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## Graduate Student Perceptions of Academic Advising During a Global Pandemic

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GRADUATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC ADVISING  
DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

of Winona State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Education

by

Carson L. Perry

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WINONA STATE UNIVERSITY

The Dissertation Committee approves the following dissertation  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

GRADUATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ADVISING DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

Magnifying the historical challenges faced by graduate students, the COVID – 19 global pandemic caused significant disruption to graduate education and forced abrupt changes to personal, professional, and academic aspects of life. Though high attrition rates plague many graduate programs, advising is recognized as crucial to graduate student persistence and success. This qualitative phenomenological study explored graduate student perceptions of advising during the COVID – 19 global pandemic. The sample consisted of eight individuals who were enrolled as full-time graduate students during the 2019 – 2020 and 2020 – 2021 academic years. Four components of Situated Learning Theory, as identified by Stein (1998), provided a framework for this study, and include content, context, community of practice, and participation. Data collection methods included questionnaires and individual semi-structured interviews which were analyzed using initial and pattern coding. Four themes emerged from the data analysis process: advisor access and responsiveness, meaningful advisor relationships, change in setting and shift in student priorities. Some participants provided insights as to how quality advising promoted persistence and feelings of support. Others expressed frustration and additional stress stemming from perceptions of poor advising practiced. This study illuminates the important role of advising in student persistence through times of disruption, like the COVID-19 global pandemic. The foundation of a meaningful relationship and communication are vital for developing an individualized approach to advising, which is vital for graduate student success.

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Carson L. Perry

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The advising needs of post-baccalaureate students are often more complex than those of undergraduate learners and these needs are understood because of a foundation of adult learning theory and literature ripe for application. Graduate students face a multitude of academic challenges unique to the individual (Lee, 2020). The intricate needs of graduate students include more than basic decisions about course registration ahead of each semester (Preisman, 2019). Graduate student advising needs include important guidance in academic socialization, career development, and development of community among learners to enhance support and belonging (Preisman, 2019). Although the rigor of graduate level academics and career preparation alone is demanding, many challenges faced by students derive from external factors (Lee, 2020). As such, academic advising is more complex at the graduate degree level as advisors must assist students with navigating circumstances resulting from the intersection of one or more components of the student's life. Inadequate advising impedes graduate student success, resulting in higher attrition rates. Moreover, graduate students and professional learners who take classes online or remotely are even more disparaged when institutions fail to meet academic advising needs (Kuo & Belland, 2016; Rigler et al, 2017).

Disruptive events, such as the coronavirus, or SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic, only magnify the unique advising needs for graduate students, while presenting additional barriers to student success (Blankenstein et al., 2020; Elmer & Durocher, 2020; Jaggars et al., 2020). In addition to the existing needs in graduate student advising, the individual's obligations -- including family, work, and personal priorities -- exacerbate the work-life-balance issue (Jean-

Baptiste et al., 2020). The need for academic socialization and community existed in graduate-level learning environments prior to the COVID-19 disruption (O'Keefe et al., 2020; Setiawan, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic forced many in-person programs, including graduate student advising, to an online format requiring particular skill and attention to meeting student needs and ensuring student success in a more complex and remote environment (O'Keefe et al., 2020; Setiawan, 2020). Forcing graduate students to forgo in-person meetings with advisors, remote academic advising further contributes to the lack of socialization and community necessary to navigate the complexities of graduate school and existing life responsibilities (Blankstein et al., 2020; Elmer & Durocher, 2020; Jagers et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020; Soria & Horgos, 2020). Clearly, the complex nature of graduate student advising presents unique challenges for advisors. The ability of the advisor to meet individual student needs either creates additional barriers or improves overall learning, increasing the probability of student success and post-baccalaureate program completion (Twale, 2015).

Developing and maintaining relationships with students is crucial for effective graduate advising, especially during complex times (Elmer & Durocher, 2020). Effective advising promotes trust, provides programmatic guidance, is individualized, fosters perceived value, and helps to maintain open lines of communication, all supporting growth of student confidence and success (Schroeder & Terras 2015). Conversely, graduate students across the United States cite poor advising as a significant challenge in an already stressful environment (Applegate, 2012; Green, 2016; Park et al., 2011). Uncertain times leave students desiring additional support and communication from the university and the program of study including engaged academic advising, which is especially challenging when all parties are forced into a fully remote setting (Blankstein, 2020).

## **Background of the Problem**

Over the past 50 years, high attrition has plagued graduate programs despite efforts to remedy, such as implementing mentoring or advising programs (Cochran et al., 2014; Di Pierro; 2012; Groenvynck et al., 2013; Satterfield et al., 2018; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Facing budget deficits due to declining undergraduate enrollment and insufficient funding, many higher education administrators attempt to capture a share of the increasing graduate student enrollment to offset budget deficits (Marcus, 2019; Murakami, 2020; NCES, 2020). Although recruiting new students is vital to enrollment management, retention efforts garner special attention because retaining existing students is more cost-effective than recruiting new students (Waters et al., 2015; White, 2015). Although a multitude of factors influence graduate student attrition or retention, such as motivation, financial constraints, and conflicting obligations, academic advisors possess the greatest ability to influence student outcomes (Bitzer, 2011; Gube et al., 2017; Leijen et al., 2016; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). Despite the importance of academic advising for graduate student retention, some students perceive their individual needs are ignored, creating difficulties as they progress through a program (Virtanen et al., 2017).

In an analysis of 79 research articles published between 2010 and 2017 pertaining to doctoral attrition and persistence, Rigler et al. (2017) highlighted the significant role advisor - student relationships play in meeting many of the unique needs of graduate students. Rigler et al. (2017) asserted that the relationships which are non-hierarchical and positive in nature are one of the most vital contributing components to doctoral student success. Students and programmatic leadership agree on the importance of the relationship, but Bégin and Gérard (2013) cited low rates of student satisfaction with advisors. When successful, the relationship addresses a wide range of needs for students including access to frequent communication (Holmes et al., 2014),

engaged, valuable interactions (Holley & Caldwell, 2011), timely and appropriate feedback (Van de Schoot et al., 2013), access to increased collaborative opportunities (Hardre & Hackett, 2015), and individualized learning (Brill et al., 2014). Graduate student needs are unique to the individual and every component of the student identity must be considered.

### **Adult Learners**

Adult learners possess distinct characteristics necessitating unique support from academic advisors (Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Adult learners are often consumers who value intrinsic and extrinsic rewards and understand future benefits (Francois, 2014). Additionally, the group appreciates connections between the academic, personal, and work components of life (Stevens, 2014). Adult students benefit from academic advising practices assisting in making connections between various parts of life and when academic advising supports students in such a way, the advisor develops an intimate knowledge of the individual student's needs. Academic advisors do not always provide direct support for every need; however, with knowledge of the institution, program, and individual student, academic advisors are positioned to connect adult learners with resources the student may not even know are needed (Sapp & Williams, 2015). Some of the resources adult students benefit from include academic support groups, counseling, tutoring, or partners for collaboration (Sogunro, 2015; Stevens, 2014). Finally, academic advisors must demonstrate respect for the individual student and provide a level of customer service beyond what is provided to undergraduate students (Firestein, 2020).

In 2017, the full-time post-baccalaureate student population consisted of 63% to 93% adult learners and a minimum of 88% of the total part-time student population (NCES, 2020). Furthermore, graduate student enrollment in 2018 increased to 3 million students from 2.2



million in 2000, with expected growth to 3.1 million by 2029 (NCES, 2020). The growing population of adult learners presents college and university professionals, specifically graduate student advisors, with challenges that require an understanding of a broad spectrum of resources and advising practices (Gravel, 2012).

Collignon (2020) suggested that adult learners require flexibility to meet life demands and that quality customer service and respect promote positive relationships with the student population. One specific way institutions enhance the student experience is by providing information through a broad spectrum of communication channels, including meetings, phone calls, emails, and social media (Exter et al., 2014; Gaines, 2014; Jones & Hansen, 2014). Frequent communication helps students remain connected to campus and less likely to experience isolation (Irani et al., 2014). Moreover, when the information continuously originates from a trusted source, such as an advisor, an opportunity for building relationships emerges, which is a vital factor in graduate student success (Reddy et al., 2020).

Schroeder and Terras (2015) interviewed adult graduate learners to develop an understanding of the student's perceptions of advising experiences and needs in various environments. The three groups of participants included online students, traditional in-person learners, and members of a cohort. Schroeder and Terras (2015, p. 43) identified the advising characteristics of each group:

1. Online students navigate graduate programs with a geographical distance from the institution and do not meet with advisors in-person.
2. Cohort members progress through graduate programs at the same pace by taking the same courses together and are distanced from the institution. However, cohort members

may schedule in-person advising sessions, typically only a couple of times over the duration of the program.

3. On-campus learners frequently visit the physical institution and maintain access to advisors.

Resulting from the study, Schroeder and Terras (2015) stressed the importance of holistic and complex advising for adult graduate learners, regardless of program modality. However, many programs and institutions fail to adequately integrate these recommendations.

### **Online Program Options**

To make academic advising with graduate students even more complex, a growing number of adult learners and graduate students enroll in online programs because of the convenience, flexibility, and lower cost potential, although attrition rates remain higher than traditional, in-person programs (Kuo & Belland, 2016; Lansing, 2017; Seaman et al., 2018). Online graduate students must often balance competing priorities of personal life, work, and academics; quality advising may help to alleviate many issues arising from all aspects of the student's life (Exter et al., 2014; Gaines, 2014). Drake (2011) cited advising as central to graduate student retention based on the ability to connect with students beyond a formal setting and to help customize developmental opportunities and support mechanisms unique to the individual.

### **Addition of Global Pandemic Stress**

The COVID – 19 pandemic emerged in Wuhan, China in 2019, caused by a new strain of novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The respiratory illness presents a

wide range of mild to severe symptoms between 2 and fourteen days after infection. The duration of incubation results in a highly contagious disease which quickly spread across the globe by mid 2020. With nearly 200 million cases resulting in almost 4 million deaths by July of 2021 (WHO, 2021), nearly every aspect of human life was impacted. Before the COVID - 19 pandemic, Evans et al. (2018) reported rates of anxiety and depression among graduate students to be six times higher than in the general public. The emergence of COVID-19 caused far more than a simple inconvenience to education systems; it proved to be a mass trauma event exerting stress globally (Horesh & Brown, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified challenges faced by graduate students. Horesh and Brown (2020) revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic created a new type of mass trauma. The unpredictability of the virus increased anticipatory anxiety, adding higher levels of mental distress to individuals. Chrikov et al. (2020) reported higher rates of major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder in students than before the pandemic, especially among students failing to adjust well to remote instruction. The mental health toll resulting from the global pandemic has necessitated urgent attention and is cause for concern (Torales et al., 2020). Almost all participants in one study (95%) responded that COVID-19 experiences were "very negative," or "moderately negative," noting job loss, worry, fear, and uncertainty as a result of the pandemic (Jean-Baptiste et al., 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, graduate students often struggled to navigate the complexities of life, work, and progressing through an advanced degree (Thompson & Prieto, 2013). As COVID-19 adversely affects the world and transforms the educational landscape,

graduate students also experience rapidly changing and increasingly intricate challenges (Mohan, 2020), adding to the difficulties of their already complex life. Not only do graduate students contend with the historical challenges of graduate programs but must also contend with widespread disruption from COVID-19. Information about graduate students' perceptions of advising needs during a global pandemic is lacking. Conducting a study on this issue may yield information that could be important to responsive approaches to graduate students when they face such difficulties.

The pandemic represents a critical inflection point, presents unique challenges for the educational sector, and continues forcing stakeholders to reconsider practices, including academic advising. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other industry organizations continue to respond differently, focusing on alleviating the arising and evolving issues (Setiawan, 2020). Learning in a physical setting is not tenable during a pandemic. Thus, educators must choose between high-technology and low-technology solutions to deliver programming, depending on power reliability, internet availability, and digital skills of learners and educators (Setiawan, 2020). Options range from the integrated digital learning platforms, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), broadcasts, to video lessons.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, graduate training occurred with minimal disturbance across various institutions of higher learning. Unlike undergraduate education, graduate education requires a closer interaction between supervisors and students (Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Students benefit from faculty advisor's assistance in developing research proposals, identifying research questions, and achieving research objectives since graduate studies focus on research. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented several challenges to graduate students since

receiving guidance from supervisors in the same manner has not been available (Blankstien, 2020).

### **Advising Considerations**

The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected advising practices, as an important extension of the learning environment (Olsey et al., 2020). Advisors play a vital role in assisting students as they select courses with an appropriate delivery modality, as well as providing students with emotional support, access to opportunities, resources, and academic mentorship. The transition of higher education during a pandemic to a remote setting was abrupt and caused high levels of concern and increased graduate student needs due to lags in coursework completion and reduced access to resources such as advising and the persistence of the disruption was cause for concern (Day et al., 2020).

For many students, graduate advising has taken place online during the pandemic, but several challenges remain. First, not all students are able to maintain consistent access to technology, and the education system is and requires students to be overly dependent on the ability to access technology (Jaggars et al., 2020). Graduate students specifically require motivation, often provided by supervisors and other academic community members in support networks (Woolderink et al., 2015). With online advising and consultations, graduate students heavily rely on self-motivation, which is rarely effective (Bawa, 2016).

Online programs require virtual communication to foster connections and relationship building between faculty or staff and students. Transitioning to a remote format presents another challenge since most graduate learners are working professionals, resulting in reduced time allocated to replicating the benefits of in-person contact (Schroeder & Terras, 2015).

Additionally, while some graduate students may be academically advanced, not all possess the required digital literacy due to a range of factors, including age and socioeconomic status. Graduate students often require extra assistance outside of mastering the course content, including academic and professional socialization, and navigating issues arising from other parts of a student's life impacting academic progress (Fedynich & Bain, 2011; Gill et al., 2012). In contrast, it is possible to satisfy the needs of undergraduate students in an online format because the content emphasis is learning basic concepts of a course or program of study. However, graduate students require closer supervision and motivation to achieve complex learning outcomes (van Rensburg et al., 2016).

Over the past decade, the landscape of higher education has evolved and experienced significant growth in online course and program offerings (Seaman et al., 2018). Many colleges anticipate an increase in online courses following the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 30% of courses that used an online modality were likely to be taken online before the pandemic, compared to an anticipated 80% following the pandemic. A 2019 report by Changing Landscape of Online Education (CHLOE) suggested that large colleges were likely to enroll 84% of graduate students in online courses, while mid-size institutions would enroll 60% of learners in online classes (Garrett et al., 2019). Meanwhile, smaller institutions could enroll only 48% of learners online. The study analyzed at least 280 online offerings in both public and private educational institutions. Medium-sized institutions were lagging in embracing blended courses, but smaller institutions were doing better as compared to the larger in enrolling students in blended courses. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning became increasingly popular, but smaller colleges were disadvantaged in many ways, largely due to limited resources.

Higher education continues to bolster graduate students' participation in learning during the COVID-19 pandemic by defining the duration of distance learning units based on individual students' self-regulation skills. The current situation has necessitated the creation of communities, as well as the enhancement of connections lost due to the transition to an online environment (Blankstien et al., 2020). Creating communities involving teachers, school managers, and other critical stakeholders would mitigate a sense of helplessness, and loneliness, while facilitating a shared experience with coping strategies whenever learners experience difficulties (Day et al., 2020). Responses also seek to address the psychological challenges that graduate students face in the current learning environment.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore graduate students' perceptions of advising during significant program disruptions, like the COVID-19 global pandemic. The current COVID-19 pandemic worsened an already stressful journey for graduate students, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Blankstein et al., 2020). Since many institutions worldwide closed physical campuses, students who wished to continue in programs have had to enroll in online coursework and access services like advising remotely. However, many students enrolled in small and mid-size institutions struggle to progress since the institutions lack preparation to accommodate online courses or are unable to support students' increased needs (Mokhtar & Gross, 2020).

## **Research Questions**

Four overarching research questions, aligned with the categories of Situated Learning Theory (Stein, 1998), guided the inquiry for this qualitative phenomenological study:

**Research Question 1:** How did the content of advising sessions and communication provided by advisors support graduate students during the pandemic?

**Research Question 2:** What are graduate students' perceptions of advisor responsiveness to their contextual needs during the pandemic?

**Research Question 3:** How do graduate students perceive advisors' efforts to promote connectedness to the larger learning community?

**Research Question 4:** How do graduate students feel about their participation in the advising process during the pandemic?

