



January 2012

# Perceived Advising Needs Of Adult Learners: A Qualitative Analysis Of Advising Experiences Among Online, Classroom, & Cohort Adult Learners

Shawnda M. Schroeder

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/theses>

---

## Recommended Citation

Schroeder, Shawnda M., "Perceived Advising Needs Of Adult Learners: A Qualitative Analysis Of Advising Experiences Among Online, Classroom, & Cohort Adult Learners" (2012). *Theses and Dissertations*. 1377.  
<https://commons.und.edu/theses/1377>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Senior Projects at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [zeinebyousif@library.und.edu](mailto:zeinebyousif@library.und.edu).

PERCEIVED ADVISING NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS: A QUALITATIVE  
ANALYSIS OF ADVISING EXPERIENCES AMONG ONLINE, CLASSROOM,  
& COHORT ADULT LEARNERS

by

Shawnda Marie Schroeder  
Master of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2009  
Bachelor of Arts, Augustana Lutheran College, 2008

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota  
December  
2012

Copyright 2012 Shawnda Schroeder

This dissertation, submitted by Shawnda Schroeder in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.

---

Katherine Terras, Chairperson

---

Lynne Chalmers

---

Lars Helgeson

---

Abdallah Badahdah

This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the Graduate School at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

---

Wayne Swisher  
Dean of the Graduate School

---

November 1, 2012

Title: Perceived Advising Needs of Adult Learners: A Qualitative Analysis of Advising Experiences Among Online, Classroom, & Cohort Adult Learners

Department: Teaching & Learning

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

In presenting this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree from the University of North Dakota, I agree that the library of this University shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor who supervised my dissertation work or, in her absence, by the chairperson of the department or the dean of the Graduate School. It is understood that any copying or publication or other use of this dissertation or part thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of North Dakota in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my dissertation.

Shawnda Schroeder  
August 14, 2012

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	ix
LIST OF TABLES .....	x
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	xi
ABSTRACT .....	xii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Deficiencies and Need for the Study .....	2
Research Questions .....	3
Conceptual Framework .....	5
Benefits of the Study .....	7
Study Delimitations and Definitions .....	7
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	10
Advising Traditional Students .....	11
Unique Characteristics of Adult Learners .....	15
Advising Adult Learners .....	19
Similarities in Advising Traditional Students and Adult Learners .....	20
Graduate Student Advising .....	29
Advising Adult Learners in Various Learning Environments .....	31
Advising Adult Learners Online .....	31

	Advising Adult Learners in Cohorts .....	37
	Summary .....	41
III.	METHODS .....	43
	Interpretivism .....	43
	Thematic Analysis as Phenomenological Method .....	44
	Research Methods .....	45
	Setting .....	46
	Participants .....	48
	Data Collection .....	52
	Interviews .....	53
	Confidentiality and Consent .....	55
	Artifact Review .....	56
	Data Analysis .....	57
	Transcription and Review .....	57
	Phases of Thematic Analysis .....	58
	Reliability and Validity .....	70
	Reliability .....	71
	Validity .....	71
	Ethical Considerations .....	75
	Researcher Reflexivity .....	76
	Role as Researcher .....	76
	My Theoretical Claim and the Influence Of Interactionism .....	78
	Summary .....	81

IV.	FINDINGS .....	82
	Development of the Shared Experience .....	82
	Programmatic Advisement: Students Need Good Advisement to Guide them Through their Program .....	85
	Innate Trust: Students Trust the Process of Advising Through their Experience with Advisors .....	90
	Individual Advisement: Advisors see Student as an Individual and Provide Individualized Advising .....	95
	Importance of Advisement: Advisors see Advising as Important as Students Perceive the Importance of Advising .....	103
	Immediacy in Advisement: Advisors are Readily Available and Immediate in Response, and Advising is Timely .....	111
	Advisement: The Perceived Experience of Good Advising and Advisors .....	115
V.	DISCUSSION .....	119
	Central Phenomenon: Good Advisement – Complex and Holistic .....	120
	Immediacy in Response: Time Allotment and Learning Medium .....	126
	Relation to Existing Literature .....	127
	Experiences of Participants Similar to Traditional Undergraduates? .....	127
	Advising Needs of Adult Learners .....	129
	Results Analogous with CAEL Eight Principles .....	131
	Limitations of the Study .....	134



Conclusions and Implications .....	134
Implications for the Practice of Advisement .....	134
Implications for Research and Assessment .....	139
Implications for the Location of Study: Graduate Student Handbooks .....	141
VI.    A NARRATIVE .....	144
The Collective Adult Learner Advising Experience .....	144
“Never Give Up, and Never Give Up on Me” .....	144
APPENDICES .....	152
A.    Preliminary Request for Participation .....	153
B.    Consent Form .....	154
C.    Interview Protocol .....	156
D.    Process of Analysis .....	158
REFERENCES .....	160

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Research Questions .....	5
2. Eight Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners (CAEL, 2000) .....	6
3. Discussion of Relevant Literature: Visual Representation of Discussion .....	11
4. Comparison of Advising Needs: Requirements for Advising Traditional Students and Adult Learners .....	29
5. Skype Screenshot: Generic (taken from <a href="http://www.Picsgate.com">http://www.Picsgate.com</a> ) .....	48
6. Advising Experiences of Adult Learners: Preliminary Thematic Map .....	67
7. Categories, Themes, and the Central Phenomenon .....	84
8. Central Phenomenon: Advisement as Combination of Advising and Advisor .....	121

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Phases of Thematic Analysis .....	44
2. Research Study Participants .....	50
3. Revision of the Phases of Thematic Analysis as Applied .....	59
4. Codes Present Among all Participants Categorized by Learning Medium .....	62
5. Shared Codes Among Paired Learning Mediums .....	65
6. List of Characteristics/Traits of Good Advising and Good Advisor .....	122
7. Learners' Perceived Requirements for Good Graduate Student Advisement .....	123
8. Support of Existing Literature .....	130

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my husband, thank you for your friendship, love, and competitive encouragement. You have always been the one to show me my true potential and have believed in me when I haven't believed in myself. This would not have been possible without your support. I want to thank my son. The second I held you I knew I had to finish the degree at an accelerated pace – I did not want to miss a single bedtime story. Your laughter and beautiful smile have been the greatest comfort during times of stress. Thank you to my friends and family for your motivation and patience.

I want to thank the members of committee – my skills in research and analysis are stronger because of you. Thank you Lynne Chalmers, Lars Helgeson, and Abdallah Badahdah for your support and the valuable insight you have provided throughout the development of my dissertation. Thank you Katherine Terras for your excellent advisement and friendship. I am grateful for the time that you have devoted to my education and scholarly work. I have enjoyed our time together and appreciate every suggested comma!

Finally, thank you to the nine participants that took the time to share their stories. I hope that I have been able to accurately convey your experiences and highlight the significance of good advisement.

## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study sought to investigate, understand, and make meaning of the perceived advising experiences among nine adult learners. Participants were students pursuing their Master's degrees in a department of education at one public university in the upper Midwest. This research explored and described the advising experiences among, and within, three learning environments to include online, classroom, and cohort.

Three adult learners from each learning environment were interviewed either in person or through an electronic video system. Participants were asked seven standard questions, but question order and follow-up varied as a result of the emergent design of the study. Students were also asked to conceptualize meaning of their responses to afford greater detail. Interviews were transcribed and data were reviewed through thematic analysis. Interviews were coded; codes were evaluated and organized into categories of experience/need which led to the development of themes and a discussion of the central phenomenon. The identified themes were peer reviewed and went through member checking to ensure valid interpretation. In addition, the final themes and conclusions were reviewed and compared to the eight principles of effective advising for adult learners, as proposed by the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (2000).

The experience of good advisement was collectively defined as the product of both the person (the advisor) and the advisor's required tasks of advising. All stated characteristics of a good advisor, and expectations of good advising, were identified as

necessary for adult learner satisfaction. The adult learners identified good advisement as an important, holistic, complex practice requiring an involved, passionate, trustworthy advisor working within a strong advising system.

Only one category of need was specific to students' learning environments – immediacy of response. All adult learners identified the need for frequent, immediate communication, preferably through email. However, on-campus learners needed to hear from their advisor within two days, cohort learners were willing to wait 24 hours for a response, and online learners required notification from their advisor within hours, would be frustrated beyond 24 hours, and would begin to significantly worry by the 48th hour.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of students enrolled in colleges and universities do not fit the traditional definition of an undergraduate student. Stokes (2008) defines traditional undergraduates as those between 18 and 22 years of age, enrolled full-time, and who reside on campus. These individuals comprise only 16% of the overall student population in higher education while 40% of learners are over the age of 24, and 58% are 22 years of age or older (Stokes, 2008). Although it would appear a majority of students may be defined as adult learners, many traditional institutions do not offer guidance specific to this population.

Adult learners have unique characteristics which set them apart from the traditional student. Many have full-time or part-time jobs, families, outside commitments, live off of campus, and have significant financial responsibilities outside of school (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). In addition, many attend college to advance their careers or to set a better example for their children (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). These life situations and motivations create unique advising needs, separate from those of the traditional undergraduate; however, there is yet to be recognition of a need to restructure the common approach to advising.

## **Deficiencies and Need for the Study**

Good advising plays a significant role in student success. It is then important for universities and other institutions of higher education to continue exploring students' advising needs. Crisp (2010) noted a positive correlation between advising and a student's grade point average, classroom performance, ability to think critically, confidence in his or her ability to achieve and succeed academically, future aspirations, and persistence. Lowe and Toney (2000) also demonstrated a positive correlation between good academic advisement and adult learner retention.

Earlier research tends to discuss first-year undergraduates without specification of age. In addition, little has been written of the advising experience of first-year graduate students beyond progress on a thesis or dissertation. Research that ignores the variables of age and degree does not adequately define effective advising for any student group. In addition, there has yet to be exploration into the advising needs of those adults who learn through a cohort or an online environment. What is generally conceptualized in the literature is effective advising for traditional, undergraduate, classroom learners as one group. In research around online learning, the focus is on all online learners regardless of their age or technical experience.

Literature points to the inaccurate assumptions of many traditional institutions – adult learners require less guidance than traditional first-year college students, and those who do require advising may utilize, and benefit from, current advising services employed for the general college population (CAEL, 1999; Stokes, 2008). What is clear is both traditional students and those who are older than average require sufficient and specific student advising.



Frequently, research quantifies students advising experiences as well as the various positive student outcomes associated with good advising. Categories of “good advisement” have been predetermined by the researchers, and in many cases, were not theoretically based. In addition, tools used to identify “good advising” did not generally test for, nor meet, standards of good validity or reliability (e.g., Frost, 1993; Lloyd & Bristol, 2006; Marques & Luna, 2005; Stokes, 2008; Sorrentino, 2007; Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004; Zimmerman & Danette, 2007). In addition, the tools employed reporting high validity and reliability in measuring characteristics of good advising limited participants’ responses. Students were presented with a running list of characteristics the researcher had identified as important, not allowing students to reflect on their specific experiences and/or needs (e.g., Frost, 1993; Noel-Levitz, 2008; 2011; Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004).

The intent of this qualitative research was to offer an explanation of the overall advising experience of adult learners in the three learning environments. Past quantitative, survey research on the topic has limited the understanding of the experience to the reality the researchers perceived prior to their studies. This study was an attempt to describe the experience of advisement from the lens of the adult learners.

### **Research Questions**

Light (2011, p. B11) concluded, “Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience.” This is especially true for adult graduate students and those students studying at a distance – underestimated and insufficiently researched.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate, understand, and make meaning of the perceived advising experiences of adult learners in three learning environments at one public university in the upper Midwest. The intent was to explore and understand the advising experiences and needs of the identified individuals while describing the collective advising experience within, and among, the three groups.

The research questions arose from the analysis of the literature, and the conceptual framework developed by the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (2000) which identified principles of effectiveness for serving and advising adult learners in higher education (Frey, 2007). Figure 1 offers a map of the questions developed to guide the study. Two primary questions were identified. These questions were broken into specific supporting inquiries. The third tier presented in Figure 1 was included as the opportunity for additional inquiry. These questions led to the identified method and development of the interview protocol.

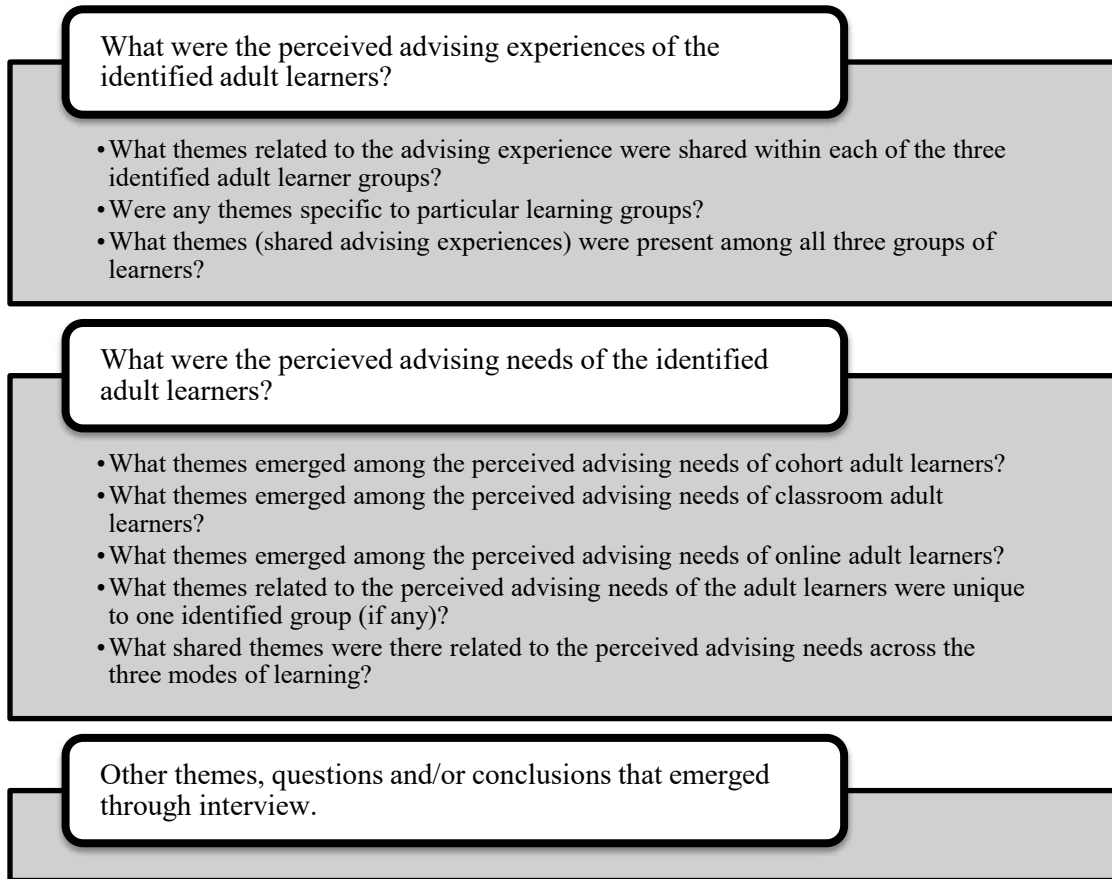


Figure 1. Research Questions. A map of the primary questions, and their associated sub questions.

### Conceptual Framework

As will be discussed further in the review of current literature, the CAEL had identified principles of effectiveness for serving and advising adult learners in higher education (CAEL, 1999; 2000; Frey, 2007). The identified needs of adult learners and the characteristics associated with a good graduate student advisor are nearly all reflected in the eight principles proposed by the CAEL. These eight principles are recommendations for universities if they desire to meet the needs of, and satisfy, their growing population of adult students. While the CAEL describes the eight principles as exemplary practice for the institution as a whole, previous research also identified each as

a necessary practice for effective adult student advisement. See Figure 2 for an outline of the eight principles and exemplary practices associated with each (CAEL, 1999; 2000; Frey, 2007).

<b>One</b>	<b>Outreach</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overcomes barriers of time, place, and tradition</li> <li>• Creates lifelong access to educational opportunities</li> </ul>	
<b>Two</b>	<b>Life &amp; Career Planning</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addresses life and career goals</li> <li>• Assesses and aligns student goals with the programs capacity to meet them</li> </ul>	
<b>Three</b>	<b>Financing</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotes choice and payment options</li> <li>• Has answers to financial questions</li> <li>• Promotes equity</li> </ul>	
<b>Four</b>	<b>Assessment of Learning Outcomes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aligns credits with previous work experience</li> <li>• Assigns curriculum relevant to students' career goals</li> </ul>	
<b>Five</b>	<b>Teaching-Learning Process</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses multiple methods to connect concepts to useful knowledge and skills</li> <li>• Uses experiential and problem-based methods</li> </ul>	
<b>Six</b>	<b>Student Support Services</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhances students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners</li> <li>• Encourages use of comprehensive support services</li> </ul>	
<b>Seven</b>	<b>Technology</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information</li> </ul>	
<b>Eight</b>	<b>Strategic Partnerships</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engages in partnerships and relationships with other organizations to improve educational and work opportunities for students</li> </ul>	

Figure 2. Eight Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners (CAEL, 2000).

The intent of this study was not to prove/disprove said framework, but this concept does highlight the knowledge and anticipated outcomes (assumptions) I held as a result of reviewing literature on the topic of adult learner advising needs. The model was also applied during the discussion of the research findings.

### **Benefits of the Study**

The in-depth description of perceived advising experiences and needs for the three adult learner groups has the potential to influence the advising system in the associated departments at the identified university. In addition, the detailed advising experiences of each group of learners may influence advisors' interactions with students and improve students' outcomes. These are both a benefit to the current learners who participated in the study, and a benefit for future adult learners who require advisement in one of the three environments.

It may also benefit those who participate in the study by reinforcing the importance of advising, encouraging utilization of available advising resources. Although results are not generalizable to all adult learners, findings can be shared with advisors to better inform their approach to advising. Finally, results will benefit future research as they have the potential to identify needs expressed by adult learners, or more specifically, the needs and experiences as they relate to each of the three learning environments.

### **Study Delimitations and Definitions**

For the purpose of this research, I developed, and applied, the following delimitations: study was to be done (a) at one university in the upper Midwest; (b) within one department of education; and (c) among adult learners (age 25 or older), working on

a Master's degree, and completing at least 80% of their course work through either an online, on-campus, or cohort environment.

I developed, and applied, the following definitions. They are a product of the studied university's definitions, consensus in the research, and the characteristics of the participants.

- *Adult learners* – These students are 25 years of age or older and are currently enrolled in a graduate program (Master's degree students only) at the identified public university. The term adult learners will be used interchangeably with *nontraditional students, adult students* and *graduate students*.
- *Cohort adult learners* – These students meet the above definition of adult learners, but they also move through their program with one individual group of students. They have the same projected completion date and the same program of study, essentially sharing a common educational experience within an identified period of time. These students must complete 80% of their coursework within their cohort.
- *Online adult learners* – These students meet the definition of adult learners, but are also completing their graduate degrees with at least 80% of the coursework online. Online learners may also be referred to as *distance learners*.
- *On-campus adult learners* – These students meet the definition of being adult learners, but are also completing at least 80% of their graduate coursework in a classroom on the identified campus. On-campus learners will also be referred to as *classroom learners*.

- *Learning Environment* – A learning environment, also referred to as a *learning medium*, or *learning group* refers to the three student groups of interest, defined above. The three *learning environments* are online, cohort, and classroom.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of current literature begins with a discussion of traditional advising and the characteristics that benefit conventional undergraduate students. Further, the characteristics of adult learners will illustrate their unique advising needs. Discussion of current research will point to what has been identified as successful advising for both traditional and adult learners. Also identified are the characteristics of higher education that are necessary to ensure adult learners succeed. A small body of literature on graduate student advisement will highlight the need for further study of this population. Finally, the review will attempt to introduce cohort and online adult learners. Previous research on advisement in higher education typically ignored these subgroups of adult learners, or included them in the research but did not consider their situation, advising experiences, or needs as separate from those of general adult students. The review will conclude with an overall critique of previous research on the topic of advising, followed by further support for a qualitative analysis of adult students' advising experiences and needs; specifically as they relate to online, cohort, and classroom learners.

Figure 3 offers a visual map of the report's discussion and analysis, and identifies the questions being asked while searching for relevant literature. For example, the review of literature began by asking, what is already known about advising?



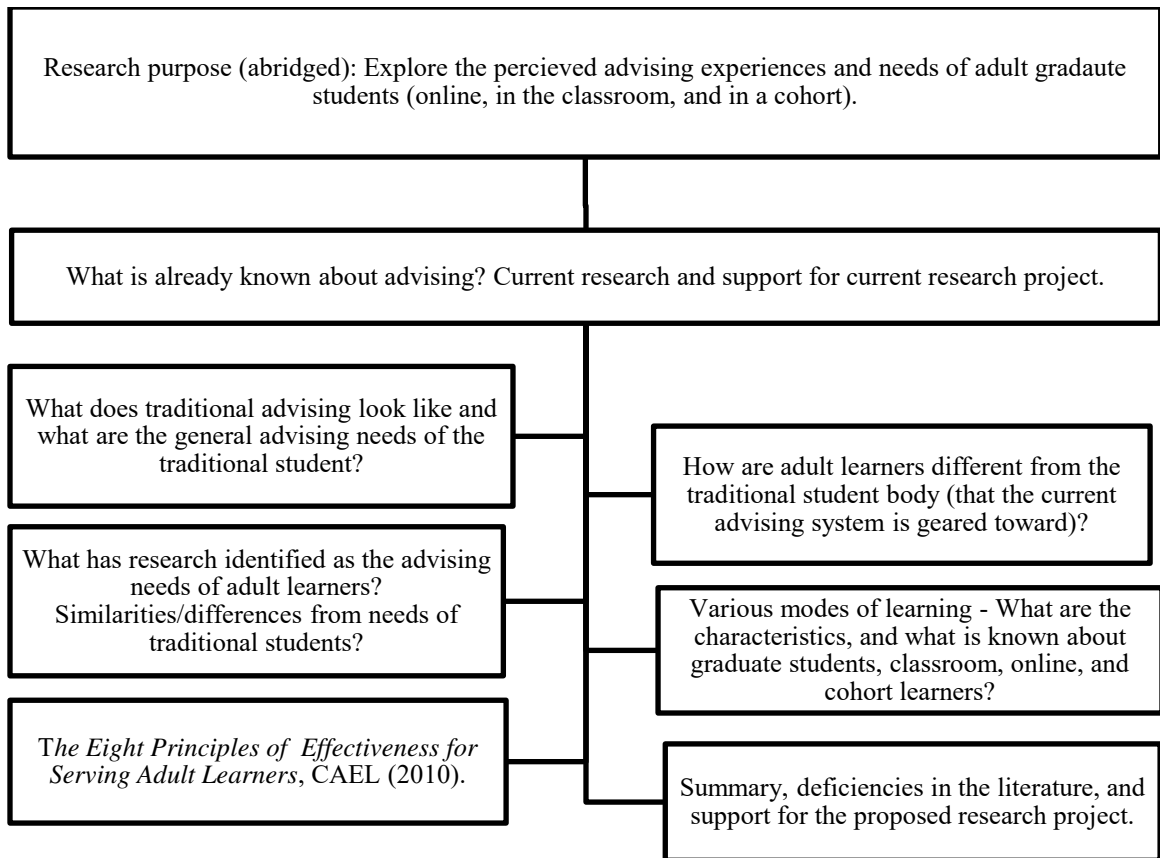


Figure 3. Discussion of Relevant Literature: Visual Representation of Discussion. This figure provides a visual map, serving as a guide through the discussion to follow.

### Advising Traditional Students

Although this research explored advising experiences of adult graduate learners, the following discussion relates primarily to traditional advising of undergraduates. First-year, traditional students commonly interact with campus advisors. Advisors may be responsible for an array of tasks specified by their college or university. Although each campus warrants a unique system of student services and mentoring, common themes transpire when assessing successful student advisement.

Light (2001) has produced a body of research on the topic of the undergraduate experience. He interviewed over 1,600 students at Harvard, as well as faculty and staff at

100 other institutions of higher education, to ensure variety in the sample population. Both graduate and undergraduate students were encouraged to discuss the challenges they perceived in completing a degree. Educators were asked to voice their concerns for undergraduates. Light (2001) found that providing or having access to good academic advisement was ranked the number one challenge in higher education for both faculty and students.

A theme consistent among the research identified advisors as responsible for creating a trusting relationship with his/her students (Bleeker, G. W., Bleeker, M. M., & Bleeker, B., 2010; Light, 2001; Martin, 2004). In addition, students needed to be advised on how to manage time, and develop a class schedule (Jones, 1993; Light, 2001; Martin, 2004). Martin's (2004) research expanded the topic of scheduling advisement and noted advisors must also guide undergraduate students toward an academic program in which they can excel. Light (2001) went further to conclude that students ought to be encouraged to join an activity while in college and must also be pushed to produce collegial work. Finally, Light mentioned all of these strategies are only effective if advisors continue to follow-up with their students (Lau, 2003; Martin, 2004). However, adequate follow-up in the discussion of traditional student advisement suggests meeting each semester (Lau, 2003; Light, 2001; Onnismaa, 2003; Peck & Varney, 2009). This is an important note as literature on advising adult learners refers to adequate follow-up as meeting multiple times throughout the semester (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Peck & Varney, 2009).

Light's (2001) research was significant in recognizing what qualities were important in academic advising, but it did not address age as an independent variable. As

a result, the discussion of the data implies the advising techniques will benefit all students regardless of their personal demographics or program of study. Furthermore, one case presented by Light (2001) shared the experience of a doctoral student with his advisor. This information leads one to think the generalizability of Light's (2001) research may be questionable if the proposed advising techniques are intended to describe good advisement for students at every level of higher education (e.g., undergraduates, graduate), and of every race, gender, and age.

College is a social environment, regardless of where traditional students reside. An additional variable associated with a positive undergraduate experience, and student retention is building constructive human relations (Lau, 2003; Light, 2001; Martin, 2004; Onnismaa, 2003; Peck & Varney, 2009). Advisors are expected to encourage students to become involved in their campus community, to create peer relationships, and to build strong professional relationships the advisor. This advisor-advisee relationship is built and fostered by assisting students with their academic goals and providing motivational support (Jones, 1993; Lau, 2003; Light, 2001; Martin, 2004; Peck & Varney, 2009). The advisor's role is to provide guidance on what is available and to explain what students' options are academically – they provide and clarify the basic rules and serve as a medium to introduce students to the college (Onnismaa, 2003; Peck & Varney, 2009).

Finally, research conducted by Lau (2003) sought to explain factors affecting student retention. In doing so, she discovered traits of successful student advising among traditional undergraduate students. Many of the things she mentioned have been corroborated by other research and include: academic advising must be treated as an on-going process and should include follow-up sessions (Bleeker, G. W., Bleeker, M. M., &

Bleeker, B., 2010; Lau, 2003; Light, 2001; Onnismaa, 2003; Peck & Varney, 2009); advisors must provide support and positive reinforcement (Bland, 2003; Lau, 2003; Light, 2001; Martin, 2004); and advisors must treat students as equals to promote self-confidence and a sense of belonging.

In accord with Light's (2001) research, Lau (2003) also noted that of all the positive traits among good advisors, one has been deemed most important for student success; an advisor should be both personable and approachable (Bleeker, G. W., Bleeker, M. M., & Bleeker, B., 2010). Garrit Bleeker, Martha Bleeker and Barabara Bleeker (2010) found that not only were relationships important and required trust, but a majority of traditional students also valued their parents' academic advice, which requires traditional advisors to take note of such influence when providing guidance.

Lau's (2003) discussion corresponds with other research on advising traditionally-aged students. However, she did note, "Academic advising is more important to the freshmen . . . because these newly arrived students tend to need more guidance and support from the academic community" (Lau, 2003, p. 133). Her research did not explore the needs of first-year adult learners or include these individuals in the discussion of first-year students. Conclusions Lau drew are similar to research previously discussed as they do not recognize adult learners as individuals who require distinct attention and sufficient advising. It has been mentioned that many adult learners return to graduate programs after a significant break from formal education; having been away from a culture that is quickly evolving with each new group of students, these graduate learners should also be considered, or referred to as, first-year learners.

