with their academic advisors. In addition, my experience in the advising field brought reflexivity to my research, an important aspect of qualitative research (Flick, 2018).

The academic advising relationship, with its potential to impact college students' development on multiple levels, is one construct ripe for further exploration of what factors shape the meaning-making process. Even more important to understanding this phenomenon is not simply the interaction itself, but the extent to which those interactions lead to a meaningful relationship between advisors and their advisees. Interrogating that relationship beyond that broad superficial level, defining which specific interactions contribute to meaning- versus sense-making, can help academic advisors, as well as other higher education professionals, begin to address more perplexing questions regarding how to define and create environments which are conducive to student success.

Scope of the Study

The scope of my study was influenced by research bias, my choice of methodology, as well as my positionality and subjectivity.

Researcher Bias

I was concerned that my lived experience might create a sense of bias but was also intrigued by the idea of reconceptualizing bias (Roulston & Shelton, 2015) as well as a call for

researchers to "be meaningfully attentive to their own subjectivity" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). If I understood bias "as a characteristic quality unique to a particular researcher" looking at the "relationship between theory and method…researcher's roles, and…analysis of researcher's work" (Roulston & Shelton, 2015, p. 337), my subjectivity emerged in a new light. Peshkin (1988) offered several "Subjective Is" for research, several of which would pertain to what I was looking to explore: the *Community-Maintenance I*, the *E-Pluribus-Unum I,* the *Pedagogical-Meliorist I,* and the *Non-Research Human I.*

In reference to Peshkin's (1988) Is, in my research, I was the "*Community Maintenance I*" as I had an "attachment to the [advising] community and concern for its survival" (p. 19). I wanted advising to be understood as a meaning-making activity for students as well as recognized as a profession and for its role in promoting institutional and student success. Throughout the interviewing planning process, the pilot interviews, and the participant interviews, I reflected on whether academic advising was something the advising community wished was meaningful but then wondered if it was meaningful to students in the same way, or in a way they would be able to see and/or define.

As the *E-Pluribus-Unum I,* I sought a way to bring primary-role advisors, advising administrators, and students together in a common goal of achieving institutional and student success. I was the *Pedagogical-Meliorist I* in that I desired to see the advising experience made better for all, but, as Peshkin (1988) remarked, I struggled with conflicting Is as I questioned who is best to advise? Finally, the *Non-Research Human I* was engaging in and reporting on research out of a simple interest in getting to know students where they were and learning more about how we all make meaning of our worlds and experience.

My closeness to the topic, as a participant, scholar, and researcher, meant that my role in the research was reflexive as I wanted to learn from and grow from the positionality I assumed. I had hoped to explore meaning-making in the advisor/advisee relationships through not only analyzing my work but having my participants reflect on their experience as well. For this reason, I had planned to reduce the chance of any real or perceived bias by asking participants to reflect on their own meaning-making and confirm my interpretations. Based on the results of the first round of interviews, I chose not to have my participants engage in self-reflection.

Choice of Methodology

Even though phenomenology emerged as the most salient methodology—it is about the lived experience—it seems as if this could be true of *all* qualitative research. It is possible that other methodologies could have revealed more about the students' advising experiences that this study did not explore. Crotty (1998) wrote that "[p]henomenology is about saying 'No!' to the meaning systems bequeathed to us [and] setting that meaning system aside" (p. 82). He proceeded to explain that this means to look beyond "everyday meanings" for phenomena that may emerge around us resulting in a reinterpretation of those phenomena. In this study, I looked to reinterpret the concept of both institutional and student success through a student lens. This posed challenges for me as a researcher doing work in my own field particularly vis-à-vis my positionality and choice of methodology or framework. Saying "no" was easier said than done. I was also concerned about the nature of the study within the greater context of the advising profession. Crotty (1998) reflected on the fact that it is human nature to want to "define and classify" (p. 81). As members of a profession, and as professionals, advisors seem to be in a constant process of defining and classifying who they are and what they do (Campbell & McWilliams, 2016; Himes & Schulenberg, 2016; Larson et al., 2018; Lowenstein, 2005, 2020);

McGill et al., 2016; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). This process then extends to the relationships advisors want or expect to have with their students, or conversely the relationships they expect students (to want) to have with them. The limitation here was that the experience of advising, and the relationships formed therein, is so diffuse, depending on the context, the institution, students, or the advisors, that these experiences may not have been as readily shared across these delineations. On the other hand, the possibilities for the richness and diversity of experiences that had the potential to emerge could have helped the advising profession fully grasp the potential of the advisor/advisee relationship as a meaning-making experience.

In discussing some of the challenges inherent in phenomenological research, Creswell and Poth (2017) stressed the importance of identifying the philosophical assumptions required by this approach. They also stressed the importance of selecting participants who have shared the same experiences. While my study would appear to have meet these two challenges, Schulenburg and Lindhorst's (2008) work suggests that even to say "advising is advising" can be problematic. While all my participants may experience advising as it is delivered by the institution, I needed to be careful that I did not over-generalize that experience, or the relationships that resulted from that experience, as I conducted my research. On the other hand, I understood that the possibilities inherent in analyzing and interpreting the experiences I might hear/listen to were endless. Advising professionals listen, hear, and share experience as part of the daily work they do. Without exploration and interpretation, they remain only experiences.

Power and Privilege

As I prepared to conduct my study and throughout the research process, I was acutely aware of the role power and privilege played in the approach to my study, how I reflected on what I was hearing from my participants, and how I analyzed my findings. As a white middle-

class cis gender female growing up in a university town, where my father was on the faculty, and where the socio-cultural contexts of which I was a part were relatively homogeneous, I never considered issues of power and privilege until I chanced upon them myself in early adolescence. Reflecting on this, however, I have come to understand that this very statement is an indication of my subjectivity and positionality, that there is power and privilege wrapped up in not having to consider issues of power and privilege until we are ready to do so. Therefore, while we can upback our invisible knapsacks to begin to comprehend that privilege (McIntosh, 2003), what we may find is that there are additional knapsacks hidden within that we will be forever unpacking. I continued to unpack these knapsacks throughout my research process.

I am a mid-level manager in higher education where it is part of my responsibility to advocate for the importance of going to college; this position gives me insight into and understanding of the context of my advocacy as well as revealing its limits and boundaries. I am highly educated, coming from a background where education "as far as I wanted to go" was always a given. This means that while I can be seen as walking evidence of the benefits of post-secondary education, I am also coming from a place where it can be hard to fully comprehend the socio-cultural backgrounds of students and their parents, either of whom may not have those same privileges. In addition, because of my education, I have power, both perceived and real, embodied in the knowledge that I convey as I fulfill my responsibilities. This is a unique position for those of us doing research in our own field where our participants are also those who we serve: we are an insider/other (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) for we are at once the teacher and the student, the advisor and the advised.

Whether power is received or real, earned, or unearned, it is a concept that needs to be acknowledged as Linda Smith (2012) discussed in her exploration of decolonizing

methodologies. Smith cautioned that "history is mostly about power" and that "a thousand accounts of the 'truth'" will not give marginalized peoples "the power to transform history into justice" (p. 35). As advisors who want to conduct research to tell the stories of our students, we need to enter that sphere with an understanding of what it means to tell another's story as well as the privilege we are given by others to tell their stories. We also need to recognize that we may be afforded that privilege by the nature of the earned and unearned power that comes along with our position. This is part of our knapsack that once unpacked cannot be put away.

For my research—looking at how students make meaning of their advising experience—my goal was to use my findings to show that the advising experience is meaningful; however, I am an advising administrator who also advises so it was important to acknowledge whose story I was telling and the power and privilege that went along with that telling. Smith (2012), speaking for people whose (hi)stories have always been told by those who had the presumed and assumed power to tell them, wrote about a process of reclaiming history as "coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspective and for our own purposes" (p. 41). This idea of "centring [sic]," (Smith, 2012, p. 39) meant that I needed to question if students felt they had the power to make their own meaning of their experience, to share their own stories fully and honestly.

In addition to the power I have due to my educational status and role as administrator/researcher, I was also conducting my research as part of a PhD program, a privilege that is available to those who can afford and have the ability to pursue doctoral work. I believe that learning comes easier to some than others and have always been cognizant of this unearned privilege that I carry with me, especially in reference to the work I do with students who are struggling academically. I recognize that this privilege changes my experience as a

student and as an educator. As much as learning comes easier to some, for those to whom it does, it also often instills in us a passion for knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone, a passion that is not always as present in others as we might want to find it. While this is not a traditional privilege, it has been one that I have been cognizant of before I could even identify it as such. I recognize that it opened doors for me that may not have been opened for others and now creates boundaries for me being able to understand and empathize with the telling of others' stories and the interpreting of their experiences.

The corollary to having the ability to pursue life-long learning is also being in a position of privilege to be able to do so, economically, and psychologically/philosophically. I carry both these types of privilege: I have the financial means to afford this pursuit of knowledge, but I also have the support of family, friends, and colleagues who understand and appreciate my desire to pursue doctoral studies. And when this privilege intersects with my privilege as a white cis female in academic advising, I do not need to worry that I will be viewed as not having rightfully earned my place in my world of work and school.

In addition to power and privilege, I considered the ways my positionality and subjectivity affected my approach to my research from when I first started asking questions through when I began to answer those questions. My positionality and subjectivity played a part most often in the analysis and discussion of my findings and therefore will be addressed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, respectively.

Research Design

This study used phenomenological inquiry to explore the lived experiences of exploratory majors, with regards to the advisor/advisee relationship, and the meaning-making processes that occur within those relationships. **Meaning-making** is a process through which humans construct

meaning, interpret, and find significance in their experiences. It involves continual interpretation and connecting smaller experiences to bigger ones. Meaning-making is a constructivist term that refers to the epistemology used to clarify and connect "all these interpretations, narrative frameworks, philosophical rationales and perspectives, and faith or belief systems" that guide how human beings "live, love, learn, work, and worship" (Nash & Murray, 2010, p. xx).

Exploratory majors are students who matriculate without a chosen major. College and universities also use "undeclared" or "undecided" to refer to these students. For this study, "exploratory" will be used due to its positive, active, connotations, except when discussing my site and in my conversations with participants as their institution used "undeclared."

Phenomenology challenges us to explore the "meaning that individuals attribute to experiences in their world" (Durdella, 2019, p. 105). In this study, I used **interpretive, or hermeneutical**, phenomenology, in that as the researcher, I had my own lived experiences of academic advising and the relationship I had with my advisees, both of which impacted the study's design and implementation. For my study, phenomenology and meaning-making were inextricably entwined: the former is essential to the latter within the context of the experience being explored (Peoples, 2021). Advising is a commonly-shared experience or phenomenon among college students—which Light (2001) offered as perhaps the "single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experiences" (p. 81); hence phenomenology was more apt an approach than a narrative study which would have simply explored the individual students' stories themselves (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A case study analysis was considered but would not have been appropriate as I was not focusing on a particular institution. I was intrigued by grounded theory as a methodology at first, but I decided that I was not looking to develop a theory around meaning-making. In addition, while I researched the idea of combining a grounded theory study

with narrative analysis (Lau & Suto, 2012), I ultimately determined that I was interested in exploring the phenomenon of meaning-making within the academic advising relationship as interpreted through students' advising stories rather than listening to the stories to understand how students made sense and meaning of their advising experiences and relationships. Essentially, I was seeking to arrive at a "composite description" of the "essence of the [academic advising] experience" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 77) and the meanings made therein. I used interviews rather than focus groups, as I was more interested in learning about the individual student experience (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018)

Participant Selection Process

In this section, I discuss criteria used for identifying a site, participant selection, the sampling methods, sample size, and how I recruited my participants.

Identifying a site

To identify a site at which to conduct my study, I first conducted a Google search for "exploratory major" programs. I used "exploratory" to narrow my search to sites that might have dedicated programs for students without majors. I then went to each school's website in an attempt to determine if their programs met my criteria, in particular if they mandated advising and if students were advised by primary-role advisors. From that search, I created a list of 24 schools with exploratory major programs, six of which appeared to have mandatory advising by primary-role advisors. For the remaining 18, it was not clear from their websites if they met those criteria. I obtained contact information for directors of the six programs from the NACADA membership directory and sent an email explaining the nature and scope of the study to those individuals (see Appendix B). From those six potential sites, I received three responses: one did not allow outside research, another did not meet the criteria, and a third did not follow-

up with me after their initial response. Three individuals did not respond to my inquiry. I then received the names of three potential sites from colleagues in my doctoral program: one of those sites did not meet the criteria and two others did not reply after the initial response. A last potential site, obtained after seeing an article on *Academic Advising Today*, also did not pan out after initial contact. My site was eventually finalized from a personal contact though a NACADA connection.

Participant Selection

Student participants were enrolled as degree-seeking students in a bachelor's degree program. They had not declared a major upon matriculation. They had at least one meeting with their academic advisor before participating in the first interview and anticipated attending an advising session in their second quarter with the same academic advisor. Participants were at an institution where quarterly advising was mandatory for exploratory students. Initially, I had hoped to find an institution within commuting distance from me to make it possible for in-person interviews. Research on the effectiveness of virtual interviews over in-person interviews in qualitative research has been conducted before and after the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated such methods (Archibald et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2021) with results pointing to the need to evaluate the "practical, rigorous, and ethical considerations" (Roberts et al. 2021, para. 1) of conducting interviews in Zoom. As the location of my site necessitated Zoom interviews, I explored these considerations which are discussed in Chapter 5.

My participants, from an academic perspective, were relatively homogenous: they were first-year students at the same university in the same program for undeclared majors. The student population of the institution site, however, was racially/ethnically diverse with over two-thirds of the students coming from underrepresented populations and just under half identifying as the

first in their family to attend college, meaning that there was the potential for considerable breadth and depth of experience. My sample size represented that population with half identifying as first-generation. The gender breakdown included nine who identified as female and one who identified as male. Racially, five identified as White, two as Asian, one as Hispanic and two preferred not to identify their race. All were between the ages of 18 and 20.

Sampling Methods

I used purposeful criterion-based sampling to recruit participants for my study. My participants were recruited from a large public university in the United States, via an email sent by the director of undeclared advising (see Appendix C). I also prepared a flyer (see Appendix D) that was given to the director to post. The email gave my name and contact information in case potential participants had clarifying questions. I wanted to make sure participants were aware of the full scope and nature of the study and "walk in the door feeling informed, comfortable, and appreciated" (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018, p. 7). I offered a participation incentive in the form of a gift card for participants who completed both interviews. Once I pivoted to a reflective questionnaire, the students received the incentive upon submitting the questionnaire. From the initial recruitment email to approximately 1400 students, I received 12 responses; ultimately, I recruited 10 participants. Once students agreed to participate, I followed-up with an informed consent form (see Appendix E*)* and an initial demographic questionnaire (see Appendix F), the latter of which was anonymous, although some of the information was revealed through participants' answers to my questions.

Sample Size

My initial sample size was ten students; ten completed the first interview and nine replied to the reflective questionnaire; one of the responses to the questionnaire was not usable as the

student indicated she had not had a second advising appointment. I had hoped to have 10-15 students complete the process. The student numbers are in line with recommendations (Creswell & Poth, 2017) for qualitative research although Schreier (2018) summarized other recommendations including adjusting sample size as the research unfolds. However, I also knew that saturation—where I stopped researching once I was no longer gathering new information (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015)—is as, if not more, important, than an estimated sample size (Peoples, 2021). I anticipated that reaching saturation would depend on which students responded to my interview request; I judged saturation to have been achieved after the initial round of interviews.

Research Methods and Data Collection

In qualitative research, the focus is less on *finding* phenomena than on determining how phenomena can be analyzed (Flick, 2018). To "turn" the phenomena, researchers must first choose an interesting or relevant phenomenon that has not yet been fully "analyzed, described, compared examined" (Flick, 2018, p. 6), then they must determine the focus of the phenomenon and appropriate research question(s), and finally, decide what methodology to use to explore the questions. For this study, the **phenomenon in question** was the academic advising experience and the **focus** was the academic advising relationship and the meaning made as a result of those experiences, as related to institutional and student success.

To gather data required to address my research questions I interviewed exploratory students in the second quarter of their bachelor's degree program and collected responses to a written reflective questionnaire in the third. I noted demographic and other information that may be pertinent to my study, as indicated by the literature, such as gender, ethnicity, or parental

education levels. In this section, I discuss the research methods that were used in this study, including interviews, a reflective questionnaire, and a brief document analysis.

Interviews

As I prepared for the interviews, I considered my status as an "insider," i.e., someone with knowledge of advising, by engaging in reflections to challenge any preconceptions I had about how students made meaning of their advising experiences. I conducted a set of four pilot interviews with my own former advisees. While conducting the pilot interviews, I considered these reflections and asked my pilot participants if they felt the questions had led them in a particular direction. This helped me decide if and how I wanted to share any of my own experiences as an advisor in the interview process (Roulston & Choi, 2018). I decided that it had helped that my pilot participants had known me and therefore I would share basic information as well as explain my personal and professional reasons for conducting the study. This served to "break the ice" and create a disarming environment (Bloom et al., 2008). Based on the results of the pilot interviews, I changed the order of the interview questions and added some basic questions about the participants' backgrounds at the start. I also began each question with a general introduction to the question.

I interviewed 10 first-year students in Zoom meetings. To facilitate data analysis, I used an Otter.AI pilot to join my interviews; thus I had a transcription and summary in addition to my recording of the Zoom interview. I conducted my first interview with participants after their fall quarter advising appointment. The goals of the first interview were to understand the advising experience from the students' perspective and encourage them to reflect on the relationships they had with their advisors, including asking students to walk me through an appointment they had with their advisor (see Appendix A). Originally, I had planned to conclude the interview by

having them reflect on any meaning they may have ascribed to that experience; however, due to the answers to the initial questions, this was not asked but was hinted at in the questions found in the reflective questionnaire (see Appendix F).

Using semi-structured interviews also allowed for qualitative rigor in my findings as it made it possible to use follow-up questions or probes that allowed for "free-ranging conversations…directed by what participants have to say" (Roulston & Choi, 2018, p. 2). I had expected that using semi-structured interviews would permit me to guide the conversations but also allow them to flow naturally and change course if needed. I found that this did not occur, and my participants were mostly relatively reticent, which was a secondary reason I decided to pivot to a questionnaire in lieu of the second interview. In phenomenological interviews, the focus is on participant experience and the meaning made as a result those experiences, including "feelings, perceptions, and understanding" (Roulston & Choi, 2018, p. 4). Throughout my research, I wondered why I was not hearing those feelings, perceptions and understanding that I had expected to hear. This is explored further in Chapter 5.

