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Professional Staff Retention in Higher Education: Making Sense of Why Advisors Stay

Frankie Roark Weeks
Coastal Carolina University

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PROFESSIONAL STAFF RETENTION IN HIGHER
EDUCATION: MAKING SENSE
OF WHY ADVISORS STAY

by

Frankie Roark Weeks

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of Coastal Carolina University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education
with a specialization in Higher Education Administration.

Education Sciences and Organizations

Coastal Carolina University

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Doctoral Committee:

Dr. Sheena Kauppila, Chair
Dr. Arlise McKinney
Dr. Holley Tankersley

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated staff retention in higher education by focusing on the retention of academic advisors. Academic advisors play an integral role in student success and advising is notably one of the fields in higher education with the greatest turnover. This turnover comes at great costs, financial and otherwise, for the institution.

An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was used to study how academic advisors make sense of their persistence in a high turnover field and to identify professional, personal, and institutional factors that contribute to persistence. Eleven professional staff members whose primary role is academic advising at a four-year institution with less than 15,000 students were interviewed. The sample was 60% female and 40% male: 60% white and 40% BIPOC.

Interviews were analyzed using IPA to identify Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) for each participant and then Group Experiential Themes (GETs) were identified through clustering of the PETs. Four themes and eight subthemes emerged from the analysis to address the four research questions on persistence.

This research contributes to the existing literature on academic advising and staff turnover and retention. It has implications for practice for new and veteran advisors and advising administrators. The study's findings bring attention to the reasons professional staff in higher education persist when so many others leave the field.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family. To my grandchildren, Lucy James and Benjamin, for bringing me tremendous joy and being my light throughout the process. To my daughters, Kaeli and Courtney, for giving my life purpose. Being your mom is and always will be my greatest honor. To my husband and best friend, Charlie, for the unwavering support and belief even when I did not believe in myself. And most of all, to my parents, Jimmy and Jean Roark, who taught me the value of hard work and instilled a love of learning that inspired me to take on this challenge. Your example of unconditional love has paved the way for an extraordinary life.

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To Beth, Julie, Leslie, and Ricky, thank you to the friends I did not know I needed. We started together and we finished together. I never expected that this endeavor would bring me lifelong friends, but here we are. I appreciate every word of encouragement, every late-night text confirming that I was not alone, and every well-timed gathering. I am happy to forever straddle the line between the procrastinator's club and the overachievers.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Professional staff are a key factor in the success of college students and play an essential role in the overall success of the college or university. It is imperative that higher education institutions employ knowledgeable, motivated, and dedicated staff to achieve the institution's mission. Like most industries, higher education faces a challenge when it comes to employee turnover. While there is a large body of research dedicated to employee turnover, the research on turnover and retention in higher education has primarily focused on faculty rather than staff.

With the number of professional staff members leaving higher education institutions (HEIs) reaching its highest rate ever in 2022 (Walton, 2022), it has become increasingly important to understand why some professional members choose to stay when so many others leave. The inaugural College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey reported that more than half of the staff in higher education are at least somewhat likely to seek new employment in the coming year (Bichsel et al., 2022). Results of the second administration of the survey in 2023 were consistent with the original findings (Bichsel et al., 2023). The surveys included employees who occupy nonfaculty positions including administration, professional staff, and nonexempt staff. Professional staff are defined as the administrative staff who are responsible for the daily operations of the institution and who assist students in areas beyond academics which are covered by academic staff (faculty and graduate assistants) (Bray & Williams, 2017). Academic advisors have one of the highest turnover rates of all professional staff, with an average term of less than three years (Solon et al., 2022). While much literature can be found on faculty retention, retention of academic advisors and other professional staff only gained attention in the last two decades (Bray & Williams, 2017; Gander et al., 2019; Graham, 2012;

Jo, 2008; Kodama et al., 2021; Solon et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2016). This may be attributed to the rising costs of higher education prompting extensive debate on the value of higher education, as well as a more holistic approach to student success which extends well beyond the scope of academics and relies heavily on professional staff members in student affairs, health and counseling services, advising, and many other key areas. Combined with the pandemic's impacts, staff retention is one of great interest to administrators who recognize the impact staff turnover has on student success and the institution's mission.