Traditional advising tends to focus primarily on academic guidance and support for first-year students. The emphasis is on introducing the students to the university and assisting in their goal setting. Traditional students need guidance on choosing an academic major which requires advisors to provide insight into various programs on campus. The relationship must be one of collaboration and mutual respect, though advisors must recognize they are the students' primary resource to the college. Justyna and Cofer (2010) noted, as a result of students' reliance on advisors for advice in all aspects of the university, advisors must also know when, where, and how to refer students to other services on campus (Bleeker, G. W., Bleeker, M. M., & Bleeker, B., 2010). Finally, these students tend to be put on a traditional timeline and are given advice on how to attain their goals by a specific deadline (Drake & Stockwell, 2009). When discussing the characteristics of adult learners it will be evident that previously discussed characteristics of traditional student advising do not always meet the needs of adult learners.

### **Unique Characteristics of Adult Learners**

Traditional student advising remains the norm for a majority of campuses, regardless of their student body's characteristics (Stokes, 2008). Although the current student support systems appear to foster growth and assimilation for traditional college students, they ignore the unique characteristics of adult learners and leave these students feeling lost and overwhelmed (Hensley & Kinser, 2001).

Hensley and Kinser (2001) examined adult learner persistence and what these individuals perceived as obstacles to obtaining an education. One question posed in their mixed-methods research asked students why they perceived they had been "unsuccessful

in past attempts at college” (Hensley & Kinser, 2001, p. 7). Many individuals stated they felt overwhelmed and as if they did not fit in with their classroom peers. An additional barrier was that the students believed “teachers and advisors didn’t care” about adult learners (Hensley & Kinser, 2001, p. 8). Adequate adult student advising was defined by this group to be a quality that encouraged persistence (Hensley & Kinser, 2001).

Although generalizability of this study may be limited due to sample size, it illustrates the unique needs and life situations of adult learners, stressing the importance of addressing these students as a separate population. Not only have efforts to provide advising specific to adult learners encouraged persistence and retention among older students, but they have also been found to increase alumni donations (CAEL, 2000; Flint, 2005; Frey, 2007; Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Noel-Levitz, 2008; 2011).

In order to address the advising needs of this population, it is important to understand what sets adult learners apart from traditional college learners – those identified as between 18 and 24 years of age. A large body of research explores the various characteristics of adult learners (e.g., Allen, 1993; CAEL, 1999; 2000; Leonard, 2002; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Peck & Varney, 2009; Stokes, 2008). Within literature on the topic, there is general consensus with regard to the characteristics of adult learners, and general barriers these students face in pursuing further formal education.

Adult learners are described as the future of higher education as their participation rate now comprises 40% of the college population (Stokes, 2008). These students are characterized in a majority of the research as any individual age 25 or older (Allen, 1993; CAEL, 1999; 2000; Leonard, 2002; Peck & Varney, 2009; Stokes, 2008). Much of the

research also characterizes adult learners as individuals who are financially independent and are married and/or have a dependant(s) (Allen, 1993; CAEL, 1999; 2000; Leonard, 2002; Peck & Varney, 2009; Stokes, 2008). Although a few students who are of a traditional college age (18-24) may experience similar life situations to those described in the literature, such as having children or a full time job, a majority of adult learners remain over 24 years of age (CAEL, 1999; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The literature reviewed in the remaining discussion all refer to adult learners as those over the age of 24. The discussion of the implications of ignoring those students with similar characteristics to adult learners, but under age 25, is beyond the scope of this report, but a population which may require further attention in future research on the advising experiences.

As a result of their age, adult learners tend to have more life experiences they will bring with them to the classroom (Bowl, 2003; Merriam et al., 2007). These work and life experiences may often lead to frustration when the students already consider themselves knowledgeable on the topic of a course they are required to take (Bowl, 2001; 2003). Adult learners' dissatisfaction with the inability to have previous knowledge applied toward a degree is similar to the frustration they voice over the ambiguity of transfer credits (Bowl, 2003; Frey, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007).

In addition to work and life experiences, adult learners often cite financial stress as a barrier to higher education, as well as the need for clear guidance concerning financial aid (Frey, 2007; Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Merriam et al., 2007). Financial stress is also a contributing factor to the issue of limited time for adult learners, as many maintain at least part-time employment while working toward a degree, and may also

have a family to care for at home (Allen, 1993; CAEL, 1999; Frey, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007; Peck & Varney, 2009). Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) stated in all the literature they have reviewed on the topic, the primary reason for adult nonparticipation in higher education was lack of time and money.

In recognizing the various challenges posed to adult learners, it is also important to note their motivation for pursuing higher education as it does not fit the traditional mold. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007) discussed a study and a published book (completed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural organization) to explain why adult learners return to higher education. The study found 90.6% of adult learners surveyed in the United States cited career or job-related reasons for returning to school (Merriam et al., 2007). When these same individuals were asked about their goal for learning, 58% (the largest percentage) stated they were learning to earn a professional or career upgrade (Merriam et al., 2007). The authors of the book stated this research illustrates a strong link between adult learners' work lives and their participation in higher education (Merriam et al., 2007). Adult learners do not attend college simply for the experience, but view higher education as a means to an end.

As previously mentioned, adult students tend to have more commitments outside of school than do traditional students. These commitments create a demand for part-time programs in higher education, the need for flexible scheduling, recognition of students' dual commitments, and guidance for learners on how to navigate the university system. This guidance is especially important as some adult learners struggle to adjust after re-entry into a program and/or after many years away from formal education (Allen, 1993; Frey, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007; Richardson & King, 1998). The aforementioned



characteristics, and the supporting research, point to the need for advisement specific to adult learners.

These students lack a voice when they enter higher education and experience more stress and social difficulties as a result (Leonard, 2002; Merriam et al., 2007). Finally, Bowl (2001) explained in her qualitative analysis that adult learners tended to feel screened out of traditional education. Advisors, educators, and other traditional aged students held preconceived notions that adult learners did not have the ability, nor potential, to succeed in a traditional college setting and/or those who were successful did not require advisement (Bowl, 2001; Hensley & Kinser, 2001). These assumptions cannot have a place in advisement for adult learners. Research then turns to the question: What is required in advising to reach and support these students?

### **Advising Adult Learners**

Research has, and continues to, create a distinct image of adult learners. In response, higher education is responding with adult-friendly degree programs, adult learner orientations, and adult student organizations. Yet, these are novel approaches to education and many traditional institutions do not yet offer such services for adult learners. The CAEL (2000) found one of the primary reasons universities have not altered their current advising to meet needs of adult learners is because of the general misconception that adult learners are “self-supporting and do not need the same level of support as 18-23 year olds” (p. 11). The same report stated, in reality, adult learners need just as much, if not more, quality academic and student advising than their younger peers (CAEL, 2000; Jones, 1993). In addition, advising must meet the distinct needs of adult students.

The current advising system tends to primarily focus on first-year students with the assumption these students tend to be between the ages of 18 and 24. All adult learners are first-year students at some point when pursuing higher education. As a result, though they have particular advising needs not traditionally met by the current system, there are a few characteristics of good advisement they share with traditional undergraduate first-year students.

### **Similarities in Advising Traditional Students and Adult Learners**

Regardless of age or degree, when first-year students arrive on campus, they bring with them fear, excitement, anxiety and a desire to find their fit within the college community. Adult learners enter higher education with similar confusion and need for advisement as traditional undergraduates. Exploration of adult learners and their advising needs supports what earlier research on traditional advising concluded – adult students, like traditional undergraduates, need someone within the institution who will take an interest and care for their well-being (Bland, 2003; Frey, 2007; Peck & Varney, 2009). In taking an interest in adult learners and traditional students, advisors for both student subgroups must also assist individuals in socially integrating with the campus community (Hensley & Kinser, 2001). Hensley and Kinser (2001) postulated first-year students, regardless of age, must feel part of the student body if they are to perceive the university as a good fit and continue to pursue and complete their education.

Research on adult learner and traditional student advising needs share other similarities as well. Adult learners need similar academic advisement. Both require assistance to ensure they choose courses that fit their schedule and apply toward their academic program (Bland, 2003; CAEL, 2000; Frey, 2007). The relationship between

the advisors and students must also be egalitarian and perceived by both as a partnership (Bland, 2003; CAEL, 2000; Leonard, 2002; Peck & Varney, 2009). The CAEL (2000) insisted adult learners would benefit from this relationship if they were considered active partners in the “planning, delivery, and evaluation of their learning” (p. 7). This relationship must also foster trust – a characteristic identified in the research as imperative to good advising for both older than average students and those of a traditional age (Bland, 2003; CAEL, 2000). Finally, because traditional undergraduates may struggle during their first year away from home with new freedoms, and adult learners identify several commitments outside of higher education, advisors must serve as a part of the students’ support system providing encouragement and motivation for both student groups (CAEL, 2000; Frey, 2007).

Similar to traditional first-year students, adult learners must also receive advisement on time management and creating an academic timeline (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Jones, 1993; Leonard, 2002). However, Hensley and Kinser (2001) and Jones (1993) noted, unlike traditional students, adult learners’ timelines may not be linear – a topic saved for later discussion. An additional activity important for both adult learners and traditional undergraduates is adequate follow-up. However, similar to the previous trait, what is considered adequate by the population of research depends on the age of the students studied. Adult learners require frequent advising, support, and follow-up while typical undergraduates perceive their advisors as providing sufficient follow-up if they are to meet on one occasion each semester (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Peck & Varney, 2009). What is clear, even in the discussion of the similarities, is adult learners require distinct advisement.

### **Adult learner's unique advising needs.**

Two of the most recent and influential research reports on the topic of adult advising needs are the National Adult Student Priorities Report from Noel-Levitz (2008; 2011) and the CAEL's report on Serving Adult Learners in Higher Education (2000). Noel-Levitz (2008; 2011) sought to measure how satisfied adult learners were with their educational institution. The logic which drove their research attested that satisfied adult learners were more successful students (Noel-Levitz, 2008; 2011). In addition, past research pointed to a positive correlation between satisfaction and graduation rates, and satisfaction and alumni giving. There was a negative correlation with higher satisfaction and lower loan defaults among adult learners registering higher overall satisfaction as well (Noel-Levitz, 2008; 2011). From this information, Noel-Levitz (2008) proposed universities must be concerned with meeting the needs of their adult populations.

The 2008 student priorities survey assessed 84,214 students from 218 U.S. institutions of higher education over a three year academic period (quantitatively). Noel-Levitz (2008) identified advising as one of the four most ill-fitting priorities among undergraduate adult learners; students reported their highest dissatisfaction was in advisement. Traits that were then identified as important in advising adult learners included:

- Faculty and advisors must be available at various hours and outside of the classroom
- Advisors and staff must be helpful and caring
- Advisors and staff must be easily accessible

- Advisors must provide advice on how an academic major may apply to a specific career goal
- Adult learners seldom experience a “run-around’ when seeking information at” the institution or from advisors (Noel-Levitz, 2008).

Again, attention was given to undergraduates, not graduate adult learners.

In a more recent report, Noel-Levitz (2011) identified student support services and life and career planning as areas of high importance among adult learner satisfaction. However, in this report, little was mentioned of the specific advising needs and/or the measures of satisfaction.

Much research on the topic of adult learners’ advising needs point to similar requirements as noted above. Bland (2003) found advisors’ competence important in both building trust and providing quality advisement. In addition, effective developmental advising required advisors have extensive knowledge on how the university system works and what is best for adult learners (Bland, 2003; Jones, 1993; Peck & Varney, 2009). A majority of the literature also noted that advisors must be accessible and willing to be flexible on location and time of individual meetings (Allen, 1993; CAEL, 1999; 2000; Frey, 2007; Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Jones, 1993; Peck & Varney, 2009; Stokes, 2008). Personal characteristics of good advisors included patience, empathy, caring, and being kind (Haricombe & Prabha, 2008).

Adult learners have little free time and are generally accessing higher education as a means to achieve advancement in their careers. As a result, they do not have time to search for the answers to their questions, nor are they willing to take a course that will not benefit their end goal. Advisors must recognize these findings and assist students in

setting measurable goals to fit their lifestyles (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Leonard, 2002). Bland (2003) described advising adult learners as coaching – providing good advice, teaching them the tools they need to succeed, and cheering them on when they need motivation.

Effective advisors will also assist students in overcoming individual barriers (CAEL, 2000), understand and be aware of students' outside commitments (Richardson & King, 1998), and recognize advising may be long term (Bland, 2003; CAEL, 2000) and require frequent interaction (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Peck & Varney, 2009). Bland (2003) noted that taking all of this information into consideration when advising adult learners requires advisors to take a holistic approach that would lead to the “advisee’s personal, academic, and professional growth and development, and ensures that the student has a meaningful educational plan that is compatible with his or her life goals” (p. 7).

Like traditional undergraduate students, adult learners require motivation and support from their advisors (CAEL, 2000; Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Jones, 1993; Lau, 2003; Light 2001; Peck & Varney, 2009). However, Hensley and Kinser’s (2001) research, and discussion from the CAEL (2000) noted adult learners require a different type of motivation. Adult learners lack confidence in their abilities to succeed in college and are at an increased risk for noncompletion (Hensley & Kinser, 2001). Therefore, advisors must remind adult learners of their capabilities and applaud these individuals every time they enroll for an additional course or return for a subsequent semester (CAEL, 2000; Hensley & Kinser, 2001). In addition, advisors should act as advocates

for older than average students, and as a mediator between the students and their institution (Jones, 1993).

The risk of drop-out among adult learners is also the reason advisors must guide students on developing an appropriate timeline. The literature emphasized guiding traditional undergraduates on creating a timeline, but when advising adult learners, advisors should remember students' plans may not be linear (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Leonard, 2002). Many adult learners will cycle in and out of various programs; Hensley and Kinser (2001) noted for some, noncompletion may actually be the best outcome. What is important is advisors address the needs of adult learners and are open to various academic plans which may or may not fit a traditional linear process of college completion (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Leonard, 2002).

Adult learners must be encouraged to discuss their academic and collegiate fears. What the CAEL (2000) and Richardson and King (1998) found, however, was that adult learners present fears not like those presented by traditional learners. These students are also less likely to open up about their fears unless addressed directly (CAEL, 2000; Richardson & King, 1998). Students' fear of having to compete with 18 to 24 year old students must be addressed. Advisors must be aware of reentry concerns and recognize many adult learners fear asking for career or graduate school advice because they believe they should already know how to manage those decisions (Richardson & King, 1998). Finally, it is important advisors teach adult learners to truly view themselves as both a student and an active participant in their education (CAEL, 2000). Advising is teaching, as a result, adult learners' mentors must be prepared to present these topics to their advisees (Peck & Varney, 2009).

Literature on adult learners and their advising needs is consistent and identified similar experienced frustrations and barriers. Vista (1995) noted it is important for a college or university to recognize unique aspects of adult learning environments, but it is not enough to simply know how to address these students; advisors must also act upon this knowledge. Vista (1995) concluded that advisors must not be faculty members or hold teaching positions, but instead, should be hired for the sole purpose of providing advisement. Faculty members have outside commitments and cannot be as available if they have a regimented class schedule (Vista, 1995). In addition, faculty members must designate time to research and meet other teaching requirements. Vista (1995) stated these tasks get in the way of meeting the needs of adult learners and take time away from faculty members' advising preparations and responsibilities. In addition, adult learners' advisors must have time to train on the complexities of transfer credits, financial aid, and tracking students through their programs (Vista, 1995). The research illustrated that adult advisors must have extensive skill and training in working with older than average students and must also be able to deal with the complexities of the university (Vista, 1995). In order to adequately address all the topics previously mentioned and to ensure adult learners receive proper mentoring, an advisor's job should be just that – to advise students (Vista, 1995). Any other task, such as teaching, would take away from the time necessary to adequately address the varying needs of adult students.

Research presented from the CAEL's (1999) benchmark study and the CAEL's (2000) principles of effectiveness disagreed with Vista and found benefit in advisors holding dual roles in the university. Students will immediately be introduced to a faculty member at their first advisor meeting and are also encouraged to take a course from their



advisor (CAEL, 1999; 2000). Being a member of the faculty may also lead to a more informed advisor and one who is familiar with course scheduling and academic expectations (CAEL, 1999; 2000).

A majority of the literature does not support the idea that advisors for older than average students must have no other role within the university. However, many do point to, and support, the need for specific training on how to advise adult learners (Allen, 1993; CAEL, 1999; 2000; Frey, 2007). In 1993, Allen concluded that advising would be improved through better training and evaluation. He further explained that training is necessary if a university is to provide competent, well-trained advisors as has been demanded by adult learners in the research. Trained staff would be more aware of special situations and problems of nontraditional students who have been found to be at a higher risk of drop out (Allen, 1993). The need for advisement as a sole career and the call for specialized training both address what Stokes (2008) sought to accomplish in his dialogue on national data: to bring attention to those working in higher education that the institution must become more aware and “responsive to the needs of students of all types” (p. 2).

The CAEL (1999) completed a benchmark study to identify and describe “effective models for colleges and universities that seek to serve adult learners” (p. 1). From this research, they developed principles for effectiveness in advising adult learners (CAEL, 2000; Frey, 2007). The information provided by this benchmark study laid out an effective plan encompassing all topics previously addressed. It offered a practical discussion on how to ensure advisement needs of adult learners are being met (CAEL, 1999). The CAEL (2000) identified eight principles of advising adult learners which

included: (a) outreach; (b) life and career planning; (c) financing; (d) assessment of learning outcomes; (e) teaching-learning process; (f) student support systems; (g) technology; and (h) strategic principles. The specifications and meaning of these principles were defined, followed by what was deemed exemplary practice for meeting each principle (presented in Figure 2).

Much of what was considered an exemplary practice for each principle, and what the other sources written or sponsored by the CAEL discussed, have been previously mentioned. The traits of an effective advisor included helping students identify their own barriers, working as a partner, discussing the advisees specific goals, helping the learners foster a student identity, developing a long-term relationship, providing encouragement and support, and working around students' unique schedules, to name a few (CAEL, 2000).

The benchmark study found an advising program must be established specifically addressing the needs of adult learners. Training related to advising adult learners must also be mandatory for advisors (CAEL, 1999; Frey, 2007). The qualities and characteristics of a good adult learner advising previously discussed were mentioned in the literature provided by the CAEL (1999; 2000) and Frey (2007). The research presents clear and consistent advice for a successful adult student advising program and illustrates the importance of clear direction and guidance for adult students. Figure 4 presents a Venn diagram comparing the advising needs of traditional students and those of adult learners. Shared advising needs are presented in the overlap.

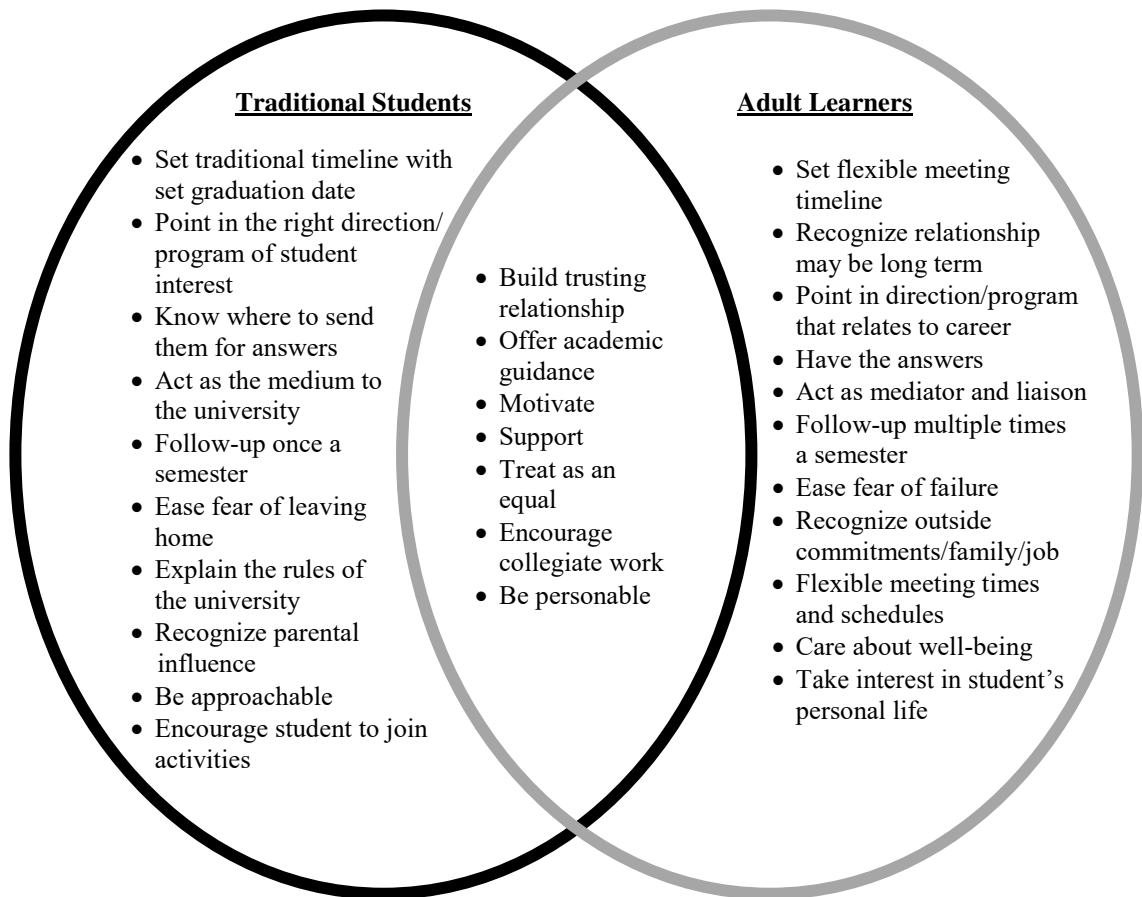


Figure 4. Comparison of Advising Needs: Requirements for Advising Traditional Students and Adult Learners.

### **Graduate Student Advising**

Current literature on advising has not explored common advising needs specifically among graduate students. Instead, research related to graduate learners describes advisement through the progression and completion of students' theses or dissertations. There was no consideration, or exploration, of advising as a holistic practice; nor was there discussion of the role of advisement in navigating program or course requirements (e.g., Faghihi, 1998; Luna & Cullen, 1998; Polson 2003; Selke & Wong, 1993).

The existing research on the advisor-advisee relationship in graduate school is significantly dated (e.g., Berg & Ferber, 1983; Grives & Wemmerus, 1988; Magoon & Holland, 1984; Witters & Miller, 1970). Some of the results may be consistent with current advising needs among graduate students, but with advances in technology and accelerated culture change in institutions of higher education, many of the guiding theories and conclusions are no longer relevant.

More recent literature on the topic has identified having a caring nature, offering support and motivation, being competent in the area of study, knowledgeable about the university system, and having good communication skills as characteristics of good graduate advisors (Herzig, 2004; Polson, 2003; Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, & Hill, 2003; Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004).

Although Herzig's (2004) research focused primarily on female graduate students in mathematics, the qualitative approach to research is similar to this study's method. After holding interviews with six female graduate students in mathematics, Herzig (2004) found students noted feeling invisible, needing guidance, wanting a good mentor, and noted they were lacking moral support (p. 384). These issues, Herzig noted, could be ameliorated with good advising services.

Finally, Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, and Hill (2003), through interview, identified themes among graduate students who were satisfied with their advising experiences and those who were not. Satisfied students noted among several other characteristics that their advisors were chosen, held regular and frequent meetings, were readily available, offered career and academic guidance, had an interest in their research, and encouraged professional engagement by treating students like colleagues. In

contrast, those who had negative advising experiences noted their advisors were assigned, had infrequent meetings (identified as less than 2 a semester), did not offer career guidance, had no interest or knowledge on the students' intended research topics, and did not treat students like equal partners (Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, & Hill, 2003).

The aforementioned research on graduate student advising identifies advising characteristics similar to those required for general adult learner advisement. However, a majority of the literature on graduate advisement is either dated or has made an attempt to quantify and generalize the advising experiences.

### **Advising Adult Learners in Various Learning Environments**

Research has begun to explore advising experiences and needs of adult learners; yet, the literature classifies students as one general population, regardless of degree, program, or learning medium. There is no body of research, to date, that offers a comparison or explanation of the advising needs of adult students in various learning environments. As research has recently begun to look at adult learners as a unique group of students with a distinct set of advising needs, further exploration must be made into the needs of students who study in a cohort and those who study solely online.

Research has not begun to explore the advising experiences of adult learners in cohort environments, and has barely scratched the surface of describing modern online learners, but it is necessary at this time to explore what has been discovered about these student populations.

### **Advising Adult Learners Online**

Although research has been done on traits of good online advisors and the advising needs of students studying at a distance, results quickly become dated as online

education is evolving at a rate which makes it difficult to contribute a relevant discussion to literature on the topic. Online study has evolved from independent reading and individual reporting to an educator, to group discussion, blogging, social networking, visual interaction, and screen manipulation and sharing. However, there are characteristics of online learners and advising needs that have been generalized by various authors.

### **A picture of online learners.**

Literature has described online learners as adults, typically over the age of 24 (Granger & Benke, 1998; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Rovai, 2003). These individuals often work full time, have a spouse and/or children, and are geographically isolated from any other learning opportunities – characteristics also used to describe adult learners (Granger & Benke, 1998; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Wiesenber, 2001). In addition, online learners are more frequently female, which may be a result of their tendency to perform better and have better persistence in online learning environments than males (Ritzer, Ross & Powell, 1990; Rovai, 2001; 2003).

In order to succeed, students who study online must be proficient in study skills not required of classroom learners. To study effectively online, research has found students must be familiar with how a computer functions, have good time management, be responsible, have strong literacy (i.e., be capable of clearly writing and explaining their thoughts), and have strong interpersonal skills (Cole, 2000; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Rowntree, 1995; Sherry, 1996).

Online adult learners have also been generalized as: (a) having multiple roles associated with several outside commitments; (b) being goal oriented; (c) looking for

career advancement; (d) feeling isolated; (e) having been away from formal education for an amount of time; and (f) are typically financially independent and in need of financial aid to participate in distance education (Bennett, Priest, & Macpherson, 1999; Granger & Benke, 1998; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003).

### **Persistence rates and advising needs of online learners.**

A large body of literature around online learning looks to explore persistence in an effort to respond to the issue of higher attrition rates among students who study solely online; the issue is not recruitment, but retention (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Rovai, 2003). In fact, Carr (2000) found persistence among online learners was 10 to 20 percentage points lower than among students enrolled in traditional higher education.

In Rovai's (2003) research on increasing persistence rates among online learners, he reviewed various models, including Tinto's student integration model, Bean and Metzner's student attrition model, as well as variety of composite persistence models. Although no one model had the breadth to explain the advising needs and experiences being explored in this study. Rovai (2003) noted, in his comparisons, all persistence models pointed to strong advising as an influential variable in students' persistence in online learning.

Aoki and Pogroszewski (1998), though dated, also proposed a model for online learning which highlighted advising needs of online learners and that advisors may not be necessary. The discussion is dated in its reference to various electronic modes of education and communication, but the model proposed to explain online education and characteristics of successful online programs remains valuable and relevant. To assist in the planning and designing of virtual universities, programs, or courses, the authors

suggested using the Virtual University Reference Model (VURM). This provides an overview about how to deliver information and instruction and what support services are necessary for distance learners.

In this model, a virtual university is described as having four major components: (a) administrative services; (b) student services; (c) resource services; and (d) faculty services. A description is provided for each, followed by a discussion of the advantages of both asynchronous and synchronous delivery systems (Aoki & Pogroszewski, 1998).

What is of interest in this report is the discussion of the student component in which little attention is given to the advising needs of the individual. Instead, an emphasis is placed on creating a sense of community through peer relationships among distance learners. One wonders if this is intended to replace or reduce the need for official university advisors.