Talmage (2017) stresses the role of the interviewer as "collaborating participant" where the interview process is "actively constructed through interviewer-respondent collaboration" (p. 2). Thus, as I interviewed participants, I had planned to pick out "hints of meaning-making" (p. 3) and ask them to expand more, allowing us to engage in deeper conversations about the academic advising relationship. I attempted to used probes to "confirm the respondent's perspective and meaning" (p. 10) and insure I was not projecting my ideas of meaning-making into the dialogue; there was always the chance that I would see something as meaningful when the participant did not. I considered that it might be possible that students would reflect on ineffective or unethical advising experiences and that this would be an interesting discussion

both during the interview and in my analysis of the results. Would they make meaning of that experience? Would they define it as bad or unethical or was that my interpretation?

Qualitative research entails an emergent design which means that the process may change based on where the research is leading (Durdella, 2019; Wertz et al., 2011). I had anticipated that the stories I heard would have the potential to be uniquely rich and meaningful (both to me and my participants) but that it would be the story of the story, the meaning-making process, which would become the phenomenon that would be the ultimate focus of my research.

Reflective Questionnaire

After my initial round of interviews, I determined that saturation had been achieved; I believed I was unlikely to gain additional insight from a second round of interviews. I decided that rather than have the participants reflect on my analysis of their first interview, I would instead have them respond to a reflective questionnaire to see if our initial conversation had changed the way they viewed any additional advising interactions they had since experienced (see Appendix F). While I had originally planned to use the second interview to further explore findings, themes, and "clarify [my] preconceptions so they can be incorporated in the data analysis" (Peoples, 2021, p. 65) and have my questions mirror the ones asked in the first interview to see what, if anything, had changed for the student, I concluded that similar data could be gathered from a written questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent to participants via a Microsoft forms document. They responded using their previously chosen pseudonyms to assure anonymity while allowing me to connect their responses back to their original interview. Nine participants responded to the survey. One response was incomplete; I followed-up to have the participant complete the survey but did not receive a response.

Document Analysis

I examined the following online documents at my site: vision, mission, and goal statements, information on policy and procedures, general program information, as well as expectations for advisors and advisees. Many academic advising professionals would agree that for advising to have meaning it should go beyond the simple transaction of registering for classes or checking off boxes on a degree audit, but I wondered where within the artifacts that guide their practice does it implicitly or explicitly state advisors will help students make *meaning* of their experiences? The concept of sense-making (Schudde et al., 2021), as opposed to meaning-making, factored into my analysis in terms of how advising policy and procedure played a part in the student advising experience and advisor/advisee relationships, but I questioned how this might also impact students' meaning-making experiences.

Transferability or Qualitative Rigor

While quantitative research relies on validity and reliability as methods to assess the generalizability of research, qualitative methodologists look to the concepts of credibility, and trustworthiness to gage the accuracy of their findings (Barbour, 2013, Saldaña, 2011). Credibility entails convincing my readers that my methodology was sound, while trustworthiness implies being transparent about my methodological processes. In addition, as a qualitative researcher, I focused on "transferability" (Rapley, 2013) or qualitative rigor (Peoples, 2021). In transferability, a "reconceptualization of generalization" (Schreier, 2018, p. 4), the key concept is

> to determine whether the findings obtained for one instance or set of instances in one specific context can also apply to other instances in a different context. The extent to which findings can be transferred from one case to another depends on the similarity between the respective contexts. (p. 4)

In my study, the broader context was academic advising and the relationships formed between advisor and advisee.

Although credibility in qualitative research may not be as readily assessed as validity in qualitative research, Creswell and Poth (2017) discuss nine strategies used in qualitative research to assure credibility and suggest that researchers employ at least two of the strategies in their studies. The nine strategies fall under the areas of researcher's lens, participant's lens, and reader's lens. Under researcher's lens, I used "clarifying research bias or engaging in reflexivity" where I discussed any "biases, values, and experiences" (p. 341) that I brought to my study. Under participants lens, based on my years of experience in academic advising, I de facto engaged in "persistent observation in field" (p. 342) even while conducting my research. Under reader's lens, I used "generating a rich, thick description" (p. 343) of my participants' responses and the context under which my interviews were conducted so my readers could decide whether my data could be transferred to other settings.

Researcher Bias and Reflexivity

I disclosed my subjectivity and positionality, biases, values, and experiences at the onset of my study to situate my reader and give context to my research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In addition, I noted any biases connected to my past experiences and perspectives that may have influenced my analyses as I made them (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Observations

My "field-based decisions about what is salient to study, relevant to the purpose of the study, and of interest for focus" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 342) were based on on-going observations of the advising process as both an advisor and advising administrator. These observations began before and continued during my research. I became more intentional the

further I got into my study: my research guided my work and vice-versa. Many of these observations are discussed in my "Reflections" in Chapter 5.

Generation a Thick Rich Description

I described the type and profile of the institution, the make-up of the student body, as well as provided in depth participant profiles.

Data Analysis/Explication

The focus of my study was to understand the essence of the academic advising relationship and experience by "analyzing data for significant statements, meaning units, textual and structural description, and description of the 'essence'" (Creswell & Poth, p. 165, Table 4.2). Qualitative analysis differs from quantitative analysis in that the researcher does not enter the research arena with a specific hypothesis to prove but rather with a set of questions to be answered throughout the data analysis and collection processes. Also dissimilar from traditional empirical research, these two processes occur side-by-side in an emergent design (Durdella 2019; Wertz et al., 2011) that is recursive and dynamic with the researcher moving from fieldwork to reviewing their data and back to fieldwork until they reach a point of saturation. Again, the nature of my initial research findings did not give me enough material to engage in this process in an iterative or intentional manner. However, there were aspects of my research that reflected a process of emergent design: as I reflected on my first round of interviews, I found myself pursuing a different lens of analysis which I allowed to develop in place of my original intentions. Part of this process did involve reviewing my data by comparing it informally to my own advising experiences and my interactions with my advisees.

Saturation is reached when the data do not generate any "new information or insights into the phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 197). With my research, I realized that saturation

was neither what I needed to achieve to say my research was "complete" nor perhaps something that I needed to pursue in the first place. My participants talked about their experience in ways that caused to me to consider that phenomenon at a ground level and move forward from there. Their responses challenged me to consider whether it is more important to listen and meet students where they are than somewhat arrogantly considering that we know what is best for them.

Two different approaches to qualitative data analysis involve putting "subjective experiences as the focus" or "describing the making of a social situation," while a third goes "beyond the first two. . .and into the spheres of implicit and even unconscious aspects of a social phenomenon. Data…come from recording interactions but also from analysing phenomena beyond individual awareness" (Flick, 2013, p. 5). This third approach applied best to the research I conducted in that advising has been and continues to be viewed as many different "things" including "counseling, learning, mentoring, guiding, encouraging, advocating, navigating, educating, teaching, and even…friendship" (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008, p. 33). Indeed, it may not even be completely clear to (or mutually agreed upon by) advisors and advisees as to what is actually occurring during the advising process or what constitutes the "advising relationship." It was important for me to keep in mind these aims and approaches as I analyzed the specific data collected for my study. The eventual goal was that my readers would be able to see the specific connections between the data I collected and the analysis I ultimately produced.

As I organized my research outcomes, I wanted to "report… on how the phenomenon was experienced using significant statements and discussing meaning of themes" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 166, Table 4.3). This section will delineate the specific methods of analysis I explored in my study.

Preamble to Analysis

I had anticipated that the purpose of my study—to discover and understand the phenomenon that is the academic advisor/advisee relationship in a college or university setting and its role in the meaning-making process and how students view both institutional and student success—would have required me to first clarify what characterizes an academic advising relationship as well as how any meaning-making therein is manifested. After I had determined this, I would ask more questions to arrive at the true essence of the phenomenon. It became clear early on in the research that those initial clarifications would be difficult to achieve, making the second round of questions more challenging.

Hermeneutic Circle

As my study used hermeneutic phenomenology where the "focus is on interaction between the researcher and the data" (Peoples, 2017, p. 65) I searched for common as well as uncommon themes as participants shared their accounts of the phenomenon. Martin Heidegger (1982) discounted the idea of bracketing in phenomenology believing that it was not possible for researchers to completely separate themselves from the experiences they were studying (Peoples, 2021). He spoke instead of the use of the hermeneutic circle, a "description of the process of understanding," rather than a technique, where "as we begin to understand and interpret something," we revise any preconceptions we have (Peoples, 2021, p. 32). In data analysis, this entails constantly breaking down the whole into codes and themes and then using my understanding of those parts to re-interpret the whole: "the parts make sense of the whole and the whole makes sense of the parts, and this hermeneutic circle continues until a new understanding emerges" (p. 33). In my research this entailed comparing not only my *student* participants' experiences to other students' experiences but also comparing those thoughts and feelings to

what I gleaned from my document analysis, as well as my own reflections on the process. There were multiple overlapping layers to this study making for a potential rich circle of analysis.

The use of the word *analysis,* however, can be problematic in a phenomenological study as the meaning of "analysis…to 'break into parts' is in contrast to phenomenological inquiry…[which] seeks to understand the phenomenon as a *whole* (Peoples, 2021, p. 57, emphasis in original). Peoples (2021) offered "explication" as an alternate term, where individual parts of the phenomenon are explored but the framework of the whole is not lost in that process (p. 57). Whether I analyzed my data or explicated it, the key point is that I allowed my method to be emergent, where how I understood the data themselves "emerge[d] and change[d]" throughout the process (p. 58). At the end of the analysis, the descriptions should be meaningful and understandable to students who have had that same experience. As a researcher I had expected to live vicariously through my participants' stories, noting all details of each individual narrative—however small—in order to "transcend the nature of each description to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon" (p. 58) Given the nature of the responses I received, this was at times a frustrating process as I wondered if there was meaning-making occurring which my participants may not have had the language to describe.

Process of Analyses

To collect the data necessary for this study, I employed interviews, a reflective questionnaire, and online document analysis. Throughout the on-going data analysis, I also used techniques specific to phenomenological research. Peoples (2021) offered six steps in a "data analysis flow chart" (p. 59) and Durdella (2019) suggested that the "unique steps that [the researcher follows]…in the analytical process are what "distinguish data analysis in phenomenology" (p. 269) and discusses several strategies that "span a range of activities, before,

during and after fieldwork." These are distinguished by epoché, where I attempted to suspend any "subjectivities…[or] preconceived notions about the phenomenon" (p. 269), "phenomenological deduction"—chunking data into "meaningful statements" about participants experiences, and "imaginative variation"—allowing multiple meanings and possibilities to emerge as I viewed the data from diverse perspectives (p. 270). Durdella (2019) also delineated three phases of qualitative research in general: preliminary data analysis, thematic data analysis, and interpretation. As I analyzed or explicated my data, I explored these stages while also following Peoples' (2021) specific steps for phenomenological analysis: deleting irrelevant information, such as filler words or phrases, from the transcript, generating preliminary meaning units, creating themes as final meeting units, synthesizing themes into "situated narratives," synthesizing "situated narratives into general narratives" and generating general descriptions" (pp. 59-62).

Coding

Coding, as a method of analysis, is not traditionally employed in "phenomenology's reflective, eidetic analysis;" nor does phenomenology "emphasize the frequency of themes" even though themes of meaning units are often "named" (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 280-281). In particular, phenomenologists often eschew the idea of using analysis software to code data as "the goal of reading the transcripts is to familiarize oneself with the transcript" (Peoples, 2021, p. 66). I read all the transcripts through and watched the Zoom recordings to get a broader sense of the data before beginning the coding process. I then used line-by-line analysis, as Peoples (2021) suggested, to explore specific and general meaning units, themes, and narratives. I used coding software to track and organize the codes and themes in my analysis; however, I did not use the

software to create the codes themselves. As I continued to code, I revised and/or combined previous codes as more meaning units occurred.

Journaling

Journaling is a means whereby I could demonstrate the process that becomes the hermeneutic circle (Peoples, 2021). I kept notes of my thoughts, feelings, and experiences as I began the pilot interviews, the study interviews, and subsequent analysis. When my research methods changed after the first set of interviews, I reviewed my research methodology and noted my reactions to needing to change direction. I reflected on the loss of what I had expected the study to be. This in itself is a hermeneutic circle where "[e]very revision of a preconception has the ability to develop a new projection of meaning" (p. 65).

Challenges Foreseen

In their discussion of qualitative interviews and grounded theory methodology, Charmaz and Belgrave (2013) presented a challenge to the process of data collection and analysis which could be applied to my research as well. They discussed tensions that surface between what I heard in the individual subjective stories, and the "collective analytic story" (p. 21) that emerged from my research. The stories had the potential to be uniquely rich and meaningful (both to me and my participants) but it is the story of the story, the meaning-making process in the advising relationship, which was the ultimate focus of my research. I resolved these tensions by having my participants (and their stories) take precedence while data was being collected, but "when analyzing data and presenting findings" (p. 22) shifting my focus to the phenomenon as a whole. I accomplished this by making sure my interview questions were "sufficiently general to cover a wide range of experiences and narrow enough to elicit and explore the participant's specific experience" (p. 7).

Interpretation in Analysis: Researcher Bias

Meaning-making is a very subjective experience. Flick (2018) cautions researchers conducting qualitative interviews who use interpreters and translators that they must "take into account the influence of these additional agents on the interview situation and what is being said" (p. 9) and Marvasti (2013) offers that "different analysts might see different things in the same bit of data" (p. 12). Translation, however, could refer to experiences as well as language: as researchers we are also "translators in the forms of concepts of other persons' words and actions" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 67). I wondered if I would approach my data differently because of my own pre-conceptions of what meaning-making in the academic advising relationship is or should be? How can we truly understand what our participants are saying when they make a statement (Durdella, 2019)? I was cautious of giving more credence to one participant than another (Barbour, 2013) if their responses better meshed with any pre-conceptions I had.

Thus, as I was conducting analysis, I was attentive to my own translations of the meaning-making process. Self-reflection is key to addressing these concerns. Durdella (2019) suggested this may mean "conduct[ing] two research projects at the same time: one into [my] topic and the other into [me], [my] interactions, and the research process" (p. 309). In this manner, ultimately I would be able describe to my readers how I saw "[my]self in relation to the phenomenon, participants, and information that [I] anticipate[d] gathering and interpreting" (p. 321).

Making Meaning of Meaning-Making

Qualitative data collection (and its subsequent analysis) is about the study and exploration of the meaning-making processes of various phenomena (Flick, 2018: Marvasti, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As I was studying how students make meaning of *their*

advising experience on a micro level, I wondered if I would also find another meaning-making process—the macro level idea of advising as a meaningful process in and of itself. In this sense, I found myself exploring what it actually means to make-meaning. Large constructs such as "finding purpose" and "achieving success" are sometimes tossed around in the literature, along with practical suggestions for how to help others to attain these ends (Bowman, 2022; Nash & Murray, 2010) but what is not as well addressed is what is behind the means that lead to these ends: they work, but why, and how? Lessons learned should allow higher education professionals to determine what works in student and institutional success as opposed to what does not, focusing on *their* successes rather than failures, and moving away from a deficit-based model to a strength-based one.

Chapter 3 Summary

This chapter discussed the purpose and qualitative rationale for my study. I addressed the research design and methodology I used in my inquiry, along with how my power and privilege might have influenced any processes. I also discussed the theoretical perspectives and basises behind my purpose and rationale. I outlined my processes for collecting and analyzing data including participant selection, methods used, and analysis tools. I addressed ways to minimize bias, including transferability and qualitative rigor, as well as potential challenges that could occur. I concluded with a discussion of additional concepts this research might uncover. In the next section, I present the findings of my research.

Chapter 4 – Findings

Overview of Chapter 4

In this chapter, I review the findings of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study using semi-structured interviews, a reflective questionnaire, and an analysis of online documents. The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the advisor/advisee relationship of first-year exploratory majors in a college or university setting and its role in the meaning-making process and both institutional and student success. The analysis of virtual documents showed Wellington State University's (a pseudonym) mission and approach to be in line with what the academic advising community believes to be the purpose of academic advising and its impact on student and institutional success. In contrast, the semi-structured interviews and subsequent follow-up reflective interviews revealed that participants more often than not struggled to make meaning of their advising experience, although evidence of sense-making was present. This chapter begins with a presentation of my participants and their stories, as well as an overview of Wellington State University (WSU). I then present a thematic analysis of the interviews and reflective questionnaire responses. Finally, I reflect upon the advising related documents on Wellington State University's website.

Description of Wellington State University

In the following section, I provide a description of the site where I conducted my research as well as an overview of its advising program for undeclared students.

Demographics

Wellington State University is large public university in the United States. The one-year retention rate is above 90% and the six-year graduation rate is above 80%. Its acceptance rate classifies it as very selective. More females make up the study body than males. Just under 85%

are non-white. More students commute than live on-campus and over two-third come from in-state. Approximately half of WSU's graduates identify as first-generation students.

Undeclared major program

About 15% of Wellington State University's first year class comes in as "undeclared." Eighty percent of students who come in as undeclared choose to be undeclared, the remaining students are admissible to the University but not to their first-choice major. Students admitted as undeclared are required to declare a major by the time they reach junior status.

Advising structure

Undeclared students are required to meet with a professional academic advisor before registering for classes each quarter. The average advisor case load is 250 students, which could decrease throughout the year as students declare majors and are assigned to new faculty advisors. Advisors in the undeclared advising office also assist students who are transitioning between majors.

Resources available to undeclared majors

In addition to professional advisors, additional student staff hold drop-in hours and provide additional support. Students are encouraged to make appointments with professional advisors outside as well as inside of formal advising periods. The office website lists responsibilities of both students and advisors. An optional first-year experience course is available for those who choose to enroll.

Major selection process

Several resources are available for students choosing their major, including the external site "What Can I Do with This Major?" Students are referred to Wellington State University's career development center for additional support and guidance in choosing their major. Students

apply to the college where the major is offered when they are ready to declare a major. Several majors require a student to first take certain pre-requisite courses before being admitted to that major.

Participant Selection Process

All participants responded to an email invitation (see Appendix B) distributed by the WSU advising office to all first-year exploratory students. Upon completing a survey to verify they met the additional selection criteria of needing to have at least one advising appointment in the first two quarters of their first year, they were sent a demographic survey (see Appendix G) and invited to schedule an interview. All surveys were sent through Microsoft Forms. Interviews were scheduled through Sign-Up Genius.

Participant Information

In this section, I provide an overall description of my participants' demographics. I also share some of their stories.