## **Qualitative Characteristics and Research Design**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore perceptions of graduate students' advising experience during the COVID-19 pandemic through individual semi-structured interviews. In these interviews, participants were asked to reflect on the nature of advising support from graduate programs, identify any advising issues experienced, and discuss how they used advising resources, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Qualitative research was chosen as a research methodology because it uses words and open-ended questions to explore the meaning ascribed to human issues (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Questions and procedures that emerge from the data collection occur typically in the participants' setting (Campbell, 2014). Observations of individuals occur in a natural context or environment, not a controlled environment (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).



Although tools such as audio recording devices or cameras document information, the researcher analyzes and interprets the resulting data. Furthermore, in qualitative research, the investigator frequently collects data from multiple types of open-ended sources (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

Qualitative research relies on a deductive and inductive analysis of the data to produce themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The themes that emerge from data collected in the field represent a dynamic process in which the researcher digs deeper into a problem and becomes more knowledgeable about the topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Throughout the data analysis process, the investigator reflects upon personal experience to understand the lens through which the information is filtered and acknowledges any inherent bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The result of such an inquiry is a robust description of the topic under study that considers multiple perspectives and accurately represents the sample population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Definition of Terms**

This investigation intended to explore graduate students' perceptions of advising during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the researcher used the following definitions for the purpose of this study:

**Academic advising:** “Academic advising applies knowledge of the field to empower students and campus and community members to successfully navigate academic interactions related to higher education” (Larson et al., 2018, p. 86).

**Adult learner:** “Any student, regardless of age, who has adult responsibilities beyond college classes, and for whom those adult responsibilities take priority in times of crisis” (NACADA’s Advising Adult Learners Commission, n.d, para 2).

**COVID-19:** A highly contagious respiratory illness that emerged from Wuhan, China, in 2019 and quickly evolved into a global pandemic. It is also known as coronavirus or COVID (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

**Graduate student:** An individual working toward an advanced degree, such as a master's or Doctorate. Also known as a post-baccalaureate student (NCES, 2021).

**Mentoring:** A purposeful and personal relationship in which a more experienced person (i.e., the mentor) provides guidance, feedback, and wisdom to facilitate the growth and development of a less experienced person (i.e., the mentee). Mentoring consists of one-to-one interactions that involve the delivery of guidance, feedback, and lessons learned. (McWilliams, 2017, pg. 70).

### **Limitations**

In research design, limitations refer to factors outside of the investigator's control (Furfaro et al., 2020). Guba and Lincoln (1981) posited the importance of trustworthiness, or rigor, in qualitative research; however, it proves problematic for some researchers to achieve. Furthermore, participants' willingness to share information with the researcher was a limitation (Kelly et al., 2017). Another limitation was participant truthfulness. Rudestam and Newton (2015) asserted that the principal investigator must satisfy questions about the thoroughness of the research. Finally, generalizability was a limitation of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). The study's data and conclusions apply only for the purposes of the specific study site. The study intended not to generalize findings but rather to provide insights into individuals' lived experiences in a specific context at a specific point in time.

## **Delimitations**

Delimitation's outline factors a researcher intends to include or omit in the research and are vital for establishing the boundaries of a study (Ellis & Levy, 2009). Delimitations result from the researcher's control over aspects of the study by including or excluding criteria emerging from the limitations (Simon & Goes, 2013). The investigator delimited participant selection to one graduate-level program in the United States' Midwestern region. The sample size was delimited to three to ten participants. A small sample size is a hallmark of qualitative research and a phenomenological design intended to gain rich and thick descriptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participation in the study requires students to be full-time in one specific academic program, matriculating during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher delimited participant selection to students with full-time status during the 2019 - 2020 and 2020 - 2021 academic years, ensuring participants experience graduate school before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher used purposeful sampling to identify and select participants who fit the defined criteria in this proposed study.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study is potentially significant because it seeks to understand graduate student perceptions of advising needs during widespread disruption like that of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the study may lead to improving the graduate student advising experience during times of disruption and inform the work of professionals who serve in an advising capacity with specific responsibility for advising graduate students. Adding to the body of knowledge on the long-term influence of disruptive events like COVID-19 might assist

graduate schools in becoming more agile in understanding and meeting the unique advising needs of graduate students, thus positively impacting student retention and success.

### **Study Overview**

This qualitative inquiry consists of three chapters. Chapter I introduced graduate student academic advising and situates the topic within the context of COVID-19. Additionally, the chapter provides a robust introduction to the identified problem and goals of the study. Chapter II identifies, summarizes, and analyzes literature pertinent to this study. The critical analysis relies on current literature, with exceptions made for the theoretical framework and historical perspectives. Chapter III provides an in-depth discussion of the study methodology and design and justifies the approach. Chapter IV presents findings from this study. Finally, Chapter V discuss the implications and recommendations of the research and conclude the study.

### **Summary**

Graduate students experience a wide range of challenges presented by the intersection of various components of their identities: student, professional, friend, family member, and more. The challenges are unique to each student, requiring individualized advising to promote student success. However, inadequate advising is frequently cited as a contributing factor to student attrition. Exacerbating graduate student support networks and resources, the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for further research into graduate student advising experiences during times of mass disruption.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This study seeks to explore graduate student perceptions of academic advising during a significant disruption like the COVID-19 global pandemic. Comparing the meaning of shared human experiences with the body of research knowledge adds value to the decision-making process and lends credibility to developing interventions and approaches to solve problems. This review of literature provides a succinct discussion and synthesis of information regarding this inquiry. Overarching sections include a historical perspective of advising, current literature of graduate student advising, effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education practices and procedures, and a theoretical framework.

#### **Historical Perspective of Advising**

The development of academic advising over the past 200 years warrants reflection and inspection due to the increasingly vital function of the field (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016). Understanding how academic advising evolved and the impetus for change provides insights into current strengths and reasons for the field's deficiencies. Himes and Schulenberg (2016) suggested that boundaries of current practice emerge from the advancement of the profession and illuminates potential future trajectories. This historical perspective of academic advising covers four predominant eras of academic advising, frequently cited by scholars: before 1870, 1870 – 1970, 1970 – 2003, and 2003 – present (Frost, 2000; Kuhn 2008).

## **The First Era of Advising: Before 1870**

The creation of Harvard College established the foundation for higher education in America in 1636 (Cook, 2009). Eight more institutions emerged leading up to the American Revolution; however, these colleges barely resemble the landscape of modern higher education (Rudolph, 1990). In fact, in this first era of advising, formal academic advising did not exist as education was prescriptive and designed to create lawyers, doctors, and ministers from the sons of the wealthy (Gordon et al., 2011). Attending small, elite colleges became a status symbol, networks for the wealthy, and reinforced the social stratification (Rudolph, 1990; Thelin, 2011). College curriculum instilled a traditional understanding of manliness in young men via rigorous coursework and stringent discipline. Authoritarian leadership removed any personal or nurturing aspects of interactions with faculty to reinforce the traditional beliefs (Thelin, 2011).

Frost (2000) explains that after the American Revolution, a shift in the purpose of higher education occurred. Colleges began educating a wider breadth of the population for greater social good rather than individual gain. In the subsequent 100 years, enrolment in higher education skyrocketed due to the creation of over 450 institutions (Geiger, 2000). Additionally, the coursework transformed into specific subject areas, and faculty became specialized, and some institutions granted students the freedom to select courses. In 1841, Rutherford B. Hayes wrote a letter to his mother from Kenyon College that is widely cited as the first mention of the term "adviser" when he explained a new initiative from the President of the institution:

A new rule has been established that each student shall choose from among the faculty someone who is to be his adviser and friend in all matters in which assistance is desired and is to be the medium of communication between the student and faculty. This I like very much. My patron is a tutor in the Grammar School who has graduated since I came

here. Upon the whole, the President governs very well for those who intend to take every opportunity to evade the laws. But he is rather hard on those who are disposed to conduct themselves improperly. (Hayes & Williams, 1922, p. 54)

### **The Second Era of Advising: 1870 – 1970**

Frost (2000) describes the years between 1870 – 1970 as a period of academic advising implementation by institutions throughout higher education. However, educators, administrators, and scholars neglected to examine the practice to establish theories, goals, or methods (Frost, 2000). Gordon et al. (2011) described that beginning in the 1870's curriculum offerings rapidly grew, leaving students with decisions about what courses to take. The promotion of electives and the advising process of the time reshaped higher education into the modern-day system (Gordon et al., 2011; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010). During this time, institutions such as Johns Hopkins University, Harvard, Boston College, and the University of Chicago established formal advising programs (Gilman, 1886; Harper, 1905; Rudolph, 1962).

During the century-long second era of academic advising, advising systems predominantly served as mechanisms for course selection approval and as an attempt to bridge the growing gap between faculty and students (Gordon et al., 2011). Other functions faculty once held, such as programming, orientation, and psychologists transitioned to stand-alone positions (Rudolph, 1962). In particular, advances in educational psychology codified the need for the various functions by promoting development of the whole student, rather than just in specific areas (Schetlin, 1969). This student-centered approach to higher education emerged in the 1920s and gained significant traction through the 1930s and 1940s.

In 1937, the American Council on Education (ACE) facilitated a conference focused on investigating issues related to student personnel work, identifying tools, and promoting standardization of practice (Schetlin, 1969). The publication resulting from the conference, *The Student Personnel Point of View* (American College Student Personnel Association, 1937), highlighted and promoted progressive practices such as holistic student development, encouraging students to maximize individual potential, and a comprehensive approach to learning both in and outside of the classroom (Roberts, 2007). The document solidified the need for and legitimized specific components of modern student services and student affairs.

Despite the maturation of a student-centered focus, the general system of American higher education maintained parental responsibilities until the 1960s. Lee (2011) described the relationship as "in loco parentis," relating to the treatment of students by colleges and universities. *In loco parentis* is a Latin phrase meaning "in the place of a parent" (Garner, 2009). The legal term allows individuals or organizations to act with the legal privileges and responsibilities of a guardian. In this case, colleges and universities maintained full latitude in developing students and controlling every aspect of students' lives, in and out of the classroom (Lee, 2011). Developing students meant developing every aspect through control and discipline. Lee (2011, p. 67) illustrated the significance of faculty and administration control with a quote from the first President of Johns Hopkins University's inaugural address:

The College implies, as a general rule, restriction rather than freedom; tutorial rather than professional guidance; residence within appointed bounds; the chapel, the dining hall, and the daily inspection. The college theoretically stands in loco parentis; it does not afford a very wide scope; it gives a liberal and substantial foundation on which the university instruction may be wisely built. (Gilman, 1876, para. 24)



### **The Third Era of Advising: 1970 – 2003**

The establishment and defining of academic advising demarcate the second era, examination distinguishes the third era (Frost, 2000). In the 1970s, advisors began to explore how advisors at other institutions conducted business. A developmental approach emerged from the work and put advisors in juxtaposition to the prescriptive advising preference of many faculty advisors, causing tension between professions (Moore, 1976). The seminal works of O'Banion (1972) and Crookston (1972) provided clarity to the field and helped establish standards for teaching and development of students (Cook, 2009). The scholarly works further progressed advising, not only as a profession but also as an academic discipline.

The growing profession and discipline of academic advising resulted in a need for further organization. Established in 1979, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) formed to "promote the quality of Academic Advising in institutions of higher education, and to this end, it is dedicated to the support and professional growth of academic advising and advisors" (Beatty, 1991, p. 5). The initial network consisted of 429 members, and in 1981, the organization published the first NACADA Journal, further establishing NACADA as the authority on advising and advising research (Beatty, 1991; Cate & Miller, 2015). As research contributed to progress in the field between the 1970s and 1990s, various academic advising models materialized, and individual institutions approached the practice in a unique manner. Although most higher education institutions maintained advising structures during this time, Habley and Morales (1998) reported few institutions requiring training and little compensation for faculty advisors.

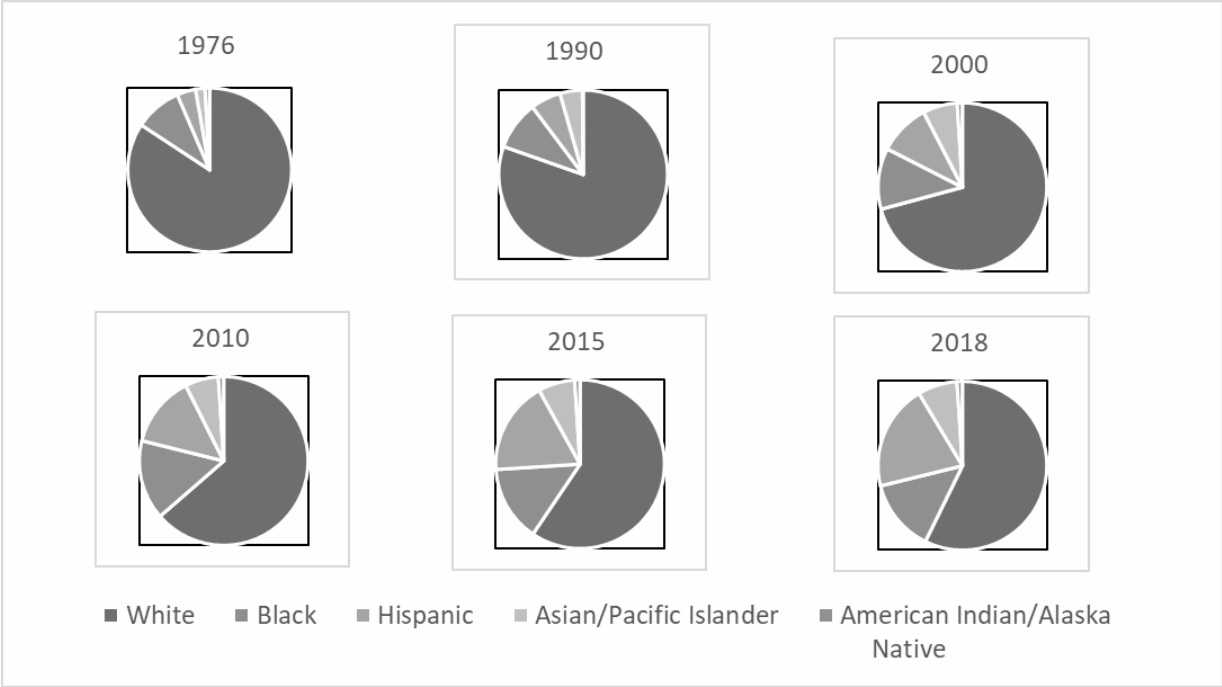
## **The Fourth Era of Advising: 2003 – Present**

In the fourth era, scholars and practitioners continue to refine the definition and functions of academic advising. The continually growing need for academic advisors in all aspects of higher education demands an equally diverse background and expedites the advancement of the field through increasingly nuanced research and discussions (Grites et al., 2016). Research and theory development advanced to the point that NACADA and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) worked to develop advising standards for the field and continue to update them as the field advances (Cate & Miller, 2015; Cook, 2009). The standards created a much needed clear and uniform path for practitioners' professional development to meet the increasingly complex needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Efforts to make college accessible to first-generation, adult learners, and racially and culturally diverse groups of students continue to reinforce the need for advisors to help guide students through individualized education and development (Fischer & Stripling, 2014). NCES (2019) reports that in 1976, American colleges and universities' total enrollment consisted of only 15.7% non-white students. However, due to increased accessibility efforts, the number of non-white students grew to 44.8% in 2018 (Figure 1). Additionally, women made up approximately 40% of the total American postsecondary enrolment in 1970 but surpassed male undergraduate numbers in 1980 and 1990 at the graduate level (NCES, 2019). By 2018, American colleges and universities' enrollment consisted of nearly 60% female students (Figure 2).

In addition to assisting students to navigate the complexities of higher education, advising progressed into a vital retention tool. Five years into the fourth and current era of advising, higher education experienced a significant financial blow caused by the recession of

2008 (Mitchell et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2015). Nationwide, state budgets dwindled, and lawmakers significantly cut education sector funding. Despite continuously growing enrollment at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Figure 3), many colleges and universities also made difficult decisions, including spending cuts and tuition increases. Mitchell et al. (2017) reported annual tuition rates soared between 30% and 80% between 2007 and 2015, accounting for inflation. Students acquired significant amounts of loans to cover the inflated costs of attending college without fully understanding the long-term impacts.