Little attention is given to advising students, though the model does stress the importance of developing a relationship between instructors and their students. It was written that online educators are generally responsible for “serving as a mentor, an advisor, and a supervisor of the student’s academic progress” which is the only true mention of advisement in the report (Aoki & Pogroszewski, 1998, p. 9). Following this suggestion, if a student were enrolled in three online courses, they would have three individual advisors in a given semester, each likely to have a unique perspective which may lead to conflicting advice for the student.

A more recent study on program implementation for online learners has been done by Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003). After providing a description and analysis of scaffolding in education, Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) proposed a program of



scaffolding in online student support services that outlines good advising as pivotal for distance student success.

The general concept of scaffolding is described as “providing learners with more structure during the early stages of a learning activity and gradually turning responsibility over to them” as they master the skills necessary to succeed on their own (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003, p. 2). Through study and assessment of a program which had applied scaffolding and was implemented for online learners, the authors concluded it is especially important to stress the necessity of good advisement in online education. The interaction students have with their advisors helped them feel connected to the institution and assisted in scaffolding self-directness (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003, p. 5).

In addition, the report stated advisors should assist in identifying problems and barriers for their online students, offering support before it is too late (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Finally, in relation to the proposed approach to learning, the authors found advisors responsible for providing a great deal of support for new students while teaching them how to be an advocate for their own educational goals. It was important advisors assist students in developing their ability to guide their own learning, described as scaffolding students’ abilities to advise themselves. Students can be responsible for their own education online; however, they will only succeed if first given strong advisement on how to do so.

Finally, Wiesenberg (2001) completed a five-year, longitudinal study of 15 graduate students at one university to determine adult online learners’ transitions, responses to change, and factors influencing their level of stress or comfort within a given program. The research made a strong case for improved student support and

adequate student advising to ensure adult online learners are able to cope effectively. As students moved from the beginning to the middle of their program, they noted advisors were more responsive to their needs than they had been previously, and advisors appeared to be more understanding of the students' multiple responsibilities. However, when surveyed in the middle of the program, well after transition, these same students perceived the advisors as less responsive and felt administration arranged things for their benefit, not the students'.

Finally, at the completion of the program, students perceived advisors as more supportive and responsive to their needs and identified the advisor's ability to recall past discussions and specific student characteristics as influential in their assessment of the university as a "student-friendly" place (Wiesenberg, 2001, p. 52).

With students' perceptions of a student-friendly university being positively correlated with how well they registered handling stress, it is imperative that efforts are made to smooth students' transitions and address any issues or barriers they may face. Advisors then have an important role in influencing online student satisfaction with the overall institution.

It is clear good advising is imperative for positive student outcomes among online learners. Other identified responsibilities of online advisors include: being responsive to the needs and competing demands of students (Granger & Benke, 1998; Wiesenberg, 2001); assisting in identifying resources for learning; helping set an academic plan; assisting students in coping with the process of distance education; building students' online study skills; setting short-term immediate goals with the learners; encouraging personal evaluation (Granger & Benke, 1998; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003); being

familiar with various computer software and mediums of advising online; offering career counseling (Granger & Benke, 1998); and most importantly, being trained specifically on how to advise online learners with the understanding these advising needs are unique to this student population (Beaudoin, 1990; Granger & Benke, 1998; Wiesenber, 2001).

### **Advising Adult Learners in Cohorts**

There is a significant amount of literature related to the discussion, benefits, and drawbacks of cohort learning. However, a majority of the literature does not address advising needs of these individuals and/or if there are formal advising procedures in place. As this research seeks to address the role of advisement for cohort learners, it is imperative to understand what is already known about cohort students, how they learn, and how they perceive the cohort experience.

#### **The cohort model.**

Cohort programs are more pervasive in teacher education than any other field of study (Sathe, 2009). The common definition of cohort learning refers to lock-step learning in which a group of students enroll in the same program and move through the program together taking the same courses at the same time (e.g., Chairs, McDonald, Shrover, Urbanski, & Vertin, 2002; Fenning, 2004; Hanley & Mather, 1999; Imel, 2002; Reynolds & Hebert, 1998; Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001). Some authors have elaborated on this definition to highlight the student growth while learning in a cohort, identifying students' development of community, support, and confidence as part of the definition of cohort learning (Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006; Fenning, 2004; Hanley & Mather, 1999; Hesse & Mason, 2005; Norris & Barnett, 1994).

The identified purposes of cohort learning include:

- Creating a community of learners that may offer support to one another (Imel, 2002; Sathe, 2009)
- Promoting self-actualization among learners, and encouraging collaboration (Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006; Fenning, 2004; Hesse & Mason, 2005; Sathe, 2009);
- Increasing confidence in cohort participants, encouraging growth, promoting inclusion, developing interpersonal skills, and teaching students how to effectively work in a group (Brooks, 1998; Chairs et al., 2002; Connor & Killmer, 2001; Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006; Fenning, 2004; Hanley & Mather, 1999; Hesse & Mason, 2005; Imel, 2002; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Sathe, 2009).

When students feel included and they have the respect of their learning group, they have better retention, improved outcomes, and a more positive attitude toward the subject matter (Brooks, 1998; Chairs et al., 2002; Connor & Killmer, 2001; Fenning, 2004; Imel, 2002).

Bullough, Clark, Wentworth, and Hansen (2001) completed a qualitative assessment of one cohort program with the intent to “deepen understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of cohorts primarily from the teacher education students’ perspectives” (p. 99). From one identified cohort, four men and 16 women participated in a life-line case study in which the cohort, not the individual students, was the case of study. Data were derived from multiple methods, including: classroom observations; a survey of student attitudes completed at midterm and course completion; a socio-gram to identify student clique memberships; a group interview; a cohort life line sketched at both two months into the program and at completion; and individual student interviews at the

end of the program of only those participants identified by the socio-gram as either inside or outside of the cohort group (Bullough, Clark, Wentworth, & Hansen, 2001, pp. 98-99).

Through analysis and identification of patterns across all employed tools, the authors identified the advantages and disadvantages of cohort learning from the students' perspectives. One of the disadvantages identified by this group was the danger of the cohort's potential to take on a life and purpose of its own – one that may potentially conflict with the objectives identified by the program. However, it is also written this weakness may be overcome through clear leadership and positive reinforcement. Proper group advisement early in the program may offer the cohort guidance and allow the group to develop in-line with the mission of the program. However, the topic of cohort student advisement was again absent from the research agenda and the reported discussion.

The strength of cohort learning most commonly identified by both professors and cohort participants was the group's ability to foster trusting professional relationships. Other substantial findings included the value of the cohort as an emotional support system with less intellectual exchange than had been anticipated, recognition of a shared experience, and realization many of those participating did not approach, or define, cohort learning as anything more than a group of people who learn together.

The results, though limited in scope, have the potential to highlight general themes among experiences of cohort learners, influencing future research on the topic; they may guide questions asked of cohort learners moving forward. In addition, the authors of this report were also professors for the researched program, implying, as

would be good practice, they will act upon what they have found to improve their specific program and ameliorate the identified problems of cohort learning.

The cohort model has been implemented and tested in a variety of programs, and the research has explored effective models to offer a description of what cohort learning looks like. However, when cohort guidance and leadership are addressed (which is infrequent) the authors discuss the role of student leaders and the responsibility of cohort instructors with no attention drawn to the role of academic advisors (Potthoff, Dinsmore, & Moore, 2001). Fenning's (2004) research discussed the importance of cohort learning in an effort to respond to the changing characteristics of students in higher education. It is not that advisement is noted as unnecessary in this research; instead, it is not addressed at all and the researchers offer no justification for overlooking this facet of learning and guidance in higher education.

#### **Characteristics of cohort learners.**

Fenning's (2004) research on the application of learning communities and cohorts took place in Canada, but her discussion of the characteristics of cohort learners is relevant to the proposed research. She stated these learners need flexibility, a university responsive to their individual learning needs, and a program that recognizes the necessity for the lessons learned to transfer to employment opportunities and applicable skills (Fenning, 2004).

These students are generally identified as adult learners and look for curriculum focused on real life application (Imel, 2002; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Sathe, 2009). Cohort students strive in an environment where the learning is collaborative among, not only the students, but the instructors as well. Study and learning are a group effort, not

competitive, and the instructors view the student-teacher relationship as a partnership of collective learning with no significant disparity in power.

Cohort learners are generally described as adult learners, and as a result, have several characteristics in common with earlier descriptions of adult students. These students need career advice, seek collaboration, and need flexibility and alternative learning mediums to name a few. However, research on adult learners has identified the advising needs of this population as well as the characteristics of good advising when working to increase retention and positive student outcomes, while researcher on cohort learners disregards the topic of advisement.

### **Summary**

In addition to guiding future research, the existing literature provides significantly clear consensus on characteristics of an effective advisor (see Figure 4 for a summary of characteristics). Although Vista (1995) noted advisors should not be faculty members, most advisors continue to serve multiple roles within the university. The CAEL (2010) identified having an academic position as a positive attribute among advisors. As a system, universities must begin to recognize training is required of advisors responsible for working with older than average students. In addition to providing seminars for adult learner advisors, universities must recognize the time requirements for working with nontraditional students and the unique time schedule these students demand (CAEL, 2000; Jones, 1993). Edwards (2007) even noted one's advising technique and record should come into play when hiring new faculty. When universities look to fill a position, they need to look for individuals who are able to provide advisement and are able to meet the needs of, and have experience working well with, adult learners (Edwards, 2007).

Finally, individuals responsible for advising older than average students, those online and in a cohort environment, must take the time to consider the unique needs of these populations and continually revisit research in the area of successful adult advising in order to guarantee they are providing an effective service to their students.

The intent of this qualitative research was to offer an explanation of the overall advising experience of adult learners in the three learning environments. Past quantitative, survey research on the topic limits the understanding of the experience, and limits response categories to the reality the researchers perceived prior to their studies. This study was an attempt to describe the experience of advisement from the lens of the adult learners.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

The theory of interactionism, and the interpretivist qualitative paradigm influenced this phenomenological approach to research and, subsequently, the methods of data collection and data analysis (thematic analysis) that were applied.

#### **Interpretivism**

Interpretivists seek to understand and describe the “world in which they live and work” through the study of the meaning assigned by participants to their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). This is also referred to as constructivism. With roots in sociology, interpretivism theorizes the social world is constructed through meaning and there is no one objective, observable experience or truth. Any truth about experience or behavior is context-bound, therefore, it is subject to how the individuals interpret and give meaning to the reality in question. In research of behavior, experience, and explanation of a social reality, the most reputable study is one in which a researcher describes and explains the situation or experience of study from the point-of-view of those involved (Livesey, 2006).

As the social world is produced by those in current interaction, the truth or reality of any experience is continually redefined – yet traditional advisement has not been. As such, to understand the current reality of advising for our adult learners, their needs and experiences with advising in higher education must be described from their shared

perspectives (Livesey, 2006). The intent of this qualitative research was to generate meaning from the participants to offer an explanation of the overall advising experiences of adult learners in the three learning environments.

### **Thematic Analysis as Phenomenological Method**

The practice of thematic analysis places meaning and understanding at the root of analysis and promotes a discursive interpretation of data as individual codes may cross-reference multiple themes. This is in contrast to content analysis which employs mutually exclusive predefined categories while coding the data. In addition, the applied method highlights a systematic approach to review of the data to identify topics and higher order themes. Finally, as is consistent with the methods employed in this study, Braun and Clarke (2006) wrote that this approach is utilized to report experience, meaning, and the reality perceived by participants without limiting interpretation to themes supported by a pre-determined, potentially irrelevant, theory. Consistent with the phenomenological approach to research, Table 1 highlights the phases of thematic analysis, and their explanation, as noted by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 35).

Table 1. Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 35)

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Description of the Process</b>
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.

Table 1. Cont.

Phase	Description of the Process
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming Themes	On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

These are the steps most frequently followed in research employing thematic analysis as phenomenological method (e.g., Al-Salti & Hackney, 2011; Ellis & Kitzinger, 2002; Freeday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Tuckett, 2005; Wilkinson, 2000). As is consistent with the practice of thematic analysis, the aforementioned steps were employed in the analysis of the interview transcripts for this research. See the subsequent discussion of employed methods for further description of the data collection and analysis.

### **Research Methods**

Qualitative research seeks to offer an explanation or deeper understanding for a given phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived advising experiences of adult students in three learning environments (online, on-campus, cohort). The intent was to explore and to understand the shared advising experiences and needs of the participants while also describing the importance and variation of themes among the three groups. This was in response to the deficiencies presented in the review of current

literature. In order to respond to the stated research problem and to achieve the purpose of this research, I employed the following phenomenological methods.

Nine adult learners in one Master's program participated in semi-structured, emerging, one-on-one interviews which were transcribed, reviewed, coded (open coding), categorized, and discussed through the steps of thematic analysis. Further explanation of the phenomenological approach to research will be given through the discussion of the chosen, and applied, methods.

### **Setting**

The setting of this study was a public university in the upper Midwest. Participants were selected based on age and their enrollment in Master's program in a department of education. This qualitative research intended to explore the experiences of a small group of nine adult learners in one department to generate deeper understanding and meaning associated with good advising. The intent was not to generalize these experiences to the entire adult learner population nor even to the overall adult student population enrolled at the identified university. The intentional identification of a single degree and department was to ensure any variation in experience was a result of students' learning environments and not their programs of study.

The location for this project was based on purpose, convenience, and the university's large number of graduate students, as well as significant enrollment in a department of education, averaging a class size of roughly 80 students annually (Office of Institutional Research, 2011). The university identified roughly 14,000 students enrolled for fall 2011; 2,560 were identified as graduate students (Office of Institutional Research). Without accounting for the number of undergraduate students who may be

classified as adult learners, it was clear from the above enrollment data that the chosen university had a significant population of students over the age of 24 and/or enrolled in graduate study. In addition, the particular department of education offered various degree options and learning opportunities, to include on-campus, online, and cohort study.

Participants on-campus were given the opportunity to select the location, time, and date of the interview to ensure participation was not a burden. The in-person interviews were held in a private on-campus meeting room for two participants, both on weekday afternoons, while the third on-campus learner asked to complete the interview in his home on a weekday evening. Those learners who were at a distance were offered the opportunity to hold the interview through a medium of their choice. These interviews were then done through phone conversation (one participant) and Skype (five participants).

Skype was founded in 2003 and has more than 30 million users online. It is an online communication system allowing individuals to connect through text, voice, and/or video simultaneously wherever their location internationally. Skype may be accessed by phone, television, a landline, or on a personal computer. Participants communicating through Skype did so through their personal computers, allowing the students and myself to do the interview face-to-face. Skype is a free service offered through Microsoft. For more information on this tool, please see their information page at <http://about.skype.com/>.

Participants who used this method of communication to complete their interviews had previous experience with the system. Figure 5 offers a screenshot image of the software and serves as an example of how the interviews occurred in this study.



Figure 5. Skype Screenshot: Generic (taken from <http://www.picsgate.com>).

## Participants

Graduate students seeking a Master's degree were recruited and selected through recommendations of faculty within a department of education at one public university in the upper Midwest. It was imperative to interview students seeking the same degree level within the same department to ensure the comparison and identified differences of perceived advising needs across environments were descriptive of the learning environment (online, on-campus, cohort), and not the culture and advising requirements of particular departments. In addition, applying these criteria protected against identified differences that may have been the result of the anticipated degree. Students seeking advisement while completing a doctoral degree may have had specific advising needs and were not included in this study.

Purposeful criterion-based and random selection were employed (Roulston, 2010) as four professors in the department were contacted and asked to offer a list of potential student participants based on the criteria. Students were randomly chosen from the running list of available, and applicable, participants. The four identified professors, and gatekeepers for the participants in this research, were asked to provide a list of students

who met the following criteria: 25 years of age or older; enrolled in a program within a department of education, regardless of the number of credits; working toward a Master's degree; and completing roughly 80% of their coursework either online, in a classroom, or in a cohort.

Said request resulted in a list of 11 online, 7 on-campus, and 10 cohort students. Only three students from each learning environment were interviewed for this study. To determine which students to contact for participation, all were listed randomly in one document and every other student was contacted until each group had the required number.

For the purpose of inclusion, online learners were those who met the criteria for an adult learner, age 25 or older, in a graduate program, and were working on their graduate degree with at least 80% of their course work to be completed online.

Cohort learners were those who met the criteria of an adult learner and were identified as part of a particular cohort within their program/department. A cohort learner moved through his/her program with one identified group of students. These individuals had the same projected completion date and the same program of study, essentially sharing a common educational experience within an identified period of time.

Classroom learners were identified as those with the above criteria for adult learners and were also completing at least 80% of their coursework through in-classroom learning.

I contacted the identified students, the study was described, and the students were asked if they were willing to participate. This was not considered the consent, but rather, it was intended to highlight the students' willingness to review the proposal and the

consent form for participation. In this initial contact, students were also asked about their preferred method of communication. See Appendix A for a copy of the preliminary request for participation email sent to all participants. Also, see Appendix B for the consent form that was both attached to the preliminary request, and the confirmation of the meeting time and location.

Only three students were non-responsive – two online learners and one on-campus – requiring additional contacts to be made in their place. Table 2 provides a description of the nine students who agreed to participate, their mode of communication and/or interview location, as well as their identified gender, and general distance from the university of study. Other demographic and personal characteristics were shared and noted, but are not reported to ensure the confidentiality of the respondents.<sup>1</sup> However, in interpretation of the identified themes and overview of the data analysis, further student characteristics were shared as was necessary and relevant for the discussion.

Table 2. Research Study Participants

<b>PSEUDONYM</b>	<b>LEARNING MEDIUM</b>	<b>SITE</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>GEOGRAPHIC DISTANCE</b>
<b>John</b>	On-Campus	John's Home Weekday Evening	Male	None
<b>Sara</b>	On-Campus	Campus Meeting Room Weekday, Noon	Female	None
<b>Deb</b>	On-Campus	Campus Meeting Room Weekday, Afternoon	Female	None
<b>Beth</b>	Online	Phone	Female	Nearly 1,700 miles
<b>Jane</b>	Online	Skype	Female	Nearly 600 miles
<b>Kate</b>	Online	Skype	Female	Over 300 miles

<sup>1</sup> All participants' names have been changed



Table 2. Cont.

<b>PSEUDONYM</b>	<b>LEARNING MEDIUM</b>	<b>SITE</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>GEOGRAPHIC DISTANCE</b>
<b>Mike</b>	Cohort	Skype	Male	175 miles
<b>Amanda</b>	Cohort	Skype	Female	45 miles
<b>Stacey</b>	Cohort	Skype	Female	Nearly 80 miles

A total of nine participants was an adequate sample size as the intent of this qualitative analysis was to offer a clear, in-depth description of the perceived advising experiences among a small group of learners in order to better understand their situations and perceptions of advising. Creswell (2007) stated in a phenomenological study, it is sufficient to interview “between 5 and 25 participants” who have experienced the identified phenomenon (p. 61). In addition, Morse (2000) noted, although it is difficult to predetermine the number of participants needed to capture enough information in qualitative (interview) research, one can rely on a smaller sample size if the topic is clear and the questions are obvious for those being studied and/or interviewed, if there will be a significant amount of data (conversation) taken away from each participant, and if the interview has been designed to produce a significant amount of information.

The interview as an emerging process will be discussed in a later section, but suffice to say at this point, students were encouraged to simply reflect on previous and recent advising experiences they have had while a graduate student at the identified university. Questions were sent prior to the interview to allow additional time for reflection and recall, and to ensure participants were comfortable with the topic area and came to the interview with material for discussion. Open ended, emerging questions allowed for a significant amount of detail from the participants and afforded the

opportunity for follow-up questions pertinent for each learner. The topic was clear, fresh in the memories of the learners, and was not a subject commonly associated with ill feelings which would make it a difficult experience to explain (Creswell, 2011; Glesne, 2011). The employed methods met the criteria identified above to support a sample size of nine.

### **Data Collection**

One-on-one interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants. Students were contacted by phone or through email. The learners were asked if willing to participate, and if so, were sent an additional copy of the consent through email. The questions listed in the interview protocol were also sent to each participant for review and to introduce the content.

Interview as an emergent design allowed for flexibility in the interview process and provided the opportunity to take the interview in a different direction if necessary to address the research problem (Creswell, 2011; Roulston, 2010). As students responded to questions about their recent advising experiences, key words were noted and additional questions were asked to encourage further discussion.

In addition, to capture the students' experiences, without leading and limiting the interviewees to specifically address advising needs, the copy of interview questions sent in advance only included those questions asking about overall advising experiences with a disclaimer other related questions would be asked as the interviews evolved.

An interview protocol was developed from analysis of the literature, in relation to the stated conceptual framework, thorough review of the research problem, and through

the observation of two online adult advising experiences at the stated research location. The interview protocol is described in a later section but may be found in Appendix C.

## **Interviews**

Creswell (2001) described an interview protocol as a document which includes instructions for the process to be employed in the interview, and an outline of the questions to be asked. After review of the literature and the identification of the research purpose and questions, an initial interview protocol was developed. The protocol included a checklist of tasks to be completed prior to the interview, an overview of the study, an outline of the questions to be asked, a list of potential probes, space to take notes, and a final list of tasks to complete after the interview.

Though not stated explicitly in the interview protocol, additional questions were asked in an attempt to gather a richer description of the students' advising needs. These inquiries resulted from conversation with the students.

The interview protocol illustrated a semi-structured design of inquiry. All participants were asked the same seven questions. However, as identified in the final protocol in Appendix C, several of the questions had multiple means of arriving at the same intended response. As an example, one question asked the student to describe the characteristics or traits of a good advisor, or from their description of a good advising session they provided earlier, to describe the characteristics of that advisor.

The flexibility of the semi-structured interview protocol allowed the interview questions to match the students' previous responses and created conversation, which led to a richer description of the participants' experiences. All interviews were completed,

audio recorded, and transcribed by me which allowed for consistency in the questioning and preliminary identification of relevant statements and/or potential themes.

In addition, the interview questions were reviewed by three colleagues and then piloted on two adult learners who met the aforementioned criteria. The pilot students responded to the questions for the purpose of testing the instrument, and also offered constructive criticism and advice. This process was considered a preliminary peer review of the research instrument.

### **Participant follow-up.**

Following the first review of categorized data for identification of themes, participants were sent follow-up interview questions through email to further explore their conceptualization of particular advising needs and experiences, and to clarify any ambiguous statements taken from their interview transcripts. As this step was taken during the identification of themes, further explanation is given in the discussion of the data analysis.

### **Pilot interviews.**

To test both my ability to interview and the validity of the interview protocol, two pilot interviews were held with peers. Selection of participants was based on the criteria applied in this study. Additional criteria applied here required a familiarity and comfort with the two participants as well as experience with qualitative research as they were asked to also provide a peer review of the interview process and protocol.

#### ***Pilot interview one.***

The first interview was held in a local coffee shop identified by the participant. After introduction to the project, the participant signed the consent, agreed to the audio

recording of the interview, and then began the session. The interview lasted roughly 45 minutes. After the session, the participant provided suggestions for improvement and highlighted areas where either I, or the question, was not clear.

### ***Pilot interview two.***

The second interview was held over Skype, and also lasted roughly 45 minutes. In preparation, the program was downloaded. The participant was asked in advance to share her Skype account name for contact purposes, and a quiet location was reserved. During the interview the internet lost connection on two separate occasions requiring me to reconnect with the student. This was noted in the pilot, and students included in the study who chose Skype were warned about this potential error, and what steps to take if it occurred.

Following the second interview, no significant changes and/or criticisms were shared, requiring little modification to the interview protocol. However, a process was developed for securing the necessary student information required to connect through this medium.

### **Confidentiality and Consent**

Though this research did not have any foreseeable risks, nor did it require students to reveal especially embarrassing or sensitive information, all interview responses and transcriptions were de-identified. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. In addition, the consent form was not linked to either the participants' pseudonyms or their associated interview transcript. Information was also stored in separate locations. Interview transcripts were maintained in my private residence in a locked file while the signed consent forms, with no link to the transcription, was stored in a locked drawer in

my office. These measures were taken to ensure confidence of the participants and encourage candid descriptions of their individual advising experiences.

After students agreed to consider participation, a two page project description/consent form was sent electronically. The learners had time to review the document. A follow-up email was sent to answer any questions and to address any concerns. Once the students gave consent, an interview time and location was set. For those interviews completed in person, the consent form was signed and given to me prior to recording. Any interview completed through a web service or over the phone was either scanned and emailed prior to the interview or mailed through the US Postal Service. Participants were given a copy of the project description for their records (see Appendix B).

Note the project description in the consent form was vague to ensure respondents were not led in their conversation. It was important to refrain from revealing the intent to describe advising needs in addition to understanding the advising experiences.

The consent form provided a brief description of the project, included my contact information, advisement they may withdraw at any time from the study without consequence, outlined the time commitment required of the participants, and made clear their participation was voluntary.

### **Artifact Review**

Relevant artifacts related to Master's degree student advisement in a department of education were also reviewed as a secondary source of data. Documents, as mentioned by interviewees and/or identified through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts,

were identified and reviewed to test the reliability of the data (e.g., participants' programs of study, request for a permanent advisor, or change of advisor forms).

Glesne (2011) wrote that review of relevant artifacts and/or documents has the potential to "raise questions about your hunches and thereby shape new directions for . . . interviews" (p. 85). In addition, review of documents related to student advisement provided the opportunity to compare students' perceptions of advising with the department and/or school's intentions in developing guidelines and protocols around advising. It also led to the development of themes in the data and offered more reliable data as students' comments and discussions related to the identified artifacts were compared (validated) with the said documents – supporting the reliability of the participants' responses. Further discussion and review of all artifacts included in this study may be found under the section on triangulation of data.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Transcription and Review**

All nine participants consented to have their interviews audio recorded. All recordings were personally transcribed by me allowing for immediate review of the interview content. After all interviews and transcription were complete, and follow-up interview data included in students' original interview file, preliminary exploratory analysis allowed for general review of all data (Creswell, 2011). This review was to ensure the data were sufficient and there was no need for further interview to adequately answer the research questions and/or to describe the advising experiences of the three learning groups.

### **Memo writing.**

Literature on the topic of qualitative data analysis emphasizes the importance of taking notes and reflecting in real time (Creswell, 2011; Glesne, 2011). In each interview log, notes (memos) were made in the margins referencing thoughts, potential themes, and codes. Following each interview, the memos were immediately reviewed for reflection. The purpose of memo writing was to help generate potential themes for the analysis. All responses or statements that seemed to contradict my assumptions were highlighted to capture real-time reflection and analysis of the data. As an example, after a second student identified declaring his temporary advisor as his permanent, I noted in the margin to review other interview transcripts for this behavior while also proposing what this trend may allude. Likewise, as it became apparent students did not have a favorable view of the student handbook, notes were made in the margin of the interviews postulating why this may be and making note of students' physical reactions to the topic.

### **Phases of Thematic Analysis**

Following is a discussion of the steps taken in reviewing and analyzing the transcription data. Initial codes, and the development and definition of identified themes will be introduced in this section, but further explanation and analysis have been saved for the discussion of this study's findings. Note the steps identified in thematic analysis are consistent with the phenomenological method of research which maintains one analyzes data by reducing the information into themes shared by all participants prior to detailing the essence of the overall experience of advising (Creswell, 2007; Husserl, 1965; 1975; Schutz, 1967).



Table 1 identified six phases of thematic analysis; however, the process of data analysis employed deviates at phase three. Instead of moving directly from codes (phase two) to a search for themes (phase three), phase three became a search for code associations and categorization. The original third and fourth phases, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), were then condensed to a single fourth phase consisting of a search and review of themes.

Categorization of codes was a necessary addition as the process of data analysis consistent with phenomenology suggests moving from codes, to categories, to themes – a step missing from the phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The search and review of themes was listed as a single step as it became a cyclical process. Based off of the identified categories, there was a search for themes, and those identified were reviewed. When no significant results were found there was an additional search for themes. The cyclical application of Braun and Clarke’s phases three and four led to the revised fourth phase in my analysis. See Appendix D for a copy of the steps followed in the process of analysis.