Demographics

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Resident/ Commuter	First-Generation	First Choice School
Alina	Female	Unknown	Resident	Yes	Other
Annie	Female	Asian	Commuter	Unknown	WSU
Callie	Female	White	Resident	Unknown	None
Catan	Male	Asian	Resident	Unknown	Other
Elliot	Female	Unknown	Resident	Unknown	Other
Estella	Female	Asian	Resident	Unknown	None

Evelyn	Female	White	Resident	No	Other
Felicia	Female	White	Commuter	Yes	None
Hannah	Female	Asian	Commuter	Yes	Other
Rose	Female	Hispanic	Resident	No	None

My participants were 10 first-year exploratory students in their first year at Wellington State University. Nine identified as female and one identified as male; three identified as white, four as Asian, one as Hispanic, and two declined to give their race; thus the racial breakdown was disproportionate to the university at large. All were between the ages of 18-20. Five identified as being first-generation on the anonymous survey but only three shared they were first generation in the interviews. Two did not identify as first-generation during in the interviews, one was not sure, and the other four did not discuss this demographic; this is proportionate to the number of first-generation students at Wellington State University. One identified Wellington State University as their first-choice, five indicated it was not their first choice, and four did not have a first choice. All had done well in high school: three self-reported high school GPAs of 3.00-3.99, while seven reported a high school GPA of 4.0 or higher.

More Than Just Voices: Participants Stories

The students in my study were at the beginning of a turning point in their lives. I started out the interviews by asking them about how they ended up at Wellington State University. They were willing to share a little part of their lives with me and deserve to have those stories told. In the next selection, I have chosen segments from each interview to bring an individual experience to a name. Separate from their advising experiences per se, the stories center around choosing to attend college, family support, and transition into this next stage of their lives. For all interview

quotes, I used the process of intelligent verbatim, removing the majority of filler words such as "like" to make the quotes easier to read and follow.

Alina

Alina is a first-generation student who lives on campus and identifies as female. She chose not to reveal her race. She reported that as "first generation student" she was "still kind of figuring out college myself." When asked what her college journey had been like so far, she responded:

> I been here since September…and I'm liking it. There's definitely times where I'm struggling because high school to college is a big jump, and also, I live six hours away, so obviously I'm not able to see my family as much. But other than that, college has been really fun. It's a new environment. I've been making friends and really enjoying my classes here.
>
> I think I expected it to be hard, and I know that I had some weak points that I needed to fix, like taking exams and my study habits, but I think, I think it's gotten better

Five participants including Alina were planning on a science major and taking the necessary pre-requisites. Although chemistry was her favorite class, Alina was leaning towards a biology major:

> I do want to go into research and academia, maybe in the biotech industry…. I know that's where, like, most of the job prospects are. I don't think there's as much when you compare it to chemistry, although I do like my chemistry class right now. I…enjoy biology. It's just a matter of [a] future career.

When asked how she felt about coming in as undeclared, she talked about her difficulty making a decision:

> When I initially applied to WSU, I was debating on the majors I should apply to. So they have [two different programs}. And I feel like I couldn't decide then when I was applying. So I was [thought] if I get in and I attend, maybe if I take the classes here, then I can decide later. So I kind of just prolonged my decision, so I applied undeclared.

All of the participants in my study were in-state students and had chosen WSU from among state schools. For Alina, cost was a factor:

> So I lived in [home state] my whole life, so…I want to stay [here]. Also I don't want to pay out-of-state tuition. College itself is really expensive, and so I just want to stay [in-state]. [WSU] seemed like the best option, the best school I got into. I did get in to some out-of-state schools, but they were either out of my price range, or…just too far away.

Alina also discussed her family's impact on her attending college:

> I think my family was definitely a big part. They really prioritized education… especially my dad…. I consider myself first gen, but my mother has attended college, but my father has not, and I guess because he hasn't necessarily gone to college…he wanted his children to go to college…. I think in one way, it was kind of for my family, but obviously for myself, because in this job market, it's tough finding jobs regardless of a degree.

Alina's decision to go to WSU was largely financial and like several of my participants, she is learning towards a STEM major but wants to explore options within several STEM fields. Getting a job after graduation is already a concern for Alina. She has adjusted well to WSU despite living far from her home.

Annie

Annie is not sure if she is first-generation or not. She identifies as female and Asian and commutes to WSU. Similar to Alina, Annie also mentioned initial struggles getting adjusted:

> I would say the first two months, it was like a mixture of getting used to the new environment and getting everything prepared. I would say the first few weeks I was still kind of getting adjusted…. I didn't really know the best way to handle it at first, but now I think I'm doing a lot better.

Similar to Alina, she mentioned enjoying her science classes and leaning towards biology as a major but also possibly pursuing a medical field:

> I would say, like, my favorite class right now is biology. Science is my favorite subject, so that's why I enjoy learning about biology. I would say it's more memory intensive and conceptual compared to chemistry.

For Annie, coming in undeclared was a path towards a more competitive major:

> The reason why I came undeclared was also because of what other people were advising me to do, because I was aware that the biology or pre-med majors were very competitive, and I think my application was not strong enough to be accepted. So I applied undecided, so I could change into my major.

As a commuter who needed to continue her training as a skater, WSU was Annie's first choice. She enjoyed the convenience of being able to schedule classes around her practice times. She had a cousin who attended WSU and others who helped her in the application process:

> Oh, I would say, like some of my friends and family also helped a little bit. I think my family, they kind of just gave me general advice…studying well and getting good grades so…my GPA was good enough to apply [to college].

Annie was learning towards biology or a pre-med major but chose to come in as undeclared as she thought she would have a difficult time getting into a competitive major like biology. She struggled but now feels she is doing better. Annie commutes as it makes her practice schedule as a figure skater easier.

Callie

Callie identifies as female and white and did not share whether she was first-generation or not. She is a resident student and says she did not have a first-choice college. When asked about her college journey, Callie spoke first of what it felt like to come to WSU as an undeclared student and expressed some initial trepidation:

> Well, it's been pretty good…. I feel like I've gotten a lot of useful help from my advisors, and I'm glad that I came in undeclared, even though I was initially kind of scared about that…. Because all of my peers were declaring their majors, so it seemed like everybody knew what they wanted to do, and I just didn't.

Unlike some of the participants who came in undeclared as a pathway to an intended major, Callie leaned more to the "exploratory:"

> My favorite class is my American History class. I am thinking about declaring history as a major. So that's been really fun. I'm also taking photography, just for fun, a writing class, a linguistics class, and then, like a freshman experience class, it's just an advising class.
>
> I'm happy that I came in undeclared. I think that I'm probably going to declare history at some point, but I'm going to wait a little while just so I can take more classes and experiment.

Like many of the participants, WSU was an economical option for Callie. She also had help from her college counselor and family and was already looking ahead to graduate school:

> [My choice was] mostly for financial reasons. I get my tuition paid for if I go to a public school. So although I had other schools that I wanted to go to out of state, I chose WSU because I wouldn't have any debt.
>
> [M]y college counselor in high school was very involved, because there were only 10 people in my class, we got a lot of personal time…so she really advised me on all the pros and cons of the different places that I was considering. And…my parents pointed out that it would be best to save money…[for] grad school.

In terms of her adjustment to college, Callie talked about making friends and feeling isolated:

> I'd say my biggest fear was not making friends…. Of the friends that I have made, they're very good friends, but I haven't made a lot of friends, so I'm sort of disappointed about that. And then also, my school is very isolated, so it's hard to go out and experience things. So I have been disappointed about that also.

However, she also mentioned she was surprised that she was "was way more prepared to start college and leave home than I thought I would be."

Although nervous about coming in as undeclared, Callie is following a more traditional undeclared pathway and is somewhat uncertain of what major she will chose but has a potential major in mind. Her decision to attend WSU was a financial one. She was nervous about how she would adjust; while she has made some friends, she is still feeling somewhat isolated. She is currently taking a freshmen experience class.

Catan

Catan identifies as male and Asian and chose not to share whether or not he is first-generation. He lives on campus and WSU was not his first choice. Catan also chose to answer the question to tell me a little about himself in terms of his major selection journey:

> I started off as a public health major, but then I realized that I didn't really want to go in, like, the medical pathway, but I wasn't really sure what pathway I wanted to take so I kind of just went into undeclared and then my cousin told me to do electrical engineering. So I'm on that pathway to electrical engineering. So I'm not really set on it, but I don't really know what else I should do.
>
> Honestly, when people, ask me my major, I don't want to say undeclared, because, I consider myself electrical engineering, but I'm technically undeclared. So I just tell people I am electrical engineering because it makes things easier. But it's kind of harder than if I declared a major earlier because I…can't get certain classes [I need for] the major, so…that's one con. But then I don't know, I feel like I have a larger variety of classes I can take.

And in terms of his adjustment to college, Catan replied:

> It's been good. I've been able to balance work social and academics. It's a little difficult, but I've been like getting by.
>
> I'm gonna be honest, I wasn't really that excited about college life, because everyone just wants to party and stuff [and] I'd rather just hang out with my friends in my dorm or just play games. It's not really appealing to me. Um, yeah, I have a lot more freedom with my classes and I can be more independent because I'm not living with my family.

> It was surprising. I thought, I thought it'd be going out more a lot, but I have a lot of work to do.

In Catan's case, WSU was not his first choice:

> I really just wanted to go to [a school that was] kind of prestigious, but… I just chose the [schools] that were close by. So I got waitlisted from [the others I applied to] so I chose this one.

Family also influenced Catan: he mentioned his mother being a main influence and that his cousin had gone to WSU.

Catan is also interested in STEM but is conflicted about whether he wants science or engineering. However, he considers himself to be an engineering major and shares this with others. He is enjoying being independent but is not going out as much as he had expected due to the amount of work he has.

Elliot

Elliot identifies as female but chose not to share her race or whether or not she a first-generation college student. She lives on-campus. WSU was not her first choice. At the beginning of the interview Elliott said she did not have much to say about her advising experience, but in fact ended up taking longer than others. Elliot described a challenging transition to college:

> I did have kind of a road bump, I guess because the transition [from] high school to college wasn't very easy for me; I'm going to a college away from home, and the dorming experiences had a toll on me, because, I haven't been around my family.… We have this thing called orientation days, I guess, and we were choosing our classes I was panicking because I didn't know what to do.

But also:

I have roommates in my dorm, and they've been helping me get through it, and the teachers have been so nice here…the welcome felt very warm.

Elliot also applied to several other schools.

When I applied to the [other schools]…. And I really liked the programs more at WSU. And I live close to [other school]…so I know, like, the environment around there, and I guess I really wanted at first…to go away from home, And it backfired on me once I was here.

However, Elliot encountered dissonance with her major immediately:

But I was really interested in WSU, because initially I got into WSU for [major].… During orientation is when I switched to undeclared…I had a talk with one of my [aunt's friends who is a clinical psychologist, and she was asking me so many questions about college and what potential job I wanted, and at the time, I was really stressed [about] what I wanted to do, and I didn't know if I made the right choice. And…I do want to make good money in the future. So that was like a topic that came up.… [Then] she said about, oh, if you do [major], you might not make good money. And I was like, um, so what [do] you recommend?

I guess the talk with my aunt's friend took [the idea of majoring in first choice major] away from me, because I was more interested in what she was doing, and so at the orientation, I was just kind of overwhelmed. And I should have talked about it more, but it was kind of rushed in terms of, like, choosing classes, and they took us to different rooms based on, what major we had, and [in] the room…for… major[s] , they [said] if you guys aren't interested in [major], let us know right now. And then, I was one of the

> ones that, like, went out with the group that didn't want to do [major] anymore, and they took us to the undeclared area.… So I just, took it upon myself to change my major.

Elliot had similar thoughts to being undeclared as Callie:

> At first I was very panicky because I felt like I made the wrong decision.… There wasn't …a one-to-one advisor meeting. It was like a full group, and we were all trying…to choose our classes. And by the time they got to me, and I was talking [about being] interested in…[major], which is listed on the site, and I learned that it doesn't exist…they renamed it.… For now [undeclared is good for me] because I don't really have an option to switch my major without taking the classes…. I think I'm in a good spot.

Similar to others, Elliot's parents had an influence on her decision and finances played a factor:

> I asked my parents about [applying to college] and they [said] wherever you want to go is okay with us. And I crossed off out-of-state schools…. My parents probably would have let me go, but I don't want to be that far away from home. And I guess during the selection of where I would go, my parents were more insisting towards the closer school. And I was it was between WSU and [the other school]. But…the financial aid was better…here.

When discussing what surprised her or what she learned herself in her first quarter, Elliot said:

> I guess I wasn't expecting [that] I wouldn't be able to talk to people easily, because I was so used to talking to my friends all the time and talking to people around me. And once I didn't have my friends with me at college, I was pretty much silent, I didn't know what to say and I didn't know how to interact with others…. And so I was trying to make friends, but it was really hard to because I relied on my friends too much to help me…get adjusted, and helping me talk to people, because I mostly get nervous around others. Like

trying to communicate with them, because I, tried not to be too serious…. But I try to, make jokes and be funny. And sometimes it works out and sometimes it doesn't

Elliot is one of several students who changed to undeclared from a specific major during orientation when they selected classes. She was initially worried that she had not made the correct choice out of concerns for her financial well-being after graduation. However, she is confident now in her decision to remain undeclared. Coming to WSU was a financial-based decision. She had expected to make friends more easily and is struggling getting to know her classmates.

Estella

Estella identifies as female and Asian and is not first generation. She did not mention a first-choice school. Estella grew up in a small town and described wanting to branch out when she got to Wellington State:

> Well, I grew up in…a little city that's kind of next to [a larger city].… I learned… Chinese… and sort of stuff like that. But I think coming to college, I've been trying to, branch myself out because I feel like throughout high school too, I was a bit introverted.

Similar to other exploratory majors, Estella was learning toward a STEM major but also trying to make connections:

> Coming to college, I felt I just want to be more involved because of the major that I'm trying to go into, which is bio. And I heard, you have to get those connections up and meet more people. So I've joined a couple of clubs, and it's going pretty good.

She is enjoying her biology class most:

> I think I'm really enjoying the content of it. It was a lot in the beginning, but I think as time has gone by, I've enjoyed it a lot more than in comparison to Chem.… I just like

how the things piece together in it. I don't know, it's like a puzzle. It's cool to see it all come together, right?.... I want to do bio, like pre-med. I want to move into that…when I have to declare a major.

Estella had considered what she wanted to study when applying to college:

> Well, I honestly wasn't super sure about where I wanted to go.… It wasn't the biggest thought in my head. But towards senior year, I was obviously thinking about what I wanted to do, past college, but going into college, I knew I wanted to do something medical, as a reflection of what my parents do already, because my dad is a doctor and my mom is an NP right now… It was something I knew I wanted to do, but not just because they wanted me to do it. I did find that I really liked it, especially during sophomore year of high school, because I took anatomy and one of my biggest passions is art. I really love art, okay? And I saw how I could connect…art and anatomy.

Estella's family supported her choices:

> I think family played honestly, a pretty big role for me. I know I applied undeclared just because I think my mom had a friend that went here before, and she was…trying to support me as much as she could…because I was also a little bit unsure.… I didn't know if I wanted to do art or bio. I was indifferent. But…because my parents actually really supported me in wanting me to go to art school…. But in terms of going here undeclared, I think it was just that small bit of uncertainty. And I know that the bio major is quite competitive, so I wasn't sure if I would get in just with bio. So there was that too. So try it, try it out first and see what happens.

For Estella, being exploratory was just a temporary "label" on the way to officially majoring in her first choice:

> I don't feel any too different, I guess, from someone who is declared because the club I joined is a pre-health club. But most of the first-years I've met in that club are bio, or anything…pre health or…something towards…helping people in health.… And I'm basically taking the same classes courses as them, and I don't really feel too different just because I'm like, undeclared. It's just like a little label…. I'd basically be the same person as them in a year or so.

Estella was surprised how much she had changed since coming to WSU:

> I think the most surprising thing was…the change of who I am as a person, like the person that I was at the end of high school and over the course of summer, and then these two-ish months is not the same person. And I'm very surprised about that for myself, and I think it's a pretty good change…. I was scared that I was not going to be able to socialize a lot because…I've heard…that the WSU campus is not very active, but I think it's only inactive if you don't go be active.… If you…join a club or literally anything, you'll have like, a good time.

Estella also is considering majoring in a STEM field and has given thought as to why she prefers biology over chemistry. She has other interests and is also considering how to combine her interest in art with a STEM area major. She is involved in STEM related clubs and views being "undeclared" as simply a temporary label. She is surprised by how much she has changed since starting at WSU.

Evelyn

Evelyn identifies as a white female and chose not to indicate whether she was first-generation. She lives on campus and WSU was not her first choice. Evelyn stated that she was undeclared but planning to switch to a [specific] major in the spring quarter. WSU is close to

home and she feels as if she has adjusted well, occasionally going home on weekends. In describing the journey so far, she said:

> It's been good. It's been stressful, because I've had to navigate through things by myself and not with my parents…. I mean, obviously I can still text them, but it's definitely a new environment where…I didn't know a lot of people coming into the school, and it felt very foreign for me. But as I've been…getting adjusted, I feel like I've been getting more and more comfortable, which is very good…. To be honest with you, I've made a lot of friends in my econ class, okay, that have been wanting to take [another economics class] as well. And I feel like having a buddy or somebody in my corner really makes me feel okay. I'm not the only one they're struggling to…it's not just me. Other people go through the same thing.

Evelyn was the only student other than Callie taking first-year experience class. In describing the class, she said:

> they basically just walk you through programs at the university and how to ask for help, where you can seek help, and what kind of resources are available on campus.

Evelyn's first choice of schools was another in-state school; her parents supported her decision:

> My parents were very, I would say, very influential, because I'm very close to my parents, and I didn't want to be too far. They were, they were mostly, they were for Wellington State. They were like, go to Wellington State. This is the best shot you'll have.'

When asked how she decided to enter WSU as undeclared she said:

> I really didn't know what I wanted to do senior year of high school. I chose undeclared because I thought that made logical sense, I could figure it out later. My biggest worry

was just getting accepted, so I really didn't know what I wanted to do [for a major]. My parents advised me…[to] go with undeclared.

Evelyn has been challenged to find a balance between academics and her social activities:

I feel that I thought I was going to have a more intense social life, or I was going to be more social at university, and that has not been the case. I feel like I don't have a healthy balance between my social and academic life. I feel like I just do my academics. Because I feel like WSU is a big commuter school.