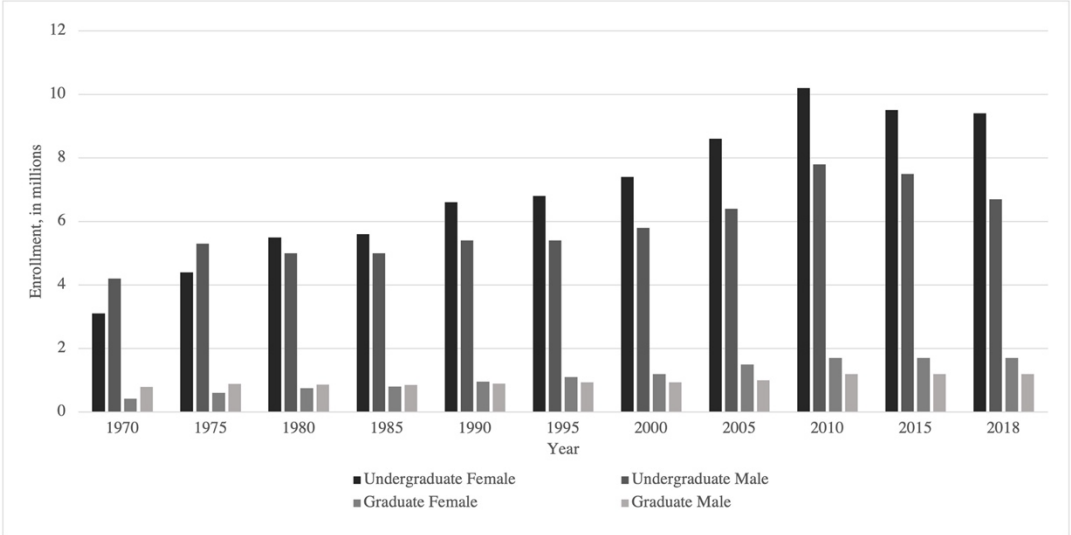


Note. Visual representation based on approximate fall enrolment for the given year (NCES, 2019).

**Figure 1.** Total American Postsecondary Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity

Students who attrit often leave with considerable debt and little opportunity for a return on the investment (Kirp, 2019). Kirp (2019) reported national undergraduate attrition rates averaging 40%. However, graduate programs across the nation suffer from higher rates of

attrition, that is, 40% - 60%, and some doctoral programs reach upwards of 70% (Allum & Okahana, 2015; Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Council of Graduate Schools, 2008, Nettles & Millet, 2006; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Despite consistent growth in enrollment until 2010, attrition rates remain high, resulting in retention, persistence, and attrition rates becoming critical metrics by which schools are assessed (Twale, 2015). Many higher education institutions now realize the strong influence of academic advising and deploy robust systems as part of student retention plans (Duke & Denicolo, 2017; Gilmore et al., 2016; Ledwith, 2014).

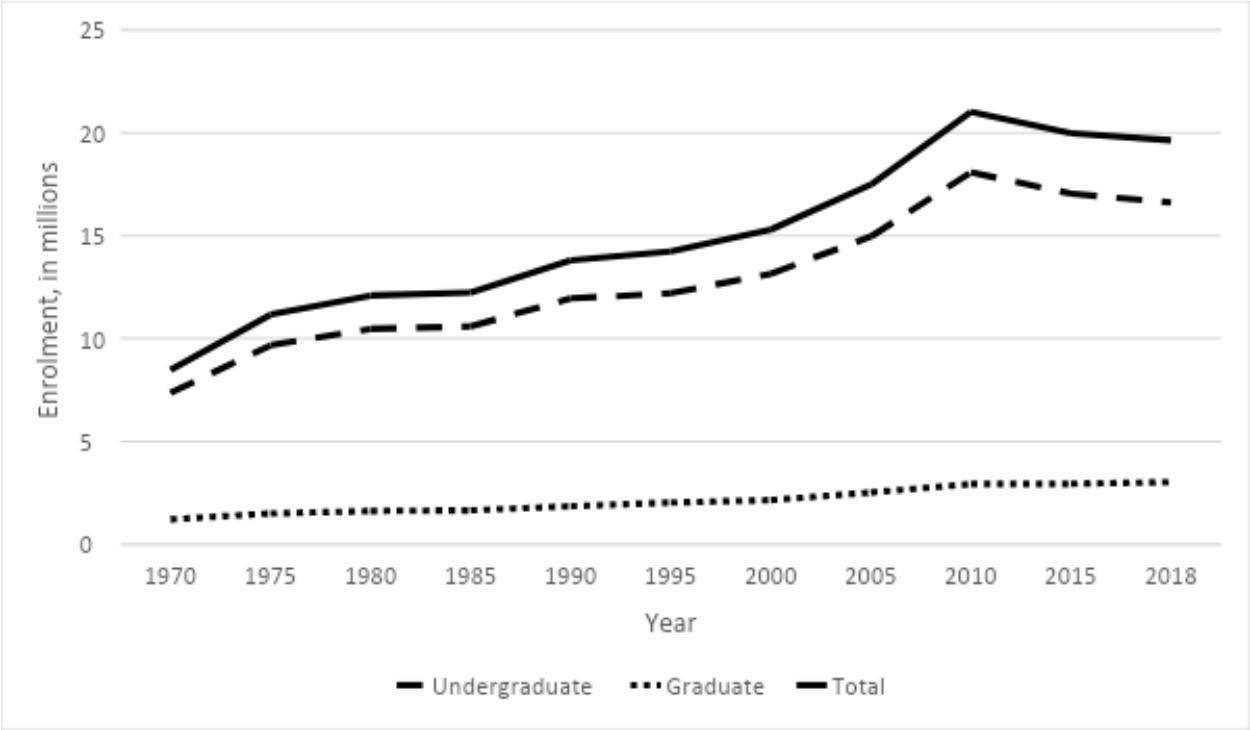


Note. Visual representation based on approximate fall enrolment for the given year (NCES, 2019; NCES 2020)

**Figure 2.** Undergraduate and Graduate Enrollment by Gender

The rich history of academic advising lends insights towards the future and explains how and why the field progressed to become crucial for student success. Political, social, and research practice influenced the growth of academic advising and remains relevant, looking to the future of higher education (Habley, 1988). Increasingly diverse student populations require

practitioners and scholars to advance the field by identifying impactful practices to meet the complex needs of students (Shaffer et al., 2010). Several high impact practices include programmatic guidance, developing trust, an individualized approach, and timely communication (Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Additionally, academic advising functions now significantly contribute to efforts mitigating high attrition rates and promoting student retention.



Note. Visual representation based on approximate fall enrollment for the given year (NCES, 2019; NCES 2020).

**Figure 3.** Enrollment in American Higher Education by Undergraduate, Graduate, and Combined Total

### Graduate Student Advising

Advisors are some of the most important and influential people regarding graduate students' success (Barnes et al., 2011; Jones, 2013; O'Meara et al., 2013). However, often due to

the cost of additional employees, many institutions do not allocate resources for professional advising services in graduate programs. Thus, faculty members are required to navigate relationships and student development from an advising perspective, in addition to fulfilling their other varied responsibilities (Namalefe, 2015). In their advising capacity and through the use of various approaches and styles, faculty should be responsible for socializing students to the world of graduate academics and scholarship, assisting in course selection, developing identity, providing feedback, assisting with research topics, and much more (Twale, 2015).

The professional field of advising recognizes numerous other advising approaches which are underpinned by research and theory (Gordon et al., 2011). Some examples of the various approaches include developmental, prescriptive, intrusive, advising as teaching, targeted, and appreciative. Despite the numerous approaches to explore and use, graduate student advisors often resort to employing the more traditional approach referred to as prescriptive advising (Ohrablo, 2014). A prescriptive advising approach entails advisors prescribing, or telling, students what to do, what courses to take, and what to research (Gordon et al., 2011). This approach fails to promote relationships and development which frequently results in students feeling isolated and disconnected from the institution (Ohrablo, 2014). Contrarily, engaging and relational approaches promote graduate student feelings of connectedness and belonging, which have been proven to increase student success and satisfaction.

### **Advising for Retention**

Higher education institutions continue to focus attention and efforts on increasing the number of students retained from one year to the next, also known as retention efforts (Park et al., 2011). Graduate programs heavily rely on faculty advisors, supervisors, or mentors to

communicate with students and provide guidance to completion. The reliance on academic relationships creates indicators of student success or attrition based on the faculty-student relationship. As a strong indicator of graduate student success, advising is a natural place for administrators to focus retention efforts (Rudd et al., 2018). Students progressing through a program often turn to a faculty advisor or mentor for more than just course selection and research advice (Duke & Denicolo, 2017). The highly individualized nature of advising promotes connectedness to the faculty member, program, and institution while combating significant feelings of isolation. Faculty advisors also assist students in navigating the complexities of higher education systems, research, and coursework struggles and hold students accountable for academic progress (Craft et al., 2016).

### **Successful Support Strategies**

Every graduate student faces unique and changing combinations of challenges due to the complexities of balancing multiple adult roles or identities and various responsibilities (Kovalcikiene & Buksnyte-Marmiene, 2015; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). Despite the challenges, many programs intentionally structure programs to promote student development and persistence. Faculty, peers, and support staff are primarily responsible for supporting the graduate student journey; however, little is known about graduate student perceptions of advising and during times of significant disruption.

### **Faculty Relationships**

Depending on the institution, faculty fulfill many crucial roles for graduate students, including advisors, mentors, supervisors, career coaches, and much more (Hollenbach, 2014).

Fostering faculty relationships through a formal process greatly benefits graduate student persistence and success (Duke & Denicolo, 2017; Fedynich & Bain, 2011; Gill et al., 2012). Lehan et al. (2018) ascertained a connection between student retention and academic coaching for online students. The study advanced the notion that graduate students require individualized attention when navigating the complexities of life and a graduate program. When the line between various graduate faculty roles becomes blurred, a frequent occurrence, responsibilities and expectations can shift without explicit conversation. The lack of clarity for expectations causes confusion for those involved. Formalizing processes, such as mentoring, advising, and coaching, aids in setting defined boundaries for the one-to-one relationships and provides the needed individualized academic, emotional, and career support (Conceição & Swaminathan, 2011; Dieker et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2019). Although many faculty roles prove crucial for student support throughout the doctoral journey, facilitating academic and professional socialization is especially vital in the preliminary stages of enrolment (Baker & Pifer, 2011).

Early in the doctoral process, students benefit from faculty assistance in developing a foundation of expectations and standards to build upon for the program's duration and carry forward into a career (Conceição & Swaminathan, 2011; McAlpine, 2012). Faculty serve as a conduit to the rest of the institution and field of study. Introducing students to other faculty, students, alumni, professionals, and professional organizations develops a robust support network for graduate students (McAlpine, 2012). Facilitation of support network development is vital to student persistence and strengthens the relationship between students and faculty while promoting autonomy through ongoing support and validation (Curtin et al., 2016). Further, a



graduate student network also gradually alleviates students' reliance on the faculty members, as others in the network share the support load.

### **Peer Relationships**

Marshall et al. (2017) confirmed the importance of peer networks for graduate students. Students depend on each other to navigate the various struggles of graduate education. Peer education and collaboration are vital to navigating the rigors of coursework and research, exams, and final defense (Cherrstrom et al., 2018; Shin et al., 2019). Occasionally, student groups form independently; however, without direct intervention from program faculty or staff, graduate programs are not traditionally conducive to peer network formation (Dieker et al., 2019). When stakeholders realize the benefits of such networks, academic and emotional support emerge, combating isolation and promoting a rich learning environment (Cherrstrom et al., 2018). Strong advisors acquire an intimate knowledge of information about graduate students which provides opportunities for individual and group connections across cohorts based on research interests, occupation, aspirations, common struggles, or social interests. Fostering peer relationships among graduate students increases student connectedness to the institution and program; thus, increasing student success.

### **Graduate Student Attrition**

Attrition refers to the number of students who exit an institution of higher education without completing a degree. Graduate student attrition is difficult to measure due to the structure of the programs; however, it continues to be of concern for students, faculty, and administrators (Twale, 2015). Graduate programs offered in an online setting, female students,

students of color, and students enrolled in non-STEM programs are susceptible to even higher attrition rates (Mueller, 2016; NCES, 2016; Okahana et al., 2018). Doctoral programs have experienced attrition rates of up to 60% over the past 40 years (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Attrition rates in graduate programs produce consequences for not only the student but the institution and greater society as well (DeClou, 2016).

DeClou (2016) contended that a student failing to complete a graduate degree often experiences a loss of direction and is left with fewer professional opportunities. Students are more likely to incur outstanding debt and a decrease in earning potential when they do not complete their graduate degree. Additionally, faculty supporting a student who does not complete a degree frequently experience frustrations with stalled research studies and feelings of wasted time (Ames et al., 2018; Devos et al., 2016). Furthermore, attrition and retention rates are often used as institutional effectiveness indicators and can carry funding implications (Center for the Study of College Student Retention, 2016). The economic impact, failed investments, and potentially discontinued research also carries negative implications on the greater society. Caruth (2015) and Zahl (2015) asserted that student attrition denies impactful societal contributions to the respective fields and carries negative economic impacts due to increased debt and reduced spending power. Understanding graduate student attrition is crucial to finding a remedy for high rates of withdrawal. It is not clear to researchers as to why so many students do not complete graduate programs. Negative implications of student attrition, paired with high attrition rates in graduate programs, specifically in doctoral programs, warrants discussion of suspected protective and risk factors (Gaytan, 2015; Okahana et al., 2016).

## **Attrition Factors**

A wide range of factors contribute to graduate student attrition. However, as students' progress to higher levels of education, an increasing number of factors influence student lives (Devos et al., 2017). Benjamin et al. (2017) asserted that many faculty members believe the most significant factors contributing to graduate student attrition are student-related, rather than faculty or institution-related. Demographics, adult responsibilities, goal-setting capacity and motivation, relationships, and personal characteristics are all student-related factors influencing students' ability to persist to graduation or attrit (Gittings et al., 2018).

*Demographic indicators.* While demographics are not factors contributing to graduate student failure, demographics indicate a wide range of factors that influence attrition (Wollast et al., 2018). Demographics as indicators means that a Black female student does not have a statistically lower chance of degree completion because of skin color. However, a Black female student is more likely to encounter issues such as having trouble connecting with faculty because of a lack of diversity in the field or struggling with social expectations of being a woman (Mueller et al., 2016). White married men are more likely to complete a graduate program than most other demographic categories of students (Sowell et al., 2015). Some scholars assert that higher education systems and structures maintain white, male, heteronormative templates that produce obstacles for people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, and women (Ramgopal, 2017; Reid & Curry, 2019).

*Responsibilities.* It is common for students to experience the graduate school journey as a transformative experience (Hill & Conceição, 2020). Significant changes to personal and professional identities require intentionality and significant sacrifice (Cherrstrom et al., 2018). The labor-intensive process of earning a post-baccalaureate degree increases the amount of

personal, professional, and academic responsibilities needing balancing (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). Graduate students must navigate a diverse range of financial situations dependent on scholarships, financial aid, cost of books, family situation, and more. The additional stress of allocating limited resources such as time, energy, and money is too much to handle for some students and increases the likelihood of attrition or the onset of mental health issues (Evans et al., 2018).

***Goal-setting capacity and motivation.*** Poor goal-setting capacity and motivation potentially contribute to attrition rates (Castello et al., 2017). Beck (2016) contended that inadequate student motivation is one of the most frequent causes of high graduate student attrition. Internal and external motivation factors influence students' decisions to persist or attrit, and varied factors tend to carry different weight depending on a given situation (Thunborg et al., 2013). Wiegerová (2016) identified three primary external motivation factors: influence of a mentor or role model, financial gains, and fulfilling someone else's goals or dreams. Additionally, the leading internal factors fall into four primary categories: desire to be a researcher, improve as a professional, prestige of attending, desire to remain in education (Wiegerová, 2016). Students with consistently low intrinsic motivations attrit at higher rates as many challenges arise and require calling on various motivation factors throughout the educational journey (Lindsay & Williams, 2015). Additionally, support systems are vital to reinforcing or upholding motivations when students struggle (Beck, 2016). It is difficult for some graduate students to identify and foster relationships supportive of the personal journey.

***Relationships.*** Family, friends, and professional or academic colleagues are sources of motivational support for graduate students (Mantai & Dowling, 2015). Family support often emerges in material, emotional, and professional support. Mantai and Dowling (2015)

affirmed that the categories students acknowledged most frequently in dissertations are social encouragement in the form of emotional and moral support from family and colleagues, academic support from peers and departmental colleagues, and instrumental support such as financial, administrative, and technical support. From the various categories, significant contributions to motivations and support emerge from the advisor or supervisor and peers (Maddox, 2017; Zhou & Okahana, 2019).