The employee attrition problem is not unique to higher education. In 2021, almost 48 million employees left their positions nationwide, averaging close to 4 million per month (Raza et al., 2022; Society, 2022). Technology and connectedness have made positions around the globe more accessible than ever as remote work, globalization, and even the willingness of employees to relocate have made competition for and recruitment of employees easier than in the past (Allen & Vardaman, 2021; Bichsel et al., 2021; Brantley & Shomaker, 2021; Gander et al., 2019; Sharma & Mann, 2018; Solon et al., 2022; Zhang & Stewart, 2017). While beneficial for those recruiting and hiring, the same reasons can be problematic for organizations that want to retain their employees. Success of an organization relies on the ability to recruit, train, and develop well-qualified personnel who are both talented and driven (Furnham & Palaïou, 2017) and to create conditions that are right for employee retention (Grotto et al., 2017).

Higher education is collectively one of the largest industries in the country, employing over 3.8 million people nationwide. Staff make up more than half of that number (IES/NCES, n.d.). There is a large body of literature on employee turnover and retention across different industries that dates back more than seventy years (Grotto et al., 2017; Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Maertz & Campion, 2004; March & Simon, 1958; Mitchell et al., 2001; Mobley, 1977;

Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980; Price & Mueller, 1986). While research on faculty retention also exists, it has only been in the last two decades that researchers have prioritized staff attrition, the separation of the staff member from the institution (Bray & Williams, 2017; Gander et al., 2019; Graham, 2012; Jo, 2008; Kodama et al., 2021; Solon et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2016).

Voluntary staff attrition, separation or exit on the employee's behalf, has garnered a great amount of attention since the COVID-19 pandemic began and a phenomenon dubbed The Great Resignation began. In 2020, employees all over the world moved to remote work as governments attempted to slow the spread of the virus and shut down most economic activity (Soares & Berg, 2022). Many professional staff in higher education came to prefer the comfort and benefits of working at home (Weinstein & Hirsch, 2023) while others felt frustration and increased stress with the change as they were dealing with poor technology, balancing family and childcare needs, and suffering from less connection with the campus community overall (McClure et al., 2023). Institutions quickly attempted to mitigate the predicted financial loss due to the pandemic by cutting positions and furloughing others. Professional staff who were spared in the budget cuts assumed responsibilities of those who were not and felt the weight of the increased workload (Winfield & Paris, 2021).

Like other fields, higher education saw an onslaught of resignations as staff were required to come back to campus. “Full-time, exempt staff turnover has increased from a low of 7.9% in 2020-21 (the academic year after the pandemic began) to 12.0% in 2021-22 to 14.3% in 2022-23” (Bichsel et al., para 2, 2023). The majority of those who resigned continued to work, but at different institutions, in different fields, or in remote positions. A desire to understand the en masse exit of professional staff prompted a pilot study by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR).

In 2022, CUPA-HR recognized this growing issue and administered the CUPA-HR 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey. The survey was created to “better understand the proportion of the higher ed workforce that is at risk for leaving their current jobs, why these employees are considering leaving, and what higher ed institutions can implement to increase retention and improve the higher ed workforce” (Bichsel et al., 2022, para 1). Results showed that 57% of employees in higher education were considering the possibility of looking for a new position in the next year. These results were consistent in the second administration of the survey in 2023 and speak to the need for additional studies and research into staff retention given the great responsibility and impact that professional staff have on the culture and mission of the college or university (Bichsel et al., 2023; Gander et al., 2019; Graham, 2012). This study focuses on why professional staff, specifically academic advisors, choose to stay when so many others either plan to leave or have left their position.

Background of the Problem

Professional staff in higher education are integral to the success of the university mission; however, staff are leaving the field or express intentions to leave at historic levels (Bichsel et al., 2022). In April 2022, the U, S, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported that 68,000 resignations were recorded in education services, 26% more than the prior year. A large number of those resignations were professional staff members in higher education (Schmiedehaus et al., 2023). Professional staff are a crucial component and a key resource of a college or university because they have the highest contact with students throughout the student’s entire academic career; however, professional staff members do not always receive recognition despite their contributions (Gander et al., 2109). Institutions often fail to realize that retaining quality staff can “drastically impact an institution’s financial sustainability” (Bray &

Williams, 2017, p.488). Professional staff such as those who work in student affairs, admissions, financial aid, and academic advising are essential for enriching student life and learning (Wilson et al., 2016).

For this study, I focus on academic advisors, professional staff members who play a key role in guiding students through their academic career and overcoming challenges. While the work of academic advisors has changed drastically over the last few decades, there remains uncertainty around the role and responsibilities of this group of professionals in higher education (Graham, 2012; Solon et al., 2022).