Table 3. Revision of the Phases of Thematic Analysis as Applied

<b>Phases of Thematic Analysis</b> (Braun & Clarke, 2006)	<b>Revised Phases of Thematic Analysis</b>
1. Familiarize yourself with the data	1. Familiarize yourself with the data
2. Generate initial codes	2. Generate initial codes
3. Search for themes	3. Categorize code associations
4. Review themes	4. Search for and review themes
5. Define and name themes	5. Define and name themes
6. Produce the report	6. Produce the report

### **Phase one: Familiarize yourself with the data.**

To become familiar with the data, I conducted all nine interviews. During the interviews, notes were made and memos jotted down for future review and recall. After each interview, the recording was personally transcribed, then re-read for errors. I then read through all nine interviews again, in one sitting, and took notes on potential ideas and themes from the original raw data. Throughout the remaining phases of analysis, the data were reviewed but no longer in the original format as irrelevant information had been removed from transcripts during a second read-through. As an example, a participant began to share information about her current pregnancy and her level of exhaustion. For this research, it was sufficient to note this characteristic as it related to her need for online advising, but it was not necessary to include her personal comments and conversation about her experience being pregnant.

### **Phase two: Generate initial codes.**

In a cyclical fashion, revised phases two and three were revisited on several occasions until a workable list of codes were identified and reviewed for categorization. The categories then informed a relevant search for, and review of, themes – presented as revised phase four.

In association with the literature, in the first review of data, I began to open code all comments related to student advisement, but with a distinction between those traits and experiences associated with the qualities of their particular advisors and those experiences associated with the physical act of advising. It became apparent there was no true distinction between the traits of a good advisor and the methods of advising. This

will be addressed further in the discussion of pertinent themes, but is important to note as it led back to a more broad review of the data with an open code.

In the second review of the data, all comments were coded generally as either related to the discussion of advising experiences and needs, or not. The intent of this preliminary round of coding was to reduce the data to a more manageable size.

After familiarizing myself with the data, and recognizing further reduction was necessary, I again read through each transcript and gave all statements related to advising an identified, general code. This review generated over 150 unique code names. As an example, codes included:

- Advisor as primary resource
- Need to be available
- Advisor advice over handbook
- Not judgmental
- Show respect for student time
- Be diverse
- Assist in course selection
- Develop student's timeline
- Be welcoming
- Have a good aura

These comments/codes were then reviewed and collapsed. Labels not appearing in any other transcript, or in association with any more than one statement, were reviewed to determine their inclusion. Those codes appearing in only one interview transcript were typically associated with other code names, and relabeled as such. Others were removed

if the statement was clearly a reflection of the individual and not related to the shared experience and explanation of adult advising.

All comments were also evaluated to determine cross-over. As an example, one participant’s statement was coded as “advisor must take advising seriously” which was similar to the code for another participant’s perception, “advisor must see the importance in student advising.” After reassessing the statements, it was evident both could be labeled as advisors’ recognition of “importance of role.” After phase two, the 150 code names were reduced to just fewer than 100 codes.

**Phase three: Categorization of codes.**

Several steps were taken to identify themes of experience and need related to adult learner advising. In the review of the broadly coded data (nearly 100 codes), a list was generated which categorized codes by learning group. Any codes that were identified among the three transcripts within a learning environment were listed. Table 4 highlights those codes identified in the aforementioned review.

Table 4. Codes Present Among all Participants Categorized by Learning Medium

<b>ONLINE LEARNERS</b>	<b>ON-CAMPUS LEARNERS</b>	<b>COHORT LEARNERS</b>
Advisor over handbook	Check-in on student	Advisor over handbook
Available	Comforting	Available
Clarify information	Don’t judge	Check-in on student
Clear expectations	Friendly	Clarify information
Clear information	Genuine interest in student	Clear information
Don’t give run-around	Good listener	Efficient
Efficient	Hear nothing bad about advisor	Email best mode
Email best mode	Know the student	Expert in field
Flexible	Not an obligation	Face-to-face

Table 4. Cont.

<b>ONLINE LEARNERS</b>	<b>ON-CAMPUS LEARNERS</b>	<b>COHORT LEARNERS</b>
Genuine interest in student	Prompt information	Fast response needed
Good listener	Provide resources	Flexible
Have many modes of communication	Respect individuality	Have many modes of communication
Help student	Set goals with student	Holistic advising
Holistic advising	Tailor program to meet students individual needs	Know policies
Knowledgeable about topic areas	Take advising seriously/see importance	Know the student
Make student feel important		Knowledgeable about specialization
Not an obligation		Knowledgeable about topic areas
Not sparse on details		Not sparse on details
Preferred being given advisor		Preferred being given advisor
Proficient in email communication		Provide resources
Prompt information		Recognize students' other roles
Recognize technical errors		Student first
Respect individuality		Value student input
Serve as guide through program		Understanding
Serve as link		Serve as guide through program
Set goals with student		
Supportive		
Tailor program to meet students individual needs		
Take advising seriously/see importance		
Understanding		
Value student input		

From the above information, an additional table was developed to identify the codes present among all three learning mediums, meaning all participants made mention of this experience or need. This step produced 13 codes, to include the following:

- Trust advisor
- Treat each student as unique/individual
- Paperwork help
- Knowledge about program
- Individual advising
- Good communicator
- Was given their advisor
- Advisor develop timeline
- Advisor do course selection
- Commitment to student
- Chose temporary advisor
- Advisor as the primary resource
- Must answer all questions

Finally, in effort to determine similarities among the learning mediums, a table was developed to identify codes present among both online and on-campus learners, those among online and cohort, and among on-campus and cohort participants. This table was produced after having omitted the 13 codes identified above shared by all three groups. Table 5 identifies the relationship among the three groups' perceived advising experiences.

Table 5. Shared Codes Among Paired Learning Mediums

ONLINE and COHORT	ONLINE and CAMPUS	CAMPUS and COHORT
Advisor over handbook	Genuine interest in student	Check-in on student
Available	Good listener	Know the student
Clarify information	Not an obligation	Provide resources
Clear information	Proficient in email communication	
Efficient	Respect individuality	
Email best mode	Set goals with student	
Flexible	Tailor program to meet students individual needs	
Have many modes of communication	Take advising seriously/see importance	
Holistic advising		
Knowledgeable about topic areas		
Not sparse on details		
Preferred being given advisor		
Serve as guide through program		
Understanding		
Value student input		

The various categorizations of coded data were done to assist in recognizing potential themes, to identify shared perceptions, and to note unique advising experiences. The intent was to display the same data in multiple formats in order to develop a broader understanding of the advising experiences. Following identification of shared codes and those not associated with any other, memos, notes and common codes were reviewed again to determine themes among, and between, learning environments.

After additional review, it was noted the application of the previous code list did not produce any code relationships. Meaning, after it was noted that all online and cohort

students identified a good advisor as one who values students' input, data were again reviewed to determine if that code was occurring in association with a particular question in the interview. This was not the case for any of the shared codes. Similarly, coded interview transcripts were reviewed to determine if any of the 100 codes were occurring consistently in association with another or if a particular code was identified and never partnered with another, which would illustrate a significant finding. Neither proved to be the case.

All data were again evaluated and five preliminary categories were identified. The following five categories (in no particular order) were present within the interviews for all nine participants.

- Advising is important; must be perceived as a serious responsibility by advisors
- Respect individuality of each student
- Innate trust in advisor and university
- Need for programmatic guidance
- Require immediate response and communication (less than 48 hours)

These categories were identified as micro-themes to the overall shared advising experience for the purpose of analytical review. All previous codes were assessed to determine how/if each fit within the five categories of shared advising experiences. A thematic map was developed and is illustrated in Figure 6. This map was employed in an additional review of the data set to identify all statements that fit within the given categories. Some participant statements fit multiple categories.



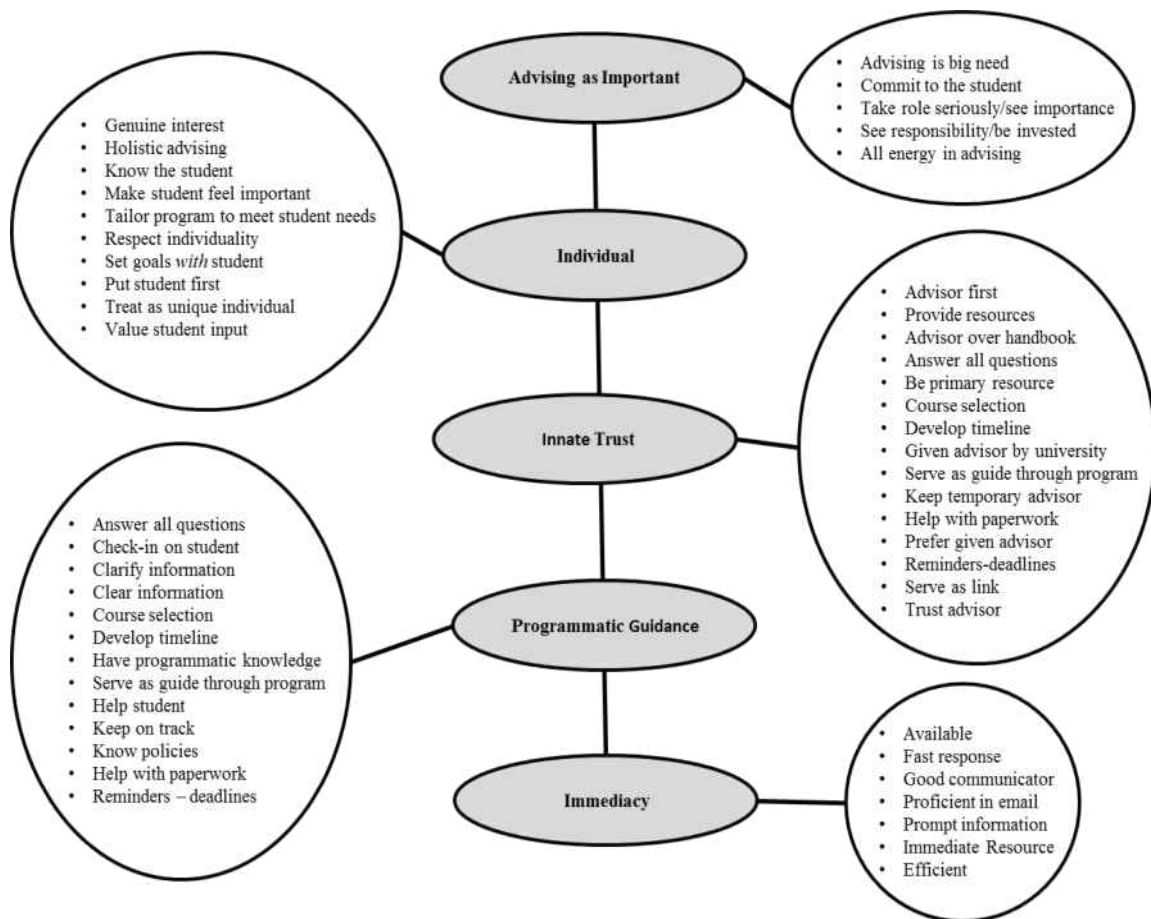


Figure 6. Advising Experiences of Adult Learners: Preliminary Thematic Map. This figure illustrates the five categories of experience along with their associated codes.

***Participant follow-up.***

The intent of this study was to offer an explanation of the advising experience from the perspective of the adult learners. To ensure the identified categories were consistent with their experience of advising, and to conceptualize the aforementioned codes, all participants were sent a follow-up email with questions specific to their interview transcripts.

All nine participants were asked similar questions, but as they related to their learning environment. The questions included: (a) is advising important for online

learners? (explain); (b) can you please describe the purpose of advising for a cohort learner?; (c) and what is a fast response, and why is it important for an advisor to respond to you with such immediacy? Additionally, all participants were presented with a list of the traits and qualities of a good advisor/advising they had expressed in their previous interview and were then asked to identify those necessary for good advising. Finally, each learner was asked one to three additional questions specific to their previous explanation of their advising experiences. These responses were added to the original transcripts and included in the interpretation of the data.

#### **Phase four: Searching for and reviewing themes.**

The aforementioned categories were reviewed with two colleagues, as a test of validity, and to work through the meaning and definition of each (as part of phase five). However, in the first review of the preliminary thematic map, it became clear what had been identified was not a thematic analysis, but a categorization of codes – an additional step at condensing and making sense of the data. It was then necessary to again explore the data for themes. However, this time the data were reviewed within the lens of the five identified categories, with one addition – complexity of the advising role. This additional category was developed as a result of the reviewed memos and aforementioned participant follow-up. This was employed for clarification as needed, conceptualization of particular terms, and to assist in the identification of themes.

In the second peer review meeting, related to the interpretation of the data, the six categories were redefined and examined in their relationship to one another. At the time of the meeting, all raw data had already been recoded to include the six aforementioned categories. The coded transcripts were read to determine if any of the six categories hung

together, or were always identified within the conversation as an answer to a particular question.

As will be discussed in the explanation of the advising experience for adult learners, three significant results came from this review and discussion. It was noted the category of programmatic guidance was always coded along with the label of innate trust; however, innate trust was also evident as standing alone in the data. To offer further explanation, when a student made a comment related to the required role of programmatic guidance in advising, this statement was also coded as evidence of their trust in the advisor. Yet, there were data that served as evidence of this innate trust not associated with programmatic guidance. One participant stated she would go to her advisor for assistance in licensing and for career advice, illustrating the level of trust she had in the guidance she received from her advisor not related to her program of study.

Additionally, it was noted a majority of statements made in all nine interviews were dual coded to include the category of complexity. It became evident in my research journal reflections, as well as in the data, the role of the advisor was exceedingly complex and required one to have an array of traits to be identified as a good advisor. This category was not only present in the original interviews, but became more evident in the follow-up with the research participants when they were asked to identify from their own list the traits and qualities required for good advising.

Finally, it was identified all participants required frequent and immediate electronic communication with their advisors. What became apparent in the participant follow-up was the discrepancy in how the learning groups conceptualized this fast response. While all of the categories were related to the complexity of advising, it was

only the code “immediate response” that learning groups had a shared meaning that varied across learning environments. This will be explored further in both the findings and the discussion.

**Phase five: Define and name themes.**

In the fifth phase of thematic analysis, the six categories were reviewed to determine their relationship and to identify the overarching themes of advising among adult learners. Five themes were identified: (a) the need for good programmatic advisement; (b) adult learners’ innate trust of advisement; (c) the need for advisement that is individualized; (d) importance of good advisement; and (e) the need for immediacy in advisement. In addition a central phenomenon, pulling from the five identified themes, was discovered – a definition of good (necessary), holistic, and complex advisement as the combination of a learners experience with the act/process of advising and the characteristics of an advisor. The definition and explanation of each theme is presented in the Chapter IV.

**Phase six: Produce the report.**

Phase six of thematic analysis is the final report, or the discussion of the advising experience of adult learners as presented in Chapters IV and V. In presentation of the data analysis, and in the telling of the story, literature was again reviewed to determine relevant sources of information specific to the identified themes.

**Reliability and Validity**

Qualitative research presents an interesting challenge to the questions of validity and reliability. It does not rely on statistical software to determine valid and reliable data for interpretation; as a result it puts responsibility on the researcher to complete ethical

research with a strong transparent method, and to take any possible measures to validate the interpretation of the data.

### **Reliability**

To ensure reliable data, criteria were identified for participant selection. Students who participated met all the stated criteria to assure reliable information. The interviewees were considered a reliable source of data related to the advising experience as the participants frequently participated as an advisee on their own volition. Finally, to avoid any additional threats to the reliability of the data, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The intent was to have a reference for any questions that may arise and to serve as confirmation for any statements or views interpreted in the results (Maxwell, 1992). Interview transcripts were also reviewed for error to ensure the data were sound. In addition, the research process has been transparent to provide a clear audit trail, to be discussed further (Roulston, 2010).

### **Validity**

Qualitative educators and resources also promote triangulation, peer debriefing and support, and member checking as methods to reduce any threat to a study's validity (Creswell, 2011; Glesne, 2011; Roulston, 2010). In addition, my potential bias as the lead researcher has been addressed through peer review of the interview questions to ensure neutrality, and through personal reflection of my subjectivity in the analysis of the data (Glesne, 2011; Roulston, 2010). Braun and Clarke (2006) also identified application of a sound method/process in thematic analysis as a source of validity in interpretation of the data while Carspecken (1995) affirms validity is in the "soundness of [the] argument"

(p. 55). Following is a discussion of the aforementioned methods employed to ensure valid research.

**Peer debriefing and support.**

This method requires a qualitative researcher to consult their peers and allow for a check of the analysis and/or interpretation. Interview transcripts were saved and the interpretation and themes derived from the interviews were shared with colleagues along with copies of the transcripts where the analysis was drawn from for the purpose of review. External input was encouraged to ensure interpretation had not been influenced by researcher bias or misinterpretation (Glesne, 2011; Roulston, 2010).

***Peer review of interview protocol.***

Peer review occurred in the development of the interview protocol as one colleague was asked to review the initial question set. This individual said the purpose of the research was not clear and she did not feel two of the questions were necessary or relevant to addressing the advising experience. As a result, the two questions were assessed and one was dropped from the protocol as it was deemed irrelevant, and the other was revised. The revision occurred as I explained the purpose of the question, and it became apparent the purpose of the question was valid for this research, but it had been confusing in its presentation in the protocol.

The modified interview protocol was then piloted among two peers to serve as a test of the method. This process was previously described.

***Peer review of interpretation.***

A thematic map was developed for data analysis. This map, along with a list of the data supporting each category, and subsequently the identified themes, were

presented to an associate for review. In this assessment of the identified themes, it was noted what had been classified as themes of the advising experience were better understood as categories of experience. Further described in the data analysis, this review led to an additional review of data and recoding of the interviews to reflect the identified categories.

A whiteboard meeting was held and served as the final peer review to reassess the interpretation and work through identification of themes. A whiteboard meeting is an informal process in which a peer who is able to relate to the discussion of the research topic reviews the developed thematic map and identified code set and assists with, and evaluates, the interpretation and analysis.

In this meeting, the original categories were reviewed, and from the discussion, I was able to conceptualize the five themes and central phenomenon evident in the data. To ensure valid interpretation, a list of the six categories and the data associated with each, were offered for review. Here, it was verified that statements pulled from each interview as evidence of the given categories were valid.

### **Audit trail.**

Through the application of thematic analysis as method, and an outline of steps taken as provided in Appendix D, a clear audit trail has been maintained for the purpose of review if the legitimacy of the study, or the interpretation, should be questioned. Maintaining sufficient and organized documentation has allowed for easy data recall which is not only necessary to respond to any future questions related to the interpretation, but has also assisted in identifying strong support from the data of identified themes.

### **Member checking.**

Member checking includes sharing the end results and interpretations with the participants to ensure identified themes are the result of the data. All participants were given a copy of their interview transcripts, along with a summary of the identified themes. Participants were asked to provide any corrections or to note any interpretations they did not feel were accurate (Creswell, 2011; Glesne, 2011; Roulston, 2010). After review, students did not identify any inaccuracies in either transcription or in analysis of the data.

### **Pilot study.**

As mentioned in the discussion of the data collection, a colleague assisted in the development and review of the employed interview questions, and the original interview protocol was tested on two graduate students who also offered criticisms related to the reliability and validity of this study's method and tool.

### **Triangulation: Artifact review.**

To ensure the data reviewed were representative of the adult learners' experiences, and identified themes were related to the particular learning mediums and not a program or department, only students enrolled in a department of education, working toward completion of a Master's degree were included in this study. This embedded analysis of one department has also been triangulated through a secondary data source – the selection and review of pertinent artifacts.

Throughout conversation with the adult learners, many would mention processes or forms required or discussed in their advising sessions. To triangulate the interview data, and confirm both the student responses and the interpretation, several artifacts were



reviewed. A general graduate student handbook and department handbook were reviewed as the primary sources of information for graduate learners outlining all student requirements, policies, expectations, and resources. However, the other artifacts chosen for review were contingent upon their mention during participant interviews and/or their reference in requirements from either handbook. To protect the anonymity of the participants and location of study, a copy of the artifacts will not be included for reader review; however, sections are referenced in the discussion. The artifacts included for review were also assessed to determine if there was evidence of the identified themes within the documents' language. Further mention of how the review of relevant documentation and resources contributed to the interpretation of the data has been addressed in Chapter V.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Beyond approval of the study's method by the Institutional Review Board, a committee designated to review any research involving living participants to ensure protection of participants' rights and welfare, steps were taken to ensure identified methods were ethically employed. All participants were well informed regarding the purpose and subject of the study. In addition, to avoid any emotional discomfort, the adult learners were given a sample of interview questions for review prior to their commitment to participate.

There were no foreseen risks to the study, but participants were presented with information of what steps to take if they felt they experienced any negative outcome as a result of taking part in this research project. In addition to the discussion of potential

risks, students were also presented with the benefits of this research for the community, the department, and for them as an adult learner.

Students were made aware they were welcome to withdraw at any time and without consequence. They were assured anonymity and that those who recommended their participation were unaware of which students were selected, if any, from their list of potential contacts. In addition, all participants were asked to provide and sign an informed consent.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

It is important to note both my role in the study, as well as my theoretical influence. Though peer review, interview transcription, and member checking are all methods employed to reduce researcher bias in a qualitative report, I wish to account for any potential individual influence on the data collection and/or interpretation (Creswell, 2011).

### **Role as Researcher**

I am a graduate student at the reviewed university who participates in frequent student advisement. I have completed a Master of Arts degree while the member of a cohort, am completing my Doctorate of Philosophy as an on-campus learner, and have previously completed a certificate degree at a distance and entirely online through another university. In each role, I never took the time to review or reflect upon my advising experiences as an adult learner or how those experiences may have differed in each environment.

Demographically, I have not traditionally fit the definition of an adult learner as presented in the literature until enrolled as a doctoral candidate. Both a Bachelor of Arts

degree and a Master of Arts degree were completed before the age of 23, with no break in my experience with formal education. It is also important to note I have experienced neither significantly negative nor positive advising in my student experience. As a result, I did not enter this research with any preconceived notions toward the advising experience of adult learners beyond the information presented in the review of literature.

The research topic of advisement in three mediums developed through interest in the advising needs expressed by peers and those reviewed in the literature, not from individual experience. However, to ensure the interpretations and thematic analyses were a product of the data and not of my past experiences, personal reflection occurred during the process of coding the data and review of my interpretations. In the development of each theme, I would reflect upon my past experiences as an adult learner and ask if I could relate to the theme, and if so, to what degree or what level of influence might this have had on my interpretation.

The decision to focus on students enrolled in a Master's degree program was an additional attempt to distance myself from the data as I no longer identify with that degree program, nor did I complete my Master of Arts in a department of education. It was decided the focus would be on graduate students in a Master's degree program, excluding doctoral candidates, to reduce any influence of my current position as a student working toward completion of said degree.

Finally, it is imperative to address assumptions held prior to beginning this research project. In the initial review of literature, I held the assumption there would be information on the advisement received for online learners, cohort learners, and on-campus learners independent of one another. In addition, I assumed the needs of these

three types of learners would be different, and their interview transcripts would point to dissimilar themes across the three learning mediums, while shared needs and experiences would be apparent as they related to needs of adult learners in general. Finally, I had anticipated hearing participants conceptualize the task of advising as separate from the role of an advisor. Though these assumptions were held, the data were reviewed and coded without the intent to prove any of the aforementioned postulations. In fact, as will be addressed in the discussion of the findings and analysis, the data noticeably contradicted many of the aforementioned suppositions.

### **My Theoretical Claim and the Influence of Interactionism**

As I understand it, there are various and multiple realities which are the product of group consensus and are constructed by those who live within each. There is an interdependent relationship between the confinements of the defined realities and those actors responsible for their construction. Though I believe a small degree of universal truth does exist, a majority of what I know to be real is the product of my culture, society, experiences, assigned meaning, and beliefs. As a result, I recognize that knowledge of a particular group, phenomenon, and/or experience is best obtained through study of those living the reality/experience of interest. In my approach to research it is imperative to explore the perspective of many individuals within a group in an attempt to identify their similarities. Then, I may offer a collective description, explanation, and understanding of their shared experience.

Though there is no one theoretical perspective of which there is perfect correlation to my aforementioned worldview, it is the product of theoretical assumptions

associated with the various works of Georg Simmel, Max Weber, George Herbert Mead, and Herbert Blumer.

Simmel, though having little influence on my perspective of the world, did introduce dialectical thought and assisted in Weber's application of the principles of hermeneutics to the social world – the creation of *verstehen* (Simmel, 1959; 1971; Weber, 1949; 1958; 1968). *Verstehen*, German, to mean “understand,” is applied within sociology to describe a social researcher's ability to understand a given phenomenon through qualitative study. There is a need to understand meaning of an experience, action, or phenomenon from the perspectives of the subjects of study; social research should then utilize interpretative understanding (Hadden, 1997; Ritzer & Goodman, 2004; Weber, 1949; 1958; 1968).

Weber's belief is that individuals live in a social world of meaning and one must study it from the perspective of the actors involved, paying special attention to the meaning they assign to their experiences. However, it is important to note I break from the idea of knowledge or truth being defined by one individual and his or her mental process, and instead, recognize interdependent relationships as noted by Simmel. What is real is understood and conceptualized through meaning produced and shared by a group of individuals (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004; Simmel, 1959; 1971).

Critics of these theorists often find fault in Simmel's and Weber's notion that one may understand a group/reality from complete inclusion in said groups and/or culture. The criticism is that a member of the out-group can never completely or truly understand and explain another culture, reality, or experience; they are constrained by their own reality. I would agree with this criticism and note from my worldview, *verstehen* does

not imply a comprehensive and absolute understanding, but supports the practice of qualitative research in which one is to give voice to the participants of study by reviewing their complex individual experiences, offering a description and understanding of the group's shared experience. The intent is to offer an understanding of the phenomenon from the meaning and perspective of those involved, encouraging participation and review of the results by the participants to ensure the interpretation is valid (Hadden, 1997; Ritzer & Goodman, 2004; Simmel, 1959; 1971; Weber, 1949; 1958; 1968).

Where Weber held focus on how one comes to understand action and behavior, Mead more specifically addressed the topic of studying and offering explanation of the social experience. Mead wrote researchers “are starting out with a given social whole of complex group activity, into which we analyze (as elements) the behavior of each of the separate individuals comprising it . . . to explain the conduct [or experience] of the social group” (Mead, 1934/1962, p. 7). Through exploration of individual accounts of advisement, I better understand, and am able to analyze and offer explanation of the shared advising experience of adult learners.

Husserl, though a philosopher with no sociological claim, took issue with science and how one came to know what was real and, thus, introduced the concept of phenomenology (Husserl, 1965; 1975). He maintained the basic principle of phenomenology was to explore the “true essence” of things without reference or reliance on any empirical evidence (Collins, 1994; p. 267; Husserl, 1965; 1975). This claim is comparable to Blumer's concern with understanding and studying the essence of social experience. Husserl's philosophy of discovering the essence of reality sparked a generation of qualitative research concerned with identifying methods, principles and

potential laws of research that would allow one to understand human experience from the perspective of the participants. A phenomenon must then be studied, and understood through the meaning and temporal setting of the participants (Husserl, 1965; 1975; Schutz, 1967).

### **Summary**

In doing phenomenological research, it is necessary to identify your own position and work to understand the experience from the perspective and associated meaning of the participants. Scholars have addressed the criticisms that methods of qualitative research receive, and in a response to said criticisms, they have begun to speak of thematic analysis as a phenomenological method. The intent of utilizing thematic analysis as method within phenomenology was to allow for evaluation of my process in interpretation and analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) have stated through application of this approach that one is able to provide clarity and transparency in the process and practice of both data analysis and discussion, which lends to the strength of the study's validity while allowing for replicability.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### **Development of the Shared Experience**

I began this research to explore and understand the advising experience of adult learners in three learning environments. The intent was to describe the advising needs of these participants, as well as how those needs compared and contrasted among the learning environments. Through thorough review of the data, it was evident the participants shared an advising experience and needs across learning environments. However, students identified distinct advisement related to their learning groups in one category of need – immediate response.