The graduate school journey is a highly individualized endeavor and, not all family, friends, or co-workers understand the difficulties or complexities involved in completing a program, making it difficult to offer support. Conversely, faculty members and peers relate to the struggles and provide more effective support than others (Maddox, 2017). Additionally, faculty members and peers maintain similar interests and a unique investment in a reciprocating support network (Pifer & Baker, 2016). Still, many institutions succeed at getting students through coursework, where regular interactions with peers occur, but struggle to advance students through the research process (Lock & Boyle, 2016). However, poor relationships with faculty members or supervisors and peers can result in low motivation, negatively influence a student's ability to complete a program, and increase feelings of isolation (Pifer & Baker, 2016).

**Isolation.** Ge et al. (2017) asserted that humans inherently need to feel connected to communities and a lack of meaningful human interaction results in feelings of isolation. The graduate student journey often becomes individualized, and feelings of isolation contribute to high attrition rates, especially in online programs (Evans et al., 2018; Strang, 2017). Irani et al. (2014) discovered online students experience feelings of isolation at higher rates than in-person programs due to fewer opportunities for interactions with faculty and peers. Failure to develop

relationships with peers and faculty mentors, advisors, or supervisors prohibit critical student support networks and create additional barriers for students seeking support. The barrier created by insufficient socialization reinforces feelings of being lost or isolated and challenges student motivations (Denis et al., 2019; Jones, 2013).

*Personal Characteristics.* Castello et al. (2017) postulated that individuals' attributes or characteristics correlate with persistence throughout graduate school. A graduate student is at higher risk of attrition if academic preparation is lacking, learning style is not compatible with the program faculty teaching, and personality traits are not suitable (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Additionally, Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) suggested programs that do not uphold stringent entrance requirements disadvantage students by overlooking students lacking requisite intelligence, preparedness, or demeanor. Although some factors, such as natural intelligence and personality, prove difficult to control, graduate programs ignoring prospective students' preparation only serve to reinforce high attrition rates.

### **COVID-19 Global Pandemic & Academic Disruption**

COVID – 19 is an acute respiratory disease that spreads from person-to-person through respiratory droplets or direct contact (Bruns et al., 2020). Once infected, an individual may not present symptoms immediately, as they may take five days to appear, on average. Additionally, not all people present symptoms but can remain contagious for up to 14 days (CDC, 2020). Common symptoms of COVID-19 include a dry cough, fever, fatigue, and conditions in the central nervous system leading to organ failure, and at times, death (CDC, 2020; Kouznetsov, 2020; WHO, 2020). Less frequent symptoms consist of congestion, headache, aches, and pains, loss of smell and taste, sore throat, skin rash, or diarrhea (WHO, 2020). Although mortality

rates remain significantly lower than similar viruses, COVID - 19 is considerably more contagious and transmittable (Kouznetsov, 2020). Individuals over the age of 60 or those with pre-existing health conditions are most susceptible to severe symptoms of the disease. Additionally, many adults face challenges of mental health due to increased anxiety and depression stemming from a wide range of concerns including the health and well-being of oneself and others, loss of childcare, loss of income, and uncertainty of the duration of the pandemic (Horesh & Brown, 2020). The public health recommendation for social distancing and limitations on in-person interactions to keep people safe from infectious diseases presents challenges for many conventional academic approaches.

Times of disruption, like the COVID-19 global pandemic, represents a watershed moment for change in higher education. Unlike many other recent disruptions, COVID – 19 is a global public health emergency impacting almost every facet of society. Mental health concerns are especially concerning for graduate students, compounding previous stress from graduate school with the traumatic stress of COVID-19 (Chirikov et al., 2020; Healthy Minds Study, 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020). Before the COVID-19 global pandemic, Evans et al. (2018) reported alarming rates of anxiety and depression amongst graduate students, especially compared to the general population. In a study of approximately 4,000 doctoral students between May and July of 2020, Chirikov et al. (2020) found that 40% of surveyed students exhibit generalized anxiety disorder symptoms, an increase of 13% from 2019. Additionally, 37% of the doctoral students reported symptoms consistent with major depressive disorder, a 19% upsurge from 2019 (Chirikov et al., 2020).

The annual Healthy Minds Study (HMS) supported the findings of Chirikov et al. (2020). The HMS (2020) survey sample of almost 19,000 graduate and undergraduate students

in the United States discovered relatively similar rates of anxiety compared to 2019; however, rates of depression increased. A majority of students expressed moderate to significant security and safety concerns, and 60% of students communicated that the pandemic impeded access to mental-health services (HMS, 2020). Although researchers continue to develop an understanding of how individuals experience events like the COVID-19 global pandemic, Horesh and Brown (2020) suggested that the high levels of anticipatory anxiety and depression equate to a mass trauma event requiring further investigation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theory provides a lens to view circumstances that allow strategic and logical connection to a set of beliefs or propositions that the researcher uses to establish a common approach for a specific study (Reeves et al., 2008). Theoretical frameworks are essential because humans gather information and filter it through a lens of history and culture unique to the individual (Butin, 2010). Something considered "truth" to one person is not necessarily a universally accepted truth, often because the perception or lens through which individuals experience the world is unique. Theoretical frameworks provide a mechanism for a researcher to provide a lens to act as a common vantage point for conducting, interpreting, and sharing research (Butin, 2010). Situated learning theory (Anderson et al., 1996) provided the lens through which this proposed study is viewed.

### **Situated Learning Theory**

Situated Learning Theory, situated cognition, or contextual learning, suggests that learning occurs because of several contextual factors: teaching and learning tools,



specific activities, and the individuals involved (Merriam, 2018). Lave (1988), considered the founder of Situated Learning Theory, posits that cognition involves an individual's mind and body and the activity and setting. The process of learning must consider the overall context for effectiveness. Greeno et al. (1993) progressed the theory by asserting that "knowing" is a relationship between specific situations and cognition. Situated Learning Theory concentrates on the process of enhancing an individuals' capacity and capability to interact with various people, places, or ideas in various situations (Greeno et al., 1993).

Situated Learning considers four significant categories to guide teaching and learning: content, context, a community of practice, and participation (Anderson et al., 1996). Content and delivery of content is crucial for student development of higher-order cognition and allows students to synthesize new and existing information more efficiently. Optimal content and delivery promote student reflection and encourage engagement. Reflection encourages students to connect with the content and assign personal meaning, thus increasing retention of information (Shor, 1996). A method to increase reflection and connection to content is through providing context (Boud, 1994; Courtney et al., 1996). When considering adult learners, context provides perspective to the content and considers culture, politics, current events, priorities, etc. (Courtney et al., 1996). Student experiences provide a connection to content, rather than being a bystander attempting to memorize information. The relatability of content due to context provides an avenue for direct engagement (Wilson, 1993). Along with context, the community of practice provides another setting for assigning meaning to content.

A community of practice is a group of individuals regularly engaging in a common activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Communities provide multiple perspectives on content or issues for which the participants reflect, discuss, and work towards a collective understanding with

other members. Ongoing interactions with other community members help provide additional context, connection, and meaning to content (Lewis, 1969). Two primary provisions of a community of practice are a commitment to collective engagement over a duration of time and a commitment to working towards a mutual understanding (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The community of practice provides an opportunity to engage in discussions and content through individual participation. Participation encourages sharing, challenging, and reinforcing of existing knowledge and understanding (Lave & Wegner, 1998). Learners develop an understanding of content through reflection, interpretation, and discussion of content with the community as a means of working toward a collective understanding or meaning.

The COVID – 19 pandemic caused significant disruption to graduate student learning, including the advising process, in each of the four areas cited by Anderson et al (1996): content, context, a community of practice, and participation. The abrupt change in learning context was the catalyst for disruption in education. Not only were the daily lives of students and advisors altered, but the context of the learning environment also shifted from in-person to remote, or online, for many. While shifting to an online advising format presents challenges, simultaneously shifting content to meet student needs compounds the issues. As previously discussed, the content of advising graduate students entails much more than course selection (Twale, 2015). The pandemic caused an abrupt shift in how advisors interacted with many students and what content was appropriate for the context. For example, many professional development opportunities were simply canceled and those moved to an online format may not be of interest to students dealing with an influx of responsibilities in other aspects of their lives. Advisors must find ways to keep students connected to and participating in the learning environment and community, which were also dramatically altered.

## Summary

The robust history of advising provides insight to how and why the advising evolved into such a vital aspect of student success. Although a sizable portion of research and literature is dedicated to undergraduate education, as graduate student enrolment continues to grow and attrition rates remain high, graduate student advising is garnering increased attention from researchers. Advising at the graduate level is highly individualized and the advisor is vital to providing students with content appropriate for the learning context. Furthermore, quality advising promotes graduate student engagement and connectedness through communities of learning and encouragement of participation, both of which increase student success and satisfaction. The challenges presented by the COVID – 19 global pandemic amplify the need for quality advising, although little research has been conducted regarding the perceptions of graduate students during this time.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

Chapter III presents the proposed methodology appropriate for answering the research questions included in this study. First, the chapter considers the foundational research design and rationale for the methodology. After presenting the research questions, details related to setting, sample, and participant selection situate the inquiry. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of research instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and a summary. Graduate student perceptions of advising needs during the COVID – 19 global pandemic warrant an investigation because this historical event represents a paradigm shift in how colleges and universities are delivering student services, specifically advising (Witze, 2020).

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore graduate students' perceptions of advising during significant program disruptions, like the COVID-19 global pandemic. The current COVID-19 pandemic has worsened already stressful situations for graduate students, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Blankstein et al., 2020). Since many institutions worldwide closed physical campuses, students who wished to continue in programs have had to enroll in coursework delivered through online formats and access services such as advising remotely. However, many students enrolled in smaller and mid-size institutions have been unable to progress since the institutions lack resources required to accommodate online courses or are unable to support students' increased needs (Mokhtar & Gross, 2020).

## **Research Questions**

Four overarching research questions, aligned with the categories of situated learning theory, guided the inquiry for this qualitative phenomenological study:

**Research Question 1:** How did the content of advising sessions and communication provided by advisors support graduate students during the pandemic?

**Research Question 2:** What are graduate students' perceptions of advisor responsiveness to their contextual needs during the pandemic?

**Research Question 3:** How do graduate students perceive advisors' efforts to promote connectedness to the larger learning community?

**Research Question 4:** How do graduate students feel about their participation in the advising process during the pandemic?

## **Interview Questions**

**Interview Question 1:** What types of information did you receive from your advisor?

**Interview Question 2:** How would you describe your advising needs during the pandemic, and how did your advisor respond to those needs?

**Interview Question 3:** How did your advisor assist you in staying connected to the larger learning community during times of remote instruction?

**Interview Question 4:** How would you describe your overall advising experience during the pandemic?

## **Research Design**

The qualitative research design was chosen for the current study because its nature allows the researcher to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of graduate students during the COVID – 19 pandemic, specifically related to advising needs. Qualitative research is a means for understanding and examining the interpretation or meaning of lived experiences prescribed by individuals or groups of people (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative researchers attempt to develop a deep understanding of a specific issue, phenomenon, or experience from a restricted number of participants (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Qualitative researchers explore many facets of an issue to gain a holistic view of participants' lived experience, not for generalization to other settings, but rather to gain a deep understanding of the complexities of a phenomenon to build upon available knowledge (Thomas & Magilvy; 2011). Rossman and Rallis (2012) identified five hallmarks of qualitative research to be: (a) it is conducted in the participant's natural environment; (b) researchers possess multiple approaches for respectfully gathering information; (c) the context is a focal point; (d) data is emergent and evolves; and (e) the research is interpretive by nature.

Neuman (2009) suggested that when a new topic emerges, or minimal literature exists on a given topic, researchers often use an exploratory design. This study aimed to explore graduate students' perceptions of advising needs during significant disruption to the academic environment, in this case the COVID- 19 global pandemic. The proposed research study intends to operationalize a phenomenological approach to guide the exploration of graduate students' perceptions and lived experiences of academic advising during the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodological framework is conducive to a document review, semi-structured focus groups, and semi-structured individual interviews as a means for data collection. The framework

provides detailed descriptions of the role of the researcher, participants, setting, and data collection and analysis.

## **Phenomenology**

At the foundation of qualitative research lies the concept that humans socially construct meaning through interactions with their environment (Merriam, 2002). Interpretations or meanings ascribed to various aspects of the world continuously evolve with the acquisition of new information or experiences. Specifically, the phenomenological approach is rooted in the notion or assumption that individuals experiencing an event or phenomenon from unique vantage points all share a common essence (Patton, 1990). Documenting the essence or meaning ascribed to a phenomenon allows for the researcher's development of practical applications or recommendations.

Moustakas's (1994) psychological or transcendental phenomenology focused on participants' descriptions in contrast to van Manen's (1990) approach, which is more concerned with the researcher's interpretation process. Regardless of the approach to phenomenology, Thompson (1997) recognized that phenomenology ultimately represents a convergence of the participants' and the researcher's perceptions. That is to say, researchers often influence participants and their responses or behavior in several ways: by raising awareness that an issue exists, questions which solicit thoughts and responses that may not otherwise exist, or simply by the presence of an observer. Additionally, researchers' perceptions, and ultimately, data analysis and findings are influenced by involvement in the data collection process and interactions with participants. Despite the mutual influence, phenomenological research design can successfully

streamline content-rich data collection through various interview procedures aimed at mitigating such factors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Phenomenology is well suited for this inquiry to document how participants make meaning of the common experience of graduate student advising during a time of significant disruption. Since the widespread impact of the pandemic touched almost every aspect of human life, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of graduate student perceptions of advising needs during the COVID – 19 global pandemic in this proposed investigation. Further, graduate student advising is worthy of further investigation as an under-researched subject vital for student success, Furthermore, assessing graduate student perceptions of the phenomenon is crucial documentation to better prepare for future situations in which disruption in the academic experience may transpire in the future.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Yin, 2016). Before the research begins, it is the researcher's responsibility to obtain permission to conduct the study, secure site approval, and anticipate ethical problems that may occur. The researcher will also be responsible for the mitigation of compromised data, as the study will take place at the researcher's place of enrollment (Creswell, 2014). The inquirer must also ensure that participants are informed about the data being collected with sufficient information to make participants feel comfortable but not to reveal the study's purpose. Furthermore, the researcher will develop well-constructed and verified research and interview questions. However, a qualitative design allows the researcher to follow a line of questioning that may spontaneously arise during the interview (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Finally, the



researcher is obligated to acknowledge and mitigate any bias to the best of their ability and present the data in a truthful manner.

## **Sampling**

The researcher selected convenience sampling to acquire an adequate sample size. The method of convenience sampling is a nonprobability form of sampling where the participants are selected by virtue of meeting pre-determined criteria including accessibility, availability, participant willingness, and physical location. The criteria established for this convenience sample include individuals enrolled as full-time graduate students during the 2019 – 2020 or 2020 – 2021 academic year at Green River University (GRU). When determining a suitable sampling method for this study, several contributing factors influenced the selection. First, convenience sampling is commonly used in qualitative research because the simplicity is cost and time effective. In addition, the timeliness of the pandemic is a pressing issue, as is the ability to connect to the sample population. Many graduate programs range from two to three years and each semester that passes reduces the number of full-time students who meet the criteria of the study. Students enrolled at an institution are easier to access than alumni because active student rosters are maintained by academic programs. It is more difficult to access individuals who meet the criteria of the study once they leave the institution. Another factor considered in the selection of sampling type was the increased stress exerted across various aspects of graduate student life resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the increased stress and time commitments, allowing individuals who met the criteria of the study to self-select for participation was deemed prudent. Finally, despite drawbacks associated with convenience sampling, the researcher deployed several mitigating strategies to promote the dependability of the sampling method,

which will be addressed later in this section.

## **Setting**

For the purpose of anonymity and confidentiality, the participants, institution, and location involved in this study are referred to by pseudonyms and participant numbers. This study will take place at GRU (Green River University), a regionally accredited public institution. GRU is a member institution of a Midwestern state college within a public university system. Green River University is a mid-sized institution with a total enrollment of more than 8,500 students (U.S. News, 2020). U.S. News (2020) reported 627 graduate students enrolled at GRU in 2019. The student body consists of 65% female students and 35% male students. Additionally, 13% of the student population identifies as students of color. GRU is known for its strong nursing, education, and business programs (U.S. News, 2020).

## **Data Collection**

After approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), data collection began. Creswell (2014) identified four primary data sources in qualitative research: interviews, documents, observations, and audiovisual information (p. 185). Finlay (2009) suggested several similar methods for exploring the participants' perceptions and experiences in a phenomenological study. For this proposed study, document review and individual interviews will be utilized for the data collection.