Evelyn was more nervous about getting into college than choosing major so had not given her major that much thought. Her parents encouraged her to come in as undeclared. She has made friends and feels she has adjusted well but is concerned that she is spending too much time on academics. She understands from talking to others that she is not the only one struggling with some of these issues.

Felicia

Felicia identifies as white and female. She is a commuter and says she did not have a first-choice as to where to attend university. Felicia described herself as a first-generation low-income student who was learning how to navigate the American education system.

As a commuter, she felt her college journey was "…good. Nothing too abnormal has happened. It's just really just going to school and then going back home." But she also remarked:

I'm still getting adjusted to the university life. It has been harder to make more friends than you would if you were to dorm because, you know, you would have your dorm mates and your suitemates and people from the dining hall. So it's been very quiet for me since I started…, for sure, but, it's been good overall.

Felicia was not set on a particular college:

> Oh, I never had a top college I wanted to go to.… [Coming] from the background I'm from any college would be a win for me, but I was also definitely competitive…. But I ended up getting rejected [from a more competitive school]. So the closest and like easiest option was WSU. So that's what I went with.

Her family played a large part in supporting her journey to college:

> Well, I'm Middle Eastern, so in my culture, women's education doesn't tend to be emphasized a lot. And so just with my mom, especially, it's always been hammered into me that I need to study and get into a good school and get a good job and support myself. So it was really like, I mean, I knew I had to go to college, like, even when I couldn't understand what college was, you know. it's definitely just been like, a set plan.

But at the same time:

> My parents, they don't really understand much about [college]…. But the one thing they did know was WSU. So since it was so familiar to them because of just hearing about it and living in the area as well.… [F]amiliarity tends to also incite preference. So they definitely liked WSU.… I never really could get advice from my parents or anything. It was more [from] my friend and her parents because her parents went to college here…. So I got a lot of my guidance from them, and just teachers and one of the SAT tutors.

Similar to Callie and Elliot, Felicia fell into the category of the true exploratory student. She mentioned enjoying both her writing and biology classes:

> I've always loved writing and it's interesting learning about neurobiology…. I'm just learning about how our brain works and how, like everyday things, we don't think about it, but there's so much going on beneath the surface, and like learning about even

emotional regulation and stuff. It's really interesting to see how people react and then think about all the things we've been learning in class.

Originally, I was leaning [toward] being a criminal justice major, but then I was talking to a friend, and she was talking about becoming a political science major, and she also wants to go into law, and also in our…theory class, we were talking with people and how they were in this pre-law frat, and there's also a club, and then all the different majors everyone else is in. So after being exposed to that, I just got even more confused.

Felicia comes from a background where women's education was not as emphasized but her parents stressed the importance of attending college. She has had a hard time making friends as a commuter. She has interests in everything from writing to criminal justice and law to neurobiology and is still very confused about her major choice. She is starting to see connections within her course work and think more deeply about the subject matter.

Hannah

Hannah identifies as female and Asian and considers herself a first-generation student. She is a commuter and WSU was not her first choice. Hannah's reasons for choosing WSU were similar to many of the other participants:

I am from [in-state].… [T]he reason why I chose WSU is because I live, right next to it. So I feel like it was the best decision for me financially, and also because I want to be close to my family. I personally don't think I could have been…far away from my family.

That was one really important factor, and [the other school I got in to] was expensive.

Her family, who originally wanted her to attend a different school, also played a major role in her journey to college:

> [The other school], it's like, a household name…and Wellington State is less well known. But I think my passion of pursuing pre-med really outweighed my parents [who said I should] probably go to [other school] if you change your mind…[about] wanting to be pre-med anymore, and…there was the deadline when you had to pick and I was crying to my parents, will you be disappointed in me if I go to WSU? And… [they said] we're proud that you even got into college because I'm first gen.… And so got the weight off my shoulders, and I knew WSU was where I really wanted to go not [the other school]

Hannah expressed similar feelings to others regarding her transition to WSU:

> I knew it was going to be hard…it's not cutthroat. A lot of people want to help each other…. Everybody wants to support each other, which I really enjoy. People are kind and if you want to find friends, it's pretty easy to find friends here, you just have to put yourself out there. And I really like the educational aspect of WSU; it was a lot more forgiving than I expected…. I think it really helped me, have less anxiety about [whether] I going to fail or not? Because…professors want to help you here.

She is enjoying her chemistry and biology class and, similar to other participants, foresees following a STEM path which influenced her transition to college:

> My future, like in the future, like I hope to go down the pre-med path…. At first, I was scared, because my plan is to go to medical school, and for medical school you need to have really good grades, and so I had a lot of anxiety.… But after a while, I got the hang of it. I think something that really helped me was because I took a lot of APs in high school. It really prepared me for the college life.

When asked about whether she was taking the first-year experience class she remarked:

> I was gonna take that, but…my friends in the undeclared major, they did it because they [were] fulfilling the credits.… But my classes fulfilled my credits, and I just wanted to take the minimum level the first year.

Similar to Annie, Catan, Estella, and Evelyn, Hannah came in as undeclared because she did not get into her first-choice major. However, she is now enjoying it:

> At first I was, I was sad because…I want to do bio, but then I got into undeclared. But now that I'm in undeclared, I'm happy because it's, I'm not really sure right now. And a lot of my friends who got into bio are switching over as well…[to] test out what WSU has to offer.
>
> Now I have a way better outlook on it, just because I have so much freedom if I, realize maybe I don't want to do pre-med anymore… I have the option of just trying out other classes, which is awesome. My other [undeclared] friends have the option because we have a lot of restrictions lifted for us. Signing up for classes we can basically sign up for with anyone who has that major and so we have a lot of priority in deciding what we want…I'm happy that…I have the ability to change my mind and not stick to something that I might regret later on.

Hannah experienced some angst over her decision about which school to attend; however, her parents supported her throughout the decision-making process. She chose WSU as she was leaning toward pre-med. She applied to be a bio major but did not get in so is now undeclared. She was upset about being undeclared at first but is now happy as she has started to question if she wants to be pre-med. Since coming to WSU, her anxiety about doing well has subsided due to the support she has received.

Rose

Rose identifies as female and Hispanic. She lives on campus and does not consider herself to be first-generation. She did not have a first- choice school. Rose also had a challenging transition to college:

> Well, coming from where I come from…the education wasn't that good. So coming here you have to look for the resources. And you have to make sure that everything is good. But I feel like…it was just too much for me. And I was overwhelmed these past few weeks, [so] this has been like really stressful. But then now I feel like I'm kind of getting the hang of it, but it's still, you're on your own. You have to do everything yourself if you need tutoring.… So this is hard.

When asked what helped her be able to navigate processes better, she stated: "[h]onestly, I would feel just because the classes are coming to an end, that's why it's going to be better." On the other hand, when discussing her favorite class, anthropology, she said:

> It's interesting and I like the way that the professor teaches class; he has lectures, but he explains it thoroughly. And then even when you go…to his office hours, he explains it more to you so you're able to get it, even though the concepts are hard.

Rose was not considering going to Wellington State University at first:

> I was going to go to a [another college] in the beginning because I felt like it's going to be too much.… But then I had realized at the end, at the last moment where you could submit [the application], this teacher, he was telling me…that [I] should go to go to a university. And then I ended up doing it; he kind of convinced me.

Her family supported her decision:

> Honestly, they just let me make my decision.… They just want me to get an education…because honestly, it's my life too so I feel like…even if they had an input in it, I feel like I would just still choose whatever I wanted to do.

Rose had originally considered coming to WSU with a declared major but learned early on that she did not like it:

> [I]n the beginning, I wanted to do biology. That was my intended major. But then I realized that I didn't really like it, so I ended up switching to undeclared so I could just explore what I wanted to explore…instead of just committing to biology

Similar to Elliot, she was helped with her decision to change based on her experiences at Orientation but was still nervous about needing to change a major:

> I feel like with biology, I wanted to be an orthodontist…but I feel like that's too hard for me like it's going to be too much and I'm gonna be so stressed. So then the first day that I had come to orientation and they split us up into [majors]…. I was just like, no, I do not want to do it…. Because I throughout the summer [I was thinking]…do I want to do it? Do I not want to do it? And then I had already made up my mind, no, I don't want to do it. So then I had just told [the advisor] and then because I think she was an advisor for biology, she [said]…if you don't want to do it, I recommend you switch now.
>
> I like being undeclared, but I feel…it's hard because you have to declare [in] two years and then you have to know what you want to do. And then [I] have to make sure that [I]…talk to the school that I want to go into….And then I have to talk to them and then I have to do an application, and I have to make sure I complete all my courses with a C minus or above…and a certain GPA.

When asked about her dreams, hopes, and fears of coming to college she stated:

> I feel it's definitely like a dream. I never expected to be here because I would think oh, I would just…commute .So it's definitely like a dream…come true but also I have a lot of fears…. It comes with anxiety like stress and stuff.… You don't really know how it's going to be obviously.… But I never really knew how hard it was going to be.
>
> What surprises me is how hard I could push myself.… I wish I was one of those people that didn't have to study like having an easy major. But, I feel like it pays off. But…I guess I don't really have the [same] college experience.… I do have it, but I don't have… the fun of it.

Rose switched to undeclared as a result of her experiences at Orientation and is now nervous about having to declare a major in two years. She arrived at WSU feeling overwhelmed, but she is starting to get better at doing things for herself. Coming to WSU has felt like a dream for as she always thought she would commute to a local school. She found it harder than she expected but is surprised at how hard she can push herself; she feels she is not getting the same college experience as others due to how hard she has to study.

While participants had some similar personal experiences and differed in others, including where they were in their major selection process, they all shared the common experience of being advised in their first quarter as an exploratory major. Now that I have introduced my participants, I will discuss the themes that emerged when I asked questions regarding their academic advising experiences.

Themes from Interviews and Reflective Questionnaire

Many themes emerged through the interviews and in the reflective questionnaire. To analyze these, I return to my research questions. The following questions, the wording of which

is partially reflected in the elements of NACADA's (2017a, 2022) core competencies, guided this study:

RQ1 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe **the interactions** they have had with their academic advisors in their first and second quarters of college?

RQ2 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe **the rapport and relationship** they have built through interactions with their academic advisor in their first and second quarters of college?

RQ3 How do first-year students in exploratory majors express **their knowledge of the logic and purpose of the curriculum** [sense-making] as a result of their advising experiences in their first and second quarters of college?

RQ4 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe experiences with **problem solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning, and goal setting** as a result of their advising experiences in their first and second quarters of college?

First, however, I explored participants' thoughts on the purpose of their first advising appointments, their expectations of their advisor, and how they prepared for the appointment.

Purpose of advising appointment

At the start of the interview, I asked participants how often they had met with their academic advisor and for what purposes. All participants had a group advising interaction during orientation and met with their assigned advisor during the first quarter as required. Felicia had reached out prior to the mandatory meeting because she was "really confused on what classes or how I was supposed to start." The majority had met in person although three met in Zoom and

another over the phone. The purposes mostly centered around class selection for the next quarter although not everyone directly answered the part of the question regarding the purpose of advising. Alina, Elliott, and Evelyn had contacted their advisors with follow-up questions about specific class questions, if they were struggling in a class, or pursuing a specialized path such as pre-med. Catan and Hannah had scheduled a follow-up meeting.

For Estella and Evelyn, the purpose was not as defined. Evelyn said:

> I only met with my academic advisor once this quarter. I am pretty sure it was just for checking what classes that I need to do…next quarter, yeah, and then figuring out, what [general education classes] I have or don't have filled out.

While the question of the purpose of advising was difficult for some participants to answer, most agreed that it was largely to choose their classes for the next quarter. About a third had seen their advisors outside of their scheduled advising appointment while four reflected feeling they should be in contact with their advisor more often.

After learning about what they saw as the purpose of *advising*, I was interested in learning about the expectations participants had of their *advisors* themselves and how those expectations differed from the ones they had of their high school guidance counselors.

Advising expectations

Participants expected advisors to have knowledge of the curriculum and be able to offer guidance. Felicia had low expectations of advising being that WSU "is such a big school…so they just don't have enough time to get to every student" but in the end was

> actually kind of impressed with the advising because I was able to schedule an appointment and kind of talk about what I was trying to accomplish and what kind of classes would get me to, you know, go through that direction.

Alina expected her WSU advisors to be more knowledgeable than her high school guidance counselors, while Callie acknowledged that she had high expectations due to her advising experience in high school:

> I guess my expectations were that it would be similar to high school, but I had a very different advising experience in high school than most people, so I felt like I was able to ask any sort of question that came up and just rely on my advisor to sort of give me all the hypotheticals that I was thinking of for my plan going forward,

Alina spoke of feeling grateful for mandatory advising as an undeclared student:

> I think advising is like almost having a secondary source to confirm … that what you're doing is correct. Obviously I don't know how it goes for other majors, but they have to register classes almost on their own, and they don't get advising sessions, I don't think, unless you want to, but undeclared, we're supposed to have these sessions, which I really like, because it's basically double checking with the person, like, hey, am I on the right track?

Evelyn was also grateful:

> I feel that I'm more grateful for the advising experience because I feel like I take it for granted having coming from a school that had so much advising…. But I feel like I'm realizing now that other schools don't have the undeclared…undergraduate advising that's so personalized for the freshmen. So I really appreciated that coming in, especially because I didn't know what I wanted to do.

Catan felt that his expectations of his advisors were different than his guidance counselors in high school in that "I feel like it's like I have to rely less on them, and it's just more like, if I need to, if I have a question, I can ask them." On the other hand, Rose wanted more guidance:

> I feel like my expectations were [that] it was kind of more guidance.… But now I don't know. I feel like they expect you, which I get it, they expect you to know what you want to do, or what do you want to take. But I feel like I wanted it to be more of them telling me…not what I should do, but…basically more guidance.

But later she expressed that perhaps it was her responsibility to tell her advisor what she wanted rather than the other way around: "now I know that it's gonna be more of myself, more me telling her, what I want to do and stuff, not her [telling me] go to this, do that."

When asked whether her expectations of advising were met, Callie remarked:

> Yeah, they were definitely met. My advisor was very knowledgeable about all my questions. The only thing that was different was that she referred to a lot of online resources that I could just refer to myself like I didn't have to depend on her. So now I just have all of those websites pulled up all the time.

Estella and Hannah both were unclear on what to expect. Estella remarked that she wasn't

> really sure how much they're supposed to give me advice on I guess, because, I don't think there's any way that they know every single up and down, left, and right of every single major and the courses and all the professors.

And Hannah explored what to expect on Reddit:

> I didn't know what to expect from my advisors. And just seeing that stuff online, I had set like a minimum of, oh yeah, this is what I probably [should] be expecting from an advisor, and this is exactly what I got.

Participants gave a variety of different answers as to their expectations that may or may not have been predicated on their expectations of and experiences with their high school guidance counselors. There were differing thoughts about whether their advisors should tell them

what to do or not. A couple participants remarked on being grateful for their advising or that it was mandatory. Two also acknowledged that the advising they received as undeclared students was different than their classmates who had majors. After discussing how students saw the advising process and their expectations of the advisors, I was also curious as to how participants had prepared for their particular advising meetings.

Preparing for the appointment

All but one of the participants had prepared for their advising appointment in one or more ways; Rose said she did not prepare but "knew what courses she wanted to take." Eight mentioned checking the course catalog and four referred to a specific website that listed courses and the pre-requisites needed to take those courses. Six had visited the undeclared advising program website. Evelyn remarked after exploring the site:

> I feel like before I had so many choices and I didn't know what I was doing, and now I feel like I still have so many choices, which is amazing, but I feel I know I would like to go more down this road, so I'm more interested in this.

And Alina said "I think [the site] definitely helps me be more prepared and be more knowledgeable, when, my counselor would ask me…are you aware of this? I…knew what they were talking about."

Three mentioned Degree Works although only one knew its name—Alina referred to it a "cool" program/website where students could look at sample degree programs and requirements. Five had explored websites of other majors. Three mentioned visiting other online platforms for assistance with course selection and/or schedule building.

Four indicated they had prepared questions for their advisors in advance of the appointment. Elliot remarked:

> I guess instead, I feel like if I didn't have those questions, we would be rambling about, oh, we could probably do this or do this, but I feel like talking about [the] questions I had prepared really went straight forward about what I wanted to do, and so I don't know what my advising experience would be if I didn't ask the questions, but I felt like I just made the meeting go much smoother by straightforward asking what I wanted in terms of the advising experience.

Catan had done research after his appointment and felt that he could have been more prepared:

> So I'll definitely be more prepared with the questions that I could ask, because I feel like the first one…I didn't do any research, so I wasn't prepared, so I didn't have any questions to ask, so it was kind of like not a good use of the time that I had with them.

On the other hand, Elliot remarked on being overwhelmed by the options:

> I did look at the resources, but it was aligning with [what I wanted] and I have to look through all this, and there's too much, and I don't think I'm getting much out of this, but because I kind of know what I want to do, so I didn't really look at them because…[it's} more exploring all the majors instead of looking at one.

However, she was one of the five who looked at specific programs:

> I did research on the school that I wanted to enter…. And I looked at the requirements of the classes that I needed, and I also prepared questions about what should I do in this scenario where I can't get this class.

Hannah's questions centered more around what she needed to do to prepare to go pre-med, vis-a-vis research opportunities and paid and volunteer clinical opportunities. She sought out additional advising from the university's pre-med advisors per the advice of other students who were pre-med and said she would be more likely to go back to those advisors for advice.

Callie also prepared questions reflecting that because of her "history with very involved advisors" she "knew everything to ask and…knew what [her advisor] could and couldn't do for [her]" so she "was able to lead the conversation." When I followed up to ask why she asked the questions she asked she replied: "I just want to know the most about how to get a worthwhile experience at college, like, just get the most out of it."

Most everyone prepared for the appointment by exploring a variety of university resources, either general or ones specifically provided by the undeclared majors advising office. Less than half prepared questions and those that did largely asked questions about requirements for the programs they had explored. Two identified that asking questions helped them get more out of their advising experience.

For the remainder of this section, I explore my findings framed by my research questions.

Research Question 1: Interactions

RQ1 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe **the interactions** they have had with their academic advisors in their first and second quarters of college?

Three main themes emerged when participants described their interaction with their advisors: descriptions of the advising experience itself, descriptions of advisor traits, and descriptions of advisor behavior. Occasionally, participants sought to explain or give meaning to the interactions but mostly the interactions they described were purely transactional. They had met once (occasionally twice) with their academic advisors mostly to discuss courses for the winter quarter.

Theme 1: Advising Experience

Two sub-themes emerged when describing the advising experiences: participants feeling rushed and participants mentioning the advice they received from others.