Good adult student advisement was important among all participants, regardless of learning group. Students perceived advising as imperative to their success. Advisors had to take their role seriously, and see value in the practice of advisement. As one learner noted, it was important to have “somebody that is part of this life changing process that is education” and that advisors recognize the unique needs and life goals of each student.

Immediacy of response and communication in advisement was the only theme in which the experience of advisement was dependent upon the students’ learning environment. Though all participants identified the need for a quick response time through electronic communication, the conceptualization of “fast” was contingent upon the students’ learning groups.



The participants identified both the practice of good advising and the personal characteristics of a good advisor. However, these descriptions were not intentional, and what was understood as the shared experience was the need for good advisement. Good advisement was defined as the collective experience with both the individual advisor and the required practice/tasks of advising.

The following discussion will present the traits students associated with the act of good advising as well as the characteristics required of a good advisor as they relate to each theme of need. A collective description will follow explaining the perception of good advisement in relation to each of the five themes: adult learner need for (a) good programmatic advisement; (b) innate trust in advisement; (c) individual advisement; (d) importance of advisement; and (e) immediacy in advisement.

The linear maturation of the phenomenon through the identified categories of good advisor and advising, and the development of themes of good advisement are presented in Figure 7. Chapter V will present the central phenomenon and how each theme contributed to the development and deeper understanding of the students' shared experience with good advisement.

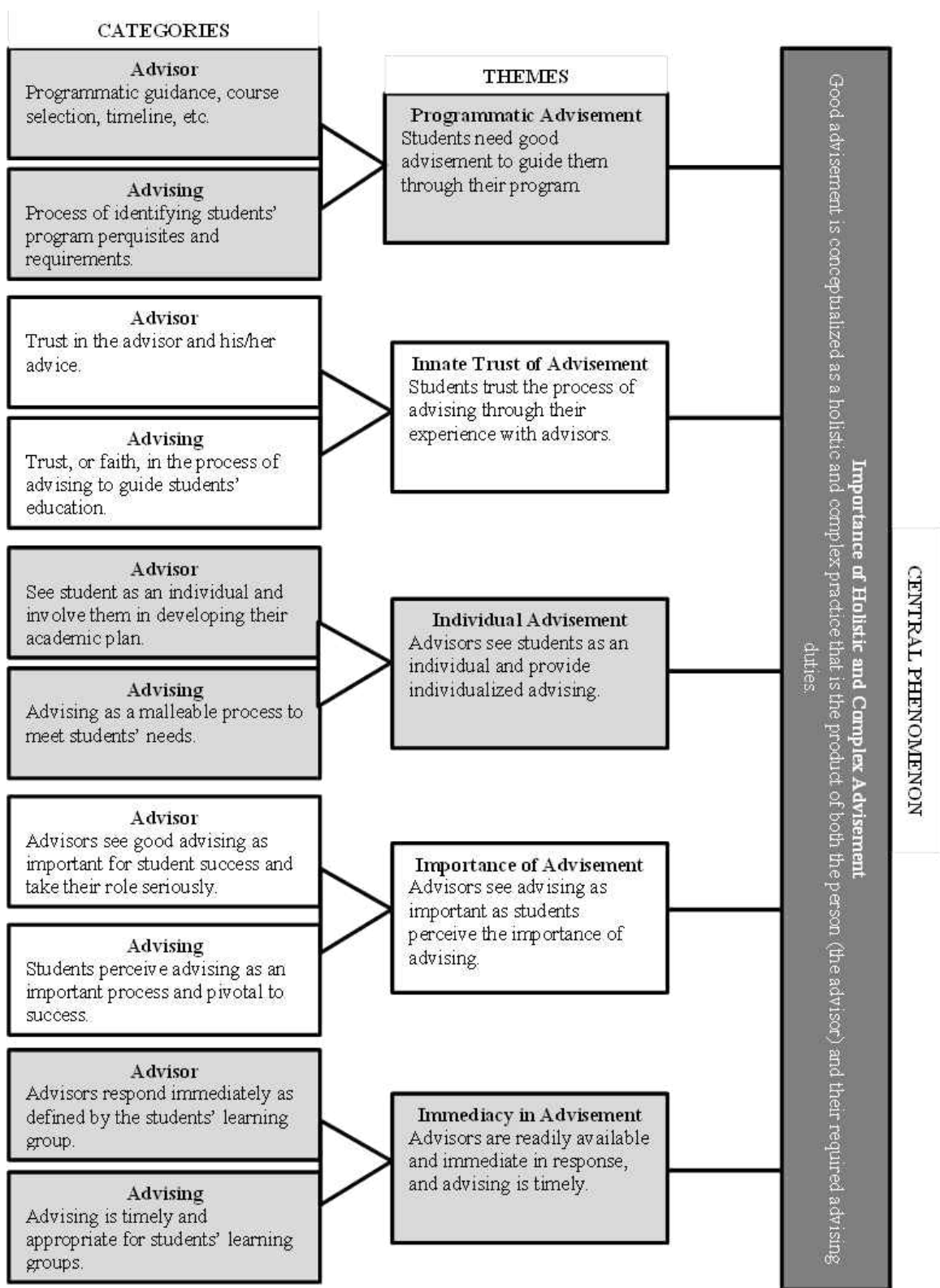


Figure 7. Categories, Themes, and The Central Phenomenon. This figure conceptualizes the students' perception of the importance of holistic and complex advisement.

## **Programmatic Advisement: Students Need Good Advisement to Guide them Through their Program**

The theme, programmatic advisement, arose through review of the students' statements regarding both the structure and purpose of advising, and the role and expectations of a good advisor. Programmatic had been conceptualized as any statement referring to the guidance, direction, scheduling, course selection, program assistance, policy knowledge, and/or paperwork knowledge and support experienced by the students in their description of both advising and advisors. Frequently in conversation with the participants, a student would identify a form of programmatic guidance as a necessary task for a good advisor. This personal quality, skill, or trait would also be described as evidence of good practice in advising.

Deb, an on-campus learner, described a positive experience with her current advisor. She was asked to describe what traits, behaviors, or skills led her to define this individual as a good advisor. Deb offered several programmatic examples:

[The advisor] filled out the paperwork for me . . . guiding me through the whole program . . . [telling] which classes to take . . . as I went through the program she would change it for me for what I liked or didn't like and [was] somebody that I know will know what they are talking about.

When later asked to describe the purpose of advising, Deb stated it was:

to provide guidance throughout the program so that the student is able to complete the correct coursework in a timely manner and not make mistakes, take the wrong classes.

In her description and definition of both a good advisor and good advising, Deb identified programmatic guidance. There was not a distinction between the practice of good

advising and the role of the knowledgeable and prepared advisor. Advisement was then the combination of an advisor's character, skill, knowledge, and passion to guide and see a student through a particular program, and the act of advising by offering assistance with course selection, deadlines, program timelines, and graduate school forms.

Following is a discussion of the tasks associated with good advising as they relate to this theme of need. Proceeding the tasks of advising is presentation of the individual characteristics of a good programmatic advisor. Concluding the description of this theme is a presentation of the experience of good advisement as the combination of a good advisor who completes all of the tasks of good advising. This model of discussion will be followed for each of the remaining four themes.

#### **Good programmatic advising.**

John, an on-campus learner, shared "good advising is important for quite a few reasons; it provides a good start for an academic life [and] it maintains focus" for the learner. Good programmatic advising presented the student with the courses required for his or her program and a timeline highlighting both deadlines and course order based on prerequisites. Participants also noted good programmatic advising would offer assistance in managing requirements and paperwork required by the graduate school.

Kate, a student studying online, said the purpose was to "provide the necessary information about the student's required courses and program." Advising was the process, or action, of guiding students through the requirements of the overall graduate school, their identified program, and in some instances, particular courses and prerequisites.

The students, regardless of learning medium, perceived advising as the necessary service provided by the university to offer assistance and information specific to their program of study. The intent was to keep the student on track to graduate and to ensure all of the requirements of the university were fulfilled. Good programmatic advising was “important for all students . . . [as it] provide[s] you with assistance throughout your program.”

### **Good programmatic advisor.**

The advisor was the individual responsible for providing the services above. However, what made an advisor good was not only his/her ability to provide a list of classes and deadlines, but to demonstrate strong organizational skill, knowledge, and comfort with the program requirements. Sara shared her best advising experience was positive because of the character and personal qualities of the advisor. Her advisor had been prepared, “realistic, informative,” and clear in the programmatic guidance she offered.

The preparation that she had just made me really feel at ease . . . she literally broke things down semester wise, credit wise, to show me that it is obtainable, you can do this and so the [advising] session just really; I was like, WOW! Ok that was more realistic than I have had in all of my [past] sessions . . . we know certain things need to be taken and need to be done at certain times you know but she did have a couple of sheets . . . she has been doing it so long she just knows the process and she understands you know what students need so she just spit out a lot of information.

The shared perception of a good programmatic advisor is illustrated in the above excerpt. Sara spoke passionately about this experience, and specifically about the advisor. This had been the case with all participants.

When asked to describe good advising, the students spoke in generalities highlighting physical tasks, and in many instances, offered a list. Good advising was illustrated by knowing the required courses, giving deadlines, identifying prerequisites, etcetera; while a good advisor was enthusiastically described through story and with energy as students defined a good advisor as prepared, concerned, involved, passionate, and knowledgeable.

A good advisor had particular personality traits and the descriptions offered were in the form of advisee stories and sharing of past experiences. As an example, one participant emphasized the role of the advisor by sharing “if an advisor is knowledgeable about the curriculum and what classes need to be taken [identified as traits of good advising] but does not take into account the student's perspective, I don't think that advisor would be as good.” It was not enough to just perform the tasks identified with good advising, but an advisor had to also account for the student and work with them on a personal level – there was more to advisement than the tasks associated with advising.

Amanda, a cohort learner, also drew upon the individual behavior of her advisor to illustrate exemplary programmatic advising.

She knew what it was like going from a smaller college to a bigger college [and we] talked a little bit about how I feel that it is going . . . as a student she knew me . . . [and was] always just like, ‘Oh, you’re doing great’ or just something

encouraging and they make you feel like you are on the right track even if you feel like you are way off of it!

Though “offer encouragement” was not a task associated with good programmatic advising by the adult learners, it was evident as a requirement for one to be deemed a good advisor. The same may be said for the ability of the advisor to relate to the student and draw upon past experience while developing a program of study.

The purpose of advising was to assist in breaking down the information and creating a plan and course schedule, but the good advisor developed these skills while also adding to the act of advising a personal interest in the student and an approach to advising that fit the needs, and was realistic for, the learner.

#### **Good programmatic advisement.**

Good programmatic advisement was the combination of tasks associated with good advising and the personality traits and individual skill sets required of a good programmatic advisor. The advisor had to practice good advising through completing anticipated tasks. In addition to assistance with course selection, deadline identification, and form completion, the advisor had to offer this programmatic guidance while working with the student, making the experience positive, offering a comfortable environment, remaining enthusiastic and being “really nice, very personable, and just an all-around really great person . . . to help get [you] through this.”

The advisor was the face of advising and responsible for creating a comfortable environment in which they may then offer the guidance required for student success. There was no clear distinction by the participants between the characteristics of good

programmatic advising and the personality and character of a good programmatic advisor.

### **Innate Trust: Students Trust the Process of Advising Through their Experience with Advisors**

A good advisor was responsible for answering all the students' questions, timely completing students' paperwork, served as the link to the university and the program requirements, provided all necessary deadlines and other relevant resources, and served as someone advisees could trust. Good advising was provided through course selection, timeline development, and other advising services identified in the discussion of programmatic guidance. The statements with the aforementioned codes were demonstrative of the participants' innate trust of their advisor and the process of advising as defined by the university. All statements categorized as "programmatic guidance" in the interview transcripts were found to hang with the code "trust," though the same cannot be said of the reverse. Good advisement was described here as the student's ability to trust the process of advising through the role of, and relationship with, the advisor.

#### **Trust in advising.**

Student statements that had been coded as evidence of "programmatic guidance" were found to have also been coded as an indication of the students' trust in advising. These two codes hung together in every transcript and were present among all three learning groups. It is appropriate they hung together as a student who relied on an advisor for deadline notification also trusted the accuracy of the timeline provided by the advisor. Through their discussion of the programmatic guidance required of good



advisement, students demonstrated a level of trust in the university and the role of advising in a graduate program.

Students were asked to describe the process they had followed when identifying their permanent advisor. In recollection of their advisor selection, all noted the university first assigned a temporary advisor upon admission. The learners continued to explain they had each declared their temporary advisors as their permanent. This practice was illustrative of their trust in the university to connect students with an appropriate, knowledgeable, and capable advisor.

This intrinsic trust in the university and its expectations of advising were apparent as Deb was asked to describe when, in her graduate career, she made her advisor selection. Deb explained she had completed the necessary paperwork to declare her temporary advisor as her permanent before she had begun the program. Though Deb, being an on-campus adult learner, had the opportunity to meet in-person with her temporary advisor to discuss this decision, she trusted both the university in its initial assignment, and the word of the advisor in her alleged qualifications to provide good advising.

When asked why they went with their temporary advisor, other students stated, “I didn’t know anybody else in the program.” “I didn’t choose [my advisor].” The decision “was kinda [sic] made for me.” The university “sent me who my advisor would be.” The graduate school “actually chose my advisor for me.” While some of these statements led to a question of the students’ autonomy in this decision, the adult learners’ perceived this as a positive advising practice. They did not have the time, personal connections, or necessary information to make this decision alone.

Students identified good advising as taking a structured approach as outlined and assigned by the university. Additionally, students identified characteristics which led them to trust the advising they received. This was different than the discussion of the personal attributes required for a student to trust an advisor. Trustworthy advising was informative, clear, concise, provided guidance, and was accurate. Several students noted they had yet to be given any bad or inaccurate advice, and this had led to their trust in advising. Good advising was dependable and something a student did not have to question.

### **Trust in advisor.**

It was evident students had faith in the practice of advising as they all took advantage of this resource and found it to be necessary for their success and program management. For good advising, a student had to be able to trust the process and requirements of the advising program and did so by completing the necessary paperwork and following program requirements. However, much of the students' trust in the university came as a result of their direct experience with their advisors. A good advisor was one who was able to create a comfortable collaborative relationship with their advisees, fostering a culture of trust.

As it became apparent students had natural faith in their advisors, all participants were asked what led them to trust their advisors. It was in this discussion personal characteristics were identified and described as imperative for building a trusting relationship. Adult learners perceived a trustworthy advisor as one who was knowledgeable, always gave sound advice, was able to relate to the students, drew upon

past experiences to share with his/her advisees, and had a positive reputation among other students and faculty.

**Trust in advisement.**

Good advisement was described as the students' ability to trust the process of advising through the role of, and relationship with, the advisor. Confidence in both the process and the individual were imperative for satisfaction with advisement among the adult learners.

Amanda was asked what she believed her experience would have been without an advisor. She responded:

It would be more frustrating and more time consuming on my part and it might not be as, um, the whole experience might not be as positive as just having a person to go to that I know I can trust and work with and that I know she is working to help me as much as she can . . . she is my link to, um, the campus and to understanding the process, the process as a whole . . . I think it is so important because the program is so fast and furious that there has to be someone you can rely on who knows exactly what needs to be accomplished for you to get through it.

This excerpt illustrates how important it was for the adult learners to have someone whom they could trust and go to for assistance. In addition, Amanda's discussion also pointed to her trust in the process of advising. Like the other participants, she never questioned the requirements of the university. Instead, she believed all required activities and forms were necessary and served a purpose, and the advisor's role was to help navigate these expectations.

Programmatic guidance had a clear list of positive traits associated with good advising and an additional (yet not entirely separate) list of attributes associated with good programmatic advisors; yet, participants' discussion of trust took a different approach. Students could define both good and bad programmatic advising. In addition, they did not anticipate their programmatic advisement to be either good or bad; but instead, defined it as such based on their experience with the advisors. Meaning, the advisement had to take on particular characteristics and fulfill, or fail to meet, particular expectations to be categorized as either a positive or negative advising experience.

With regard to the category of trust, students did not begin their recollection of advisement from a place of neutrality. All students identified entering into their advising experiences with a pre-existing expectation of trust with their advisor and the process of advising. As a result, students had a difficult time responding to the question of what led to their perception of dependable advisement. They stated the advisor did not have to do anything to acquire the advisees' trust, but did have to work to maintain their confidence.

Mike, a cohort learner, was asked to describe what led to his confidence in the advisement he was receiving. He shared:

She seemed like a trusting person and she obviously knew what she was talking about so that there, it doesn't take a lot for me to trust someone and I'm not saying that as a bad thing for her but, I don't know she seemed trusting and I heard nothing but good things about her.

Mike admitted he began the advisor-advisee relationship depending upon the advisor and trusting her advice. He noted he had not heard anything bad about her, and had yet to have a negative experience. He, like the other participants, identified an initial trust of

advisement, noting it would take a negative comment from a peer, a personal unpleasant experience, or the advisor's inability to meet his demands or needs to challenge said confidence.

The discussion as to how the topic of trust was addressed, and to which question it was in response to, was as important as the students' statements themselves. How the answer was given supports the conclusion that students blindly and initially trusted the institution, its process of advising, and their advisors. It would require a negative experience to shake the students' confidence in their advisement. The adult learners entered their program expecting to trust their overall advisement through their experience with the advisor and the employed practice of advising.

### **Individual Advisement: Advisors see Student as an Individual and Provide Individualized Advising**

Individualized advisement was conceptualized as an advisor working to develop a relationship with the student and offering individualized advising in order to meet the specific needs of each student. The role of a good advisor was to develop this relationship, foster a collaborative approach to education, and take time to both involve the student in developing their academic plan, and to come to know and understand the advisee. Good advising was perceived as the process of assisting students through their program while accounting for unique circumstances and expectations.

#### **Individualized advising.**

Advising had to be a "collaborative effort" with the intent of developing an academic plan to satisfy the needs of both student and university. One participant noted good practice required identifying courses that "would better serve ME throughout the

progression of the program which was GREAT!” She had a positive advising experience because she was part of the process.

Good advising was the process of blending the students’ expectations, goals, and interests with the requisites of their program, and the university. John, an on-campus learner, was asked to describe his experience in developing his timeline and academic plan; he shared that he and his advisor “worked on that together” and good advising sought to understand “my plans, my tentative plans in terms of what I have time for and . . . [then] spelled it out and pulled up the classes I needed to validate to get done.” Again, it was taking into consideration the students’ programmatic plans and anticipated graduation dates and timelines while working to make these expectations fit within the program and university requirements.

Most important among all learners was that advising would not look to present the students with a standard, universal plan for program completion. Participants were adamant that good advising would develop a personalized academic timeline, and encourage individual course selection. It was imperative good advising “put the student first” and ensure adult advisees did not “feel like one of 50 people that [the advisor] has to deal with.”

A student had to feel they received advising unique to their particular situation, and were not simply led through a universal program of study. This discussion of the need for individualization was identified through the participants’ conversations related to bad advising experiences. When participants shared the need to feel their opinions mattered, and that advising was not something standard across programs and learners, it

was always in response to their experiences or perceptions of bad advising – not in identifying characteristics of good advising.

Any advising practice that limited students' autonomy and stifled their voice in course selection and program planning would be identified as a negative experience. One student shared when a past advisor had provided him a list of the courses he would take, along with a projected timeline identified by the program requirements, his dissatisfaction led to a request to terminate the current advisor-advisee contract. He understood he would be required to take the courses listed in the academic plan, but resented he had not been included in identifying course order or been asked to offer "my opinion because it is ultimately MY career path that I am trying to figure out." He saw this limit in his capacity to be an active participant in his advising as something that could potentially affect his future career path and associated goals.

In Kate's story of a bad advising experience, she shared her frustration with her advisor "handing me a piece of paper and sending me out the door! So, I really appreciate when my input actually matters." Deb shared this sentiment and like Kate noted that in her negative advising experience she perceived the advising was something done "over and over with the same students and . . . didn't really care about the individualized stuff."

John, though he could not recall any negative advising experience, did share that he perceived poor advising to fit the following description:

Advisement that is not willing to, I mean if it were to scale me up with other people, say hey, this one did it this way, why shouldn't you? [Or] throw me in the water with everybody else . . . I need to be treated as an individual, understood as an individual, advised as an individual and not be treated like one of a big group.

Though John did not recall a negative experience, his perception of what would illustrate bad advising was in perfect correlation with the personal stories other participants shared. Good practice in adult learner advising had to provide a clear outline of expectations, include the student in the discussion of course selection and timeline development, seek to combine student expectations with program requirements, recognize individual student needs, and strive to know the advisee and his or her career goals in order to provide relevant and appropriate academic and career advice.

Much like the category of trust, participants' explanations of individualized advising were best understood in the context of the interviews. Students did not share good advising would involve the advisee, but instead, noted their worst advising experiences were the result of not being a part of the process. This suggests that it is important to work with the students; to do otherwise would result in a negative student advising experience and potentially dismissal of the current advisor.

**Advisor concerned for individual.**

The advisor was perceived as responsible for advising the student on how to connect their personal academic goals and interests with the expectations of the program and university. However, students identified additional personal characteristics an advisor had to have in order to be deemed effective and reliable. An advisor had to be a "good listener" and create a "good rapport" with the advisees. A good advisor would also be flexible and recognize his or her advisees' conflicting roles and responsibilities. In the discussion of the personalized approach to advisement, the adult learners also shared an advisor had to be tolerant, respect diversity, and had to understand and not judge students for their unique life styles, beliefs, and/or cultural backgrounds. Students



wanted someone whom they could confide in, who took an interest in them, their stories, and their ideas for the future. They wanted someone who would take the time to build a strong collaborative relationship where they would be comfortable seeking and accepting emotional support from their advisors.

The advisor had to be a good listener and the students noted this required that they not only “listened to what I have to say [but] find VALUE in what I am saying.” One on-campus learner reiterated this point, and in her discussion of bad advising, shared frustration when she was “trying to tell them something and they’re not listening to what I have to say and still like, ‘no, you should do it like this or this is how it needs to be done’ and not being open to certain things.” It was not enough to simply hear the student, but the advisor must then take what was shared into consideration and work with the advisee to develop a plan that works for the student and the requirements of the university. Someone who does anything less than what has been described had been perceived as a bad advisor.

Adult learners in all three learning environments were also concerned the advisors take into consideration the students’ dual roles and responsibilities, making an effort to understand the personal background and familial situations of their advisees. This had also been a trend identified in the literature on adult learners – older than average students required a degree of flexibility and understanding that were different from traditional students as a result of their additional life responsibilities and circumstances (e.g., Allen, 1993; CAEL, 1999; Frey, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007; Peck & Varney, 2009). Mike, a cohort learner, shared he needed an advisor to be flexible because “of all my classes, plus I am teaching, and I am a coach, plus I drive bus . . . so with my busy

life . . . flexibility is key!” Another participant shared her advisor realized “I have other things going on. I have a family and stuff like that you know” so she needed to be “as realistic as possible” in her expectations and timeline development.

Characteristics of these adult learners included parenting responsibilities, concerns with finance and affordability of education, hours of work outside of academia, untraditional availability, and discomfort with and reliance upon technology for communication at untraditional hours. All three learning groups perceived a good advisor as one who not only came to know these things about their advisees, but also understood the conflict presented by these dual roles and provided flexible advisement and accounted for these outside responsibilities. As an example, one of the on-campus learners shared a good advisor needed “to know me! And ‘cuz everybody is different, every situation is different, so I think them [the advisor] being in the know is important too because that’s the best way they can serve” their advisees. John also declared adult “learners will always be different and the challenge is for the advisors to meet a learner’s needs.”

A good advisor was perceived as one who understood the additional responsibilities of adult learners, then inquired into and understood the dual roles of each individual advisee. The advisor must develop an academic plan specific to each advisee and take all of his or her personal characteristics and individual circumstances into consideration.

It was important a good advisor take the time, and the interest, to build a relationship with their adult advisees. Where good advising took the students’ goals and expectations into consideration when developing an academic plan, a good advisor was

expected to go a step further and take the opportunity to come to know the student holistically from their familial obligations to their current workload. Those who had experienced strong personal relationships with their advisors shared had they not had that level of support, they did not anticipate having been as successful; one even questioned if she would have completed the program.

Those students who had yet to develop such a relationship with their current advisors shared, “I think having a strong relationship is really important” and “I would like rapport.” Deb, an on-campus learner, demonstrated a desire to have had a stronger personal relationship with her advisor and reflected upon her sister’s advising experience with a level of remorse that she had not experienced the same:

My sister has had the same advisor for the last 4 ½ years and she, she loves her! She’s her friend. She’s somebody she can go to with her needs. And not just with school! [This last point was made with a tone of astonishment and admiration and spoken with haste]. And she has been very guiding . . . [short pause here and the following statement was made in a quiet contrite voice as the participant began to slow her pace] and I kind of always wished I had had that, that I had stuck around in a program long enough to have that . . . to build a relationship like that.

Deb studied on-campus, and though she had had the opportunity to physically meet with her advisor, they had only ever communicated online or by phone. She shared this was a result of their conflicting and busy schedules and, at the time, she had not been concerned with the relationship because the advisor still took the time to include her in all academic decisions. Deb’s advisor fulfilled all the tasks associated with good personal advising as

she inquired into Deb's academic goals, anticipated timeline, desired credit load, and other life responsibilities when developing an academic plan. Even though there was collaboration, Deb missed the opportunity to build a personal relationship with her advisor, which her sister had experienced. In this story is the perceived experience of good personal advisement – the dual relationship between providing advising that is collaborative and specific to the students' needs and expectations while also coming to know the students as individuals and having a genuine interest in the advisees.

### **Individual advisement.**

Good personal advisement required an advisor to develop a collaborative relationship, build an academic plan combining the expectations of the advisee and the requirements of the university, and ensure the student was heard. Within the discussion of good advising was the expectation of the advisor to perform the tasks associated with good personal advising while also bringing to the experience a genuine interest in the student. This included a desire to build a strong relationship and rapport with each advisee. One participant's story of a positive advising experience illustrated the adult learners' inability to distinguish between good advising and a good advisor, offering instead a discussion of what was required for good adult learner personal advisement:

She asked a couple of questions you know to see, um, how many classes I was willing to take a semester, if I was willing to do summers, how long I wanted to be in the program and then kind of what I was interested in specialization wise . . . [she] listened to what I wanted . . . understanding where I [emphasis on "I"] was coming from. Like my background, what I needed, what I wanted to get from my

program of study. Just individualized, it goes back to the understanding and caring again, I guess of MY needs and what I wanted.

The student began her discussion identifying the traits of good advising practice, which quickly transitioned into personal characteristics required of the advisor to illustrate his or her concern for the student and the student's academic interests. This image of good student advisement as the result of an amalgamated perception of good advising and a good advisor was also evident in Kate's description of a positive advising experience. She explained her advisor "asked a lot of question about my goals and where I am now and where I want to be and she just seemed like she was GENUINE in the questions." Good personal advisement was important for all of the participants and any advisement not involving the student was identified as a bad experience for the learner.

### **Importance of Advisement: Advisors see Advising as Important as Students Perceive the Importance of Advising**

Participants stated they believed there would have been hardship, excessive struggle, and the potential of non-completion had they not experienced good advising. In addition, all of the adult learners spoke of using advising services as if they had never thought twice about needing programmatic and/or academic guidance. Implicit in their use of advising services, and reliance on the advisor, was a shared perception of the value of good advisement. Students perceived good advising as important, but also demonstrated the necessity of the advisor to share in this perception. The advisor needed to view the role of advising as a serious responsibility and important for them as a professional and for the success of their advisees. Good advisement was the result of the advisor recognizing the advisees' perceived value of advising while also holding a personal conviction of the importance of their role as advisor.