## **Individual Interviews**

This study will collect data predominantly through in-depth individual interviews in which the researcher will record, transcribe, and analyze all of the information provided. Interviews are among the most common forms of qualitative data collection (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews often take the form of conversations rather than formal proceedings and are a useful tool for gathering a significant amount of data in a relatively short amount of time (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The researcher, or primary instrument, maintains the ability to follow-up with clarifying questions or questions that elicit a more in-depth response, specifically during the unstructured interviews used for this study.

First, the researcher will distribute a questionnaire to participants to collect information related to demographics, academic programs, and advising. The primary data collection will be conducted through unstructured individual interviews. The researcher will schedule 45-minute interviews with each participant at a predetermined location. Individual interviews will be one-on-one and consist of a casual, interactive progression that employs open-ended questions to elicit responses related to participants' specific lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Open-ended questions are ideal for collecting data regarding graduate student perceptions of advising needs during the global pandemic. Recording and transcription of the individual interviews for analysis is common practice, which the researcher intends to use.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

For this study, the researcher recognizes several significant procedural steps resulting from the development of phenomenological inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2007). The first

procedural step is to identify the problem and decide whether or not phenomenology is an appropriate means of examination (Creswell & Poth, 2007). A phenomenological approach is appropriate when gaining a deep and rich understanding of a phenomenon or influencing the development of policies, practices, and procedures is the main goal of a study (Creswell & Poth, 2007). This study is appropriate for phenomenology because the widespread nature of the COVID – 19 global pandemic created a common graduate student advising experience worthy of exploration.

After identifying an appropriate topic of inquiry, data collection occurs through an individual approach or a combination of multiple approaches, such as individual interviews, group interviews, a document review, observations, and digital audiovisual materials (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, individual interviews will be conducted to allow individuals to share accounts of their advising experience, yielding rich and thick descriptions to be analyzed. Additionally, a questionnaire with a Likert scale and open-ended questions will be distributed for the purpose of confirmability.

When conducting any research, integrity is vital due to the flexible nature of the methodology; this especially holds true in qualitative studies (Yin, 2016). Informed consent is a critical component of the research process. Its intent is to promote the reality of free will and mitigate participant feelings of being compelled or forced to participate in a study (Putnam & Rock, 2018). Emanuel et al. (2010) outlined four significant components to informed consent documentation: competence, disclosure, understanding, and voluntariness. Competence refers to the participants' ability to assess the facts of the study and be mentally capable of deciding whether to participate or not (Emanuel et al., 2010). Disclosure means that researchers must inform participants of the study requirements, any benefits or risks inherent to participation, and

any other relevant information (Emanuel et al., 2010). Understanding means that participants must understand what the researcher is saying; this includes avoiding excessive jargon or technical terms in the consent form (Emanuel et al., 2010). Finally, voluntariness refers to participants acting of their own free will, free of coercion and undue inducement (Emanuel et al., 2010). For the proposed study, the researcher will confirm and document the four components of informed consent by discussing informed consent at the beginning of each interaction with participants and through written informed consent at the beginning of the first interaction with each participant. Because the participants are recent graduate students, competence will be assumed.

For this study, the researcher verbally explained informed consent to each participant at the beginning of each interaction. Participants received a verbal overview of the study, including the inherently voluntary nature of participation, anticipated risks associated with participation, individual rights to withdraw from the study, and the documentation or recording mechanisms in place for the data collection method being used (Neuman, 2009). Additionally, participants received verbal communication regarding compensation, anonymity and confidentiality guarantees, and contact information for the principal researcher and institution (Neuman, 2009). After the discussion, the researcher asked participants to sign an informed consent form and provide each individual with a copy before any data is collected (Neuman, 2009). Once informed consent was collected, the researcher explained the semi-structured interview process to participants. An overview of terms used in the interview was provided before interview began. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix B. Each interview was recorded and then later transcribed for analysis; recordings were subsequently deleted for anonymity of research participants after interviews were transcribed.

## **Data Security**

Maintaining secure data is paramount to research participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As such, informed consent forms, interview recordings, interview transcriptions, and all other documentation of the study were stored securely. Throughout the study, the researcher reminded participants of the voluntary, confidential, and anonymous nature of participation in the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Upon the conclusion of the study, the researcher will continue to comply with data security guidelines by locking the physical information and data in a secure file cabinet. Electronic information and data is be stored on an encrypted external hard drive and stored with the physical documents in a locked file cabinet. After five years of storage, the researcher commits to the destruction of all participant information and data via shredder and formatting of the external hard drive, in compliance with APA recommendations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## **Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis may begin as soon as data is collected and transcribed. Qualitative data analysis is an interactive process by which the researcher connects specific data points and refines them into more general concepts to report (Tracy, 2019). The researcher began the analysis by reading all data collected and wrote general notes in the margins (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Next, the researcher began coding, which is the process of interpreting participant descriptions to attain accurate meaning while organizing data sets (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2003). The interviews were coded by placing brackets around words or phrases with similar meanings and assigned a code (Burnard et

al., 2008). Once coded, all transcripts were compared to each other and combined to make a common code, thus reducing the overall number of codes (Burnard et al., 2008). Next, the researcher grouped codes into categories based on similar characteristics (Pope et al., 2000) to create a codebook. The researcher revisited raw transcripts and data that fit under specific categories and reassigned to codes according to the final established codes (Burnard et al., 2008). Through this process, themes based on codes and categories were constructed. Once organized and rigor established, the information was then reported as the study's findings (Moustakas, 1994; Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2003).

### **Initial Coding**

Initial coding is a means to categorize, explore meaning, and compare various components of data (Saldaña, 2021). The researcher assigned words or phrases to capture the concept being discussed by the participants. Initial coding was applied to both individual sentences and multiple sentence clusters, when appropriate. Two considerations that guided the first cycle coding were the purpose of the study and how the statement relates to the larger issue (Glasser, 2016). The two considerations assisted the researcher to produce a code set that was related and had significance to the study. In the process of coding, the researcher set codes for an initial interview and applied the codes to subsequent transcripts, adding additional codes as needed. After completion of the final transcript, the codes were re-applied to all of the blank transcripts to ensure all codes were considered for all data.

## **Pattern Coding**

Pattern coding is the process of merging larger quantities of data into emergent themes. Pattern codes are likened to a meta-code (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013). The process translates more tangible and descriptive codes into a conceptual idea that is inferential or explanatory in nature (Miles et al., 2020). The researcher grouped categories based on similarities or overlap in meaning to establish overarching themes that emerged from the groups of codes. The Quirkos© software permitted the researcher to easily move codes in and out of groupings as the themes evolved. When a theme logically fit into more than one category, similarities and differences were considered. Additionally, the original text was revisited to ensure the essence of the statement and context for which it was stated aligned with the overarching theme.

## **Trustworthiness**

The credibility of a study is contingent on the researcher's ability to demonstrate that proper care and consideration was afforded to the process of data collection and analysis (Yin, 2016). The conclusions of a study must accurately illustrate the subject or content of the inquiry. Lincoln and Guba (1985) evolved Guba's Model of Trustworthiness and identified four criteria for establishing trustworthiness of a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility, originally referred to as "truth value," is the degree to which the findings can be believed (Krefting, 1990; Putman & Rock, 2018). Transferability, initially known as "applicability," refers to how well the findings can be applied to other people or contexts (Krefting, 1990; Putman & Rock, 2018). Dependability, originally "consistency," means the degree to which the results of a study can be reproduced and their stability over time



(Krefting, 1990; Putman & Rock, 2018). Confirmability, initially called “neutrality,” represents the objectivity of the results so that the influence of researcher bias is limited (Krefting, 1990; Putman & Rock, 2018).

Researchers use a broad range of strategies to demonstrate the trustworthiness of a study, but not all methods are appropriate for every study. Member checking was used to establish credibility for this study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) described member checking as the process of presenting findings of the data analysis to participants and to establish accuracy. The researcher presented the emergent themes to three participants who confirmed the findings accurately represented their lived experience. A thick and rich description was used to establish transferability. Thick and rich descriptions aid the reader in understanding the setting of the study, the participants included, and the participants’ lived descriptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This strategy establishes a realistic narration that provides concrete examples for the reader. Triangulation of data was employed to support dependability. Patton (2015) asserted that triangulation occurs by collecting and analyzing two or more data sources to develop findings, a process which advances the validity of the research. Data sources used for triangulation in this study included questionnaires, individual interview transcripts, and researcher notes and observations from the interviews. Finally, bracketing was used to promote confirmability. Bracketing is a process of introspection which is accomplished via one or more methods of exploration including memo writing, interviews, and reflexive journaling (Rolls & Relf, 2006). The goal of bracketing is to identify and guard against researcher bias. For this study, the researcher used memo writing before data analysis to better understand personal beliefs. The memo book was revisited throughout the data analysis process to maintain an awareness of and mitigate personal bias from influencing the process of coding and theme generation.

## **Limitations**

In research design, limitations refer to factors outside of the investigator's control (Furfaro et al., 2020). Guba and Lincoln (1981) posited the importance of trustworthiness, or rigor, in qualitative research; however, it proves problematic for some researchers to achieve. Furthermore, participants' willingness to share information with the researcher was a limitation (Kelly et al., 2017). Another limitation was participant truthfulness. Rudestam and Newton (2015) asserted that the principal investigator must satisfy questions about the thoroughness of the research. Finally, generalizability was a limitation of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). The study's data and conclusions apply only for the purposes of the specific study site. The study intended not to generalize findings but rather to provide insights into individuals' lived experiences in a specific context at a specific point in time.

## **Delimitations**

The researcher applied several delimitations to this study. Small sample size is a hallmark of qualitative research and a phenomenological design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The investigator selected a small sample of participants from graduate level programs. A delimitation of this proposed inquiry is the participant requirements of being a full-time student in a graduate program at GRU. Furthermore, participant delimitation includes students who maintained full-time status in the program during the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 academic years. The specific dates ensure that participants experienced graduate school before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher intends to identify and select participants who meet the criteria outlined in this proposal through purposeful sampling.

## Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore graduate students' perceptions of advising needs during significant program disruptions, such as the COVID-19 global pandemic. A qualitative design and phenomenological approach were used because the researcher intended to explore the lived experiences of graduate students during the pandemic. Data was primarily be collected through individual interviews via a sample of graduate students at GRU, an upper midwestern university. The researcher protected the integrity of the study by adhering to standardized processes including informed consent and data security practices. Rigor was established using triangulation, rich and thick descriptions, member checking, and transcript and drift checking.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate graduate student perceptions of advising at a regionally accredited public university during the COVID – 19 global pandemic. This chapter presents the research questions, a detailed description of the data collection process, and participant demographics. Additionally, the data analysis process is discussed, and the findings of the study are presented. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: Advisor Access and Responsiveness, Change in Setting, Meaningful Advisor Relationship, and Shift in Student Priorities.

#### **Problem Statement**

Little is known about graduate students' perceptions of advising during a global pandemic. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, graduate students often struggled to navigate the complexities of life, work, and progressing through an advanced degree (Thompson & Prieto, 2013). As COVID-19 adversely affects the world and transforms the educational landscape, graduate students also experience rapidly changing and increasingly intricate challenges (Mohan, 2020), adding to the difficulties of their already complex life. Not only do graduate students contend with the historical challenges of graduate programs but must also contend with widespread disruption from COVID-19. Conducting a study on this issue may yield information that could be important to responsive approaches to graduate students when they face such difficulties. The four categories of Situated Learning Theory, identified by Stein (1998), underpinned the framework of this study, viewing graduate student advising as an integral

component of the educational experience. Content, Context, Community of Practice, and Participation all influence learning and should be considered by educators to maximize the learning experience.

### **Research Questions**

Four overarching research questions, aligned with the categories of Situated Learning Theory (Stein, 1998), guided the inquiry for this qualitative study:

**Research Question 1:** How did the content of advising sessions and communication provided by advisors support graduate students during the pandemic?

**Research Question 2:** What are graduate students' perceptions of advisor responsiveness to their contextual needs during the pandemic?

**Research Question 3:** How do graduate students perceive advisors' efforts to promote connectedness to the larger learning community?

**Research Question 4:** How do graduate students feel about their participation in the advising process during the pandemic?

### **Data Collection**

The researcher selected convenience sampling to acquire an adequate sample size. The method of convenience sampling is a nonprobability form of sampling where the participants are selected by virtue of meeting pre-determined criteria including accessibility, availability, participant willingness, and physical location. The criteria established for this convenience sample include individuals enrolled as full-time graduate students during the 2019 – 2020 or 2020 – 2021 academic year at Green River University (GRU).

This study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) associated with the researcher and the data collection process began upon IRB approval. Solicitation emails were distributed to the department chair of each graduate program at GRU. Moreover, it was requested that each department chair for graduate programs forward the email and attachments to current graduate students and recent alumni of the respective programs. The email provided a brief description of the study, inclusion criteria, a link to the initial questionnaire, and two attachments: a solicitation letter for students and a copy of the Informed Consent Form. Individuals who fit the criteria of the study were invited to follow the link to a Qualtrics questionnaire.

The initial page of the questionnaire welcomed and expressed gratitude for the willingness to participate, followed by the Informed Consent Form that participants were instructed to read and digitally sign. The subsequent pages dedicated questions to inclusion criteria, demographic information, and a series of Likert Scale and open-ended follow-up questions. The inclusion criteria questions ensured participants understood the criteria and provided evidence of which academic years the student was enrolled full-time and in which program of study. Demographic information provided data for comparison to the overall GRU graduate student body, which assisted in ensuring the selected sample closely reflected the population. The Likert Scale and follow-up questions provided additional data used to increase validity and reliability.

Upon completion, the questionnaires were reviewed, and participants received an invitation to find time for an individual Zoom interview. Participants then received an email with a Zoom link and password for the meeting. Each interview began with a notification that the interview was being recorded. The researcher then read the IRB-approved Informed Consent

Form and fielded participant questions. After obtaining verbal consent, the researcher provided additional reassurances of confidentiality and anonymity for participants and responses and an overview of the semi-structured interview procedure. The researcher fielded questions and concerns from participants before beginning the interview.

Four primary questions guided the interviews with three to five follow-up questions prepared for each, in the event a participant provided a brief response. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate for phenomenological studies because no two lived experiences are the same, making it challenging to create one set of questions appropriate for all participants (Wilson, 2015). The semi-structured interview protocol permits researchers to ask off-script follow-up questions tailored for specific participants to probe for more rich descriptions and deeper meaning (Barriball & While, 1994). This is also especially important for this study because the global pandemic created nuanced experiences for these participants.

The video platform, Media Space, was used to convert completed interview audio files into closed captions to expedite the transcription process. The transcriptions were not 100% accurate, requiring manual correction to the transcripts and assignment of names to delineate between interviewer and interviewee. In compliance with IRB protocol, transcripts were uploaded to participant folders on a password-protected external hard drive, along with interviewer notes, informed consent forms, and Qualtrics questionnaires. Audio and video files were destroyed upon transcript completion.

## Participants

Individuals indicated an interest in participating by completing a Qualtrics questionnaire provided in the solicitation email. One function of the questionnaire was to gather demographic information to provide context to the data collected from individual interviews. Relevant demographic information collected included a program of study, gender, age, race/ethnicity, marital status, number of children under 18 living at home if participants care for someone considered to be high-risk for serious COVID – 19 symptoms, and employment status. This data ensured that participants met inclusion criteria for participation in the study. The data gathered from the demographic questions also provided context for the lived experiences of participants. Academic, personal, and professional aspects of graduate student life contributed to the lens through which the advising experience is viewed.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) acknowledge the wide range of sample size parameters presented in research literature but suggest roughly three to 10 participants is an appropriate sample size for a phenomenological inquiry. Eight graduate students from Green River University (GRU) volunteered to participate in this phenomenological study. The distribution of participant demographic information is presented in Table 1. Participants represented four graduate programs: Doctor of Education (EdD), Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP), Master of Science (MS) in Education Leadership, and Master of Science (MS) in Organizational Leadership. Six of the participants identified as female (75%) and two identified as male (25%). The gender demographic of this study aligned with the full-time graduate student enrollment at GRU during the 2020 –2021 academic year, which consisted of approximately 73% female and 27% male students. Three participants were between 25 and 34 years old and two participants were between the ages of 35 and 44. The age ranges 18 to 24, 45 to 54, and 55 to 64 consisted of



one participant each. Additionally, six participants identified as Caucasian, one preferred to self-describe as “American,” and one participant preferred not to say. GRU does not provide graduate student demographic information, beyond gender, on the institutional data webpage.