Feeling rushed.

Several participants described the advising experience as rushed. Hannah's advising appointment, taking place over the phone was "a quick conversation . . .short and sweet [where she] got, like the information [she] needed." Her advisor discussed general education requirements, the biology curriculum, and emailed her with course recommendations. Rose also felt that the appointments felt "really rushed." She was referred to a peer academic advisor but said:

> I would prefer to speak to my academic advisor, not somebody else. You get me. But I understand that they have, like, a lot of students, and it's a lot to manage, but I feel like it just felt really brutal. And it was kind of oh, I feel like it…wasn't really guiding. It was just what do I want to do? I mean what classes should I take? And she was helping me, because [she said] we could stick with this path, or we could go to another path. But it was just me telling her, oh, I think I should take this one. And she was just writing it down, and I'm but I don't really know if I should take the class.

Callie also described her advising appointment as feeling rushed where "everything was really fast, and I knew that there were going to be 10 other students after me….And it seemed like she kept trying to end the conversation, and I kept asking more questions." She said her advising experience in high school was more personal, that at WSU her advisor helped by referring her to many online resources. When asked who lead the conversation, she indicated she did, but it was "almost like [my advisor] didn't expect me to lead the conversation." Rose reflecting on her second advising meeting wrote she felt it went better, that her advisor was

"helpful with the path [she] wanted to take…but [that] unfortunately it was a quick meeting." Felicia would have liked to have more direction but understood that her advisor had a limited amount of time.

Getting advice from others.

Estella, Hannah, Rose, and Catan all discussed advice they had received from others. Estella said she thought she "found a lot more about advice in what classes to take and other things…from upperclassmen." She had connected with them through a club and "took the initiative" of asking them about their experiences. She found them more accessible and felt they had valuable information to provide as they had first-hand experience. Hannah was also in several clubs and felt comfortable asking advice from others, upperclass students and professors, who were "going down the same path" that she was. For her, her undeclared advisor was "literally just for classes;" she would turn to WSU's pre-med advisor for more advice on what she should do if she was interested in being pre-med. On the other hand, Catan turned to his friends for advice as he "didn't know any…upperclass[men] to ask." Rose was actually referred to a peer advisor who helped normalize what she was experiencing and was "very comforting."

In addition to describing their experience with their advisors, my participants also described their advisors themselves.

Theme 2: Advisor Traits

Participants described their advisors using terms such as helpful, comforting, knowledgeable, friendly, nice, easy to talk to, and welcoming. When asked how her advisor made her feel welcome Annie responded: "they were asking about…my classes and how I am adjusting to everything, seeing if everything's okay." Catan said: "I only met with her once on Zoom. She was really friendly … easy to talk to. So easy going." And Elliot said her advisor had

helped “clear up a lot of things I was worried about” including classes she would need to take to declare a particular major and steps to take if she was not able to get a class she wanted. Evelyn also talked about how her advisor assuaged her worries saying: “She doesn’t shut me down when I’m asking stupid questions, you know….[she says] ‘no, it’s a valid question…you have every right…to worry about that.”

> Some were conflicted about whether to view their advisor as a friend. Elliot remarked:
>
> It felt very comforting, being there and talking to her, because she, I guess she also just went through college, because she kind of knew what it was like, and she was just giving me advice and telling me about herself. And I guess it really helped feel like she was kind of like a friend, I guess.

But a little later in the interview:

> I don't want to put it on a friendly scale, but we are not friends…. I feel a very strict relationship with her. I guess it feels very casual. I felt very comfortable.

Some responses described basic interactions, rarely going beyond the surface. Others understood that their advisors’ actions had a purpose. Callie described her advisors “as very friendly and informative” and stated that she felt “like they're really trying to help me . . . they're trying to get to the bottom of what I want, so they can help me the best they can.”

The third factor when it came to describing their advising experiences surfaced when participants referred to what their advisors discussed in their advising appointment.

Theme 3: Advisor Behavior

Participants described advisor behavior as providing guidance on what classes to take; six mentioned beginning to explore majors. Evelyn said her advisor would ask

> how I feel I'm doing in those classes, how I like my professors, and she'll ask me if I want to continue with the major, if I want to continue doing business. And I said yes. And then she kind of steers me in the direction of, you know, okay, if you want to do business, you should take this.

She felt her advisors were supportive but realistic about which programs were competitive to get into and provided information on alternative options.

Despite turning to her friends for advice, Estella thought her advisors were "doing a pretty good job leading me to the right direction of where I need to go as an undeclared student." Elliot also described her advisor as helpful in terms of more transactional issues, e.g., deciding how many units to take, whether she could take classes at a community college, and sending her reminders of what they talked about.

Most participants met with their advisor once as required; if they had second meetings it was to ask about alternative course options or explore academic paths such as being pre-med. Several discussed follow-up communication from their advisors. Alina's advisor mentioned a monthly email with information and tips. Elliot, Hannah, and Estella also mentioned regular communication and Felicia's advisor sent her a summary of their appointment. Rose and Catan indicated that they expected their advisors to follow-up with them.

Research Question One: Summary

Participants discussed advising appointments that often felt rushed although almost all remarked their advisors were supportive and helpful. A few reflected that they wanted more time and some also sought out advice from other students and/or campus resources. Advisors created welcoming environments. They were seen as knowledgeable and able to share important

information. Advising meetings mostly focused on selecting classes for the next quarter and sometimes exploring potential academic paths. Many followed-up after the initial appointment.

Research Question 2: Rapport and Relationships

RQ2 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe **the rapport and relationship** they have built through interactions with their academic advisor in their first and second quarters of college?

Themes that emerged for research question two were advisors using small talk and disarming behavior to build rapport with the participants. I conclude with a discussion regarding how the participants viewed their relationship with their advisor after our interview and a subsequent advising session.

Theme 1: Small Talk

The results of my pilot interviews showed that some students had a challenging time answering the question about how their advisors had built rapport or relationships. Therefore, in the study interviews, I also asked questions about what their advisors had done to make them feel comfortable. Rose said:

> I felt like it was just her manner because she wasn't standoffish, she wasn't angry, she was just…very friendly. So, I wanted to talk to her…because I know, some people it's just their energy…some sort of way you don't want to talk to them, [but] she was just very friendly.

Almost all spoke directly about what could be categorized as small talk when I asked them to walk me through their advising appointments. Rose responded:

> okay, so then I had, I had went in, right? And then she was sitting down, and then we're just talking about, well, she, I think she had told me, she had asked me about how my

> quarter was [going], and I was just telling her I was stressed and stuff. And then yeah, and I really, I don't really remember, but then she started telling me, like, oh, what classes I thought I should take. And then I was just telling her, and she was just writing them down. And then, yeah…she was kind of comforting too. She was [telling me] try my best.… And then she was telling me, Oh, how did I like the school?

Alina said her advisor asked how her classes were going and how things were with the [peer] mentors but then:

> the majority of the appointment was just…kind of planning out my next quarter classes like how that would translate into the classes that I was supposed to take for the rest of the years. And she was just looking at the GEs I have to take and telling me you have to take this class. And yeah, so I think that was it.

And later upon reflection on how well her advisor knew her, she said:

> I don't think we know each other on a personal level, because, I mean, we've only met once, professionally, I think academically, like she knows what I want to do, my interests and everything, so yeah, I think that's about as far as [our] relationship goes.

Catan said they

> started off with a conversation…asking how life at WSU was going….And then just we kind of just went right into…planning what classes to take next quarter. Also, we found out that most of my GE's are filled, so I don't really have to take GE classes. And then she just recommended four classes that I could take next year and that was pretty much, that was pretty much how the conversation went.

Engaging in small talk seemed to put participants more at ease and made them feel as if their advisor was trying to get to know them.

The next theme for research question two was disarming.

Theme 2: Disarming

Several participants mentioned disarming behavior. Estella spoke of a connection when she learned her advisor was also [her ethnicity]; they discussed her involvement in an [ethnicity] organization on campus. Elliot's advisor talked about her own college experience and asked about her adjustment to college and then offered resources. Alina and Estella also spoke about their advisors sharing personal experiences. Evelyn's advisor shared that it was her fist time advising and asked Evelyn "to be patient with her….immediately, I felt, that's awesome…. I really appreciate…knowing…she was going through this for the first time. I felt like a bond right there."

Hannah felt her she and her advisor did not "know each other very well" but said "but hopefully, I can build a…bit better relationship with her." When asked about the most important part of advising Hannah said:

> I'm [a] first gen student, so … I don't have any other guidance within my own family, I can't really ask anybody, so that's why I rely on a lot on other people, because I feel like I don't have everything, like, all the resources by myself and with my family. So I just reach out and just ask for their help as well. Just get to get their knowledge too.

In her reflective questionnaire, Hannah simply wrote that now she "felt heard." I next discuss themes from the reflection questionnaire regarding building rapport and relationships

Theme 3: Reflections

In the reflective questionnaire (see Appendix F), I asked participants questions about additional interactions they had had with their advisors since we met, requesting them specifically to focus on their thoughts about their relationship with their advisor and if our

interview had caused them to think about their advising experiences differently. Annie wrote that the interview had made her "look closer at the relationships and interactions" she had with her advisor, but Callie said she did not know her advisor well and wished they "were able to work closer together." Elliot and Alina both mentioned the advisors sharing their own experiences which made them feel more comfortable. Alina wrote:

> I think I have a good relationship with my advisor. She had asked me questions about my classes and how college was going for me. We even went briefly out of the academic conversation and asked each other about musical tastes.

Catan, on the other hand, reflected differently:

> Since we have only interacted twice…over zoom, we didn't really have the means to connect personally. Since I didn't meet with her that often, I don't expect her to know me any better and I don't believe there's anything wrong with the small talk that she initiated with me. I will admit that if we had gotten to know each other better, it would be a lot easier for me to see her in person, for example, but since I see her as a mentor/advisor of some sorts, our relationship remains strictly [academic]. Although, I respect her easygoingness and kindness that allows me to feel comfortable talking about anything personal if I needed it, but I never really initiated anything like that.

His response was in line with what he said in the interview: when I had asked about his hope for his future interactions with his advisor, he replied "I'm hoping to meet with her more so maybe, build a better connection so that there's more like rapport and stuff all right now that there has to be, right?" However, when I followed up to ask if his expectations were that his advisor would get to know him better, he replied "no, I wouldn't expect her to. I think it's just as long as she's helping me."

Research Question Two: Summary

Many advisors engaged with the participants to build rapport asking questions that focused on more than just selecting classes. Some engaged in disarming behavior, choosing to share personal experiences with participants. During the first interview few participants stressed wanting to build a relationship with their advisor. However, when pressed to answer a question about that relationship in the reflective questionnaire, some indicated they wished they could get to know their advisors better and/or meet with them more often.

Research Question 3: Sense-Making

RQ3 How do first-year students in exploratory majors express **their knowledge of the logic and purpose of the curriculum** [sense-making] as a result of their advising experiences in their first and second quarters of college?

The overall theme for research question three was participants making sense of their advising experiences. Participants expressed knowledge of the core curriculum as a result of their advising interactions. They did not express, or did not have the language to express, the logic of the curriculum, or the purpose beyond the "what;" the "why" did not come up in their responses. Their responses to my questions about the resources they had utilized suggested that they knew that courses had pre-requisites, that majors had gateway courses, and they had to complete general education requirements to progress in their studies. They also reported their advisor discussing these topics in their advising sessions or, in some cases, such as Evelyn's, beginning to steer her in the direction of a major:

> They were very supportive, but they were also very realistic. They [were saying] you might not get in. It's a very competitive program. So they were offering me, backups in

> case I don't get into maybe [major], because that's one of the more competitive programs on campus. They said…I could go with [other similar majors].

Annie and Felicia's advisors also engaged in conversations around alternate majors if they could not get into the majors they wanted.

Alina, Annie, Elliot, Felicia, and Hannah each mentioned initial discussions about a major. Hannah said:

> So basically, my advisor went through the general education [courses I] still have and haven't fulfilled. And she sent me a couple of recommendations of classes that I can take. And then she also let me know what classes I had to take if I wanted to switch into bio which is right now my plan.

Annie, Catan, Elliot, Estella, Evelyn, Hannah, and Rose each discussed the idea of being on certain paths and saw advising as helping them along those paths. Elliot felt the most important aspect of advising was "clearly stating…what paths are available." Rose mentioned her advisor suggesting different options for paths she could take, and Estella felt her advisor was "doing a pretty good job…leading me to the right direction of where I need to go as an undeclared student." Alina, Annie, and Evelyn each discussed four-year plans with their advisors. For Catan, considering a double major, it was "essential" that his advisors be there available so he could ask about that process. Alina also mentioned her advisor discussing options and making plans:

> I met up with her…[and at] the beginning of it was she was just asking me questions, like, what do you want to do? Do you like the classes that you're taking now? How are mentors going? And then the majority of the appointment was…planning out my next quarter classes [and how] that would translate into the classes that I was supposed to take

> for the rest of the years. And she was just looking at the GEs I have to take and telling me you have to take this class.

Annie said she and her advisor discussed

> what options there are for majors that I can switch [into]. She gave me a lot of options to pick from, and then we also kind of went through what general education requirements I needed to complete and…which website to look [at]…for the classes I need to take, like a general plan for the next four years.

The conversations around major selection focused on referring to external resources or discussing course requirements for certain majors. Elliot in describing her appointment said:

> she asked me if I had any majors that I possibly was interested [in], and I did tell her about the majors I was interested in. That's when we started planning what the requirements were for declaring that major. And she was telling me about the classes that were available for the quarter that we're about to go in. And she was giving me advice about you could do this, or you could sign up for this class and then take the next class in the next quarter. And she was very helpful about telling me how many units I needed to take. Because I initially asked, like, is there a certain requirement that I have to meet?

Several other comments reflect the theme of sense-making, including Estella's comment that she was "pretty sure" the purpose of her advising meeting was to discuss classes for the upcoming quarter and what general education requirements she still needed.

Document Analysis

As I looked at sense making, I felt it was important to look at the virtual resources available to students. The vessels for these sense-making experiences are the advising-related webpages including vision, mission, and goal statements, references to policy and procedure, and

general expectations of advisors and advisees. An important distinction exists between form and function—what documents *are* versus what they *do* (Coffey, 2013). Students may make *sense* of the form but make *meaning* of the function, For the purpose of my study, I considered if students might make sense of what an advising syllabus or other advising documents were—the various roles and responsibilities—but made meaning of the purpose of these documents—to help them have a successful advising experience.

The website of the advising center shares information for future and current students, focusing on general campus resources as well as those specifically geared towards undeclared students. The center's vision, mission, and goals are clearly stated, and a set of learning outcomes are listed. "Success" is mentioned several times. The learning outcomes reference both sense-making and meaning-making experiences. There is a section on general academic advising as well as one specific to exploring and choosing a major. For the major exploration section, both general and university specific information is presented. Student and academic advisor responsibilities are included; relationship *building* and meaning-making are not discussed specifically although the advising relationship as a partnership between advisee and advisor and parent is stressed. Students are encouraged to meet with career advising as well. Information is provided on preparing for, and questions to bring to, an advising appointment. A peer mentorship program is listed as one of the programs offered. The language used suggests that advising is viewed as a meaningful experience that goes beyond course registration.

Research Question Three: Summary

Participants' answers suggested that advising appointments were knocking at the surface of discussing the logic and purpose of the curriculum. Their advisors discussed pre-requisites, the paths to declare certain majors, and several even mentioned going over a path to graduation.

In this section, I also looked at the resources available to participants surrounding the sense-making process.

Research Question 4: Meaning-Making

RQ4 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe experiences with **problem solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning, and goal setting** as a result of their advising experiences in their first and second quarters of college?

The overall theme for research question four circled around how participants made or attempted to make meaning of their advising experiences. Rather than specifically asking participants about issues surrounding problem-solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning, and goal-setting, I asked them to think about the focus of their appointment, how well they knew their advisors and how well their advisors knew them, and what was the most important part of advising. Evelyn saw the focus of the appointment not only about:

> making sure I was staying on track…academically, [but also] not falling off, making sure I asking for help even before I needed it…directing me to resources, making sure I felt like my classes were manageable for me, even though they are challenging…[and making sure] I am not drowning in work

When participants did allude to meaning-making when explaining their relationship, it was just on the surface, as if the points were there, but they had not connected them yet. Evelyn mentioned looking forward to career and internships when she responded:

> I feel like [our relationship is] very, I don't know very intimate. I guess I feel like I can be myself, and I don't have to worry about…maybe criticizing me. I feel like she'll be very

> realistic. But also tell me not just what I want to hear, you know, something that will really benefit me for my career or for any internships I might want [to get].

Her language of "not just what I want to hear" suggested to me that she may have been looking for something more in the relationship.

And later:

> I feel we know each other pretty well at this point. I feel like we have a positive professional relationship. I really like her. I'm really glad she's my advisor. Yeah, I get along with her. We have a good rapport.

Evelyn came close to describing meaning-making, and even connected her feelings to student success, when she described her advisor as a mentor with whom she could share experiences. When asked what she felt was the most important aspect of advising, she responded:

> I really appreciate the experience, or the guidance from a mentor who's gone through this before and who has the experience knowing what they would have done differently, and any tips they might have for me, I feel that I really gain a lot of, I don't know what the word would be, maybe gratitude…because…I feel like [in] this program of advising…they really want you to succeed. They really care about you.

Rose had visited with student success advisor and had a positive experience.

> She was telling me about how if you don't have a 2.0 GPA or something, it affects your FAFSA. And then she [said] you could take this class and this could boost up your GPA. And don't worry…you're not the only person who has been [in] this situation.

Evelyn, however, was the only participant who directly mentioned "success."

Elliot reflected in her interview on what could be seen as sense-making learning towards meaning-making in discussing how her advisor helped clarify certain issues and come up with options for what she was worried about:

> The advising appointment I had, I think it really cleared up a lot of the things that I was worrying about, and I talked to her about a lot of my options…. I was nervous about what classes I would have to take to declare a major and stuff like that. And I guess the one-on-one really helped me focus on what I had to take and what other options I had in case, I couldn't get a class that I wanted.

Felicia discussed feeling "confused and lost" in her appointment where:

> every time I get my question answered, I feel like I understand better, but then I start thinking about it some more, and I'm like, wait, I am confused again. I feel so overwhelmed in general with all the options. So it's hard to pick one option and go with it and then not being afraid that you'll regret it later.