### **Importance of advising.**

The adult learners perceived the act of advising a graduate student was imperative. Students believed “good advising is important for graduate students because it could make or break your academic experience!” One learner shared she had left a previous college while an undergraduate because of poor advising. She was then asked to share what she would do if she were currently experiencing similar advising in her graduate program. Sara declared, “Oh my god! [pause] I would probably [another pause] I would probably try to seek somebody outside . . . it can be frustrating and irritating and make you mad!” Her immediate response to the question was one of repulsion as noted in her tone, facial expression, gestured head shake, and word choice. For her, the thought of poor advising in graduate school was shocking and evoked a heightened tone of voice. She was distraught trying to imagine progressing through her graduate career without good advising.

Mike, a cohort learner, had spoken to his independence and original thought that, beyond providing him with the graduate school deadlines and required forms, there would not be much he would need in terms of advising. After his first semester in the program, he realized not only is the task of advising important for students, but “GOOD advising is ESSENTIAL for graduate students.” Mike, like the example above, did not speak to the significance of good advising specifically for his learning medium (cohort learners), but for all graduate students.

Good advising was important to all participants. Some of the learners even addressed the importance of advising for other learning environments. Discussions within all previous categories of need were related to the students’ perceptions of the role

of advising/advisor/advisement for their particular learning group. Participants had addressed what was required for an advisor, or the process of advising, to be defined as good in relation to their learning environment (online, cohort, on-campus) without concern for what this would mean for other adult graduate students. However, an on-campus learner was speaking to her experience of on-campus advisement in relation to her online, undergraduate, or traditional aged peers and concluded for her, “good advising is imperative because we ALL need direction . . . if we are fresh out of undergrad or not!” It was important to her there be good and effective advising regardless of one’s age, program, degree, or avenue of learning.

Kate had been discussing why advising and an effective advisor were so important for her success as an online learner. After addressing the specific tasks of advising as they relate to online education, she then interjected that though these previously identified tasks were required for online advising, good “advising is important for all students! Online learners OR traditional students.” Here, Kate was using the term traditional to refer to students who complete their coursework on-campus. Again, she also perceived advising was important for students regardless of their avenue of learning.

Beth shared “good advising for an online learner is very important” and she worked to illustrate why advising was more important for online learners than any other – be it a traditional undergrad, adult learners, online, or on-campus. She had been the only participant to identify her learning group as having a greater need, going to great lengths to detail the hardships of learning online and why good advising was more important for these learners. In response to this description, and her earlier comments about an advisor needing to have technological know-how, she was asked if those who advise online need

specific training to address the needs of online students. Here, however, she reinforced what the other participants had noted; it “doesn’t matter whether an advisor is strictly for online learners or students on campus as long as the advisor displays those qualities that a good advisor should have.” Though Beth did perceive advising as more important for her learning environment (online), she and the other participants unanimously agreed good advising was important for all learners.

### **Importance of advisor.**

The advisor was identified as responsible for recognizing the importance of advising for adult learners and, consequently, taking their role as advisor seriously and with great responsibility. While students discussed why good advising was important, they also specifically addressed why a good advisor was necessary for program completion. When asked if they needed their advisor to navigate the program, all learners believed they “definitely needed an advisor!” One on-campus learner shared the advisor was important because they were “efficient and somebody that I know will know what they are talking about” while a cohort student stated “they are essential . . . I would not have been able to handle that on my own.”

There was consensus that what made advisors good was their ability to recognize how important their role was for their advisees. A good advisor had to recognize advising an adult graduate student was “a really big responsibility.” John went on to share he would “encourage them [advisors] to take seriously . . . and put in as much energy as they could to help a student out.” The idea a good advisor could demonstrate their recognition of their responsibility through their level of enthusiasm was reiterated



by Sara who, in describing her example of a good advisor, noted her advisor “takes this very seriously . . . she is IN – TO – IT!”

A good advisor had to see advising as part of their job requirement and as important as any other responsibility. Students had to be able to recognize the advisor placed their advising as a priority, or they did not feel the guidance was personal or concerned with their best interests. John, still early in his graduate career, offered a clear description of the shared perception of the importance of a good advisor:

It is very important for advisor to take whoever they are working with . . . you know, take them with commitment. With a lot of engagement and good will, because it is a really big need. It is not for nothing that they actually thought of getting advisors for students, so they should really patiently work with them because I, I really strongly feel that the rate of success will partly depend – or partly be determined by – the kind of advisor that somebody, or a student happened to work with.

It was important an advisor be committed to his or her advisees and the student’s academic plans. Again, there was a need for the advisor to be engaged or enthusiastic about the relationship and future work. John also shared a good advisor could illustrate their commitment and dedication to good advising through patience and understanding.

All students shared this perception of a good advisor and when asked if they felt they could have navigated course selection or program completion without their advisor, all declaratively said no. The responses to this question were all strong and elaborate with no participant giving a single word answer. There was urgency in response and tone which emphasized the true reliance on the advisor as students declared: “I NEEDED the

advisor!” “I probably would not have gotten . . . done [without]!” “No! They are VERY important.” “It would be difficult to get through without . . . an advisor.” “I think it’s extremely important!” Finally, when asked “could you navigate this without an advisor,” with you referring here to the universal you including all graduate learners, Mike said, “No. Definitely not. I wouldn’t think so!” A good advisor understood this student perspective and would, consequently, see value in his or her role as advisor.

### *Handbooks.*

Both the graduate student handbook for the university, and that which was developed specifically for the department of study, were frequently mentioned in conversation around importance of both advising, and the advisor. However, the handbooks were deemed irrelevant, unnecessary, confusing, and of no help – alluding to the need for, and importance of, good advisement. Kate, an online learner who shared she frequently visited her program’s webpage and other resources, went as far as to share she hated the handbook and “even my worse advisors I am sure contributed more to my learning” than the handbooks. Students either shared in her sentiment, or had no recollection of being given direction to a handbook.

Deb, a student who was completing her graduate degree on-campus, was asked if anyone at the university had shared documents, guides, or handbooks to assist in developing her academic plan. Deb shared “I haven’t seen anything like that.” She was later asked if she would have found value in one of the above resources and stated “the advisor is more efficient and somebody that I know will know what they are talking about. I could read the steps over and over again and I still wouldn’t be sure that I understood what it was talking about.” Mike, though a cohort learner studying at a

distance, had also never been aware of a handbook. When asked if given a handbook if he would use it as a point of reference, he answered “No, probably not! I would go to her. I would go to my advisor first.” Even those students who had never viewed a handbook and/or had not identified ill-feelings toward the resources perceived the advisor as their primary resource and relied on the advisor to provide all necessary guidance.

Asked to elaborate, students who were familiar with the handbooks, or had mentioned one in conversation, were asked what their first resource was for any program inquiry. They reiterated their advisors were their primary contacts. This reliance on the advisor over any resource or handbook offered by the university or program was shared across learning environments. A campus learner shared she did look at the handbook, but her advisor “had pretty much told me what was in that handbook . . . everything that was in there was like WOW ok, almost verbatim.” As a result, she admitted she no longer used the resource and would go to her advisor with any inquiry as the advisor was far more efficient and personal in her response.

Kate, who studied from a distance online, had also viewed a handbook and was aware of other resources but shared no handbook could offer the appropriate information as accurate as her advisor. Finally, a cohort learner reiterated, if given the choice, she would go to her advisor first because the advisor was someone “you can rely on who knows exactly what needs to be accomplished to get you through” the program.

The adult learners perceived the role of the advisor as important because, though resources were available, the advisor remained their primary source of information on all topics related to their academic plan. It was apparent all learners preferred advice of their advisors over guidance of a handbook (regardless of whether or not they had ever been

made aware of, or viewed, a handbook). Participants who made mention of the university's graduate student handbook were asked to further explain this preference of the advisor and one online student stated she disliked the handbook because:

There is just so much there! I don't feel like . . . I don't know, it's like learning about courses from a piece of paper. How are you supposed to really know what it's like? I mean, it's like in my job, if someone hands me an assessment on a kid, I will read it and automatically have a picture in my head. Then I will meet that kid and it's totally different! And so I approach a lot of things like that. What it says on paper might not be what it's really like. And so that's what's so important about having an advisor. It is that you can sit down and say ok, this is what I know. Am I wrong? Am I right? Where am I off? What are your suggestions for things that are off and other things like that. Whereas a handbook, it's just a bunch of information that's left to be interpreted however you feel like!

S: So what do you think the role of the handbook is?

B: Legality! I think they have to have documentation.

This learner not only perceived the handbook as irrelevant, but also understood the purpose of the resource as protecting the university from any student claims. She believed the guide was developed for the university, and not the students who were in attendance. Further discussion of the tension between the university's purpose of the handbook and the adult learners' perception will be addressed in Chapter V. However, the data illustrate the advisor is important as students recognize their advisors as the primary resource for all information and believe they could not navigate the program without good advising.

### **Importance of advisement.**

Good advisement was defined as the combination of the advisor recognizing the advisees' perceived value of advising while also holding a personal conviction of the importance of their role as advisor. Good advising was important to students – it served as an opportunity to have their questions and concerns appropriately answered. Students viewed the advisor as a link “to the campus and to understanding the whole process.” Both good advising, and a good advisor who took their responsibility seriously, were deemed important to the adult learners. Most of the learners admitted that without good graduate advisement they would have either struggled or risked non-completion. Amanda noted “it would be difficult to try to get through the program without an advisor who guides you through the different stages of the program,” no matter how well written the graduate student handbook.

### **Immediacy in Advisement: Advisors are Readily Available and Immediate in Response, and Advising is Timely**

With the advance of technology and the growth in social networking it has become exceedingly easy to remain connected to other individuals and to be available from any location at any time. Tools like email, text messaging from mobile devices, and the ability to carry your email with you on your mobile device have made higher education more accessible from a distance. They have also changed student expectations of the primary mode of advisor/advisee communication, and influenced adult learners' perceptions of adequate advisor response time.

### **Good timely advisor, advising, and advisement.**

Learners identified a good timely advisor as one that was readily available and willing to communicate frequently through email. Good immediate advising was that

which occurred around the students' schedules and addressed their questions and concerns within 24-48 hours. Good immediate advisement was understood as an advisor readily available and willing to respond accurately and immediately to any and all student questions and requests. Though this theme of good immediate advisement is, like the other themes of need, the result of the experience with the advisor and tasks of advising, the significant result of this discussion is that there was not consensus on good advising practice with regard to the definition of "immediate." Following is the discussion of the variation in students' need for immediate response as it relates to the three learning environments.

#### **Variation in the need for timely advisement.**

All adult learners identified email as the primary and preferred mode of communication. Though on-campus students noted they had the opportunity to meet in-person with their advisors, they too relied on email as the first mode of communication as it required little effort and offered immediacy in response. The adult learners' inclination to communicate through email was evident in Deb's advising experience. She shared, though an on-campus learner, she had never met with her advisor face-to-face. Their first communication was through email and Deb shared her advisor responded within hours. Not only had this proven effective, but it was also efficient; "I can email her whenever I have a question and that may be more beneficial for me than I can just get a hold of her whenever I need."

Although all learners perceived a need for immediacy in advising, there was variance across the three learning environments as to the conceptualization of immediate. The on-campus learners shared it was "important for an advisor to get back to you as fast

as possible because we are all busy and we need answers to the questions we have;” but this response was appropriate if received within 24 to 48 hours.

Cohort learners required a faster response and expected an email within 24 hours of their sent inquiry. A good advisor would respond within 24 hours, and anything received in a shorter amount of time was appreciated and perceived as excellent advising. Mike had an experience in which he had made an error on his schedule and his advisor had been able to immediately fix the mistake for him. He shared this immediacy “was key with my busy life. For her to get back to me . . . to switch it as fast as she did was fantastic!” A good advisor would have addressed his problem within 24 hours, but described as his best advisement, the issues was taken care of within only a few hours.

Amanda also perceived adequate adult learner advisement as that in which the advisor was “available to like, check it [email] once a day because that is my biggest mode of communication!” Like Mike, she perceived a good advisor would respond within said timeframe, though she appreciated an even more immediate response when given. She admitted she had email on her phone and checked hourly, if not more, for any new messages. She was willing to wait one day for a response, but it was obvious she preferred the advisor who was available and able to provide the answers needed within hours of the original inquiry. A good advisor would be able to respond to any cohort advisee’s question within a 24 hour timeframe, though the cohort learners appreciated responses that were even quicker.

Like the cohort learners, online students had identified all emails should be returned within 24 hours; however, they noted 24 hours was the longest one should take before responding and a majority of the communication should, and was expected to, be

even faster. Kate shared an experience where “I emailed her at like eight o’ clock in the morning and she responded by eight-thirty. It was great! Very fast may not ALWAYS be necessary but [it needs to be] timely – 24 hours.” Kate made it clear very fast (within 30 minutes of the student’s original email) may not always have been necessary, but it was imperative an advisor respond within at least 24 hours on all topics. Kate expected a response from her advisor within hours, though she understood there would be some instances when this was not necessary. In those situations, she would wait up to 24 hours before growing frustrated with the process of advising.

Jane also felt a good advisor was one who was available and “ALWAYS” responded within “AT LEAST” 24 hours. Jane emphasized the advisor had to “always” respond within “at least” 24 hours to be deemed an adequate advisor, but really, her best experience was with an advisor who would “answer back your emails right away when you contact them.” Her description of bad advising was “someone who is not available . . . like, they don’t get back to you for days.” Jane too expected the advisor would be accessible at all times and able to answer her questions accurately within hours, unless of course, the situation was not as important, then she would wait up to 24 hours.

After two days, online learners shared they experienced anxiety. Beth stated, regardless of the question, if she emailed her advisor, “anything over two days you know I kinda start worrying.” Good online advisors had to be willing to “constantly check their email for students emailing them questions or concerns or anything like that.” Beth was asked to provide an example of good timely advising for online learners and she noted “as soon as I emailed her I got an email back within a couple of hours . . . [that] is good advising.”



All adult learners preferred electronic communication over any other form, and though on-campus learners had the opportunity to meet in person with their advisors, and a majority took said opportunity, they too perceived email as the most efficient and manageable mode of communication. In addition, all adult learners perceived a good advisor as one who was able to provide appropriate and immediate answers to all of their questions. When asked why it was important an advisor quickly respond to all questions, the graduate adult students perceived this need derived out of their dual responsibilities and busy schedules. The learners had families, careers, and other outside commitments which required time and dedication. When they took time to work on their program of study, if there were questions, they required an immediate response so they could complete a task before moving on to another responsibility.

Though all participants identified the need for a quick response time, the conceptualization of “fast” was contingent upon the student’s learning environment. On-campus learners needed to hear from their advisor within two days, cohort learners were willing to wait 24 hours for a response, and online learners required notification from their advisor within hours, would be frustrated beyond 24 hours, and would begin to significantly worry by the 48th hour. The shrinking window of time in which an advisor must respond in order to be perceived as a good advisor across learning environments will be explored further in the discussion.

### **Advisement: The Perceived Experience of Good Advising and Advisors**

The predominant conclusion of this research was that there was no distinction between the traits and qualities of a good advisor, and the characteristics of good advising. Advisement has been applied here as the term to describe the perceived

experience of the dual, interdependent relationship between good advisor and advising. It is important to understand why such a distinction matters with regard to future research and future student advisement.

Past literature on the topic of advisement has inadvertently made a clear distinction between a good advisor and good advising. This distinction is important because the emphasis on either the advisor as the central figure in advisement, or advising as the fundamental practice of an advisor influences a university's effort and approach toward improved advisement. Good advisement was perceived as important, but would a university make change at an individual (advisor) or program (advising practice) level to improve the quality of advisement?

The body of research focused on the advisor traditionally views advising as a skill one either has, or does not. The ability to offer a quality advising experience is correlated to the advisor's passion, interest, skill, knowledge, and personality (Edwards, 2007). These studies then propose interventions or approaches to advising that take into consideration individual character. Departments are encouraged to not mandate advising for all faculty members, but to make advising an option for those with interest while also rewarding good advising by accounting for this work in tenure (Edwards, 2007; Frey, 2007; Stokes, 2008). In addition, universities are urged to consider applicants' advising techniques, experiences, and interest when hiring (Edwards, 2007). This body of research maintains it is not possible to simply teach one to be a good advisor. Personality, and interest in student advisement are as important as fulfilling the tasks assigned to advising.

On the other end of the spectrum is research focused on identifying good advising as a general practice. The intent of this research is to better understand the act of advising in an effort to train and better prepare those placed in the role of an advisor. Commonly, quantitative surveys are employed to identify which characteristics are most important among a particular learning environment. This research has proposed training programs and education for faculty to prepare them to practice good advising. It is deemed acceptable to require all faculty members to advise, but a university must offer a guide, template, and/or best practice to advising. Research that has sought to explain the characteristics of good advising suggest once the academic community understands what is required of good advising, these best practices may be taught to any faculty member (Allen, 1993; CAEL, 1999; 2000; Frey, 2007).

This distinction in past research between advising and advisor may not be deliberate; however, each piece did present a particular perspective through their discussion and implications for the future. The central phenomenon of this study, however, identifies the need to create a shared understanding of the two in order to further promote good advisement. Students perceived a holistic approach in which characteristics associated with a good advisor and the traits of good advising were both present in order to define the advisement as satisfactory.

The previous discussion presented the traits students associated with the act of good advising as well as the characteristics required of a good advisor. A collective description followed explaining the perception of good advisement in relation to the particular theme. However, note the distinction between expectations of advising and the advisor was made during the data analysis and not by the participants. As previously

mentioned, participants would waver in the description of good advisement, frequently shifting from the characteristics of a person, to the description of an act within the same sentence. One online learner began her description of good advising by stating it must assist in identifying a class schedule, timeline, credit transfer, be flexible as to when it occurs and “she must be organized . . . plan ahead . . . be able to communicate and communicate effectively [and] . . . have a lot of experience and a lot of knowledge.”

Her list of requirements for good advising switched to the characteristics of a good advisor within the same breath. The distinction between advising and advisor was made for the purpose of comparison, to illustrate the complexity of good advisement, and to support the conclusion of the experience of advisement as the combined practice of good advising and characteristics of a good advisor.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Adult learners identified the traits and characteristics of a good advisor, and the tasks associated with good advising, as they both relate to five themes of adult graduate student advisement in one department: (a) students need good advisement to guide them through their program; (b) students trust the process of advising through their experience with advisors; (c) good advisors see student as an individual and provide individualized advising; (d) good advisors see advising as important as students perceive the importance of advising; and (e) good advisors are readily available and immediate in response, and advising is timely.

Within each theme was a shared expectation of good, overall, quality advisement conceptualized as the dual relationship between good advising and a good advisor. Participants did not consciously identify requirements of good advising separate from the characteristics and traits required of a good advisor. The perceived relationship between the characteristics of a good advisor and advising responsibilities led to the shared perception of good advisement across the three learning mediums.

In addition, students' descriptions of good advisement led to a comprehensive list of needs, all of which must be met if adult learner satisfaction is desired. Good advisement was described as imperative for student success, important to the adult learners, and effective only when all of the described personal attributes of the advisor and required tasks of good advising were fulfilled without exception.

Following is a presentation of the shared student experience with advisement, a discussion around the conceptualization of *immediate* among adult learner communication needs, and dialogue related to the implications of this research on current advising structures and research on the topic of adult learner advisement.

### **Central Phenomenon: Good Advisement – Complex and Holistic**

Good advisement is conceptualized as a holistic and complex practice that is the product of both the person (the advisor) and their required advising duties. Adult graduate learners identified the importance of good advisement and defined it as the dual relationship between completing the tasks of good advising (programmatic personal guidance) and having the characteristics of an involved advisor (e.g., personable, efficient, flexible, caring, knowledgeable). A good advisor was also capable of responding, through email, to advisees' inquiries within an identified window of time. For on-campus learners, a good advisor was expected to respond within 48 hours. Cohort students anticipated it would take no more than 24 hours to receive a response, while online learners sought notification within only a few hours for a majority of their questions. However, for online learners, a response within 24 hours would be acceptable for those questions, though not common, that were not deemed as important.

Participants were unable to distinguish between the role of the advisor as an individual and the tasks associated with advising. What was found among all adult learners was a shared understanding of the importance of good advisement. See Figure 8 for a visual representation of the participants' shared conceptualizations of good advisor, good advising, and subsequently, good adult learner advisement.

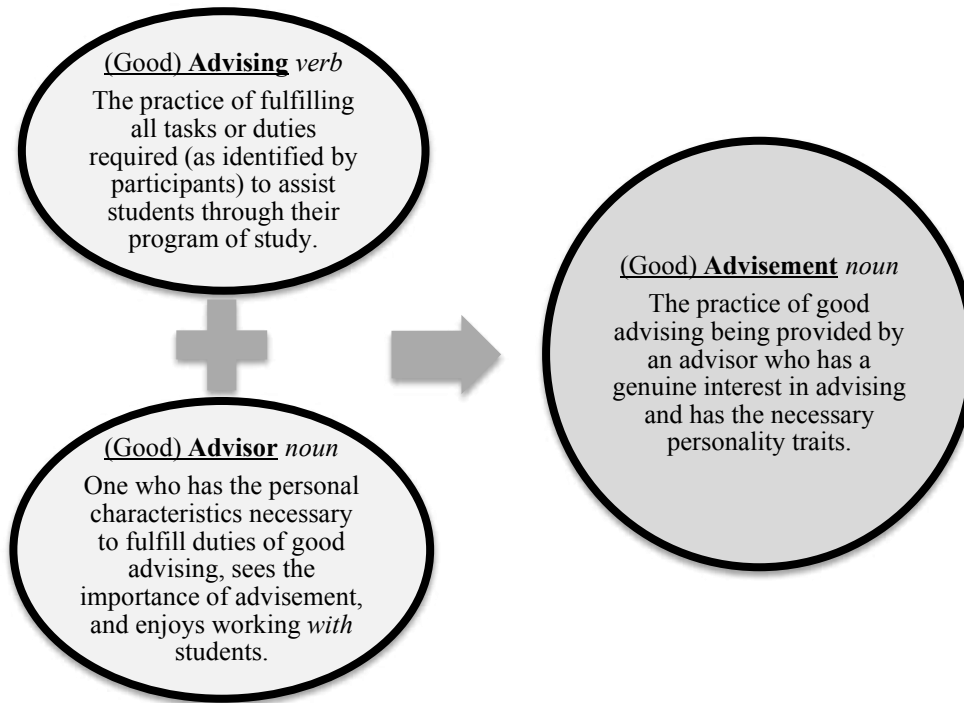


Figure 8. Central Phenomenon: Advisement as Combination of Advising and Advisor

Good advisement not only comprised both personal characteristics and general tasks, but was also quite complex. Table 6 offers a description of the overall experience of good advisement among adult graduate students. It has been organized by the practices required for good advising and the traits and characteristics associated with a good advisor. The listed requirements illustrate the students' lack of distinction between the noun and verb that comprise the phenomena of good advisement. As an example, a duty of general advising is to collaborate while an advisor must have a collaborative approach and seek to build a relationship with their advisee – both of which contribute to the perception of good overall advisement.

Table 6. List of Characteristics/Traits of Good Advising and Good Advisor

Characteristics of Good Advising	Characteristics and Traits of a Good Advisor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accurate</li> <li>• Assist in developing timeline</li> <li>• Assist with and make available required forms</li> <li>• Clear expectations</li> <li>• Collaborative</li> <li>• Create academic plan</li> <li>• Create personal academic plan</li> <li>• Deadline management</li> <li>• Dependable/trustworthy</li> <li>• Guide scholarly projects</li> <li>• Guide through program</li> <li>• Identify pre-requisite courses</li> <li>• Include student in planning</li> <li>• Is important and a priority</li> <li>• Is priority of the university</li> <li>• Keep student on-track</li> <li>• Necessary</li> <li>• Not universal across advisees</li> <li>• Outline program requirements</li> <li>• Recognize student’s goals</li> <li>• Structured</li> <li>• Trust it is provided</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Available</li> <li>• Build and maintain collaborative relationship</li> <li>• Build relationship</li> <li>• Comfort in communicating requirements</li> <li>• Efficiently use technology</li> <li>• Flexible</li> <li>• Foster culture of trust</li> <li>• Foster positive student experience</li> <li>• Give sound advice</li> <li>• Give student appropriate time</li> <li>• Good Listener</li> <li>• Have program knowledge</li> <li>• Know deadlines</li> <li>• Know of all resources</li> <li>• Not judgmental</li> <li>• Offer career advice</li> <li>• Offer encouragement through program</li> <li>• Personal interest in advisee’s plan</li> <li>• Positive reputation</li> <li>• Prepared</li> <li>• Provide emotional support</li> <li>• Realistic in program and timeline development</li> <li>• Recognize advising responsibilities</li> <li>• Reliable</li> <li>• Respect and understand diversity</li> <li>• See importance in good advising</li> <li>• Serve as confidant</li> <li>• Share personal experiences</li> <li>• Strong organizational skills</li> <li>• Take personal interest in student</li> <li>• Take role seriously</li> <li>• Tolerant</li> <li>• Understand dual student roles/responsibilities</li> <li>• Respond to questions/communication “immediately” (within at least 48 hours)</li> </ul>

Characteristics of good advising are activities or practices that may be learned and/or taught. They are duties that any individual, if given the task to advise a student, could fulfill. Characteristics of effective advisors refer to their personality traits, interests, and personal beliefs. They are not things one can simply learn. This is a significant conclusion as past research had made a distinction between people who make



good advisors and duties we may simply train individuals to fulfill. The implications of good advisement being the dual student experience with both person and fulfilled tasks will be addressed in a later section.

Good advisement for the adult graduate learners included over 80 tasks or associated characteristics, all of which had support from a majority, if not all, of the adult learners. In addition, these requirements were consistent across learning mediums and were not associated with any one group of learners.

Each student interview produced at least 15 requirements of a good advisor or tasks necessary for good advising. When presented with the comprehensive list from Table 7, as well as a list of specific traits taken from their interviews, students maintained good advisement would include all listed qualities and tasks. It was evident that adult learners would only perceive advisement as good if every requirement was met. This expectation illustrates a complex and holistic system of advisement. Table 7 provides a comprehensive list of the qualities required for good advisement. This table is intended to illustrate the complexity of good adult learner advisement.

Table 7. Learners’ Perceived Requirements for Good Graduate Student Advisement

<b>Perceived Requirements for Good Adult Graduate Student Advisement</b>	
Able to refer student to other resource	Knowledgeable in students’ specialization
Accepting	Lot of eye contact with advisee when possible
Advisor had a good reputation among colleagues	Make student feel comfortable
Advisor had a good reputation among students	Makes a good team member
Advisor had similar interests	Meet students’ needs
Ask a lot of questions of the advisee	Mentor
Assist with all necessary forms	Nice
Assistance with academic projects	Non-judgmental
Available	Offer career advice
Be a part of the student’s educational process	Offer clarification – answer student questions
Bright	Offer course suggestions

Table 7. Cont.

<b>Perceived Requirements for Good Adult Graduate Student Advisement</b>	
Bubbly	Offer tech support
Caring	Open-minded
Check up on students	Patient
Collaborative effort	Personable
Comforting	Prepared
Develop student specific academic plan	Provide emotional support
Draw on personal experience – relate to student	Realistic
Educated	Respect student decisions
Encouraging	Reliable
Enthusiastic	Respect diversity
Flexible	Share ideas with students
Friendly	Tolerant
Gentle	Trustworthy
Give program, course and other topic information	Understand students’ backgrounds
Good listener	Understanding
Good chemistry	Uplifting
Helpful	Welcoming
Honest	Work around students’ schedules
Informative	Advisor was “all around really great person”
Knowledgeable of the program	“Finding value in what I am saying”
Kind	“Have many modes of communication”
Know about licensing requirements	“Just [have] those usual nice person qualities”
Know deadlines of university and program	Be “interested in our educational development”
Know how to effectively use technology	Be a “general representative of the university”
Know university and program requirements	Build strong relationship between advisor and advisee
	Recognize students’ financial commitments to education

Beth (an online learner) responded, “I believe an advisor needs to display ALL qualities I mentioned to be a good advisor” while Amanda (a cohort student) reviewed the comprehensive list and stated “I would say they need most . . . if not all of them” to be an adequate advisor.