At the time of this study, three participants were married, three were not married but lived with a partner, one participant was divorced, and one participant was single and never married. Four participants did not have children under the age of 18 living at home, two participants had one child under the age of 18 living at home, and two participants had two children under the age of 18 living at home. Four participants were responsible for the care of an individual considered to be “high-risk” for severe Covid-19. Finally, five participants were employed full-time, one participant was working part-time, one participant was unemployed and job-hunting, and one participant was a full-time student without a job.

The coding process yielded four emergent themes: Advisor Access and Responsiveness, Change in Setting, Meaningful Advisor Relationships, and Shift in Student Priorities. Although each participant experienced graduate student advising during the global pandemic, individuals spoke of various aspects of advising in contrasting manners. Evidence from participants supports the theme through positive and detracting examples.

**Table 1.** Participant Demographic Information

Demographic Category	Participant Response	Number of Participants
<b>Program</b>		
	Doctor of Education (EdD)	3
	Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP)	2
	Education Leadership (MS)	2
	Organizational Leadership (MS)	1
<b>Gender</b>		
	Female	6
	Male	2
<b>Age</b>		
	18 - 24	1
	25 - 34	3
	35 - 44	2
	45 - 54	1
	55 - 64	1
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
	Caucasian	6
	Prefer to self-describe: American	1
	Prefer not to say	1
<b>Marital Status</b>		
	Married	3
	Living with a partner	3
	Divorced	1
	Never been married	1
<b>Children Under 18 at Home</b>		
	No children	4
	One child	2
	Two children	2
<b>Care for High-Risk Individual</b>		
	Yes	4
	No	4
<b>Employment Status</b>		
	Full-time	5
	Part-time	1
	Unemployed/looking	1
	Student	1

## **Emergent Theme 1: Advisor Access and Responsiveness**

All eight graduate students valued access to their advisor, though experiences regarding responsiveness of the advisor varied. Prioritizing the demands of personal, professional, and academic aspects of life is an ongoing struggle for many graduate students. The COVID – 19 global pandemic presented graduate students with unique situations by increasing the demands of all areas of life which created a situation for some students where access to the advisor was required to help meet those needs. Access to the advisor during the pandemic resulted in a positive experience for some students; however, others struggled with access, and it detracted from the educational process and caused additional stress.

Some participants appreciated the various avenues by which the advisor could be reached, “[The advisor] did provide their cell phone. I've always just emailed [the advisor] out of respect” (Participant 1). The student was quick to acknowledge that nothing required an emergency call but having the cell phone number provided a sense of comfort. Another student felt comfortable calling the advisor because “Sometimes e-mail is just too slow, I just need one answer and it's easier to hear it over the phone” (Participant 3). For Participant 8, access was vital to navigating a program path change:

I had to change my program path pretty fast because I had too much going on at work and at home. [The advisor] was really helpful in making that happen on short notice. They were willing to talk on the phone or have a Zoom meeting after I got done with work and [the advisor] made it seem like it wasn't a big deal. To me it was a big deal, or I might have had to take a break from school. I had to get paperwork in before the start of the semester, and it was something I needed their help for but [the advisor] made it happen.

For those who did not have access to an advisor, participants noted a range of negative issues, from feelings of frustration to the determination to leave their program of study.

Participant 5 did not feel like there was “immediate access to [the advisor]” when it was needed,

and Participant 4 expressed, “[The advisor] kind of just sent emails but then it was like [the advisor] wasn't as available during the pandemic as she was before.” Students with limited access expressed frustration and perceived a lack of support. The issue also caused setbacks in completing program requirements due to limited accessibility. Participant 4 shared, “It was difficult to try to do these things that you've never done before with all these rules that you don't know about” and went on to explain how “I just gave up” citing “communication issues” as the primary cause of withdrawal from the program.

Another factor influencing student perceptions of accessibility was the responsiveness of the advisor. Students understand that not every question requires a meeting or phone call but appreciate a punctual response to emails: “[The advisor] will email me back and in like 20 minutes, it feels. It's pretty rapid” (Participant 3). Participant 1 offered, “one of the nice things about my faculty advisor was that [the advisor] was responsive to emails and any communication really.” The responsiveness promoted feelings of “support” (Participant 7) and “importance” (Participant 8) for others during a time when even faculty were dealing with the pandemic. Taking the time to acknowledge and respond to students in a timely manner is crucial for an advisor, especially during stressful times like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Responsiveness allows students to have access to information that could cause unnecessary delays in progress to degree completion. Some advisors struggled to maintain open lines of communication with students. Participant 4 recounted that, “If we emailed her, it was like she was less responsive, less kind of there.” Participant 5 struggled with the delayed response time: “there was a time differential when I asked or left something for [the advisor] and for [the advisor] to get back to me.” The result of delayed communication for the participant was “you lose your train of thought by the time [the advisor] would finally get back to me.” Student

perceptions of a lack of responsiveness restricted the flow of information important to student progress. A lack of responsiveness was even more frustrating to an individual when “They even gave us their cell phone number but would rarely answer it or call me back” (Participant 6). Providing students with a means of communication outside of the standard school phone or email only to be unresponsive left the student feeling as though the advisor was “disingenuous” and “unreliable.”

The availability of faculty advisors to meet with students was significantly hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic by forcing in-person meetings to be held virtually or over the phone. Opportunities to connect in an informal manner or on short notice, to replace in-person opportunities such as stopping by the office or staying after class, required more intentionality of the advisor. Although it was recognized that virtual meetings were sometimes challenging, some advisors made an effort to maintain informal interactions. Participant 3 recounted that “just yesterday, [the advisor] and I stayed after class and talked for like 30, 45 minutes.” Participant 8 mentioned how convenient it was to have a faculty advisor because the class period was a time to “touch base without having to set up a meeting.” When Participant 1 did not have their advisor as an instructor during the semester, short notice meetings were appreciated, and one student highlighted:

[The advisor] would always be available in off times as well if we emailed her and requested. I could say, “Do you have any time available in the morning or at this time?” She even met with me during the summer when she wasn't technically working. So, it's really nice.

Where some students found advisors to be easily accessible for informal meetings or short notice meetings, others identified meeting times as a struggle. Faculty advisors have a wide range of responsibilities, including teaching, research, and service expectations at institutions, so

schedules fill up quickly; however, meeting the needs of students must remain a priority. Participant 5 mentioned that meetings were always scheduled a week or two out and that “if something came up for either of us, you might have to wait at home another week”, which occurred “probably 20, 30% of the time.” Participant 7 reported that individual advising sessions did not happen and that communication among students became the alternative: “Advising stuff was talked about in class but when we stopped having regular class, we had to rely on each other more for information.” Removing means of interaction with students created a gap in access, leaving students with feelings of “uncertainty” (Participant 2) or concerns of being “delayed (Participant 6).

The advisor plays a significant role as a conduit to keep graduate students informed and engaged with the program and institution. Several participants expressed an understanding that significant portions of communication regarding policies and procedures were communicated from the institutional level and that advisors did not need to play a significant role in disseminating the information. However, others felt that information was not being shared in a helpful manner. Participant 2 purported the advisor was not extremely focused “on serving the students and providing resources to help them be successful during an uncertain time and every other aspect of their life.” Participant 7 expressed discomfort with having to receive information “kind of from student word of mouth” because it “created a delay” in the flow of information, and it was not always the most reliable.

Perceptions of accessibility can be a determining factor in a student's experience. Many factors influence perceived accessibility including responsiveness, modes of communication, and availability to meet. Some participants experienced very accessible advisors who intentionally provided opportunities for formal and informal interactions and prompt responses to phone calls,

emails, or meeting requests. Others perceived their advisor to be more inaccessible because of poor responsiveness, a lack of availability for meetings, and limited means of connecting. Ultimately, all respondents recognized the COVID – 19 pandemic exerted stress on themselves and advisors and influenced changes in individual needs as well as advising practices.

### **Emergent Theme 2: Changes in Setting**

The settings for work, home life, and academics changed for many graduate students. Children stayed home for extended periods of time, businesses closed or moved to a remote setting, and higher education institutions scrambled to transition to remote or virtual courses. The change in setting presented unique challenges for the relationship between advisors and graduate students. Uncertainty increased, time became more valuable for some, and demands of all aspects of life increased or conflicted for many.

Before the pandemic, many students struggled to manage competing responsibilities from various aspects of life. Professional responsibilities increased for six participants due to transitioning to online work or mandatory overtime. Four participants had children under the age of 18 at home, requiring additional support and supervision. Four of the graduate students interviewed assisted loved ones considered “high-risk” for COVID-19. The graduate students experienced various levels of support and encouragement from advisors, but for many, prioritizing family, work, or mental health was necessary.

The change in setting brought about a change in expectations for the graduate students and advisors to navigate. Some students managed the transition while others struggled. Participant 1 explained that not being able to meet in person prohibited the ability to work as a “team” with the advisor and that “in-person support” was viewed as a valuable component of the

student's success. Participants recognized the change in setting as an “impediment” (Participant 8) and “one of the biggest academic struggles” (Participant 2). Additionally, the change in setting left Participant 4 feeling disconnected, as “it kind of felt like everyone was more on their own.” Connection to an institution and program is important for graduate students' ability to remain engaged and persist to degree completion.

The change in home and work settings created new demands and uncertainties for graduate students. All of the employed participants indicated an increased demand from their employers. Participant 6 and Participant 8 reported feelings of being exhausted or “burnt out” because of the increased demands. Participant 1 explained how “mandatory overtime shifts at work were really disruptive.” To compound these increasing work requirements, participants who were also educators moved to remote teaching which required flexibility in instruction and course requirements. For example, Participant 4 remembered, it “was terrible” because “They gave us two days and said, hey, we're going online. So, start doing lesson plans.” While this may refer to a small number in this participant pool, it is important to recognize that many graduate students act as Teaching Assistants (T.A.) or Graduate Assistants (G.A.), which involve some instructional roles so may have been a significant issue for graduate students during the pandemic.

In addition, increased demands from work had to be balanced with increased personal responsibilities. All participants responsible for caretaking of others, including those with children under 18 at home and those supporting someone considered “high-risk” for serious COVID-19 symptoms, faced uncertainty, increased demands, and worries. Participant 4 described having to balance all aspects of life, from modifying their role as an educator to ensuring basic needs were met at home:



Our school actually switched from in-person to online, which is really difficult. But then my huge problem was, how am I going to do labs online? It was extremely stressful. Just from that, just being like, okay, how am I going to teach this to students? My number one goal as a teacher is to make sure that students get a quality education. Then my [children] are here, and I have to try and help them with their school while I'm teaching and they're going to be there, and it was just like there's so much going on and that it was just minor stuff too as well. It was just the shortages of supply. You're worried about that like were we going to have toilet paper for a while.

The increased life demands, and uncertainties presented by COVID-19 were a challenge for all participants. For many, time became a much more valuable resource because days were spent splitting time between family and work and evenings were a time to make up work that could not be accomplished during the day. Participant 1 and Participant 8 identified “proactive communication” from the advisor as something that helped provide reassurances and prevented them from having to make time during the day to track down information. Further, advisor awareness of the increased life demands warranted consideration for meeting availability, student advocacy, and potential increased need for social-emotional support.

### **Emergent Theme 3: Meaningful Advisor Relationships**

Quality relationships between advisors and graduate students promote student persistence and success, especially during COVID-19. Four participants mentioned positive relationships with advisors for various reasons. Participant 7 expressed that they “felt very comfortable with her that I could ask any questions. And I know we had some good conversations.” Participant 8 found that developing a relationship with the advisor “limited unnecessary formalities” and navigating communication and the program demands during the pandemic was “easier and less stressful” because of the relationship. Participant 1 stressed the importance of the advisor relationship because of the “psychosocial support”:

Overall, I probably would not have stayed in my program at all if I didn't have such high-quality faculty advising, I don't think I would have stayed through the pandemic. I think that the advising I have received through the pandemic, even though it was over Zoom was really encouraging and motivating.

Four graduate students noted relationships with advisors suffered because of pandemic related issues. Participant 2 felt that the advisor never attempted to develop a relationship of any sort and stated that “[The advisor] never even knew what I taught.” This fact clearly did not sit well with the individual and did not meet expectations. Participant 6 felt that they could not “trust” information provided by the advisor, but it was “frustrating that we had to depend on the advisor so much but couldn't count on her.” The lack of trust and dependability was viewed as a detriment to the relationship between three of the participants and their respective advisors.

Quality advisor relationships made two students feel supported and as though they could trust the advice provided, and as Participant 3 stated, “which I think is important for somebody you want to get advice from.” Two other participants appreciated the advisor’s empathy and efforts to understand and assist them when possible. Participant 8 appreciated that “[the advisor] just made an effort to ask about what was going on in my life and sometimes just listen.” While Participant 1 shared how the advisor provided support when struggles arose at work, in their personal life, or academically: “I just like that being able to empathize and identify, but also but more than that, to point me towards things that I should do for myself, like self-care.”

The four other students expressed frustration with advisor apathy toward struggles relating to COVID-19. Participant 2 “lost a lot of respect” for the advisor because only one discussion about the pandemic was facilitated and the advisor “dismissed and disregarded everything said in that discussion.” The student also felt as though the advisor was just “checking

a box.” Participant 4 described the advisor's demeanor as “insensitive” and approached pandemic related struggles with “no real understanding.” Participant 6 understood that everyone, including faculty, struggled with the pandemic in one way or another but the advisor did not want to discuss the pandemic and “would almost get annoyed” if the student tried to talk about it. Participant 5 shared that the relationship with the advisor was “minimal” before the pandemic and “basically non-existent” once the pandemic started because the participant perceived “they just didn’t care.”

From “mentors” (Participant 1) to “basically non-existent” (Participant 5) relationships, participants experienced a wide range of support from advisors. Despite some agitation with advisors handling of pandemic related matters, two of the participants offered words of understanding to the advisor. Participant 4 empathized that “everyone was dealing with [the pandemic] and we don’t really know like what is going on in their life.” Participant 5 shared, “everybody did the best they could” and acknowledged “It's a two-way street with the student and an advisor. I mean, it's not all just, I'm not blaming her. I could have done more as well.” Three of the students with positive experiences also expressed empathy and “understanding” that advisors also had to deal with pandemic related stressors outside of school. Participant 1 shared that “it amazes me the faculty who are also advisors, especially at the graduate level” because of the ability to provide high quality advising to so many other students, advise research projects, and “they have their own stuff going on with COVID.”

#### **Emergent Theme 4: Shift in Student Priorities**

During the pandemic, many participants reported a shift in priorities. Despite competing demands in other areas of life, two students were more motivated to complete programs to free-

up time or just “be done” with the program. Participant 8 noted that the additional free time from not having as much of a social life “made more time for me to focus on my classwork and really push through.” Participant 6 felt that the entire graduate experience during the pandemic was so frustrating that “I was really just going to do anything in my power to not delay my graduation.”

Where two individuals found motivation, others identified slowing down and prioritizing other areas of life to be prudent. Focusing on a “healthy balance as much as possible” and “self-care” took priority for Participant 1 experiencing “mental exhaustion” from graduate school, work, and caring for a family member during the pandemic. Participant 8 found that family and work required priority and that “fortunately the instructors were understanding and accommodating.” Shifting to remote instruction, students were able to be home to tend to other responsibilities and many faculty adjusted workloads or timelines to accommodate the additional life demands. However, Participant 2 noted that the pandemic was “just too much” and that there was not really a choice but to prioritize work because “that’s how the bills get paid.”

As a result of the priority shift, students did not look to advisors as much for support in areas like career development or accessing information about campus. Three participants noted that professional development opportunities were relatively non-existent once the pandemic started. Two participants noted that they “wouldn't have had time” (Participant 4) or it “wasn’t something that I was really worried about at the time” (Participant 1). Additionally, several students felt that the institution or department was providing enough communication about what was happening with COVID-19 that the advisor did not need to provide that information.

## Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges to graduate students and advisors. The emergent themes of Advisor Access and Responsiveness, Change in Setting, Meaningful Advisor Relationships, and Shift in Student Priorities, illustrate how individualized graduate student experiences were. However, despite the contrast in perceptions of the advising experience during the pandemic, participants all valued access to their advisor. Most participants experienced some level of disruption from the change in setting. All individuals interviewed valued a quality relationship, regardless of whether it was a positive experience or one that could have gone better. Many participants were forced to prioritize aspects of life over academics. For one participant, the advisor provided support to persist in the program. Another cited the frustrations with the advisor and program as the cause of withdrawal. Perceptions of advising do not always equate to student success and perceptions of poor advising do not always equate to student failure. However, student perceptions of advising do influence the quality of education and student experience, especially during times of significant disruption. In the next section, applications of these findings to university advising practices are discussed.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This phenomenological inquiry explored graduate student perceptions of advising during the COVID – 19 global pandemic. After conducting a literature review, Situated Learning Theory was chosen to inform the development of this study. Stein (1998) identified content, context, community of practice, and participation as overarching components of Situated Learning Theory that influence learning. The four components were used as a framework for the development of research questions for this study, which resulted in a research question representing each component.

#### **Research Questions**

Four overarching research questions, aligned with the categories of Situated Learning Theory (Stein, 1998), guided the inquiry for this qualitative phenomenological study:

**Research Question 1:** How did the content of advising sessions and communication provided by advisors support graduate students during the pandemic?

**Research Question 2:** What were graduate students' perceptions of advisor responsiveness to their contextual needs during the pandemic?

**Research Question 3:** How did graduate students perceive advisors' efforts to promote connectedness to the larger learning community?

**Research Question 4:** How did graduate students feel about their participation in the advising process during the pandemic?

A semi-structured qualitative interview was formulated from the research questions for this phenomenological study. Eight individuals who were enrolled as full-time graduate students during the 2019 – 2020 or 2020-2021 academic years were selected for this study. They completed demographic questionnaires and participated in individual interviews. After coding the interviews, qualitative data analysis produced four emergent themes: advisor access and responsiveness, change in setting, meaningful advisor relationships, and shift in student priorities. Just as Stein (1998) recognized the interdependent nature of the four components of Situated Learning Theory, the four emergent themes of this study influence one another. This chapter presents the research questions, discussion of the findings, recommendations for practice, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of graduate students during times of significant disruption to better understand perceptions of advising. Four themes emerged from qualitative data analysis of student perceptions of advising during the COVID – 19 global pandemic (Table 4). All eight graduate students expressed the importance of advisor access and responsiveness, noted struggles associated with a change in work, home, or academic settings, and valued meaningful relationships with the advisor. Six participants noted a shift in priorities once the pandemic started.

## **Research Question 1**

How did the content of advising sessions and communication provided by advisors support graduate students during the pandemic?

Research Question 1 aligns with Stein's (1998) category of "Content" and focused on graduate student perceptions of how the content of advising sessions and advisor communication supported students during the COVID – 19 pandemic. Findings from Emergent Theme 1: Advisor Access and Responsiveness addressed this research question by underscoring preferences for how content was delivered. That is, participants highlighted the importance of informal advisor communication, advisor availability, and advisor responsiveness. During the COVID-19 pandemic many graduate students' lives became more stressful and time a more valuable resource. Because of this, opportunities to access the advisor for formal meetings, informal meetings, and timely responses were identified as valuable for accessing necessary information. The access and responsiveness promoted feelings of support for some participants and lack of access and responsiveness led to frustration and feelings of a lack of support for other participants.

The importance of access to advisors and timely responses is consistent with current graduate student advising research. Schroeder and Terras (2015) compared cohort, online, and classroom graduate students. Though each group of students maintained unique advising needs, one of the commonalities across all three groups was valued access to the advisor and responsiveness from them. Cross (2018), in agreement with Irani et al. (2014), ascertained that one of the foremost influencing factors of online student satisfaction is quality and timely communication. Access to advisors and responsiveness were crucial to student satisfaction and success prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for online programs. However, institutions



of higher education were ill-prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic and many simply did not have the time or resources to effectively transition all aspects of the institution to remote or online settings (Bessette et al. 2020). Paired with the ongoing concern for graduate students' mental health (Lederman, 2020), communication and responsiveness from advisors were that much more important during the pandemic.

Mass communication by departments and institutions pertaining to the COVID-19 global pandemic fulfilled graduate students' need to be informed about impacts of the pandemic and institutional responses. Participants of this study expressed that advisors were helpful as a point of contact for clarification, but institutional and programmatic leadership provided sufficient content and regular updates in this area. Graduate students identified the importance of access to advisors for program or research specific content. However, content outside of the scope of individual program needs, such as professional development or peer engagement opportunities, was not as valued by participants. During the time of significant disruption, essential academic information was valued.

## **Research Question 2**

What were graduate students' perceptions of advisor responsiveness to their contextual needs during the pandemic?

Research Question 2 aligns with Stein's (1998) category of "Context" which describes how the context of individual students' lives informs and influences learning. Emergent Theme 3: Meaningful Advisor Relationship provided evidence of how context affected relationships. For some, the pandemic promoted relationships, while for others who did not consider how the context of a pandemic affected students, such lack of consideration detracted from relationships.

Understanding the context of a student's life helps to create an individualized plan that meets needs and promotes academic progression. When the context of COVID-19 and student lives were considered, advisors better understood participant needs and provided individualized support including psychosocial, informal meetings, prompt communication, empathy, and more. The positive experience left participants feeling supported and understood, which promoted meaningful relationships between the graduate students and advisors. Participants who perceived their advisors did not consider the context of COVID-19 or the increased personal and professional demands experienced some level of a diminished relationship and felt subsequently not supported in their graduate studies.

Cross (2018) explored how graduate students perceived advising in an online setting and discovered the importance of the advisor and student relationship. In agreement with this study, students valued advisors who cared and exhibited positive relational behaviors. Further, Green (2016) illuminated the need for advisors to understand individual students, their circumstances, and provide individualized approaches. Fotuhi (2020) supported the need for understanding individual student needs because each student experiences different challenges and the subsequent anxieties must be addressed to provide effective learning. Fotuhi's (2020) findings suggest an individualized approach to advising graduate students is needed. Certainly, participants in this study noted novel contextual issues that emerged from the pandemic, from new childcare needs, to work demands, or dependent care adult challenges. Simply, participants expected their advisors to recognize these factors, and respond with empathy and expectations appropriate for the evolving context.

Although graduate students value meaningful relationships, Harker Martella (2017) reported that graduate students rated relationships with the advisor as important but lower than

timely and accurate information. Harker Martella (2017) recognized the finding deviates from other literature and is not congruent with the findings of this study. One reason for the discrepancy may be that the information received by graduate students is a foundational need and if not received in a timely manner could result in attrition. However, timely communication and accurate information were rated against one another and not as a contributing factor of the relationship between student and advisor. Participants responses in this study indicated responsiveness and access to information from the advisor contributed to or detracted from the relationship with the advisor. Nevertheless, meaningful relationships were valued by each participant.

### **Research Question 3**

How did graduate students perceive advisors' efforts to promote connectedness to the larger learning community?

Stein's (1998) third category of "Community of Practice" undergirds Research Question 3. Emergent Theme 2: Change in Setting suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered the daily lives of graduate students and limited opportunities for engaging or connecting with others for the sake of creating a community of practice. Around the world, the pandemic halted the operation of most non-essential industries and forced the general public to remain at home. Participants cited the closures as a reason for lack of engagement with professional communities. Though some organizations eventually attempted virtual conferences, the changes in setting for other aspects of life prevented many from participating in extended learning opportunities. Additionally, it was recognized by some students that everyone was impacted in different ways, making connecting with peers challenging. However, once organizations slowly

started to operate, some participants noted that advisors began to share webinars and events again, though attending was often difficult. Additionally, the change in course delivery settings made the informal meetings and connections with advisors more challenging. Some advisors created opportunities that were appreciated by students. One advisor provided time after online classes for student engagement, the time mimicked opportunities available when classes were in-person. Others gave out cell phone numbers because students could not stop by an office during the day or call an office line to ask a question that did not warrant scheduling a meeting but was important for student progress.

Wang and DeLaquil (2020) uncovered similar findings and reported disruption to communities of practice for doctoral students limited access to academic resources, professional networking, and social interactions. Though many engagement opportunities, such as conferences and academic residencies, were canceled, some students reported they would not have available time to participate. Finding time to connect with advisors was challenging enough because adjusted schedules created more conflicts (Ajjan et al., 2020). However, Ogilvie et al. (2020) found 70% of graduate students felt supported or very supported by advisors or major professors and 71% felt the same from student peers. The findings of Ogilvie et al. (2020) reflected a slightly higher percentage of students feeling supported by the advisor category, compared to this study; however, the size and resources of individual institutions and programs could account for the difference.

Communities of practice assist learners to interpret and reflect upon the content in the context for which it is provided, ultimately, developing meaning for the individual (Stein, 1998). The process is dependent on social interactions among members of the group (Stein, 1998). McMillian and Chavis (1996) believed that a sense of belonging, being valued by the group, and

belief that a commitment to the group will fulfill individual needs are vital to a sense of community. In this study, graduate students expressed a desire to remain connected to their community of practice but only to a limited extent. The change in setting increased demands for participants and removed existing opportunities. Participants expressed a desire to remain connected to advisors but acknowledged that the scope of interactions became more focused on matters specific to program completion.

#### **Research Question 4**

How do graduate students feel about their participation in the advising process during the pandemic?

Research Question 4 derives from Stein's (1998) fourth category: Participation. Findings from Emergent Theme 4: Shift in Student Priorities emphasize how the additional demands caused by the COVID-19 pandemic forced many graduate students to reprioritize various responsibilities and their capacity to participate. Student situations were unique but having to work from home and manage children who were not in school was difficult for some. Others noted the increased workload of rushing to transition their own teaching online and the continuous work of finding creative ways to adapt lesson plans to remain effective. Others who worked in occupations deemed "essential" struggled with regular mandatory overtime shifts. Finally, some found the additional work of taking care of loved ones considered high-risk for COVID to consume considerable time because of check-ins, shopping, and assisting with other tasks of daily living. Many graduate students had to re-prioritize their demands and responsibilities to focus on meeting the basic needs of their families. Tending to children, caring for loved ones, and performing job duties demanded more and became a higher priority than

graduate school. The shift left limited time for academics and participation in the advising process or other academic pursuits. For some, this meant reducing course loads, and slowing progress through their program of study.

Congruent with this study, Donohue et al. (2021) detailed challenges faced by graduate students during the pandemic and cited the impacts of increased workloads in personal and professional lives as one of the issues arising from COVID-19. Participants in the study also reported that the increased workload resulted in limited time for thesis and dissertation work, indicating a prioritization shift. Disruption caused by the change in setting for graduate students aligns with the findings of Kee (2018). Kee (2018) ascertained that the merging of personal, professional, and academic aspects of life was one of the more significant challenges graduate students had to navigate. Brammer (2020) explored specific challenges graduate students faced because of the pandemic and found that transitioning back home and time management were two areas students identified. The issue of work-life balance is not new to graduate students; however, the pandemic compounded stressors because of the adverse impact of COVID-19 across all aspects of life.

### **Thematic Connections**

The COVID-19 global pandemic complicated the lives of many graduate students due to increased personal, professional, and academic demands. Exploration and discussion of isolated emergent themes helps establish relevance and merit; however, examination of the interdependence among themes illustrates the complexities of graduate student lives during the pandemic. Furthermore, understanding how the emergent themes influenced one another across various aspects of graduate students' lives is crucial for the development of comprehensive

advising practices which consider the whole student. Several prominent thematic connections include the following as described.

### **Change in Setting and Shift in Student Priorities**

For many graduate students, the COVID-19 pandemic represented a confluence of personal, professional, and academic aspects of life. Some students had to balance caring for children at home all day, while attempting to meet the increased work demands caused by the pandemic and being forced into a remote academic setting. Additionally, the mental and physical health of students became increasingly jeopardized because of the added stress and responsibilities. Akin to a hierarchy of needs, caring and provide for oneself and family became a priority. Jordan (2013) presented six components of a disaster survivor's hierarchy of needs and suggested food, water, and shelter are priorities followed by safety, family and friend support, stress reduction, grief and loss, and finally assimilation and accommodation. Findings from this study support Jordan's (2013) model because the change in setting forced reprioritization of competing life demands by many graduate students.

### **Change in Setting and Advisor Access and Responsiveness**

The change in setting prevented some modes of access to advisors. Specifically, many opportunities for informal interactions such as talking after class or stopping by an advisor's office were eliminated because of the pandemic. Additionally, the increased demands at home and work limited the availability for many students and advisors were not in the office to answer or respond to phone calls. The change in setting magnified the importance of advisor responsiveness and establishing avenues for students to access them.

### **Meaningful Advisor Relationships and Advisor Access and Responsiveness**

Participants of this study expressed value for meaningful advisor relationships, regardless of individual advisor relationship status. A lack of access and responsiveness over time causes an erosion of the relationship, as it did for several graduate students. If a student does not know if or when an advisor will respond, a lack of trust emerges. Additionally, students can feel that their individual success is not important to the advisor and that a shared goal of degree completion is absent. In return, the student may not be inclined to respond to the advisor in a timely manner, thus starting a collusion cycle or negative feedback loop. In other words, a student who views an advisor as inaccessible and unresponsive may feel unvalued and return the advisor's lack of accessibility and responsiveness. In return, the advisor observes the withdrawal of the student accessibility and responsiveness and may perceive the student is checked-out or does not care about their own education and the advisor, who likely maintains a busy schedule, decides to invest less time in the student. Eventually, the relationship is extremely damaged and significant work must be done to repair it. Meaningful relationships help prevent these cycles because mutual respect and understanding is established. In this situation, if a meaningful relationship existed, the student may be understanding that the advisor is extremely busy because of an ongoing pandemic, and the lack of responsiveness and accessibility is not because of a lack of value.

### **Shift in Student Priorities and Community of Practice and Change in Setting**

Participants in this study discussed the change in setting and shift in priorities limited the opportunities to engage with a community of practice and when opportunities were presented, many students could not participate because of other priorities. Not engaging with a community



of practice was not prohibitive of obtaining any level of Jordan's (2015) hierarchy of needs. Academic demands became secondary to personal and professional demands and engagement with a community of practice is beneficial but not necessary to satisfy most academic requirements; thus, making a community of practice a low priority for many graduate students.

### **Historical Perspective Applications to Current Advising Practice**

Frost (2000) and Kuhn (2008) presented four unique eras of advising: before 1870, 1870 – 1970, 1970 – 2003, and 2003 – present. The first era of advising occurred when little need existed for contemporary forms of advising as institutions were for the social elite and authoritarian leadership styles dominated (Thelin, 2011). Implementation of the first official advising practices demarcates the second era of advising, influenced by increasing enrolment and the offering of electives (Gordon et al., 2011; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010). One of the significant contributors to the enrollment shift was the industrial revolution and concurrent urbanization. The examination of advising practices defines the third era of advising and coincides with the Civil Rights Act and Title IX, two noteworthy events in providing access to education for underrepresented populations (Frost, 2000). Refining the definition and functions of advising represents the fourth and current era of advising (Frost, 2000). In another period of rapid enrollment growth, paired with an increasingly diverse student population, advising was established as a fundamental function of higher education that remains vital to student success.

Examining the historical perspective highlights the growth and increased importance of advising in higher education over time. Historically, noteworthy events or movements coincided with transitions from one era of advising to the next because of necessary shifts in practice. The

COVID-19 global pandemic induced significant disruptions on a global scale and forced higher education to reconsider practices. The migration of courses and student services to a remote or online setting demonstrated the necessity for higher education to adopt multiple modality offerings. However, a lack of funding and the desire to return to pre-COVID-19 norms may prevent progress. Despite the mass disruption, it is unclear if the impacts of COVID-19 will usher in a new era of advising or if institutions will revert to the comforts and familiarity of previous practices. As shared by the participants of this study, some faculty advisors embrace change and adapt to graduate student needs, while others remain steadfast in previous practices. Hopefully, studies like this continue to shed light on the unique perspectives and needs of students to provide evidence of effective advising practice and propel advancement of the field.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

When considering the recommendations and as the world navigates the pandemic towards a new normal that resembles pre-pandemic life, it is important to remember that issues and concerns expressed by graduate students were congruent with existing research from before the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic represented an inflection point that converged and magnified extenuating circumstances across all aspects of life, calling attention to the challenges graduate students face. The findings of this study reflect graduate students' lived experiences and perceptions of advising during the COVID-19 global pandemic guided recommendations for practice. Recommendations were established to reflect the four emergent themes: Advisor Access and Responsiveness, Change in Setting, Meaningful Advisor Relationship, and Shift in Student Priorities.