When I asked her what her advisor may have done to make her feel less confused, she replied they would try to do

> the best they could to explain and [I would do] the best I could to understand. So whenever I did have a question, trying to break it up and to really categorize everything so it's more organized in my head, especially with credits needed, and what classes I need to take this semester and the next semester.

At times, participants seem to be looking for more guidance. Despite seeming to be uncertain about the purpose of her advising session, Estella indicated that:

> one of the biggest questions that I asked and was worried about was how competitive it would be going…from undeclared [to] bio, like, knowing how really competitive it is.

> And I was just…asked if there was, anything I could do to, you know, up my chances, I guess, of getting into the major. But then my advisor told me was just as long as I stay on track with what I'm taking and make sure I keep my GPA up, that I would be pretty fine, just basically doing whatever all the other bio kids are doing.

Hannah may have been searching for meaning-making when she spoke of her aspirations for medical school and connecting those to potential co-curricular experiences when preparing to meet with her pre-med advisor.

> I mean, for me, I'm going to search online. As an undergraduate, what do I need to do when I want to prepare to go to medical school? Then I'm going to form a list of questions, like, what should I be doing right now? I want…to start early.… Should I be doing research? Should I be doing clinical, like, volunteering hours, like, paid volunteering… paid clinical hours or whatever. And so I want to make a prepared list and ask [the pre-med advisor] from other students and just from your training, what should I do right now and then, hopefully…they can give me advice…. I've asked my friends who are pre-med…should I get a private advisor if I want to apply to med school? And they told me, no, WSU has just their own advising, [which] is really, really good, because so many students…want to be pre-med, so they have a lot of resources for that. So yeah, I should I just listen to my friends' advice, and I'm going to try…to see how much advising and help I can get from the pre-med advisors and go on from there.

While Alina said that most of the appointment involved planning for the next quarter's classes she also spoke of having

> questions about, like, possibly switching over to bioengineering or something, because definitely I do like my biology classes, but there's always been like a thing in the back of my head be like, should I take bioengineering classes?

When I asked Alina what she thought was the most important point of advising, it was to make sure she was on the right track.

Felicia may also have been looking for more opportunities for meaning-making when she mentioned "getting where she needed to be" and her overall college experience. When I asked if there was something that she expected to get out of her advising appointment that she did not, she replied:

> Yeah, I would have liked to know for sure what direction I would be going into, because, again, like I said, I'm definitely a very organized person, and I like thinking of things in terms of doing this and then that, and l knowing what steps I have to take to get to where I want to be, so not knowing for sure about how I want to go about my class registration and even the rest of my experience at WSU. But, um, yeah, that would have been nice to know for sure, but of course, no one knows that for sure, other than myself.

Reflective Questionnaire

In their reflective questionnaires, Elliot, Felicia, and Hannah directly mentioned goal setting as part of their advising experience. Felicia wrote:

> I've had two or three meetings with my peer advisors since they accept walk ins and I've had one or two with my academic advisor since that one is appointment based. Meeting with my advisors has been a pretty consistent experience. We meet, review our goals for the quarter, ask and answer questions, and then they write a summary to email to me so l can remember important points and specific classes we discussed later.

Elliot wrote that they talked about her "progress and future goals" including her interests in possibly double-majoring in her original intended major—and also going to graduate school. Annie wrote that she "thinks she has discussed major interest with her advisor" who gave her resources to help with her application to the nursing school.

Overall, the answers to the reflective questionnaire, more so than the interviews, demonstrated the potential for meaning-making experiences where further probing may have revealed the beginnings of meaning-making activity; the second advising sessions seem to delve more into the curricular aspects of advising, moving from course selection to major selection. Annie wrote about emailing her advisor with policy and procedure questions. Rose wrote that our interview "caused her to think about her interactions with her advisor and how it could be better." Felicia's view of advising had improved from her experience during orientation which had been "stressful and unclear." Both Alina and Catan remarked that they were better prepared for their advising sessions in the second quarter. Alina felt she was more knowledgeable about the advising process and therefore did not ask as many questions. On the other hand Catan wrote that he "actually did more research on the classes I should be taking and understood the change of major requirements. Therefore…I didn't come in blindly and was prepared to ask whatever questions I needed." He added that he felt this was more efficient and less of a "'wasting of both their times as he "had the answers he was looking for." He also mentioned his responsibilities for thinking about the paths he was taking.

> I think this just highlights how each student has to put in the effort to figure out their own academic pathways, not just depending on their advisor to determine it for them.
>
> But I do realize that advisors are here to help students and that I should be using the resources I have access to in order to figure out my future major pathway. I have believed

that the mandatory meetings were unnecessary because I learn to figure things out on my own, but I feel like advisors are just people who want to help and I should let them, also by putting in the same effort and respect.

Elliot wrote that the second meeting helped her focus on what classes to take and options if she could not get into a class she wanted. Estella had had an advising session in Zoom and felt as if she "was just talking to a screen for advice;" although she recognized that it was more convenient to meet online, she preferred in-person meetings. Callie's response was succinct but analytical: "I definitely noticed the methods my advisor used to help me more."

In addition, the conversations in these next meetings steered more toward major selection. For Elliot, who had done research about different options for majors, her advisor directed her to resources and events that would help confirm her choice of major:

> There's different ways my interactions with my advisor could have been…I'm grateful for my advisor because without them, I would be pretty lost in terms of my options for changing my major or suggestions of things I could try (by that I mean classes, clubs, opportunities). I also think I would have been much more stressed about what I had to complete in terms of prerequisites and general education classes.
>
> My academic advisor was very kind enough to give me external resources about the department that offers my major of interest, outside of the advisor meeting, which they sent through email. They also gave me a heads up of classes that let go of their major restrictions in order for me, and others in the same boat, to register for those hard-to-get classes.

Whereas, for the first meeting:

> [the] major focus of the meetings was about what classes I wanted to do in college, and what I needed to declare the major, right? And also talking about, like the general education requirements as well. So I felt it was more towards getting things done in terms of I need to take these classes. You declare a major and take these classes to finish my general education.

Elliot said our interview made her reflect on her advising experiences and appreciate them more. She wrote how her advisor gave her advice and suggestions based on her past experience. Knowing she had taken AP classes in high school, her advisor encouraged her to apply to the honors program if she felt comfortable. Her advisor also helped her work through her "insecurities…[over] changing her major on a whim during orientation…[wondering] if [she] made the right choice in coming to [WSU], selecting [her] major and what would happen to [her] in the future." She described questions and interactions that could lead to meaning-making experiences when she wrote: "Overall, the advisor meeting revolved a lot on how I was feeling and adjusting with my new college life, but they also considered what my goal was for declaring my major and what would happen after declaring." She concluded by stating that she "realized how helpful [her] experience was since [she] desperately needed the advising in order to clear [her] head more and relax about [her] future."

By her second meeting, Felicia felt her advisor knew her pretty well; the focus was still on completing degree requirements:

> Since we always review what goals I have for the current or upcoming quarter, we're both on the same page about whether I want to focus on completing my general education requirements, major requirements, and school requirements. Since I'm currently

> undeclared, we also review which majors I'm considering, what classes I should be taking to declare as such, and when I will be able to declare a major.

Catan wrote that:

> Our interview has made me reflect a lot because I have realized that I could be doing a lot more to ask for help regarding my academic experience. However, I just haven't felt the need to put in the effort to schedule meetings and such, so I've been simply registering and picking classes by my own standards.

More positively, Alina suggested that as her advisor discussed her "goals, experiences, or even looking at her grades, I think as time goes on, I could cultivate a really good relationship with my advisor."

Research Question Four: Summary

In this section, I explored evidence that students were making-meaning of their advising experiences. Participants mentioned advisors discussing their overall college experiences. They explored internships, looking forward to career planning, and engaging in the graduate school preparation process. They worked to clarify options and demystify the major change process as well as engaged in making connections between major and interests more often in the second meeting, reflecting perhaps where students were on their journey. Participants may have been beginning to make meaning at some level. Overall, however, reactions to advising appointment and expectations of advisors varied.

Notes on Positionality

As I prepared to do my research, conducted my interviews, and shared my results, I continually reflected on how my positionality influenced my research, particularly in reference to my feelings on power and privilege as discussed in Chapter 3. I interviewed students who come

from a variety of backgrounds, some of whom shared my privileges and others who did not. For that reason, I needed to decide how much I shared of my own background and reasons for doing my research. I also needed to decide how much of my participants' backgrounds I wanted to know going into the interviews.

Preparing to be a Researcher

As an advising administrator and advisor who feels strongly that advising is and should be a meaningful experience, as someone who is passionate about helping students make their own meaning of that experience, and as someone who is dedicated to both institutional and student success, I needed to be careful I was not looking for data or presenting findings that were not there, avoiding the issue of observer bias (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). It would have been easy for my positionality to lead me to read *my* meaning-making/experiences into my interpretation of students' meaning-making/experiences. For this reason, I had a planned to have a second reviewer and use triangulation as a method to assure that the stories I was telling were accurate interpretations of participants' experience as opposed to my visions of their experience. However, given the results of the interviews, I did not feel this was needed as I was not interpreting meaning-making experiences. I did not fully define "meaning-making" to avoid confirmation bias (Roulston & Shelton, 2015).

On the other hand, I had considered that a possible outcome of this study could actually *come from* my closeness to the topic: as a participant, scholar, and researcher, my role in the research was reflexive as I wanted to learn from and grow from the positionality I assumed. I had wanted to explore meaning-making in advising through not only analyzing my work but having my participants analyze it as well; the results of the first round of interviews precluded the latter from occurring.

Interview Questions

My positionality may also have influenced how I framed the questions I asked. For that reason, I wanted to make sure that my questions were jargon-free and were not leading participants to respond in a certain way. I ran a series of pilot interviews to address some of these concerns. Given the potential that my questions may have had language with which I was familiar, but that not all participants may have understood, I piloted the interview questions with my own advisees to get a sense of how the questions would be received (Maxwell, 2018). In the pilot interviews, I made sure to ask the participants if the questions made sense and revised them and changed their order based on the responses I received. After the pilot interviews, I realized that I would need to share some parts of my background to "break the ice" and create a disarming environment. I changed the interview questions to add some questions about participants' experiences prior to enrolling at the university and then began each subsequent question with a general introduction to the question.

Sharing Results

In addition to my positionality, I knew that my subjectivity would impact how I interpreted and shared my results. My subjectivity thus will be addressed in Chapter 5

Chapter 4 Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the results of my interviews with 10 participants and their responses to a reflective questionnaire. I began by presenting my site, Wellington State University, including its demographics, a description of the undeclared advising program, the general advising structure, the resources available to students, and the major selection process. I discussed how I selected my participants. I then presented demographic information for my participants and shared their stories. In analyzing the participant interviews and reflective

questionnaire, I first explored participants' views on the purpose of and expectations for advising, as well as how participants had prepared for their advising appointment. The remaining sections focused on my four research questions and the themes that emerged surrounding those questions. Research question one addressed advising interactions. Research question two explored advisor/advisee rapport and relationship building. Research question three highlighted the theme of sense-making, and research question four searched for instances of meaning-making.

In Chapter 5, I present the analysis of my findings.

Chapter 5 – Discussion and Reflection

Boundaries of the Study

My study focused on first-year exploratory majors advised by primary role advisors in their first and second quarters of college. It is possible that I would have found more meaning-making experiences if I had interviewed sophomore exploratory students or even juniors and seniors advising by either faculty or primary-role advisors. Other studies of meaning-making have occurred later in the college experience (Abes, 2007; Abes & Jones, 2004; Barber et al., 2013; Pizzolato, 2005). Further longitudinal research of students at different points in their academic careers could explore meaning-making in the academic advising relationship over time.

Other boundaries were setting and the make-up and size of my participant pool. My research was conducted with students in one type of higher education institution. It is possible I would have found different results if, for example, I conducted my research at a smaller school with more of a liberal arts focus. My participant pool, although somewhat heterogenous, mostly identified as female and were all high achieving students in high school. They self-selected into the study and received an incentive to participate. Several were already leaning strongly towards a major but either had not met the criteria for direct entry into that major or had decided soon after matriculating that they planned to declare that particular major. The number of participants was small; a larger number of participants could have allowed for potentially more diverse experiences to be shared and subsequently a greater understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

In addition, a secondary "setting" for my study was that the interviews were conducted in Zoom. It is possible that had I been able to conduct the interview in person, I would have been

able to engage more deeply with the participants, revealing more information about their experiences. Indeed, several even chose not to turn their cameras on for the interview.

The methodological approach I took could also have limited the results I obtained. I may have had different findings had I simply asked students to share their advising stories. Semi-structured interview may have curtailed the responses I received. I specifically did not ask participants *how* they made meaning of their advising experiences, but I may have had different findings if I had asked that question. I asked what they felt the purpose of advising was and the answers I received focused mostly on transactional experiences. Nash & Murray (2010) paraphrasing Kant wrote: "Purpose without meaning is empty. But meaning without purpose goes nowhere" (p. xx). I wonder if I would have had different findings if I asked what their advising experience meant to them.

Introduction to Chapter 5

In this chapter, I discuss my findings as related to my research questions. As an advising professional and someone intrigued by the meaning-making process, I wanted to explore how students made meaning of their academic advising experiences. As someone invested heavily in seeing students succeed, I was challenged when trying to define the sometimes undefined, or multi-defined, construct of "student success." The advising community will say it has a role in helping students have meaningful/successful/impactful experiences but is often challenged when trying to explain or clarify what that entails. As I conducted this study, I found myself reflecting, in both informal and formal bracketing experiences, on my personal and professional questions surrounding how the advising profession views student success and how those views are changing over time. My initial review of the literature led me to propose that "student success" is different than "institutional" success; part of the challenge for advising professionals is that the

two are often conflated where measures of institutional success obfuscate the more "meaningful" (for student) measures of student success (which themselves are hard to measure).

During the time of writing (and re-writing) my dissertation, given the changes in the post-COVID landscape of higher education, I found myself re-thinking where "student success" is headed. The use of predictive analytics (a huge aspect of institutional success) was in its infancy when I started to write but was firmly entrenched and dictating much of my work by the time I was writing up my findings. My writing process spanned almost three years, during which time my professional position moved from being under enrollment management to academic affairs, and my reflections over that time period became an integral part of my research. Writing for me is a process and many of these reflections came as I read and re-read what I had written, mostly in the form "comments" to my work, my own form of marginalia. Thus, in Chapter 5, I will also pause at times to consider these reflections as I believe they inform a critical part of my research analysis.

Reflection: Subjectivity

As a college student, I was excited every semester when the course guide came out. Attending a liberal arts college meant that we had much freedom and flexibility in choosing our classes. My friends would often seek me out for help 'planning their lives." After college, I stayed in higher education as it was a way to live vicariously as a student; I had found a way to never leave. Even though I spent 17 years working in student affairs, my passion was in students' academic lives, and I always sought out ways to connect to that experience as I worked with students.

My undergraduate college did not have a robust advising program, and I feel that I could have benefited from such an experience. In my work today, I see some students who speak of

stellar experiences with their advisors and others who do not. I work as an advising administrator in a decentralized faculty advising system; we are secondary advisors who often fill in for students when their advising experience is not what they were expecting or desire. I also see students who are content with sub-par advising. I realized throughout my research that my subjectivity meant that advising was very important, exciting, and meaningful *to me*: I wondered if that impacted how I was viewing my participants' experiences.

Overview of the Study

This study explored the academic advising relationship vis-à-vis several competencies of the relational component of NACADA's (2022) core competency model. It sought to address the problem of needing to view the advising experience from the perspective of the student and how or why that experience had meaning for them. It challenged advising professionals to consider what they mean when they say "[g]ood [academic] advising is the "single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (Light, 2001, p. 81) or even what a "successful college experience" is for students. It sought to shed light on the somewhat murky constructs of student and institutional success and the role of the advisor/advisee relationship within those constructs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore how first-year students interpreted the role of academic advising interactions in helping them succeed and make meaning of their college experience. Through semi-structured interviews and a reflective questionnaire as well as a brief document analysis, I explored the lived experiences of first-year students who were advised by primary-role advisors as exploratory major students in the first and second quarters of attending a four-year university. These analyses interrogated connections

between meaning-making and both institutional and student success and how the advisor/advisee relationship served as a catalyst therein. This study informs the role that meaning-making within the advisor/advisee relationship plays in the successful college experience. While studies have found that participants typically reach higher levels of meaning-making (e.g., self-actualization) several years post-graduation (Baxter-Magolda, 2008, 2009), I expected the additional element of students in my study being in the position to explore potential majors with advisors tasked to engage in more relational advising to allow for additional aspects of meaning-making to surface. Leaders in academic advising will be able use this study's findings to challenge themselves to look more closely at the academic advisor/advisee relationship and what it means to say that this relationship is integral to either institutional, student success, or both.

Participants

The participants in my study were 10 first-year exploratory majors at Wellington State University (a pseudonym). Nine identified as female and one as male. Three identified as first-generation. More than two-thirds lived on campus. Four were Asian, three were White, one identified as Hispanic and two chose not to state their race. All were in-state students.

Research Design and Methodology

My study used interpretive or hermeneutical phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of first-year exploratory students with regards to how they made meaning of their academic advising experiences. I had explored combining grounded theory with a narrative study (Lau & Soto, 2012) but landed on phenomenology as I was wanted to explore the phenomenon of meaning-making through interpreting students' stories of their advising experiences. I used interviews and a reflective questionnaire to get at the essence of the experience. I also conducted

a brief analysis of virtual documents to provide context and background to the participants' experiences.

Summary of the Findings

What emerged from my findings was an opportunity to view the student advising experience and the academic advising relationship from a different perspective and in so doing also challenge the way to view student success. After my first round of interviews, my initial reaction was to think that I had not found a shared experience or phenomenon and so I pivoted to doing a reflective survey in lieu of the second interview. The results of the survey and my subsequent analysis of both the interviews and the survey responses demonstrated that it was perhaps the absence of the story that was the story.

Reflection: Two Research Studies

When reading through Chapter 3 after conducting my first round of interviews, I noted that before I started my research, I had wondered "if I would approach my data differently because of my own pre-conceptions of what meaning-making in the academic advising relationship is or should be?" I reflected that this may indeed have been the case and further wondered if it impacted my frustrations when I thought that I had a non-finding as opposed to what was actually a "no-finding." I also noted in Chapter 3 that "when I was conducting analysis I was attentive to my own translation of the meaning-making process." My reflections after my research were yes, I had wanted there to be something that I did not find. As I had suggested in Chapter 3, I indeed ended up with two research projects—one of my topic and the other a self-reflective study of how I interacted with the research process and how I viewed myself in relation to that process. In a bracketing reflection prior to the interviews, I wrote that I had to be aware that I might have more connections with people who shared my college experiences than

those who did not. I now realize that I also wanted to make meaning of my own research process or have a meaningful research experience This is what lead me to write, after many of those connections and findings did not occur, “where does this all fit? Does it get lost? This is part of my grief/loss.”