Adult learners taking their coursework on-campus shared this perception while also offering further explanation as to why they had such high expectations of good advisement. Deb shared, “A good advisor should be able to meet the students’ needs and

therefore should have all or most of the qualities described.” For her, this list was a collection of needs identified by adult learners, and because the advisor’s role is to meet needs of all of their advisees, the advisor must subsequently have all of the identified traits.

John offered further explanation; “the more skills one has the more the chances of adaptation and survival. In the same, an advisor with more qualities will show better performance than one with fewer qualities.” The more of the listed qualities an advisor had, the better advising students would experience.

It was also important an advisor had a range of characteristics from being empathetic to well prepared. Advisors should also be knowledgeable on university requirements, as well as on a variety of topic areas. Additionally, they should be flexible in their approach to working with each advisee. Students are diverse and have different advising needs. To offer an example, John explained:

People are different. Some guys are smart. Others are slow as far as learning is concerned. Um, so sometimes, besides the resources that are available, you know some people learn more when they listen, or are spoken too. When you speak they learn a little faster than just having to read, say a handbook.

This description illustrates why students identified both needing the advisor to know of, and offer, resources while also identifying a good advisor as one who could clearly communicate the requirements and program expectations. It also supports the claim that students are unique and they present intermittent needs; subsequently the skill set and personal approach of the advisors must match the complexity of these needs.

Increasing complexity of advising was also exemplified in students' need for holistic advisement – a requirement of the advisor to meet the students' emotional, mental, and physical needs. Both Table 6 and Table 7 list the required characteristics and traits of good advisement. Among the listed characteristics include tasks identified as meeting a student's mental needs. As an example, the advisor incorporating the student in discussions of academic work, reviewing advisees' scholarly projects, and developing a collaborative collegial relationship. Students, particularly those studying on-campus, shared their physical needs were met by feeling welcomed and comfortable in the presence of a good advisor. It was also important students be offered support and encouragement to meet their emotional needs.

This research had originally sought to explore advising experiences and needs across and within the three learning environments to identify those that were shared and/or contrasting among mediums. However, what was discovered is one central advising experience – a complex, and holistic system of good adult student advisement.

### **Immediacy in Response: Time Allotment and Learning Medium**

Immediacy in response was one of the many expectations of good advisement and was one of five themes identified. However, though all learning groups reported the need for immediate electronic response from their advisors, students' conceptualization of "fast" varied by their medium of study. This is significant as it is the only theme that illustrated varying student group perspectives, and has implications for advisors in every environment of advising practice.

Those students with greatest availability to other educators, advisors, and university resources (campus learners) identified the longest time frame deemed

acceptable for an email response – 24 to 48 hours. Cohort students, though off campus, identified having more than one advisor as a requirement for their program.

Additionally, an advisor would visit their site on at least one occasion during the year.

For the cohort learners, an adequate response time was within 24 hours of initial inquiry.

Those studying solely online did not meet with their advisor face-to-face on any occasion, and were located further from the university than any other student group.

These individuals presented the shortest window of time and required an email notification within hours. This group was also the only group to speak of actual worries or stress associated with a delayed response.

Though not a conclusion, or relationship, capable of being drawn from the data, it was observed that the varying degrees of immediacy among learners appeared to increase with the number of available connections or resources the students had with the university system. The implications of the student groups' perspectives will be presented with other implications for future research on advising needs of adult learners.

### **Relation to Existing Literature**

The conclusions drawn in this qualitative analysis are corroborated by past research on the topic of advising in higher education. However, as previously mentioned, there is a limited body of literature on the advising needs and experiences of adult graduate learners – especially with regard to their specific learning environments (online, cohort, or classroom).

### **Experiences of Participants Similar to Traditional Undergraduates?**

Research on the advising experiences of traditional undergraduates had found that, like the participants in this study, students required an advisor to build a trusting

relationship with his or her advisees (Bleeker, G. W., Bleeker, M. M., & Bleeker, B., 2012; Light, 2001; Martin, 2004). In addition, these nine adult learners, like traditional students in past research, identified a good advisor as one that would assist students in identifying their academic goals, would provide motivational support as needed, and would provide guidance on course selection (Jones, 1993; Lau, 2003; Light, 2001; Martin, 2004; Onnismaa, 2003; Peck & Varney, 2009). Both the need for assistance with course selection, and direction in identifying academic aspirations were addressed in the discussion of good programmatic advisement among the participants. While undergraduates were identified as needing this guidance as a result of their inexperience with higher education and wanting to be told what was *required*, the adult learners shared needing this assistance because they did not have time to review all of the available courses, or they wanted help identifying the classes that would be most relevant to their future careers.

The need for the advisor to provide emotional support and motivate advisees was discussed under the complex definition of good adult learner advisement. Though the participants shared similarities with the characteristics of good advising found in literature on undergraduate advising needs, the reasons behind the needs were atypical. Undergraduates needed motivation to complete coursework and become engaged in the university (Lau, 2003; Light, 2001; Martin, 2004) while the participating adult learners needed to be motivated to complete the degree when life became too busy.

Finally, Lau (2003) wrote that traditional undergraduates valued an egalitarian relationship in which the students were an active participant, allowing the advisees to build self-confidence. This need to develop a collaborative relationship was evident in

the theme describing students' preference for individualized advising, where their needs came first.

Existing literature on traditional student advising identified a few characteristics of good advisement that were evident in the presented categories of good programmatic guidance and individualized advisement. There was also support and connection to the discussion of holistic advisement – meeting the students' academic and emotional needs. However, recognizing why students identify these needs is as important as the needs themselves. Recognizing the reason for the need allows an advisor to provide better guidance. While all learners noted needing assistance with course selection, past literature highlights undergraduates typically need to know what is required while adult learners want to recognize the courses' application to practice.

### **Advising Needs of Adult Learners**

Consistent with existing literature on the advising needs of adult learners, these participants highlighted the importance of good advisement, and the need for advising to specifically meet the needs of adult learners (CAEL, 2000; Jones, 1993; Light, 2001). Good adult learner advisement generally described the needs of adult undergraduates and not graduate students. However, results were similar to what was found among the nine participants: students required an advisor to (a) take a personal interest in the student; (b) identify courses that fit the student's schedule; (c) be practical; (d) be available at various hours and outside of the classroom; (e) be competent; (f) be accessible; (g) be flexible; (h) and build a trusting and collaborative advisor-advisee relationship (e.g., Bland, 2003; CAEL, 2000; Frey, 2007; Leonard, 2002; Noel-Levitz, 2008).

The following table provides a few of the previous findings in research on the advising needs of adult learners (typically undergraduate), where these results are comparable to the identified categories and themes of experience/need among the nine participants, and the authors responsible for previously identifying said conclusions. The purpose of this table is to illustrate a few supporting conclusions of past literature, but primarily, to emphasize the array of the literature on the topic and how, to date, no one source has been able to explain, exhaustively, the personal experiences/needs of the adult graduate learners with regard to good advisement as described here.

Table 8. Support of Existing Literature

<b>COMPARABLE CATEGORY/THEME</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS IN EXISTING LITERATURE</b>	<b>CORROBORATING RESEARCH (e.g.)</b>
Individualized advisement	Interest in student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bland, 2003</li> <li>• CAEL, 2000</li> <li>• Frey, 2007</li> <li>• Peck &amp; Varney, 2009</li> </ul>
Individualized advisement	Recognize outside commitments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CAEL, 2000</li> <li>• Richardson &amp; King, 1998</li> </ul>
Individualized advisement	Collaborative relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bland, 2003</li> <li>• CAEL, 2000</li> <li>• Leonard, 2002</li> <li>• Peck &amp; Varney, 2009</li> </ul>
Programmatic advisement	Set a timeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hensley &amp; Kinser, 2001</li> <li>• Jones, 1993</li> <li>• Leonard, 2002</li> </ul>
Programmatic advisement	Identify appropriate courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bland, 2003</li> <li>• CAEL, 2000</li> <li>• Frey, 2007</li> </ul>
Innate trust	Build trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bland, 2003</li> <li>• CAEL, 1999; 2000</li> </ul>
Immediacy in advisement	Be flexible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allen, 1993</li> <li>• CAEL, 1999; 2000</li> <li>• Frey, 2007</li> <li>• Stokes, 2008</li> </ul>
Immediacy in advisement	Frequent and quality communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Noel-Levitz, 2008</li> </ul>



Table 8. Cont.

<b>COMPARABLE CATEGORY/THEME</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS IN EXISTING LITERATURE</b>	<b>CORROBORATING RESEARCH (e.g.)</b>
Complexity of advisement	Knowledgeable in content area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bland, 2003</li> </ul>
Complexity of advisement	Offer career advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schlosser, et al., 2003</li> </ul>
Holistic advisement	Patient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Haricombe &amp; Prabha, 2008</li> <li>• Wrench &amp; Punyanunt, 2004</li> </ul>
Holistic advisement	Offer support and motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CAEL, 2000</li> <li>• Hensley &amp; Kinser, 2001</li> <li>• Hezrig, 2004</li> <li>• Lau, 2003</li> <li>• Light, 2001</li> <li>• Polson, 2003</li> <li>• Schlosser, et al., 2003</li> </ul>
Importance of advisement	Advising is important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CAEL, 2000</li> <li>• Jones, 1993</li> <li>• Light, 2001</li> </ul>

### **Results Analogous with CAEL Eight Principles**

The eight Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners (CAEL, 2000) was an attempt to identify and provide recommendations for universities and colleges striving to meet the needs of their growing population of adult learners. The eight principles were devised after a study reviewed six highly adult learning focused colleges and universities. Though the study is dated (1999; 2000), the results are similar to the perceived advising needs of the participating nine adult learners.

The first principle (outreach) noted effective adult learner advisement would assist the students in overcoming barriers of time and place – a sentiment shared by the participants in their request for flexibility, and availability of advisors. Secondly, the CAEL identified the need to provide guidance with regard to a student’s life and career goals. Participants in this study noted the need for their advisors to offer career advice, and to develop an academic plan consistent with their career goals.

Though one student mentioned the need for his advisor to assist with financial aid, unlike the CAEL results, these learners did not emphasize the need for the advisor to share information regarding payment options and aid. The fourth principle (assessment of learning outcomes) mentioned aligning students' coursework with practice while also assisting with scholarly projects. The nine participants required their advisors be knowledgeable regarding both the program requirements and students' topics of interest. One participant even shared he would take work to his advisor in a request for constructive criticism.

The fifth principle was not clearly evident in this study – using a variety of teaching methods to convey diverse topics. When identified by the CAEL, this principle was to be applied to classroom teaching and learning (2000). Though it was not directly related to the conclusions of this research, this principle is similar to the adult learners' request that the advisors be available, and that they address them through a variety of mediums (email, phone, in-person, as well as Skype). In addition, many of the adult learners preferred frequent advisement through electronic communication over in-person encounters, requiring advisors to use multiple and atypical modes of advising (as opposed to modes of teaching as proposed by the CAEL).

Student support services that are designed specifically for the adult learner were identified as a necessary component by the CAEL. In addition, this sixth principle highlighted the need for advisors to be aware, and encourage use, of comprehensive support services (CAEL, 2000). Though the participants were not asked to comment on the universities support services for adult learners, the students did require their advisors

be aware of such and provide direction. Students did not want to experience a run-around, but instead, to turn to an advisor that could answer all questions.

The seventh principle stated the advisor must use technology to provide relevant and timely information. Though there was no discussion of relevancy with regard to technology, the theme of immediacy in advisement specifically addressed this principle.

Finally, the eighth principle noted strategic partnership in which the advisor and advisee develop a collaborative partnership. The advisor is also responsible for engaging with outside organizations to identify other opportunities for the learner (CAEL, 2000). This conclusion was corroborated by the current study in which students identified the need for an egalitarian relationship where the advisors place the students' needs before those of the university. In addition, the nine participants wanted an involved advisor that took interest in their academic and career goals, assisting in any way possible.

Though the principles identified by the CAEL (2000) support the conclusions drawn in this research, they again describe only a small piece of the overall perceived advising needs and experiences as offered here. The previous discussion notes the correlation between existing literature and the experiences of these participants while also emphasizing the inadequacy of past research. The results of this study are substantiated by the previous literature; however, no one study has been as comprehensive.

The most significant and consistent result among all research on the advising needs and experiences of adult learners, supported by conclusions drawn in this study, is the realization that a university must tailor their advising program to meet the specific needs of their adult learners.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The initial limitation to any qualitative research is the generalizability of the identified results (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Glesne, 2011). However, the purpose of this research was to begin to understand the advising experience and needs of adult learners, in one department, from their respected perspectives. In addition, the findings may not cross programs or departments, but they do illustrate the need for such research.

An additional limitation is the point of study for a number of participants. Though I was able to interview students at the beginning, middle, and end of their respective graduate programs, one limitation may relate to those participants in their first semester as their experience with graduate advising was still limited. A future modification to similar research may be to include a particular number of credit hours or number of completed semesters into the delimitations.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

### **Implications for the Practice of Advisement**

Following is a discussion of conclusions drawn from this research, and the possible implications, associated with each, to the practice of advising adult learners.

The five conclusions with implications to practice include:

1. Recognition that good advisement is the result of the character and personality of the advisor, as well as the learned tasks associated with advising.
2. Adult learners prefer electronic communication and have an expectation that all inquiries will be answered within a short window of time.

3. Adult learners are unaware of a student handbook, or are aware but do not see its utility.
4. Adult learners *need* good advisement to succeed academically.
5. Good adult learner advisement is complex, holistic, and meets individual needs of each learner – not each learner group.

**Implications of conclusion one: Character and skill of advisor.**

Students identified a good advisor as friendly, personable, comforting, and encouraging. Good advisors were dependable, perceived as enjoying the process of advisement, and encouraged collaboration with their advisees. As previous research on the topic of advisement has identified topics and skills that a university should teach to their faculty responsible for advising, this finding illustrates that good advisement is not a collection of skills or practices one may simply be taught. Good advisement does require an advisor to have a particular skill set, and training could still occur on such topics, but good advisors will also have a passion to advise and have a vested interest and strong belief in the practice of advisement.

Not all faculty members should be required to advise adult learners. Students do not perceive those who view advising as an obligation as beneficial to their academic success. Those learners who shared negative advising experiences described advisors who were not involved, and did not come to know, or include, the students. If character and personality of the advisor, as well as their desire to advise adult learners, are all important to students' perceived satisfaction, the typical structure of advisement must change.

The practice of good student advisement should be considered in the time allocation of the faculty. If only those faculty members who value the practice of advisement advise adult learners, then this responsibility must be accounted for in contract development, and tenure consideration. As some reallocate time to good student advisement subsequently reducing their time in either teaching or research, those professors that do not have the qualifications, or interest, to adequately advise may absorb some of the research and teaching load. This is both a better use of individuals' skill sets and personalities, but also a benefit to the students who access advisement. Universities may also begin to consider interest and past experience with advisement in their hiring practices.

Finally, universities commonly evaluate student satisfaction with their educators and course experiences to identify areas for improvement. As advising becomes a larger piece of individuals' contracts, similar evaluation may occur around advising as a form of faculty assessment.

**Implications of conclusion two: Immediate electronic communication.**

Adult learners identified electronic communication as the primary, and preferred, mode of communication. One implication of this finding is that faculty responsible for advising must be comfortable using email and be willing to check for incoming inquiries frequently throughout the workday. In addition, in working with adult learners, advisors must be aware of incoming communication requests that occur late into the evening, or at other times of day not associated with traditional office hours.

Immediacy of response varied across learning groups. This finding may illustrate for those that advise in each environment what is expected among their advisee group.

An additional implication for universities outside of this study is the need to survey and determine the expectations of the students in attendance. Those who advise learners across environments may apply these findings to their practice, and prioritize email inquiries by learning group and student expectations.

The need for good adult learner advisors to be available at nontraditional hours of the day, and be capable of checking their email frequently with adequate time to respond, also illustrate the need to account for good advising in faculty members' full-time equivalents (FTE).

### **Implications of conclusion three: Student handbooks.**

Students did not utilize the student handbooks, and some were unaware of their existence. In practice, advisors may respond to this finding in a variety of ways. An advisor may recognize their advisees do not use the handbooks, and ensure the information they share covers all that would otherwise be addressed in said resources. Recognizing a student relies solely on the advisor for all academic preparation and program inquiry illustrates the need to train advisors on the content of those resources, and ensure any and all changes to the documents are received by advisors.

Conversely, if the goal is to increase utilization of such resources, the university may respond by distributing the handbooks more often and increasing their promotion. In practice, an advisor can walk through a resource with their advisees on first meeting. This may also be the opportunity to direct students to resources when responding to particular inquiries specifically addressed in the handbooks.

Regardless of the practice change employed, the finding illustrates the need for the university, as well as advisors, to reassess the importance, purpose, and role of

student handbooks, and how they are desired to be perceived by students moving forward.

**Implications of conclusion four: Need good advisement.**

Regardless of how good advisement is defined, what is noted is the need for good advisement for student program completion and success. With strong consensus on the demand and significance of good advisement, a university may look to assess if they are meeting this need. In addition, it supports the proposition of restructuring the current system of advisement to identify advising as a specific skill, and a required practice of those identified as good, dedicated advisors. It is important to the adult learners and should be important to any university concerned with the retention of these students.

**Implications of conclusion five: Complex, holistic, and individual.**

It has been shared that good adult learner advising practice could, moving forward, be considered in the hiring, tenure consideration, and FTE allocation of university faculty. In addition, advisement should be a responsibility reserved for those faculty members with the personality and skill set identified as best fit for good adult learner advisement. This is reiterated by the conclusion that advising is complex, holistic, and should be geared toward the individual, and not the learning group.

As advisors begin to realize all of the characteristics, traits, and tasks adult learners identify as necessary for good advisement, it may require persuasion at the university level to recognize advising as its own profession or skill set among faculty. The list of roughly 80 traits/characteristics of good advisement presented in Chapter IV may be shared with university systems as evidence of the complexity of good adult learner advisement.



Finally, the list of 80 required characteristics/traits necessary for good advisement was developed from the collective experience and identified needs of all nine learners – not the product of a single participant. It may not be possible for one person to have all of these skill sets and personality traits listed. An implication for practice may be to match adult advisees with the appropriate advisor upon admission. The first advising session can serve as an opportunity for both student and advisor to identify their expectations in the advisor-advisee relationship to ensure there is a fit, and if not, work together to identify another advisor best equipped to meet the student’s needs. This is in-line with the conclusion that what was important among the learners was that their advisement be individualized to meet each student’s needs, not each learning group’s shared needs. Every student interviewed, regardless of their medium of learning, had a unique situation which required flexibility and individualization in advisement – a significant implication for all advising practices.

### **Implications for Research and Assessment**

The implications of this research as outlined above are possible opportunities or suggestions for practice based on the conclusions drawn from this small sample of adult learners. The results do generate discussion around the restructuring of the current traditional system of advising, but they also lay the foundation for future research. Following is a list of topics, questions, or experiments that have become prominent on my research agenda as a result of these findings.

1. A qualitative, exploratory analysis of the advisors’ perceptions of advising responsibilities as they relate to both adult learners and traditional aged students.  
A study to understand the advisors’ perceptions of student need, and to determine

if advisors identify similar or conflicting needs between traditional and non-traditional aged learners.

2. Further qualitative research on adult learner advising to expand across various departments in one university to determine similar/conflicting advising experiences/needs, as well as across public universities.
3. Case studies of public universities, schools, departments, or programs that have adopted advising as a qualification for hire, tenure, and FTE allocation, no longer making advising mandatory among all faculty members. Attempt to identify best practices within this model.
4. If universities are to adopt a new structure of advisement in which advising is a consideration of hire, tenure, and FTE allocation, research must look to develop a reputable form of faculty assessment in relation to their advising competencies.
5. Development of an assessment tool to determine fit of an advisor-advisee to be employed when identifying a new student's advisor.

Beyond the list provided, this qualitative analysis points to the need for other research on the topic of adult learner advisement which does not necessarily fit my growing research agenda. It is however, important to university systems with growing adult learner populations. Following is a list of other possible studies on the topic:

1. Quantitative survey research which explores advising needs of adult learners specifically, and applies the characteristics and traits discovered in this in-depth analysis.
2. Study to understand why the three learning groups (cohort, classroom, online) varied in their conceptualization of immediacy in response time to determine

correlation with their level of connection to the university, or perceived available resources.

3. Experimental research which looks to test new systems of advisement to meet the growing needs of adult learners.

Finally, the comprehensive and complex list of advising needs identified through this research points to the limitation of past quantitative research on the topic. In addition, as a result of the open ended nature of qualitative research, participants were able to identify needs and experiences not previously identified by other literature on the topic. Though the required characteristics and tasks identified by these adult learners may not apply across university systems, or even across departments at the chosen university, they do illustrate the importance of each university assessing their learners' advising needs to ensure their student populations positively perceive their received advisement.

### **Implications for the Location of Study: Graduate Student Handbooks**

In discussion of students' innate trust in their advisor and the importance of good advising, it was mentioned that the participating adult learners were either unfamiliar with, or did not value, the university's graduate student handbook, nor the handbook specific to the particular department. Data illustrated students recognized their advisors as the primary resource for all information, and believed they could not navigate the program without good advising. Additionally, the handbooks were referred to as irrelevant and unnecessary because "there is just so much there;" and as another participant also stated, "I could read the steps over and over again and I still wouldn't be sure that I understood what it was talking about." Good advisement is imperative as

other resources made available by the university for the purpose of guiding student completion are not utilized.

This illustrates a need for the studied university to reevaluate the intention and application of student resources, like graduate student and department handbooks. During artifact review, the department's graduate handbook illustrated a purpose in contrast with participants' perceptions. The introduction of the document states "students are encouraged to become familiar with the contents of this handbook, and then meet with an advisor."

Findings presented in Chapter III made it apparent that students were either turned to a handbook after they had met with their advisor and not before as encouraged, or not at all. In addition, those students pointed to a document did not utilize the resource, or found it to hold no value. However, there is a degree of consistency between participants and the purpose of the artifact as students highlighted the importance of advising just as the department handbook read "the advising relationship is the single most critical element in a graduate program."

Though not intended as the purpose of this research, the data illustrated a need for the university and the department to further explore the purpose and utilization of their handbooks. It also suggests that all departments and universities that supply a graduate or program handbook "intended to support this relationship between faculty and students . . . [and] assist students and faculty as they plan [and] pursue their Master's degree" determine if students share in the perception. It may be that a university/program identifies a need to further promote these resources, or it may be necessary to reallocate time spent on developing future tools if it is evident students will not make use of them.

In the least, the trend for the graduate school to place importance on the document while students share a perception that “even my worst advisors I am sure contributed more to my learning,” should be reviewed.

## CHAPTER VI

### A NARRATIVE

#### **The Collective Adult Learner Advising Experience**

Following is a narrative developed from the perspective of one fictional adult learner. Sam's story is offered as a summary of the collective advising experience of the nine adult learners who participated in this qualitative analysis. Sam's story is told to illustrate the complexity of good adult learner advisement, regardless of learning medium. All quotes in the following story are taken directly from all nine participants' transcripts to demonstrate data supporting the narrative.

#### **“Never Give Up, and Never Give Up on Me”**

So you want me to tell you all about my best advising experience as an adult graduate learner? Ok, well I can do that. First, you should know that I am in the last semester of my Master's program. The advisement I have had since entering the program has been fantastic. I was told that was why you were interested in hearing my story – because my overall experience with my advisor and her advising has been great.

I will start at the beginning. After I was accepted into the Master's program I was sent a packet of information from the college, and in that packet was a note about my temporary advisor. It provided her name and contact information. I contacted her and we met right away! “She was my temporary advisor . . . [but] I ended up keeping her as my permanent advisor” because “I didn't know anybody else in the program” and there

really was never a “reason I would like to change her.” I mean, “I hadn’t heard anybody have a bad experience” with her. Actually, “I was very grateful” the university even assigned me an advisor because “I had no idea” who to select; “it was nice to have them hook me up with somebody” initially.

Anyway, you have to fill out a form for your permanent advisor and then you can begin to work on your program of study. I knew that the role of the advisor was to kind of help me through this process and that she was the one who needed to “set up my educational life plan for me.” My advisor was great because she didn’t make me feel like she was “just handing me a piece of paper and sending me out the door!” I have had experiences in the past where I “felt like I was being packed into a mold for them” or like the advisor “does the same thing over and over with the same students” each year, and I really don’t like that. I wanted to be a part of developing my plan and I wanted to know that the advisor was guiding ME through the program, and not just another student.

We sat down and she took out a few forms. “She talked about the courses and showed me what was available.” “We worked on this together. She asked me MY plans, my tentative plans in terms of what I have time for” and she asked a few more questions about my work load outside of school and familial obligations. We talked a little bit about what I would be required to take and then visited a little more about what I want to do in the future so she would have a better idea of the direction to send me. In the end, “she chose which [classes] she felt would better serve me through the progression of the program, which was great!”

I “think it is important that the advisor takes into account the students’ views for his or her academic plan” and that is exactly what my advisor had done. She was “understanding and caring . . . of my needs and what I wanted.”

I just enjoyed the opportunity to work with her while she laid out my future course load. It was important she was able to tell me what was required and what all of the prerequisites were, but if an “advisor is knowledgeable about the curriculum and what classes need to be taken but does NOT take into account the student’s perspective, I don’t think that would be a good advisor.” My advisor was great because she knew what was required by the program of study, but she made that work with my interests and needs as well. And again, with her “I don’t feel like I am a name on the list. I feel like I am a person that she WANTS to communicate with.”

I did like meeting with her on that first occasion, but to be honest, after that all of our communication has occurred by email. I actually prefer email over any other mode of communication because it is just so fast! Plus, “I can kind of email her whenever I have a question and I think that may be more beneficial for me. That I can just get a hold of her whenever I need.” It is harder for me to save all of my questions for that one in-person meeting and then when I leave, I realize I forgot to ask something. This is just more efficient. Now, “whenever I have a question she is always the first person that I email. We don’t talk face-to-face hardly at all.” We “contact each other quite a bit through email” though.

My advisor has always been “very accessible” and I see that in her ability to “email pretty constantly” and remain in “constant communication.” It is funny that you are asking about this because I “emailed her today, we talked over email just today even,



and she, she's very quick about getting back to me and she is really easy to talk to that way. So that's really nice." One time I even "emailed her at like eight in the morning and she responded by eight thirty. It was great!"

"Decisions I need to make as a graduate student have often needed to be done in a limited amount of time" so "if I don't get the answer right away I tend to panic a little bit." I guess my expectation is "if I were to email my advisor they would be available to like, to check it like once a day because that's my biggest mode of communication!" "I have email on my phone so I ALWAYS have it with me." Any good advisor really needs to "constantly check their email for students emailing them questions or concerns or anything like that," especially if their advisee is anything like me. "If I don't find out the answer to my questions soon, I start worrying."

You had also asked earlier about why I have considered my graduate advisement to be such a positive experience. I think it is because my advisor has all the characteristics and traits I associate with a good advisor, and she has met all the expectations of good advising. As an example, she is realistic and a "good listener and personable, and knowledgeable, prepared, and available. I just really think that having those . . . OH and you know, trustworthy . . . having those characteristics I think makes for a really great advisor and a positive experience in the advising!" She is also welcoming and "keeps me very comfortable" when we are visiting.

If you want to be a good advisor, you also "have to be organized to keep your advisees organized." There are so many deadlines, and a lot of paperwork you are responsible for submitting within a given window of time. I know I can't keep these all

straight so I need her to be organized, show me what I need to do, and help make sure I have everything submitted on time to graduate!