*Recommendation 1:* Advisors should work to be accessible and be prompt with responses to student communication. Advisors possess the ability to help students stay connected to the institution and promote graduate student persistence through accessibility and timely responses. It is natural to experience frustration when expectations are not met and a way to mitigate this is by developing and agreeing to expectations of one another. An advising agreement can be initiated by a student or advisor, but programs, departments, or institutions may consider implementing the practice as a standard. The advising agreement could be a standard document but could also be dynamic; that is, allowing for adaptations and amendments as needed. Important content to consider for the advising document include acceptable modes of communication, office hours, response times, how to schedule meetings, and frequency of meetings. An advising agreement sets explicit baseline expectations for advisors and students and allows both parties to hold one another accountable. The document could be amended as needed, like during the COVID-19 global pandemic or times of significant disruptions, when daily lives undergo dramatic change.

*Recommendation 2:* The change in the setting during the COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges for students and advisors and highlighted the need for an individualized approach to advising. Advisors who struggled to adapt to the situation left students feeling disconnected or frustrated. Students recognized and appreciated advisors who were understanding of their situation and attempted to understand their individual needs, adapt plans to their needs, and communicate when time permitted. The COVID-19 pandemic forced dramatic shifts in setting for most students, magnifying the impacts of such change. However, individual students experience such events in life from time to time. It is important to maintain an adaptable approach to advising in the event a student experiences such disruption that is not on a global

scale.

*Recommendation 3:* Students and advisors should work to develop meaningful relationships. Institution and program size often dictate the number of advising options and resources. It is unrealistic to expect every student and advisor relationship to be a perfect match. However, that does not mean a relationship cannot be meaningful and built upon mutual respect, trust, and empathy. Working to understand mutual needs and being considerate of one another goes a long way and provides a foundation for student success. Interpersonal conflicts between students and advisors add stress to an already stressful situation. Additionally, when relationships develop, the advisor is able to take a holistic approach to advising and can support the student beyond course selection. Meaningful relationships promote open communication and trust that is crucial for student persistence to graduation, especially in turbulent times when students experience high levels of stress and uncertainty.

*Recommendation 4:* Advisors should work with students to create a manageable and realistic path through the program and reevaluate the plan at the end of each semester or before new courses begin. Graduate students often lead complex lives and must continuously prioritize life demands and the COVID-19 global pandemic caused increased personal and professional demands for many. Again, graduate students can experience these significant changes at any point in life, absent global disruption. Scheduled check-in times for program or research planning help to promote intentional support through the process, and a mutual understanding of student priorities, as academics may not always be a top priority for students. Regular check-ins establish an avenue for the adaptation of plans that are in the best interest of the student.

## **Limitations**

In research design, limitations refer to factors outside of the investigator's control (Furfaro et al., 2020). Guba and Lincoln (1981) posited the importance of trustworthiness, or rigor, in qualitative research; however, it proves problematic for some researchers to achieve. Furthermore, participants' willingness to share information with the researcher was a limitation (Kelly et al., 2017). Another limitation was participant truthfulness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Rudestam and Newton (2015) asserted that the principal investigator must satisfy questions about the thoroughness of the research. Finally, generalizability was a limitation of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). The study's data and conclusions apply only for the purposes of the specific study site. The study intended not to generalize findings but rather to provide insights into individuals' lived experiences in a specific context at a specific point in time.

## **Delimitations**

Delimitations outline factors a researcher intends to include or omit in the research and are vital for establishing the boundaries of a study (Ellis & Levy, 2009). Delimitations result from the researcher's control over aspects of the study by including or excluding criteria emerging from the limitations (Simon & Goes, 2013). The investigator delimited participant selection to one graduate-level program in the United States' Midwestern region. The sample size was delimited to three to ten participants. A small sample size is a hallmark of qualitative research and a phenomenological design intended to gain rich and thick descriptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participation in the study requires students to be full-time in one specific academic program, matriculating during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The

researcher delimited participant selection to students with full-time status during the 2019 - 2020 and 2020 - 2021 academic years, ensuring participants experience graduate school before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher used purposeful sampling to identify and select participants who fit the defined criteria in this study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study presented graduate students' perceptions of advising during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Expand the sample size of this research through additional quantitative studies, possibly focusing on specific themes identified in this study, to provide greater insights, increase depth about topics noted, and expand generalizable findings.
2. Graduate programs often have specific demands of students and can be nuanced across subject areas. Exploring specific fields of study would highlight challenges aligned to the associated academic demands.
3. Initiating research studies focusing on only positive or negative experiences would provide a more robust data set to analyze commonalities. The findings of this study represent positive and negative experiences. A more critical inspection of each could provide greater detail about student experiences.
4. Comparing and contrasting practices before and after the pandemic would illuminate the lasting impact of COVID-19 on the advising process.

5. Conducting a companion study of faculty as participants to identify the ways they perceive the needs of their advisees could provide information regarding the faculty advisor-advisee relationship.

### **Chapter Summary**

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of graduate students during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The emergent themes, developed from the analysis of student perceptions, yielded results consistent with existing research pertaining to graduate student advising and experiences during the pandemic. This study further promotes the significant role advisors play in the progression of graduate students through programs of study. It is recommended that advisors maintain accessibility and provide timely responses to students, work to develop meaningful relationships with students, attempt to understand and meet individual student needs, and develop plans that are adaptable to the priorities of students. Further research on graduate student advising is needed and was magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Letter

Dear Invitee,

My name is Carson Perry, and I am a doctoral student at Winona State University Doctor of Education program. I am kindly requesting your participation in my doctoral research study titled: Graduate Student Perceptions of Academic Advising During a Global Pandemic. The intention is to explore how graduate students were academically supported during the height of the Covid – 19 pandemic. Ideal participants will have been enrolled at Winona State University as a full-time graduate student during the 2019 – 2020 and/or 2020 – 2021 academic year.

The study involves completing a basic survey, participation in a zoom interview, and participation in a follow-up interview, if needed. The total time required should be approximately an hour and fifteen minutes.

Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. The findings from the study will be completely anonymous and all collected information will be maintained in accordance with Winona State University IRB guidelines. If you would like to participate in the study, please click the survey link at the end of this document.

Your participation in the research will be of great importance to further build the body of literature regarding graduate student advising. Furthermore, it will help inform advising practice during times of significant disruption, like the Covid-19 pandemic.

Please reach out to the primary investigator or faculty advisor with any questions you have about the study and your participation, now or later during the study.

**Primary Investigator**

Carson Perry  
cperry12@winona.edu

**Faculty Advisor**

Dr. Dawnette Cigrand  
dcigrand@winona.edu  
507-457-5336

Thank you for your time and participation.

Sincerely,

Carson Perry  
Doctoral Candidate  
Winona State University

Survey link:

[https://winona.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_3sfqwxUVj0cmwCi](https://winona.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3sfqwxUVj0cmwCi)

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Form

#### **Informed Consent Form**

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study. The researcher will answer any questions before you sign this form.

**Study Title:** Graduate Student Perceptions of Advising During a Global Pandemic

#### **What is this research study about?**

You are invited to participate in a research study designed to explore graduate students lived experiences pertaining to advising during the Covid – 19 global pandemic. We hope to learn how graduate students perceive advising during the pandemic and what advising needs were met or not met. We hope the outcomes of the study inform current and future graduate student advising practice. Ideal participants will have been enrolled as full-time graduate students during the 2019 – 2020 and/or 2020 – 2021 academic year.

#### **What activities will this study involve?**

If you decide to participate, you will initially be asked to complete a questionnaire taking no longer than 15 minutes. Once complete, the researcher will contact you to schedule an interview that will be conducted via Zoom and will last no longer than an hour and a half. The researcher may contact you for a follow-up interview that will last no longer than 30 minutes.

#### **How much time will this take?**

We estimate participating in the study will require one hour and 15 minutes of your time.

#### **What will be done with the data collected during this study?**

All information collected will be stored on a password protected external hard drive and stored in a locked filing cabinet with any physical documents. When the study is completed, all hard copies will be scanned onto the password protected external hard drive with all electronic information. All documentation will remain stored in the locked filing cabinet for five years, at which point it will be shredded and the external hard drive will be formatted to delete all information.

#### **Are there any risks for participating?**

The potential risks associated with this study are psychological or emotional in nature. The researcher intends to explore graduate student experiences relating to the Covid – 19 global pandemic, where potentially traumatic events may be discussed. These risks will be minimized by allowing participants to withdraw from the study at any time and provide information for the Winona State University Counseling Services.

#### **WSU Counseling & Wellness Services**

[counselingservices@winona.edu](mailto:counselingservices@winona.edu)

507.457.5330

Integrated Wellness Complex 222

#### Hours

Lobby Hours: Monday – Friday: 8am – 4:30pm

Appointment Hours: Monday – Friday 8am – 6pm

Crisis hours: Monday – Friday: 8am – 4pm

#### **Emergency Services**

<https://www.winona.edu/counseling-services/emergency.asp>

**Are there any benefits for participating?**

There are no appreciable benefits from participating in this study.

**What are my rights as a participant?**

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may stop at any time. You may decide not to participate or to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. A decision not to participate or withdraw will not affect your current or future relationship with Winona State University.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns about this study?**

The primary researcher conducting this study is Carson Perry, a doctoral student at Winona State University, and can be reached at cperry12@winona.edu. The faculty advisor for this study is Dr. Dawnette Cigrand. Dr. Cigrand can be reached at dcigrand@winona.edu or 507-457-5336 (office). You may ask any questions you have about the study and your participation now or later on during the research process.

**Who can I contact if I have questions about my rights as a participant?**

If you have questions or concerns about your participation in the study, contact the Human Protections Administrator Brett Ayers at 507-457-5519 or bayers@winona.edu. This project has been reviewed by the Winona State University Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects.

You will be provided a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Agreement to Participate**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time. Your signature indicates that the study has been explained, you have had an opportunity to ask questions, and you have decided to participate.

Your signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Your name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of person obtaining consent: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name of person obtaining consent (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Participant Questionnaire

# Graduate Student Perceptions of Advising During a Global Pandemic

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#### Start of Block: 1

Q1 This questionnaire is intended to collect information about university-provided academic advising for graduate students during the Covid - 19 global pandemic. Information will be used to assess how students were supported and inform future graduate student advising practice. Please complete the survey in its entirety with thorough responses.

#### End of Block: 1

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#### Start of Block: 2

#### Q2 Informed Consent Form

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study. The researcher will answer any questions before you sign this form.

Study Title: Graduate Student Perceptions of Advising During a Global Pandemic

What is this research study about?

You are invited to participate in a research study designed to explore graduate students lived experiences pertaining to advising during the Covid – 19 global pandemic. We hope to learn how graduate students perceive advising during the pandemic and what advising needs were met or not met. We hope the outcomes of the study inform current and future graduate student advising practice. Ideal participants will have been enrolled as full-time graduate students during the 2019 – 2020 and/or 2020 – 2021 academic year.

What activities will this study involve?

If you decide to participate, you will initially be asked to complete a questionnaire taking no longer than 15 minutes. Once complete, the researcher will contact you to schedule an

interview that will be conducted via Zoom and should last no longer than an hour and a half. The researcher may contact you for a follow-up interview that should last no longer than 30 minutes.

How much time will this take?

The study will begin upon approval from IRB and conclude no later than May of 2022. We estimate participating in the study will require one hour and 15 minutes of your time.

What will be done with the data collected during this study?

All information collected will be stored on a password protected external hard drive and stored in a locked filing cabinet with any physical documents. When the study is completed, all hard copies will be scanned onto the password protected external hard drive with all electronic information. All documentation will remain stored in the locked filing cabinet for five years, at which point it will be shredded and the external hard drive will be formatted to delete all information.

Are there any risks for participating?

The potential risks associated with this study are psychological or emotional in nature. The researcher intends to explore graduate student experiences relating to the Covid – 19 global pandemic, where potentially traumatic events may be discussed. These risks will be minimized

by allowing participants to withdraw from the study at any time and provide information for the Winona State University Counseling Services.

WSU Counseling & Wellness Services

[counselingservices@winona.edu](mailto:counselingservices@winona.edu)

507.457.5330

Integrated Wellness Complex 222

Hours Lobby Hours: Monday – Friday: 8am – 4:30pm

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Emergency Services

<https://www.winona.edu/counseling-services/emergency.asp>

Are there any benefits for participating?

There are no appreciable benefits from participating in this study.

What are my rights as a participant?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may stop at any time. You may decide not to participate or to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. A decision not to participate or withdraw will not affect your current or future relationship with Winona State University.

Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns about this study?

The main researcher conducting this study is Carson Perry, a doctoral student at Winona State University and the primary investigator, at [cperry12@winona.edu](mailto:cperry12@winona.edu). The faculty advisor for this study is Dr. Dawnette Cigrand. You may ask any questions you have about the study and your participation now or later during the study. Dr. Cigrand may be reached at [dcigrand@winona.edu](mailto:dcigrand@winona.edu) or 507-457-5536.

Who can I contact if I have questions about my rights as a participant?

If you have questions or concerns about your participation in the study, contact the Human Protections Administrator Brett Ayers at 507-457-5519 or [bayers@winona.edu](mailto:bayers@winona.edu). This project has been reviewed by the Winona State University Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects. You may also contact the primary investigator.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Q3 Agreement to Participate

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time. Your signature indicates that the study has been explained, you have had an opportunity to ask questions, and you have decided to participate.

Your Name (printed):

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Q4 Your Signature:

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Q5 Date:

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End of Block: 2

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Start of Block: 3

Q6 Name:

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Q7 Email:

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Q8 Were you enrolled as a full-time graduate student (six credits) during the following academic years:

- 2020 - 2021
  - 2021 - 2022
  - Both academic years
  - I was not a full-time graduate student between the 2020 and 2022 academic years
- 

Q9 Program:

\_\_\_\_\_

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Q10 Did you have an assigned academic advisor for your program of study?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

End of Block: 3

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Start of Block: 4



Q11 How old are you?

- Under 18
  - 18-24 years old
  - 25-34 years old
  - 35-44 years old
  - 45-54 years old
  - 55-64 years old
  - 65+ years old
- 

Q12 How do you describe yourself?

- Male
  - Female
  - Non-binary / third gender
  - Prefer to self-describe \_\_\_\_\_
  - Prefer not to say
-

Q13 Please specify your ethnicity.

- African American
- Asian
- Caucasian
- Latino or Hispanic
- Native American
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Two or more
- Other/Unknown
- Prefer to self-describe \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to say

---

DQ1 What is your current marital status?

- Married
- Living with a partner
- Widowed
- Divorced/Separated
- Never been married

---

Page Break \_\_\_\_\_

Q15 What best describes your employment status during the Covid - 19 global pandemic

- Working full-time
- Working part-time
- Unemployed and looking for work
- A homemaker or stay-at-home parent
- Student
- Retired
- Other

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Q16 If your employment status changed during the Covid - 19 global pandemic, please explain.

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Page Break

Q17 How many children under 18 live with you?

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Q18 Are you responsible for the care of parents, grandparents, or individuals who may be at higher risk for serious Covid - 19 symptoms? If so, please explain.

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End of Block: 4

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Start of Block: 5

Q19 Based on your experience during the Covid - 19 global pandemic, how likely are you to recommend your academic advisor to future students?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

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Q20 Please explain why you chose  $\{q://QID19/ChoiceGroup/SelectedChoices\}$  rating on the last question.

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End of Block: 5

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Start of Block: 6

Q21 Please rate your satisfaction with the following in regard to your advising experience during the Covid - 19 global pandemic:

Content of Advising Communications

- Extremely satisfied
  - Moderately satisfied
  - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
  - Moderately dissatisfied
  - Extremely dissatisfied
- 

Q22 Advisors Attentiveness to Individual Needs

- Extremely satisfied
  - Moderately satisfied
  - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
  - Moderately dissatisfied
  - Extremely dissatisfied
-

Q23 Assistance Staying Connected to Learning Community

- Extremely satisfied
  - Moderately satisfied
  - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
  - Moderately dissatisfied
  - Extremely dissatisfied
- 

Q24 Frequency of Advising Interactions

- Extremely satisfied
  - Moderately satisfied
  - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
  - Moderately dissatisfied
  - Extremely dissatisfied
- 

Q25 Overall Quality of Advising Experience

- Extremely satisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Moderately dissatisfied
- Extremely dissatisfied

End of Block: 6

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Start of Block: 7

Q26 What, if anything, would have made your experience with the Academic Advising during the Covid - 19 global pandemic better?

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End of Block: 7

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Start of Block: 8

Q27 Thank you for your participation in the survey.

You will be contacted via email to set up a zoom interview.

End of Block: 8

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