Research Question 1

RQ1 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe the interactions they have had with their academic advisors in their first and second quarters of college?

Participants described their interactions with advisors in terms of advisor traits and behaviors but also seemed to have an easier time reflecting on the advising experience or what happened in the session. Similarly, their expectations also centered around what they expected their advisors to do but in a more transactional than relational sense; grasping the purpose of advising beyond that eluded some. It was interesting, however, that all but one had prepared for the advising appointment in one way or another, suggesting that they understood there was a purpose even if they were not able to fully articulate it, although both the preparation and the purpose focused mostly on choosing classes. Less than half had prepared questions suggesting that the others expected the advisor to lead the conversation.

My participants may have expected transactional advising as that was what most were accustomed to from guidance counseling in high school. In discussing their expectations, most felt as if they were met; although one said their advisor was helping the best they could, and no-one’s reaction was superlative. This could be an issue of students not knowing what to expect or not understanding what advising could be. It may not be possible to make “meaning” of something that one does see as that meaningful or significant; for many of my participants the advising experience itself may have seemed as simply one more step in their first-year journey.

Hannah said that she felt her undeclared advisor was there simply to help her find classes to take. Most students said their advisors followed-up with them to clarify the conversation or remind them of what was discussed—again more transactional than relational.

On the other hand, the fact that several participants described the experience as being rushed indicates that they may have been looking for more in the experience; Callie keep asking questions even when her advisor was trying to end the conversation. If her advisor had had more time, perhaps those additional questions would have led to more meaning-making. Participants spoke of their advisors discussing possible major and career paths but the question or discussion of "why" did not emerge. Also interesting were the students who reported getting advice from others: peer-advisors, professors, other upperclass students, and specialty-area advising such as pre-law and pre-med advisors. This raises the question of whether there is meaning-making occurring in informal advising sessions that is not being captured or cultivated.

Reflection: Whose Meaning and Purpose

I had originally planned to ask my participants to reflect upon their own meaning-making between the first and second interviews. In a reflection after the pilot interviews, I wondered if they would be able to analyze this process and/or if it would introduce bias. However, in my thoughts after the decision to use a reflective questionnaire instead, I wondered if their responses to the questions would confirm my "no finding" from the interviews and reflected that it was always possible there could be meaning in those reflections that I had not seen before. In comparing the responses I found that those participants who had more to say did reflect more deeply on their experiences in their answers to the questionnaire than in the interviews.

I reflected further that there is an adage among higher education professionals that "students don't know what they don't know." Many questions and comments peppered my

margins. Higher education professionals work to help students find purpose or make meaning but what if students do not see meaning and purpose in the same way? Does that matter? Will students look back on where they have been and draw the lines from advising to meaning-making and purpose? Will they ever know if they get there? This is a metric that simply cannot be measured. Is there progression in the advising relationship? Do students only begin to make-meaning of something after they had made sense of it? If so, what turns sense-making into meaning-making and what can advisors do to encourage this change? I noted in one Memo that students seemed more knowledgeable after the first advising session and thus did ask more questions, but I wondered if students did not know the questions to ask, and maybe further questions would have led to meaning-making. It is an issue of students needing to be advised on the questions to ask?

Research Question 2

RQ2 How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe **the rapport and relationship** they have built through interactions with their academic advisor in their first and second quarters of college?

Participants seemed to struggle with defining relationships or talking about rapport especially in the first round of interviews. Yet, the traits and behaviors discussed in Chapter 4, along with the themes that emerged from my second research question lead me to believe that advisors were *attempting* to build rapport and a relationship with their students; many participants reported their advisors using small talk to get the conversations going. It is possible then that my participants may not have had the emotional or cognitive maturity to understand what their advisors were trying to build. If meaning-making is a process through which humans construct meaning, interpret, and find significance in their experiences, then perhaps my

participants were simply not ready to articulate that process. Phrases such as Alina's comment that she and her advisor talked about classes—"so I think that was it;" and that her advisor knew what she wanted to do and her interests "but that's about as far as [our] relationship goes" may be indicative of this idea. Evelyn said she had a positive professional relationship, that they got along and had good rapport, but did not say more.

Participants described their advisors as friendly but mostly stopped short of saying they were friends. When asked more specific questions in the reflective questionnaire, some were able to articulate the process further, but most still described largely transactional experiences. However, most did not seem to *expect* their advisors to build a relationship; rather they expected guidance and direction.

The themes of small talk and disarming behavior that emerged indicated an attempt to build rapport and create the building blocks of a relationship, but this did not appear to be enough. It is telling that several participants noted they either would have liked to or felt they should have a better relationship with their advisors, even if it was not initially expected. Many were able to reflect more deeply in the questionnaire about their advising experiences and perhaps were beginning to see the meaning behind some of them. And that ones that did describe a more connected relationship, appreciated it. Several participants remarked on the possibility of a stronger relationship, but then they would not be with the same advisor after they declare a major.

Reflection: What's in a Relationship?

In a bracketing reflection prior to starting the interviews I wrote: "what am I assuming the relationship to be? Back to the relational component of the competencies. Is there one type of relationship we expect to have? Or one we think is best for student success or institutional

success? How will meaning-making connect to student success? Need to connect the dots more." And then after the interviews, I commented in the margins: "Is this institutional versus student success?" In one Memo, I wrote: "If there is no relationship, is there institutional success without student success." This may have been the first time I looked at the potential that the two constructs of student success could be in conflict with one another.

The sections on academic advising on Wellington State University's website for undeclared majors do not mention relationship *building* or meaning-making as part of the academic advising experiences, although peer mentors are tasked with building relationships, which reflect perhaps what my participants said about their experiences with their peer advisors. The other relationship that the materials do mention is one of shared responsibility for the advising process. Advisor responsibilities listed did include tasks that would lean towards meaning-making. Nash and Jang (2013) discuss "meaning making mentors" (p. 2) suggesting there may be space for this outside of the advising area. One who spoke of meeting with a peer mentor felt there was a connection because they shared similar experiences; indeed she met with that person more often than her academic advisor. It may not be possible to develop a relationship after one or two meetings.

Research Question 3

RQ3 How do first-year students in exploratory majors express **their knowledge of the logic and purpose of the curriculum** [sense-making] as a result of their advising experiences in their first and second quarters of college?

Participants discussed the logic and purpose of the curriculum mostly in transactional terms; they seemed to view the "logic and purpose" to be simply to check off boxes towards a degree, or to meet pre-requisite requirements for their majors. Participants did not refer to

advisors explaining general education requirements but rather spoke of them simply as requirements that needed to be fulfilled. They expected their advisors to have knowledge of the curriculum, but they were not concerned with explanations of it. The focus was more on exploring requirements for majors. Perhaps the idea of a core curriculum as having a logic and purpose (for students) is outdated. Several participants were more immediately focused on what comes after college. Estella mentioned that her advisor led her in the direction of where she needed to go "as an undeclared student," which for most students seemed to be choosing the classes that they would need to take as pre-requisites and/or to explore possible major paths. The fact that several mentioned four-year plans indicates that they were looking for potential majors but from a more sense-making perspective: Elliott mentioned her advisor looking at the sequencing of courses and how many units she had to take. It does not appear that conversations were started that would have eventually lead to meaning-making.

Most of the participants were aware of the advising resources available to them on the website but referenced them mostly for exploring requirements for certain majors. The other sections were not mentioned as much. It is not clear if they were aware of the sections on advisor expectations or how to prepare for an appointment.

Reflection: Meaning-Making versus Retention

As I was finishing writing Chapter 4, I went to my division retreat on case management and student success. The president gave a speech about the challenges the university was facing and how important retention was. His mantra was that every interaction matters. He told us (academic support and student affairs staff) that we should be excited to be doing the work that we were doing because it was transformational for students. Following his presentation, we were presented with retention and student success (GPA) data. But it was numbers and figures in the

aggregate. It all seemed transactional. We then did an exercise about what our teams did to support students: we could see the potential for transformational interactions there. The retreat concluded with a discussion on how to manage cases, in what ways and how often we needed to do outreach, and when to say we had done all we could to get the student to see us and then "close the case." But afterwards, when I reflected on the retreat, I thought to myself: in the end it's all about the transaction. And we are measured on the outcome of the transaction--that's institutional success. What happens during the process or even after the case is closed--whether we reach that student or not--that's the transformation, that's student success.

Research Question 4

RQ4: How do first-year students in exploratory majors describe experiences with **problem solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning, and goal setting** as a result of their advising experiences in their first and second quarters of college?

Participants discussed the major declaring/decision-making process with their advisors, which can straddle the idea of sense-making and meaning-making. However, they mostly discussed the experience in terms of degree-planning and courses to take as pre-requisites; the idea of *exploring* a variety of majors did not surface as much, although some students seemed to be going that exploration themselves. In preparing her questions for the pre-med advising team, Hannah was anticipating the need to work with them on problem-solving and decision-making regarding what she needed to do to be ready for medical school. However, there were not as many in-depth reflections from other participants concerning experiences with the *undeclared* advising process; although several did mention experiences where advisors helped them with their confusion and/or anxiety over picking classes, knowing what was coming next or whether they were ready for a certain major.

In their reflective questionnaire, on the other hand, several participants did mention their advisors working with them on their goals for the quarter, how to prepare for declaring a double-major, or exploring what happened after they declared a major. Perhaps these experiences were now more prevalent, or the participants were just more attuned to them happening. Maybe they started to realize this was what was expected of them. These initial advising experiences, even though seemingly not rich in meaning-making, may serve as catalysts for future meaning-making experiences when students are more ready to have them.

"Meaning-making" in college can refer to meaning-making of both students' curricular and co-curricular experiences and while academic advising is clearly in the realm of the curricular, for the purpose of student success, the co-curricular is also important. Participants did not reflect on their advising experiences much beyond the academic realm, other than the small talk, or the occasional personal sharing of a common interests, although a few did mention attempts to build a relationship. This may reflect the presence of two relationships where the "academic" relationship is not seen as a "relationship" by students, especially younger ones in an undeclared program where they may still see most relationships with older adults as more proprietorial. A relationship may have to be seen as personal to have meeting. For the most part, my participants were not making personal connections with their advisors.

The Wellington State University webpage for academic advising states that the advising relationship is based on shared responsibility. The idea of a "co-created" plan is a proponent of the appreciative advising approach (Bloom et al., 2008). Most of my participants did not discuss in detail their role in the advising relationship, which may have made the meaning-making process more challenging. Few participants suggested that their advisors challenged them which may also make it hard to make meaning of the experience.

Williams and Murphy (2022) spoke of the idea of "students' *construals*—their sense-making of themselves and their environments" (p. 117, emphasis in original) and discussed how the effect of an experience depends on how students construe that experience. Considering this in light of my findings, it is interesting to consider how students construe advising. Most saw advising as transactional and that could possibly make it harder for them to make meaning of it. When Felicia mentioned being confused after talking to friends about her options for a political science major, she made an appointment to see her advisor, but the conversation centered around pre-requisites, and she left still not knowing much about political science.

Reflection: To Define or Not to Define

I made the decision at the start of my research process not to define meaning-making so as to avoid confirmation bias. In a reflection before the interviews I wrote: "I know it will be a challenge to remind myself that a no-finding is a finding. Is meaning-making really a thing? Can we define what it is?" After the interviews I questioned whether I should define it to help my analysis of the findings. I wondered if their experience might be meaningful in a way they could not explain or define. However, after writing Chapter 4, I wrote "I don't think so; now I think there be may multiple levels of meaning-making perhaps and the students may have made meaning in a different way than I had expected, not as deep but with different significance for them." In a later comment I wrote "As I reviewed the data again; I saw little tidbits of meaning-making getting ready to bloom. It's almost as if I saw the aha moments just out of their reach." While the aha moments may or may not have occurred it was interesting to wonder what might have come next.

Levels of meaning-making

Halfway through writing Chapter 4, I went back to Nash and Murray's (2010) definition of meaning-making. I wondered if the advising experience was deep enough for meaning-making as they were describing it. I wondered if we let it be. Nash & Murray (2010) defined meaning-making as a constructivist term that refers to the epistemology used to clarify and connect "all these interpretations, narrative frameworks, philosophical rationales and perspectives, and faith or belief systems" that guide how human beings "live, love, learn, work, and worship" (p. xx). They challenged their readers to make room for meaning-making. They offered that students need to have "systems of meaning to inform" the purposes the academy wants them to achieve (Nash & Murray, 2010, p. xx).Their "campus guide to meaning-making" presented theoretical frameworks and used philosophy to explain the meaning-making process but their chapter on practical advice is titled "making room for *meaning*" (p. 127, emphasis added). But who then is doing the making?

Nash and Murray (2010) presented strategies for inside and outside the classroom as well as one-on-one meetings with students including telling stories, asking philosophical questions, creating purposeful silence, tackling tough topics, and connecting context and content. The participants in my study did not speak of these types of experiences in discussing their advising appointments.

On the other hand, there were responses that suggested that students had smaller experience of meaning-making. If I were to think of meaning-making as I described it earlier—as a process through which humans construct meaning, interpret, and find significance in their experiences, this seems more feasible than Nash & Murray's (2010) definition. There were times when students may have been looking for significance even if they did not immediately identify

it as such. This mostly occurred when they were discussing goals and plans beyond the transactional nature of their advising appointments, where something happened in their advising appointment that made them consider future directions.

The findings of my research could be viewed light of self-authorship theory (Baxter Magolda, 2008, 2009; Kegan, 2004) and the learning partnership model (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004) where my participants were still following formulas and relying on external authorities for any meaning-making experiences. There was not much evidence of advisors attempting to move students into the crossroads using principles of the learning partnership model. What I saw that appeared to be tidbits of meaning-making could have been students beginning to question their previous assumptions and formulas, creating potential provocative moments (Pizzolato, 2005) for advisors to help students make meaning.

Reflection: On a "Guide" to Meaning-Making

Can there really be a "guide" to meaning-making? How much is planned and how much is organic? Do we really *need* a "guide" to meaning-making? Is meaning-making something we want to control?

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

I had offered in Chapter 1 that part of the study was as much a hermeneutical exploration of the meaning of advising as well as the meaning of the advising experience, suggesting that if advising is the bridge between the curricular and the co-curricular that research is needed to see what happens on the bridge to contribute to students' meaning-making capabilities. The potential to have things happen on that bridge is strong but advisors have to be intentional about working to make them happen. It is these "happenings" that will contribute to student success. If retention is indeed not a learning outcome then advisors need the time to figure out how best to work

inductively within a "deductive construct (aggregated data reported for accountability purposes)" (Troxel, 2019, p. 53), if they truly want to be able to contribute to both student and institutional success. Most of the participants in my study only met with advisors once a quarter: it may be difficult to develop a relationship out of one or two meetings. Another said she had four years to get to know her guidance counselor in high school who know "everything she was interested in for four years before I ever got to college." Meaning-making may take more time and require stronger relationships to be built.

In order to truly make meaning of an experience, it may be important for students to purposefully reflect on that experience. One of my participants said that she had gained a lot from our interview. Students may need some type of pre-advising to prepare or challenge them to think in ways that would lead to meaning-making, an advisor "guide to meaning-making" but at a very specific level to the profession. I also noted that my participants seemed to make more meaning from their informal advising experiences. Academic advising professionals are often nervous about informal advising out a concern for students being "mis-advised," but there could be a way to allow for and encourage these potential meaning-making experiences.

The "definition" issues raised in this study may continue to perplex scholars and practitioners in the field—not only in terms of how to define but also in terms of when and whether to define, or even perhaps for whom to define. At the time of this writing, a draft of NACADA's 2025 *Definition of Scope of Practice for Academic Advising* had just been distributed to its members for review and feedback; the final version may serve to make the issue less perplexing. But higher education, an industry often accused of changing at a glacial rate, is now changing faster than ever before, and advising is coming along for the ride. Will future or amended definitions be necessary as we navigate the waters that predictive analytics are

churning? Will there need to be sub-definitions for different advising approaches? And again, then, for *whom* is advising being defined? It is important enough for professionals *in the field* to know and love what they do? Or is it defined by advising professionals to help *d* understand what they do? A meme about academic advising created in humor may have more truth than fiction, where the first frame, "what society thinks I do," is a picture of a student's weekly grid schedule and the last frame, "what I really do," shows an advisor and a student working one-on-one together in what could be a "meaningful" session. But is the field in danger of the first picture becoming the last? And if so, what can/needs to happen for the field to continue to live up to its definitions?

Another definition in question is the question of meaning-making itself, what I was trying to harness when I first starting writing. The following is a set of marginal comments I made while re-reading through Chapter 1 after my first round of interviews. In Chapter 1 I had written:

> One way to explore how individual students succeed, as well as how institutions view and document that success, is to interrogate how students make meaning of their college experience, rather than simply understanding (i.e., making sense of) the components that constitute that experience.

My comments were: "For Chapter 5: how do they [students] define meaning-making? Is it the same as how we define meaning-making?" And then, after the reflective questionnaire, as I was starting my initial analysis of the data, I added: "Do we even know what it means to make meaning?" I used the second comment as a preamble to the section on meaning-making in college in Chapter 1.

However, after analyzing my responses, I am not sure if I have come any closer to answering that last question. In fact, I commented before beginning to analyze my data that it

was interesting that I ended the study with some (and more) of the same questions I had before I began. The challenge is perhaps that the advising field uses ideas such as "meaning-making" and "finding purpose" and "making the most out of college" but it may not be completely clear to or agreed on by everyone in the field what they mean by those terms.

Reflection: What is "Good" Advising

In my notes, when re-reading Chapter 1 after my interviews, in response to Light's (2001) comment regarding "good advising," I questioned: "But is it? Is making the most out of college, student success or institutional success?" And to my suggestion that Light's (2001) work concentrated more on what advisors could/should do but did not delve into how or why the experience was as significant as it was *to and for the student,* I commented after the first round of interviews: "For Chapter 5: So is this good advising?" This is a question that continued to emerge for me as I was conducting the interviews and that relates to the multiple definition conundrum. I am an "advising" administrator who also "advises;" my office "advises" approximately 50-75 exploratory students a year, depending on how long they remain exploratory. We are the "Center for Academic *Success* and *Advising*," recently renamed from the Center for Student Success to reflect more accurately our role in the "advising" process. Yet, we are in a decentralized system where the vast majority of the "advising" is done by faculty. (I continue to put "advising" in quotations because of the definition issue). The 'advising" we do is relational: with the exception of our undeclared students, we do not engage in transactional advising. It takes time to do the kind of relational advising that leads to student success (and as a bi-product, institutional success).