When I think about my advisor, I know that part of what led me to trust her advice and respect her suggestions was that she has “a lot of experience and a lot of knowledge.” She is well “educated” and has “experience in the field” that I will be working in soon! I say educated and knowledgeable because, to me, these are separate characteristics. Because all of our advisors are also faculty, you can generally trust that they are well educated. However, they need to know more than just what textbooks say about the subject area. A good advisor has to be able to apply this information and make it evident how this will be used in practice. It is also really helpful if she has done this before. You know, if she has had experience actually DOING what she is sharing with you, well that just makes me trust what she has to say even more!

I also think knowledgeable, for me, has a few meanings. Firstly, it refers to her knowledge of the program and the university and all of the requirements associated with graduate school. I had a negative experience “back in undergrad where my advisor told me to take one of the wrong classes that I didn’t need. So, I think a knowledgeable advisor just needs to know the classes that you need to take and when to take them and when would be the best time to take them.” When I say my advisor was knowledgeable though, I also mean that she shared “knowledge of the particular field” that I am going into “so having that person that is of the same interest and having that person know something” about that subject area is important. You have a resource – “somebody that’s in that area of knowledge.”

I don't know if this is the case for all graduate students in this program, but I really value developing "rapport" with my advisor and sharing a "collaborative" and personal relationship. I always expected the primary task of advising to be providing programmatic assistance – you know, advising on courses, deadlines, and scholarly projects. But, my advisor has really helped me get through the program on a more personal level as well.

When I started this program, "I didn't think that I needed a whole lot of emotional support to go through this, but I can definitely see someone that goes through this you know, midway through, knowing they still have a year, a year and a half left, thinking this is taking too much of my time and the classes are too hard." With me, I know that with my advisor, I can email and "vent a little bit about the struggles" and I know she has been there before and I can "maybe get some advice from her." "I remember one semester I actually emailed my advisor and said 'I think I am going to have a breakdown!'" She helped me through it, we rearranged my classes and course load, and now, here I am ready to graduate! She has been "supportive through the entire time." This is important for all advisors – they should always say things "like 'Oh, you're doing great' or just something encouraging and make you feel like you are on the right track even if you feel like you are way off of it!" Really, just "never give up and never give up on me!"

As I go on about all of the things someone needs to do to provide good advising, and as I share stories about my advisor, I am beginning to realize how complex and holistic GOOD advisement really is. My advisor has provided programmatic guidance,

has offered emotional support, developed a “good personal relationship” with me, and has even offered career and licensure advice when needed!

I have gone to my advisor with “career questions . . . that weren’t related to the classes I am taking” and she wasn’t bothered by this and even shared stories from her past experiences. Licensing is also really confusing and she has helped with that process and found a lot of answers for me! She has been “interested in [my] educational development” from the beginning, and even what I will do with my knowledge (and really, my degree) after I graduate. She has a “genuine interest” in me and my success.

Like I have already said, there are a lot of things needed in order to provide good graduate advisement. I think about all of the things I have addressed: flexibility, accessibility, communication, personality requirements, program knowledge, building rapport, and taking an interest in me and my educational development. I look at a list like this and believe that “a good advisor should be able to meet the students’ needs, and therefore, should have all or most of the qualities that I described.” A good student advisor really “should be well rounded.” This may be a relatively extensive list, but “in the same, an advisor with more qualities will show better performance than one with fewer qualities” and likely have more satisfied advisees.

As I begin to address the complexity of good adult learner advisement I want to make sure that I state how important good advisement has been, and still is, for my academic success. You may have already come to the conclusion that good advisement is important for the adult learner, because if it were not important to me, I wouldn’t have the high expectations I have previously listed. “Good advising is important for graduate students because it could make or break your academic experience.” “I know that for me,

I definitely needed an advisor” – “they are essential!” Without my advisor I don’t think I “would have gotten my topic proposal done correctly.” “It’s just the little things” like checking in on me, making sure all of the paperwork has been turned in, and making sure I am handling everything.

This program has been really intense, so it was important I had good advisement because it is “so fast and furious that there has to be someone you can rely on who knows exactly what needs to be accomplished . . . to get through it.”

After sharing this with you I realize how much I expect of my advisor and think I will probably have to send her a thank you card after I get through the program! I really hope that my experience has not been an anomaly and that all graduate adult learners are having similar positive experiences – whether they be online, campus, or cohort students. “Good advising is imperative because we all need direction” and it really is “important for all student” types.

“It is very important for advisors to take whoever they are working with, to take them with commitment; with a lot engagement and goodwill because it is a really big need.” There is a reason universities “actually thought of getting advisors for students, so [advisors] should really patiently work with” their advisees. I strongly feel “the rate of success will partly depend, or partly be determined, by the kind of” advisement you receive. I have been fortunate and had great advisement during my graduate career and have really enjoyed having someone be a “part of this process – this life changing process of education.”

## APPENDICES

Appendix A  
Preliminary Request for Participation

Hi **[Participant Name]**,

My name is Shawnda Schroeder, and I am a doctoral candidate in the department of Teaching and Learning. **[Professor's Name]** shared your name with me as **[he or she]** thinks you would make an excellent addition to my research project. I am doing a qualitative study (interviews) to explore the advising experience of adult **[online, on-campus, cohort]** learners. I am sending this email to ask if you would be willing to participate.

All that would be required of you would be to participate in one interview with myself to discuss your advising experiences as a graduate learner. Following the interview, there may be a few follow-up questions if there is need for clarification, but otherwise, I will require no more of your time. In addition, your name will not be mentioned at any time in the research, the transcripts, or the final research report.

I have attached the consent form to offer more information regarding my dissertation and the method. Please let me know if you would be willing to set up a time to visit with me, and complete an interview. If so, I am willing to do the interview at a time that works best for you, and we can complete it through Skype, or another medium you would prefer **[or a location that works best for you – on-campus learners]**. I really appreciate you taking the time to read this email and consider assisting me in completing my dissertation by participating in this study.

Let me know if you have any questions, otherwise I look forward to hearing from you (either way) about your willingness to participate. If willing, we will work to set up a time that works for you right away, you will be asked to sign the consent form, and prior to the interview, I will send you a list of some of the questions so that you can be familiar before we visit.

Thanks again **[Participant's Name]** and have a great weekend!

Shawnda Schroeder

(218) 779-8222

[Shawnda.schroeder@und.edu](mailto:Shawnda.schroeder@und.edu)

Appendix B  
Consent Form

**INFORMED CONSENT**

**Researcher:** Shawnda Schroeder

**Contact:** [Shawnda.schroeder@und.edu](mailto:Shawnda.schroeder@und.edu); (218) 779-8222

**Departement:** Teaching & Learning (PhD Candidate)

**Purpose of the Sudy & Invitation to Particiapte**

You are being asked to participate in a research project based on your enrollment in a graduate program at the [University Name] as either an online, cohort or classroom adult learner. The purpose of this study is to explore the academic advising experiences of graduate adult learners who study in these three different learning environments. As a participant, you will be asked to set a date and location for an interview with the lead researcher. It is estimated that the interview will last roughly 90 minutes and no interview will run longer than two hours. Following the initial interview, you may be contacted by phone, no more than twice, to answer follow-up questions. These interviews/clarifications will be brief – no longer than 30 minutes. If you are willing, the interview will be tape recorded (without your name or any identification) for the purpose of review and later transcription.

The interview questions will be sent in advance so you have time to think about your responses; however, these questions serve simply as a guide and each interview will be unique. It is estimated that between six and nine students will participate.

**Risks and Confidentiality**

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Your real name will not be used at any time and the recording and transcription of any and all parts of your interviews will be coded for the purpose of review and in the final report. In addition, to make sure that the information shared in the final report is accurate, you will be given a draft of the researcher's comments and conclusions from your interview and allowed to make edits or suggestions.

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. However, if you feel uncomfortable you may ask to stop or choose not to answer a particular question. Your



participation is voluntary and your decision to not participate or to discontinue your participation at any time will not affect your current or future relations with the [University Name].

**Benefits**

The in-depth description of perceived advising experiences for the three adult learner groups has the potential to influence the advising system in the associated departments and learning environments at the university. This is both a benefit to the current learners that participate in the study and a benefit for future adult learners that require advisement in one of the three student groups in the future. It may also benefit those that participate (unintentionally) by reinforcing the importance of advising and utilizing their advising resources that are available.

**Statement of Research**

The researcher conducting this study is Shawnda Schroeder. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Shawnda at the information above. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone else.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participants Name: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix C  
Interview Protocol

**Interview Code:** \_\_\_\_\_

Perceived Advising Needs of Adult Learners: A Qualitative Analysis of Advising  
Experiences Among Online, Classroom, & Cohort Adult Learners

Interview Protocol

- || Interview recording tool(s) tested
- || Review purpose of the interview:  
[The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of graduate adult learners that study in these three different learning environments. It is estimated that the interview will last roughly 60 minutes and no interview will run longer than two hours. Following this initial interview, you may be contacted by phone, no more than twice, to answer follow-up questions. These interviews/clarifications will be brief – no longer than 30 minutes. If you are willing, this interview will be tape recorded (without your name or any identification) for the purpose of review and later transcription.]
- || Consent form signed

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's number of completed semesters in program: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Think of your most recent advising experience [on-campus; online; in a cohort] at this university. I would like you to tell me about this experience.
  - a. Possible probes: List four adjectives to describe this advising experience
    - i. Tell me more about . . .
  - b. You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_,
    - i. Tell me more about . . .
    - ii. What was [topic] like for you?
    - iii. Walk me through . . .
2. Now, think back to when you experienced what you would consider a good advising session as a graduate student. Please describe this experience for me.
  - a. Possible probes: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_,
    - i. Tell me more about . . .
    - ii. What was [topic] like for you?
    - iii. Walk me through . . .

3. Can you think of a time you were not satisfied with your advising, or had a bad advising experience as a graduate student?
  - a. If no experience: List four adjectives to describe a bad advising experience, or red flags that would make you think you would request a new advisor.
    - i. Possible probes: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_,
      1. Tell me more about . . .
      2. What was [topic] like for you?
      3. Walk me through . . .
4. Can you describe the characteristics or traits of a good advisor (even if you have not experienced them)? OR, from your description of a good advising session, can you describe the characteristics of this advising/advisor?
  - a. Possible probes: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_,
    - i. Tell me more about . . .
  - b. You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_, how would you define this?
5. Can you describe any traits or qualities of an advisor or advising session that you do not like, whether it has happened for you or not? OR, from your description of a bad advising session, can you describe the characteristics of this advising/advisor?
  - a. Possible probes: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_,
    - i. Tell me more about . . .
6. Can you write down key words, or define, what you perceive as your advising needs as a graduate student [online, on-campus, cohort] learner?
  - a. Possible probes: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_,
    - i. Tell me more about . . .
7. Is there something about your advising needs as a(n) [online, on-campus, cohort] learner that another learner wouldn't know?
  - a. Possible probes: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_
    - i. Tell me more about . . .

- || Thank participant
- || Assure them of confidentiality
- || Remind about potential follow-up
  - || Member-checking
- || Ask for any final questions of participant

Appendix D  
Process of Analysis

**\* Excerpt from personal research journal**

1. Transcribed all interviews
2. Went through all interviews (blind) and highlighted comments (electronically) related to this research (anything related to an advising experience/need). Did not delete other comments, but drew attention to those to consider for inclusion.
  - a. Blind – meaning without pre-determined code list and with an attempt to ignore pre-conceived perceptions of need
3. Went through all learners (blind) and gave a description/long code to all highlighted statements –organizational categories (Maxwell, pg. 98)
  - a. Blind – meaning without knowledge of which interview transcript I was reading or if the learner was online, cohort, or on-campus (though this was generally revealed in their question responses)
4. Listed all long codes in an excel document (over 100) and listed where these codes appeared (which interviews)
5. As new codes appeared on the excel document, went back to previous interviews to see if this had been present and overlooked or not present, or coded as something else
6. Created color categorization of codes that appeared among all learners (yellow); all online learners (blue); all on-campus learners (green); and all cohort learners (purple)
7. Reviewed all codes that appeared among only one of the participants' interviews and determined their need for inclusion
8. Identified all the codes that were unique to each learning medium and identified each code that was shared among two, i.e. a code that was apparent among all online and all cohort learners but wasn't present in the interview transcripts of the on-campus students
9. Searched various codes and code categories to identify themes – clusters of meaning (Creswell, 2007, p. 61)
10. Identified five salient themes and listed each long code that supports the stated theme
11. Reviewed all clean data again and noted areas for clarification among participant responses
12. Contacted all participants again with follow-up questions that related to identified themes and others that were needed for clarification of student's meaning
13. Reviewed all clean data again, and data in follow-up responses, to note where the identified themes were present
14. Reviewed themes for their place in the interview to determine potential relationship between themes

15. Had one peer review of themes – themes were identified as categories of advising experiences and not themes
16. Reviewed all data again, now applying the identified *categories* to statements within each interview and the participant follow-ups
17. Reviewed all categories to see if any hung together or were unique to one set of learners
18. Had second peer review of interpretation to go over theme development
19. Identified two phenomena related to advising experience – immediacy of response (which is the only theme that hangs with a particular type of learner) and the dual role of advising and advisor to create an experience of advisement
20. Completed artifact review to test the reliability of participants' responses and validity of interpretation. Reviewed all artifacts participants' referenced in their interviews.
21. Sent general theme discussion and individual interview transcripts (with no identifiers) to participants for review – member checking.
22. Additional review of literature to identify future implications of research and any connection to the identified themes.

## REFERENCES

- Advisement. (2012). In *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, The*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advisement>
- Advising. (2012). In *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, The*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advising>
- Advisor. (2012). In *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, The*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adviser>
- Allen, B. A. (1993). The student in higher education: Nontraditional student retention. *Catalyst*, 23(3), 19-22.
- Al –Salti, Z., & Hackney, R. (2011). Factors impacting knowledge transfer success in information systems outsourcing. *Journal of Enterprise Information Management*, 24, 455-468.
- American Psychological Association. (2009). *Publication manual of the APA* (6<sup>th</sup> edition). Washington, DC: APA.
- Aoki, K., & Pogroszewski, D. (1998). Virtual university reference model: A guide to delivering education and support services to the distance learner. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 1(3). Retrieved from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/aoki13.html>
- Applerouth, S., & Edles, L. D. (2007). *Sociological theory in the contemporary era: Text and readings*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Pine Forge Press.

- Aronson, J. (1994). A pragmatic view of thematic analysis. *Qualitative Report*, 2(1).  
Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/BackIssues/QR2-1/aronson.html/index.html>
- Baugh, K., Jr. (1990). *The methodology of Herbert Blumer*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Bean, J., & Metzner, B. (1985). A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research*, 55, 485-650.
- Beaudoin, M. (1990). The instructors changing role in distance education. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 4(2), 21-27.
- Bennett, S., Priest, A., & Macpherson, C. (1999). Learning about online learning: An approach to staff development for university teachers. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 15, 207-221.
- Berg, H. M., & Ferber, M. A. (1983). Men and women graduate students: Who succeeds and why? *Journal of Higher Education*, 54, 629-648.
- Bland, S. M. (2003). Advising adults: Telling or coaching? *Adult Learning*, 14(2), 6-8.
- Bleeker, G. W., Bleeker, M. M., & Bleeker, B. (2010). What millennial first year students need from academic advisors. *Academic Advising Today*, 33(1).
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interaction: Perspective and method*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bowl, M. (2001). Experiencing the barriers: Non-traditional students entering higher education. *Research Papers in Education*, 16(2), 141-160.
- Bowl, M. (2003). *Non-traditional entrants to higher education: 'They talk about people like me'*. Sterling, VA: Trentham Books.

- Braun , V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Brooks, P. A. (1998). Cohort communities in higher education: The best example of adult education. Proceedings from the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Adult Education Research Conference. San Antonio, TX.
- Bullough, R. V., Clark, D. C., Wentworth, N., & Hansen, J. M. (2001). Student cohorts, school rhythms, and teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Spring, 97-110.
- Carr, S. (2000). As distance education comes of age, the challenge is keeping the students. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, A39-A41.
- Carspecken, P. (1995). *Critical ethnography in educational research: A theoretical and practical guide*. Routledge, NY: New York.
- Chairs, M. J., McDonald, B. J., Shrover, P., Urbanski, B., & Vertin, D. (2002). Meeting the graduate education needs of Minnesota extension educators. *Journal of Extension*, 40(4). Retrieved from <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002august/rb4.php>
- Cole, R. A. (Eds.). (2000). *Issues in web-based pedagogy: A critical primer*. London: Greenwood Press.
- Collins, R. (1994). *Four sociological traditions*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Connor, K. R., & Killmer, N. (2001). Cohorts, collaboration, and community: Does contextual teacher education really work? *Action in Teacher Education*, 23(3), 46-53.



- Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). (1999). Serving adult learners in higher education: Findings from CAEL's benchmarking study. Retrieved from [http://www.cael.org/pdf/publication\\_pdf/CAEL%20Benchmarking%20Findings%20Executive%20Summary.pdf](http://www.cael.org/pdf/publication_pdf/CAEL%20Benchmarking%20Findings%20Executive%20Summary.pdf)
- Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). (2000). Serving adult learners in higher education: Principles of effectiveness, executive summary. Retrieved from [http://www.cael.org/pdf/publication\\_pdf/Summary%20of%20Alf%20Principles%20of%20Effectiveness.pdf](http://www.cael.org/pdf/publication_pdf/Summary%20of%20Alf%20Principles%20of%20Effectiveness.pdf)
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five traditions* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2011). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, INC.
- Crisp, G. (2010). The impact of mentoring on the success of community college students. *The Review of Higher Education*, 34(1), 39-60.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (1998). *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues*. Sage: London.
- Dinsmore, J., & Wenger, K. (2006). Relationships in preservice teacher preparation: From cohorts to communities. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 33(1), 57-74.
- Drake, J., & Stockwell, K. (2009). Academic advising "for good." *Academic Advising Today*, 32(4). Retrieved from <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/ePub/AAT32-4.htm#2>
- Edwards, T. S. (2007). Practice what we preach: Advising and the hiring process. *Academic Advising Today*, 30(1), 1-2.

- Ellis, S., & Kitzinger, C. (2002). Denying equality: An analysis of arguments against lowering the age of consent for sex between men. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology, 12*, 167-180.
- Faghihi, F. Y. (1998). A study of factors related to dissertation progress among doctoral candidates: Focus on student research self-efficacy as a result of their research training and experiences. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities & Social Sciences, 59*, 1456.
- Fenning, K. (2004). Cohort based learning: Application to learning organizations and student academic success. *College Quarterly, 7*(1). Retrieved from <http://www.senecac.on.ca/quarterly/2004-vol07-num01-winter/fenning.html>
- Flint, T. A. (2005). How well are we serving our adult learners? Investigating the impact of institutions on success and retention. *Council on Adult and Experiential Learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED509933.pdf>
- Freeday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 5*(1), 2-11.
- Frey, R. (2007). Helping adult learners succeed: Tools for two-year colleges. *Council on Adult and Experiential Learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.cael.org/pdf/HelpingAdultLearnersSucceed.pdf>
- Frith, H., & Gleeson, K. (2004). Clothing and embodiment: Men managing body image and appearance. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity, 5*, 40-48.
- Frost, S. H. (1993). Developmental advising: Practices and attitudes of faculty advisors. *National Academic Advising Association Journal, 13*(2), 15-20.

- Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Granger, D., & Benke, M. (1998). Supporting learners at a distance from inquiry through completion. In C.C. Gibson (Ed.), *Distance Learners in Higher Education* (pp. 127-137). Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing.
- Grives, J. E., & Wemmerus, V. (1988). Developing models of graduate student degree progress. *Journal of Higher Education*, 59(2), 163-189.
- Hadden, R. (1997). *Sociological theory: An introduction to the classical tradition*. Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press.
- Hanley, B., & Mather, D. (1999). Cohort grouping and preservice teacher education: Effective pedagogical development. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 24(3), 235-250.
- Haricombe, L. J., & Prabha, C. (2008). F. W. Lancaster as scholar, teacher, and mentor: Reflections of students. *Library Trends*, 56, 747-762.
- Hensley, L. G., & Kinser, K. (2001). Rethinking adult learner persistence: Implications for counselors. *Adultspan Journal*, 3(2), 88-100.
- Herzig, A. H. (2004). 'Slaughtering this beautiful math': Graduate women choosing and leaving mathematics. *Gender and Education*, 16, 379-395.
- Hesse, M., & Mason, M. (2005). The case for learning communities. *Community College Journal*, 76(1), 30-35.
- Husserl, E. (1965). *Phenomenology and the crisis of philosophy*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Husserl, E. (1975). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

- Imel, S. (2002). Adult learning in cohort groups: Practice application brief. *Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education*, 24, 3-4.
- Jones, C. (1993). An unpopular recommendation – Professional advisors only! *Adult Learning*, 4(4), 31.
- Justyna, E., & Cofer, R. D. (2010). Ten “must have” tips for new (and not so new) academic advisors. *Academic Advising Today*, 33(1). Retrieved from <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/ePub/AAT33-1.htm#13>
- Lau, L. K. (2003). Institutional factors affecting student retention. *Education*, 124(1), 126-136.
- Leonard, M. Q. (2002). An outreach framework for retaining nontraditional students at open-admission institutions. *Journal of College Counseling*, 5, 60-73.
- Light, R. J. (2001). The power of good advice for students. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 47(25), B11.
- Livesey, C. (2006). The relationship between positivism, interpretivism and sociological research methods. *Revision: Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA)*. Retrieved from [www.sociology.org/uk](http://www.sociology.org/uk)
- Lloyd, S., & Bristol, S. (2006). Modeling mentorship and collaboration for BSN and MSN students in a community clinical practicum. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 45(4), 129-132.
- Lowe, A., & Toney, M. (2000). Academic advising: Views of the givers and takers. *Journal of Student Retention*, 2(2), 93.

- Ludwig-Hardman, S., & Dunlap, J. C. (2003). Learner support services for online students: Scaffolding for success. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 4(1), 1-9.
- Luna, G., & Cullen, D. L. (1998). Do graduate students need mentoring? *College Student Journal*, 32, 322-330.
- Magoon, T. M., & Holland, J. L. (1984). Research training and supervision. In S. D. Brown, & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Handbook of counseling psychology* (pp. 682-715). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Marques, J. F., & Luna, R. (2005). Advising adult learners: The practice of peer partisanship. *Recruitment & Retention*, June, 5-6.
- Martin, K. (2004). Academic advising: Responding from an administrative perspective. *Academic Advising Today*, 27(4). Retrieved from <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/ePub/AAT27-4.htm>
- Maxwell, J. A. (1992). Understanding and validity in qualitative research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62, 279-301.
- Mead, G. H. (1926). The nature of aesthetic experience. *International Journal of Ethics*, 36, 382-392.
- Mead, G. H. (1934/1962). *Mind, self and society*. C. W. Morris (Ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Mead, G. H. (1938). *The philosophy of the act*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Morse, J. M. (2000). Determining sample size. *Qualitative Health Research*, 10(1), 3-5.

Noel-Levitz. (2008). 2008 research report. *National Adult Student Priorities Report*.

Retrieved from

[https://www.noellevitz.com/upload/Papers\\_and\\_Research/2008/ASPSReport08.pdf](https://www.noellevitz.com/upload/Papers_and_Research/2008/ASPSReport08.pdf)

Noel-Levitz. (2011) 2011 research report. *National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report*. 1-16.

Norris, C. J., & Barnett, B. (1994). Cultivating a new leadership paradigm: From cohorts to communities. Proceedings from *Annual Meeting of the University Council on Educational Administration*. Philadelphia: PA.

Office of Institutional Research (2011). \* *University population by degree/program* [Data file].

Onnismaa, J. (2003). The personal study program as a tool for career planning and personalization of adult learning. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 40(3), 33-42.

Peck, L. G., & Varney, J. (2009). Advising IS teaching: Providing adult learners with strategies for self-advocation. Retrieved from NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources Web site:

<http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/M02/Adult-Learner.htm>

Polson, C. J. (2003). Adult graduate students challenge institutions to change. *New Directions for Student Services*, 102, 59-68.

Potthoff, D., Dinsmore, J. A., & Moore, T. J. (2001). The diversity cohort – A professional development program for college faculty. *The Teacher Educator*, 37(2), 145-156.

- Reynolds, K., & Hebert, F. T. (1998). Learning achievements of students in cohort groups. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 46*(3), 34-42.
- Richardson, J., & King, E. (1998). Adult students in higher education: Burden or boon?" *Journal of Higher Education, 69*, 65–88.
- Ritzer, G., & Goodman, D. (2004). *Sociological theory* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Ritzer, G., Ross, L. R., & Powell, R. (1990). Relationships between gender and success in distance education courses: A preliminary investigation. *Research in Distance Education, 2*(2), 10-11.
- Roulston, K. (2001). Data analysis and ‘theorizing as ideology.’ *Qualitative Research, 1*, 279-302.
- Roulston, K. (2010). *Reflective interviewing: A guide to theory and practice*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Rovai, A. P. (2001). Building classroom community at a distance: A case study. *Education Technology Research and Development Journal, 49*(4), 35-50.
- Rovai, A. P. (2003). In search of higher persistence rates in distance education online programs. *Internet and Higher Education, 6*, 1-16.
- Rowntree, D. (1995). Teaching and learning online: A correspondence education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? *British Journal of Education Technology, 26*, 205-215.
- Sapon-Shevin, M., & Chandler-Olcott, K. (2001). Student cohorts: Communities of critique or dysfunctional families? *The Journal of Teacher Education, 52*, 250-364.

- Sathe, R. S. (2009). Using the cohort model in accounting education. *Accounting Education, an International Journal*, 18(1), 33-49.
- Schlosser, L. Z., Knox, S., Moskovitz, A. R., & Hill, C. E. (2003). A qualitative examination of graduate advising relationships: The advisee perspective. *Journal for Counseling Psychology*, 50(2), 1-27. DOI:10.1037/0022-0167.50.2.178
- Schutz, A. (1967). *The phenomenology of the social world*. Lehnert: Northwestern University Press.
- Selke, M. J., & Wong, T. D. (1993). The mentoring-empowered model: Professional role functions in graduate student advisement. *National Academic Advising Association Journal*, 13(2), 21-26.
- Sherry, L. (1996). Issues in distance learning. *International Journal of Educational Telecommunication*, 1, 337-365.
- Simmel, G. (1959). The problem of sociology. In K. Wolff (Ed.), *Essays in sociology, philosophy, and aesthetics* (pp. 310-336). New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks.
- Simmel, G. (1971). Fashion. In D. Lvine (Ed.), *Georg Simmel* (pp. 294-323). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Skype Limited. (2011). *About Skype*. Retrieved from <http://about.skype.com/>.
- Sorrentino, D. M. (2007). The SEEK mentoring program: An application of the goal setting theory. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 8, 241-250.
- Stokes, P. J. (2008). Hidden in plain sight: Adult learners forge a new tradition in higher education. *A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education*.



- Tuckett, A. (2005). Applying thematic analysis theory to practice: A researcher's experience. *Contemporary Nurse, 19*, 75-87.
- United States Census Data. (2010). *State (state name removed to protect anonymity) population change* [data file]. Retrieved from <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/data/>
- Weber, M. (1949). *The methodology of the social sciences*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Weber, M. (1958). *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. New York, NY: Scribner's.
- Weber, M. (1968). *Economy and society* (Vols. 1-3). Totowa, NJ: Bedminster Press.
- Wiesenberg, F. (2001). The roller coaster life of the online learner: How distance educators can help students cope. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education, 27*(2), 33-59.
- Wilkinson, S. (2000). Women with breast cancer talking causes: Comparing content, biographical and discursive analyses. *Feminism and Psychology, 10*, 431-460.
- Witters, L. A., & Miller, H. G. (1970). College advising: Analysis of advisee-advisor roles. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association for Teacher Education, 9*, 36-40.
- Wrench, J. S., & Punyanunt, N. M. (2004). Advisee-advisor communication: An exploratory study examining interpersonal communication variables in the graduate advisee-advisor relationship. *Communication Quarterly, 52*, 224-236.
- Zimmerman, B. B., & Danette, P. (2007). Technical communication teachers as mentors in the classroom: Extending an invitation to students. *Technical Communications Quarterly, 16*(2), 175-200.