Light (2001, p. 81) said that advising was unrecognized as a characteristic of a "successful college experience." In my comments after the interviews, I questioned whether it

was possible to become more recognized. Now I wonder (and worry?) if advising may become recognized for institutional success, with student success as an added bonus when it happens: metrics such as retention are more about getting through college logistically but are less about "the successful college *experience*." I commented on my post-interviews read-through that I worry about the long game being sacrificed to the short game: we can get butts in seats and that's a short-term measure of success but if we do not worry about the success of the individual butt we put in the seat (beyond whether that butt is still in the seat at a given time in the future), we will not have long term success. I worry that if advisor performance is measured on that one easier-to-measure metric, that's the one advisors will end up doing. It would seem advisors are challenged to "make room for meaning making" (Nash & Murray, 2010, p. 127) but are not always rewarded for meaning-making nor do they necessarily have the room to give to meaning-making efforts.

My reflection shows that I had concerns about definitions even before diving into my research and that these concerns continued throughout my research. The "definition conundrum"—beyond just defining "advising" will be one that the academic advising community continues to tackle as the profession deals with the myriad of challenges facing higher education in the second quarter of the twenty-first century.

Future research might then also want to interrogate the major decision/change process and question if, when given the opportunity to explore, are students who are *open* to exploring more likely to make-meaning of those experiences. Do advisors get discouraged when students are not as interested in exploring as they are? What about when advisees ask: "is this an easy class?" Research into advisor reactions to some of these common frustrations might open up doors for further exploration of the meaning-making process.

Other areas of "advising" that occur on college campuses could be explored. There is often focus on the differences between and/or overlap of academic and career advising (Carduner et al., 2011; Rey, 2022; Shaffer, 2024). I wondered at one point in the analysis process if meaning-making was more likely to occur in career advising. Further research could thus explore meaning-make in a career advising appointment or another advising situations.

Mottarella et al.'s (2004) research suggested the depth of the advising relationship to be an important cue to a successful advising experience, where depth was characterized as an established relationship where the advisor knew the advisee by name and asked questions about the advisees' academic experiences. Higgins (2017) asked what the institution's responsibility was to help advisors gain the knowledge and skills necessary to engage with this core aspect of advising. McGill et al.'s (2020) study found that the relational component was the least stressed in one advisor training and development program. Further research into how this component is stressed in advisor training programs, especially with the increased focus on predictive analytics to help detect students in need of additional advising support, could identify gaps between advisor training and/or expectations, and student learning outcomes.

I suggested earlier that it may not even be completely clear to, (or mutually agreed upon by), advisors and advisees as to what is actually occurring during the advising process or what constitutes the "advising relationship." Today's advisors would have as much to say (if not more given my results) about the academic advising experience than their advisees. Studies about how academic advisors review meaning-making in the academic advising relationship could complement this one. Particularly interesting would be to be interview advisors from different generations, those who have been in the field for decades versus those who have just started, and

former advisors who are now advising administrators. Included in this study, or even a separate one, could be leaders of divisions that supervise advising units.

In reviewing Chapter 1, I reflected on my question about how students view the relationships they have with their advisors and the meaning-making that occurs therein: "Maybe they don't? Or is the meaning hidden and we need future studies to figure it out?" Quantitative studies that attempt to connect meaning-making to institutional success are difficult given the definition issues surrounding what it means to make meaning. Those that attempt to connect the two hard-to-define constructs of meaning-making and *student* success have that difficulty compounded. However, mixed-method studies that identified specific examples of meaning-making and student success and then explored those correlations might reveal interesting findings. Many of my participants talked about family influence and most were first-generation. Exploring how some of these factors relate to how students build relationships and make-meaning may also be interesting.

In deciding on the methodology for this study, I had considered the idea of a grounded theory and explored the idea of grounded theory combined with a narrative study. Further research might want to approach the idea of meaning-making in the academic advising experience using a different methodological approach. Listening to students advising stories might help us understand how they construct meaning through narrative; this would most likely work better with older students. This might also help us further understand and reinterpret the concept of student success through a student lens as I had suggested when I discussed my methodology.

Nash & Murray (2010) discussed the idea of the "quarterlife generation," those between the ages of 20-35 (p. 4). They addressed questions about whether college students are ready

intellectually, have the maturity and life experience, as well as the emotional and social intelligence, for meaning-making, or if the concept of meaning-making even interests them. They spoke of the twenty-first century challenges facing "this" generation—those who were of that age when they were writing. Fifteen years later, we have a new generation of quarter-lifers, who have all experienced a global pandemic at various points in their K-12 education and are now facing political, cultural, and societal changes at a pace faster than any other generation of students in America has faced. New research into how this generation may make meaning differently than other generations would be very interesting: in a multi-generational workplace, how does one generation help another make meaning?

One of the hallmarks of good qualitative research may be that it begins to answer some questions while raising the possibility of others. This presents a challenge when it comes to writing a "conclusion" to a process that seems to point in multiple directions or to study that raised more questions for its research than it answered. Therefore, in lieu of such remarks, I will present an epilogue consisting of two reflections: one a reflection on my research experience and the other a pre-flection on the landscape for student success (and yes, institutional success) in higher education.

Epilogue – Final Reflection and Pre-flection

Reflection: Wanting Something to be There

Before starting the interviews, I engaged in the following bracketing reflection. I wrote that I recognized that my background in having attended a liberal arts college where I enjoyed the freedom to be undeclared and explore for the sake of exploring and pursuing new knowledge, may lead me to want to find meaning in academic advising, or the logic and purpose of the curriculum, that is not there for others. After the interviews, I commented "Yes, this is what happened."

After I ran the pilot interviews, I had the following bracketing reflection: What am I looking for? Why am I frustrated when I do not get the answers that I would expect? Can there really be a common goal of advising? Do I need to ask participants what they see as the common goal of advising? I am worried that first-year students may not have the language to describe what I am looking for. What am I looking for? (And indeed after the first round of interviews, I commented "Yes, exactly!")

I wondered if my questions were really getting at how students express "knowledge of the logic and purpose of the curriculum" or "problem solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning, and goal setting? *Do I need to ask more specific questions?* I had hoped for richer answers but did not get that in the pilot interviews. *Do I see what I get in the first round and then delve deeper in the second interviews?*

I did not do a second round of interviews but did craft the questions in my reflective questionnaire to ask more specifically about the advising relationship. It was interesting that some students gave me more information in writing. I had remarked in Chapter 3 that my experiences in the advising field brought reflexivity to my research. While this was important to

my research, it also had a downside as I was initially frustrated and disappointed after my first round of interviews. This also goes back to my subjectivity: I wanted the relationship to be meaningful because as an advisor, the experience was meaningful to me. It also goes back to research bias and the idea that my concern for the survival of the advising world that I know and love meant that my no-findings were doubly impactful. I commented in the section on my subjectivity: "this is not just me, but all advisors. We want this, but is it [meaningful]? The college experience is meaningful but is the advising experience meaningful?" And then: "Is it the students as well as us? Is it meaningful but not in the way they see it or define it?" I still wonder what answers I would have gotten if I had actually asked how their advising experience was meaningful to them.

Pre-flection: The Story of the Story

When I started my research, I wrote that hoped that I would listen to student stories, but that it would be the story of the story, the meaning-making process, which would be the ultimate focus of my research, reflecting that this might mean I would end up with two research projects—a study and a study of a study. I also wondered if meaning would also be constructed in the context of the study itself where, based on what I observed, I would also make my own meaning of the experience. Throughout that second research project, the study of my study, I reflected on whether I was indeed finding a story of a story. I am writing this last, after having completed everything else, and believe that the story of the story may just be beginning to be told. If I look at the simple definition of meaning-making—a process through which humans construct meaning, interpret, and find significance in their experiences—and consider my various reflections throughout the research process, I did make my own meaning of the experience. If I look at the more philosophical definition: "all those interpretations, narrative

frameworks, philosophical rationales and perspectives, and faith or belief systems that each of us brings to the various worlds in which we live, love, learn, work, and worship" (Nash & Murray, 2010, p. xx)—one that I found hard to apply in my research with my participants, I also made meaning of the experience: that's the story of the story.

Advising administrators, whether they conduct formal research or not, are scholar-practitioners in their fields, for they are all informal observers of student experiences. They are challenged daily to navigate the lines between research and (best) practice, between what they may observe in student stories and the larger aggregate "student" experience, between what they believe to be best for student success and a larger idea of what is best for institutional success. Ultimately, this may also cause them to challenge the meanings they have made. Higher education is facing significant existential threats that could fundamentally change the business model to which it is accustomed. The story of the story may be how it (and those who work within its structures) respond to those challenges balancing both student and institutional success and creating environments open to meaning-making experiences.

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Appendix A - Interview Questions

1. I want to hear about you. Tell me a little about yourself
    a. What has been your college journey so far?
    b. What classes are you taking? Which is your favorite class? Why?
    c. Why did you choose to attend WSU?
    d. What role did family/other play in your decision?
    e. What made you want to participate in this study?
    f. How do you feel about being undecided?
    g. Has college been what you expected it to be? What is the most surprising thing you have learned this semester?
2. How often have you meet with your academic advisor? For what purposes?
3. What were your expectations of academic advising/your advisor prior to your first advising appointment?
    a. How were those expectations met?
    b. What different expectations do you have now that you have had an advising appointment?
4. How did you prepare for your academic advising appointment?
    a. What resources did you use? (website, videos, other students)
        i. How did what you learned from the resources impact your advising experiences meet your expectations?
5. Walk me through an appointment you had with your academic advisor. Was the focus of the conversation?
6. What experiences did you have with advising (formal or informal) prior to enrolling in college?
    a. How were those experiences different than the ones you had at WSU?
7. How would you characterize the types of interactions you have had with your academic advisor?
8. What was the major focus of your advising appointments?
    a. What did you discuss with your advisor?
    b. Who lead the conversation?
        i. If you lead the conversation: why did you choose to ask the questions you did?
9. Please describe the relationship you have had with your academic advisor this year.
    a. How did your advisor build rapport with you?
    b. How well do you feel your advisor knows you?
    c. How well do you know your advisor?
10. What makes you seek out advising? What is the most important aspect of advising to you?
11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your advising experiences or you that I haven't asked**?**

Appendix B - Inquiry Email for Site Selection

Hello,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Leadership in Academic Advising program at Kansas State University. I recently had my dissertation proposal accepted. My research will center on how students make meaning of their academic advising experiences.

I am in the process of looking for sites at which to conduct my study, which will involve interviewing students and analyzing relevant documents. The criteria for students to participate is that they are first-year students in exploratory majors, advised by professional advisors at institutions that mandate advising.

From my initial searching, it looks as if students at _____ might meet this criteria. I am writing to inquire if you think it would be possible to conduct my research at _____. Please know that this is not an official request; I'm just reaching out to potential sites to determine the possibilities. I am happy to have a conversation to explain more fully the scope and focus of my project.

I can be reached at *email address* or *phone number* if you have additional questions.
Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Helena Cole

Appendix C - Recruitment Email to Potential Participants

Date:

Hello,

Please see attached flyer regarding a chance to share your advising experiences with a doctoral student doing research on the academic advising experience.

If you are interested in participating, please contact Helena Cole, graduate researcher, at *email address.*

Thank you.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: *What are the criteria for participating in the study?*
A: Students should be first-year students (not transfers) who matriculated as undeclared/exploratory students. They should have attended at least one advising appointment in the fall 2024 quarter and should be planning to attend at least one advising appointment in the winter 2025 quarter.

Q: *How will students' responses be used?*
A: Individual responses will be analyzed via qualitative research methods to uncover overall themes. Pseudonyms will be used throughout the process to keep students' identities confidential.

Q: *Who will see the responses?*
A: All responses will be collected anonymously. The final dissertation may be published in online databases or professionally. Participants will have the opportunity to review the analysis and provide feedback and will be given a final copy of the dissertation if requested.

Q: *Who can students contact with questions or concerns?*
A: For questions about the study, please contact the researcher, Helena Cole at *email address.*

Appendix D - Recruitment Flyer

ADVISING STUDY:
EARN A $25 AMAZON GIFT CARD

What is the study? A doctoral dissertation looking at the advisor/advisee relationship

Who can participate? First-year students who are exploratory majors who met with an advisor in the fall quarter and plan to meet with an advisor in the winter quarter.

What do I have to do? Participate in two interviews, one at the late fall 2024 and in the second in March 2025.

Benefits:

- **Share your insights about your academic advising experience**
- **Learn more about the research process**
- *****Participants who complete both interviews will receive a $25 Amazon Gift Card*****

Want to participate? Contact _____ for more information!

Appendix E - Informed Consent Form

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

RESEARCH SUBJECT'S CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Making Meaning in the Academic Advising Relationship: Reflections on Student Success

Name of Primary Investigator: Wendy G. Troxel, EdD

Name of Faculty Advisor: Wendy G. Troxel, EdD

Name of Graduate Student Researcher: Helena Elizabeth Cole

Project Approval Date: _____

Project Expiration Date: _____

Length of study: _____

Contact details for problems/questions:

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Helena Cole at *phone number* or *email address*, or the Primary Investigator, Dr. Wendy G. Troxel, at *phone number* or *email address*
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant or if you feel you might be at risk, contact the Kansas State University Research Compliance Office (URCO); Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

A. Purpose of Research. This study explores how students view the relationships they have with their academic advisors and the meaning-making that occurs therein. It interrogates how students see their advising experiences as contributing to their success.

B. Duration of Participation. You will be asked to participate in two one-hour interviews over the course of the 2024-25 academic year.

C. Criteria for Participation. To be eligible for this study you must 1) be enrolled in a four-year college or university in the Unites States, 2) be classified as first-year students, 3) be in a program for exploratory/undeclared majors, 4) have been advised by a primary-role advisor in the first quarter of the 2024-25 academic year, and 5) must be planning to be advised by a primary-role advisor in second quarter of the 2024-25 academic year.

D. Research Procedures. Data collection will begin in the fall of 2024 and conclude by the end of the 2024-25 academic year. If you chose to participate, you will be asked to complete the following:

- Initial Interest Form, Demographic Questionnaire, and Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research form
- One one-hour recorded semi-structured interviews conducted in Zoom
- One follow-up reflective questionnaire collected through a Microsoft Form document

Total participation time for this study will be approximately 2.5 hours over the course of two-three months.

E. Foreseeable Risks. We anticipate the risk to be minimal, There are some possible risks involved. 1) You may be uncomfortable talking about their advising experiences. To reduce any risk, the interviewer will remind you throughout your interview that you have the right to stop participation or choose not to answer certain questions. 2) There is an unlikely risk that your advisor will learn of your participation and/or responses. To reduce this risk, reports, documents, and recording associated with this study will be kept in a secure location, with limited access, until such time as the research study is concluded; at which point, any reports, documents, and recordings containing identifying information will be redacted or destroyed. No material will correlate the information in the informed consent form to the research data

F. Benefits. If you complete the process will receive a twenty-five dollar ($25) Amazon gift card. There are no other direct benefits to you, but you will have the opportunity to reflect upon the advising experience and what it means for you to achieve success in college. You will also gain insight into the research process.

G. Compensation, Costs, and Reimbursement. Compensation will be made in the form of a twenty-five ($25) Amazon gift card, emailed to you upon completion of questionnaire. As interviews will be conducted in Zoom, no additional compensation or reimbursement will be provided. There is no cost to participate in the study.

H. Withdraw from Study. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

I. Confidentiality. We will take all steps to make sure that any information that is obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you is kept strictly confidential. To protect your confidentiality, you will be assigned a pseudonym of your choosing to be used in all documents related to the study. Your name will not be used outside this informed consent document. All reports, documents, and recording associated with this study will be kept in a secure location, with limited access, until such time as the research study is concluded; at which point, any reports, documents, and recordings containing identifying information will be redacted

or destroyed. No material will correlate the information in the informed consent form to the research data. However, when required by law or university policy, identifying information (including your signed informed consent form) may be seen or copied by authorized individuals. The final write-up may have direct quotes attributed to your pseudonym.

The results of this research, with all identifiable private information removed, may be presented at symposiums or conferences or published in scholarly journal or distributed to another primary investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent.

J. **University Contact Information**. I am the graduate student researcher in this study, conducting the research for my dissertation as a doctoral candidate in Leadership in Academic Advising at Kansas State University. If you have any questions about this research, please contact Helena Cole at *phone number* or *email address*, or the Primary Investigator, Dr. Wendy G. Troxel, at *phone number* or *email address*. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant or if you feel you might be at risk, contact the Kansas State University Research Compliance Office (URCO) at (785) 532-3224

K. **Acknowledgement and Consent.** I understand that this project is research and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that I can rescind my decision to participate and withdraw my consent at any time, without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understood this consent form and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a copy of this consent form,

Participant name: _____ Date: _____

Participant signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix F - Reflective Questionnaire

1. Have you had additional interactions with your advisor since our interview? If so, were they/how were they different from your previous interactions? Please describe anything that comes to mind.
2. Since our interview, is there anything you have thought about regarding your relationship with your advisor? Consider things like how well your advisor knows you; what they do to get to know you better; how comfortable you feel with them and that they know you as an individual with unique goals and experiences.
3. How has our interview caused you to think about/reflect upon your advising experiences (the things you talk about) differently?
4. Is there anything else you'd like to add about how your academic advisor supports you while in college?

Appendix G - Demographic Survey Form (Anonymous)

(All questions required an answer)

1. Gender
   - ○ Male
   - ○ Female
   - ○ Non-binary
   - ○ Prefer not to say
2. Race (leave blank if you prefer not to say)

   [ ]
3. Age
   - ○ 18 – 20
   - ○ 21 – 22
   - ○ 23+
   - ○ Prefer not to say
4. Do you consider yourself a first-generation student?
   - ○ Yes
   - ○ No
   - ○ Not sure
   - ○ Prefer not to say
5. Was WSU your first-choice school?
   - ○ Yes
   - ○ No
   - ○ I didn't have a first choice
   - ○ Prefer not to say
6. What was your high school GPA?
   - ○ 4.0+
   - ○ 3.0 – 3.99
   - ○ 2.0 – 2.99
   - ○ Less than 2.0
   - ○ Didn't have a GPA/Don't remember
   - ○ Prefer not to say