Due to the key role professional staff play in student outcomes, staff attrition can be costly and disruptive to the institution, both financially and in other hidden ways (Graham, 2012; Jo, 2008; Marshall et al., 2016). Conducting a search and recruiting qualified candidates can be expensive and is estimated to range from 90% to 200% of an employee's salary (Allen et al., 2010; Grotto et al., 2017). In addition to the cost of a search, replacing an employee can include search committee time, bonuses for specialized staff such as academic advisors in athletics, an increase in the salary paid over that of the previous employee, moving expenses, and training costs (Marshall et al., 2016). On top of financial costs, the institution and its students may also suffer in other ways such as a loss of institutional knowledge and skill, loss of productivity, and low morale for the remaining employees (Figueroa, 2015; Graham, 2012; Marshall et al., 2016). Professional staff possess "much of the systemic knowledge, the intellectual capital, required to ensure the functioning of the university" (Graham, 2012, p. 439) and the loss of these individuals may be disruptive to the department and campus culture (Marshall et al., 2016). Student services and support are impacted when a vacancy occurs because students may suffer from a feeling of disconnection due to the loss of the relationship

and shared history with the previous staff member (Figueroa, 2015; Graham, 2012; Marshall et al., 2016). Further, the work conducted by staff has a significant impact on retention and persistence of students which, in a market-driven economy, is crucial to public perception and funding (Graham, 2012).

Employees leave organizations faster than they can be replaced as a two-week notification of intent to exit is standard, but the replacement process can take months. This vacancy leaves a void in the organization where production and services may slow (Raza et al., 2022). Remaining employees are left to fill the void risking the possibility of feeling overtaxed and suffering burnout (Figueroa, 2015) more quickly than if only responsible for their own work. In addition, time is lost when training remaining employees to take on the tasks of the vacant position just to reassign the duties and responsibilities when the vacancy is once again filled (Marshall et al., 2016).

The work performed by professional staff directly impacts student retention and persistence which, given the competition for students as enrollments decline, is crucial to funding (Graham, 2012). As staff turnover occurs, there is loss of institutional knowledge, but also loss of relationships that result in students feeling disconnected from the institution (Figueroa, 2015; Graham, 2012; Marshall et al., 2016). Further, student services may suffer as vacancies overtax remaining staff and decisions are made as to what must be left undone in the interim. The work does not necessarily resume immediately when new staff are hired since time for onboarding and training the new staff member is needed, and it takes time for the new employee to build relationships with colleagues and students as they identify their own vision and goals for the position. Given the significant role professional staff members play in student

success and supporting the institutional mission, it is essential to study the issue of attrition to better understand the causes and seek solutions.

Academic Advising

Academic advisors are professional staff members who play an integral role in the academic success of undergraduate students (Klepfer & Hull, 2012). For this study, the terms advisor or academic advisor are defined as a professional staff member whose primary role is academic advising. Historically, academic advising was viewed as an additional duty of faculty whose primary role was teaching (Cate & Miller, 2015). The term faculty advisor will be used to distinguish between the two populations.

Advisors have a unique position given that their responsibilities often straddle the academic and student life realms of higher education. The position of academic advisor has evolved in the last few decades, with initial steps taken in 2003 to identify academic advising as a recognized profession (Cate & Miller, 2015). Academic planning, once primarily the responsibility of faculty, morphed into a career dedicated to the provision of support for students as they face a variety of issues ranging from academic to environmental to interpersonal that are not regularly included in faculty training (Cate & Miller, 2015, p. 40). As advising evolved, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) Concept of Academic Advising was created. It includes a curriculum, pedagogy, and student learning outcomes; as well as a body of research and practice grounded in theory (Cate & Miller, 2015; Drake et al., 2013; Hagen et al., 2010; Kuhn & Padak, 2008).

The impact of advising on student success has been consistently supported by research since 2012 when Klepfer and Hull first conducted a study with support from the Center for Public Education (National Association of Research Board). The study showed that working

with an advisor in college “sometimes” or “often” significantly improved a student’s chances to graduate. At two-year institutions, frequent advising meetings increased the student’s possibility of staying on track by up to 53 percent (Klepfer & Hull, 2012). A 2013 report, *Guided Pathways to Success*, completed by Complete College America (CCA), named advising as an essential component of degree completion (CCA, 2013). Advisors are advocates for students throughout the student’s academic career. The advisor’s specialized knowledge of curriculum, university policy and procedures, and their experience with the bureaucracy of the institution, can be used to assist students when they encounter hurdles (Wallace & Wallace, 2016). Retention of these staff members is critical to student support and completion.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

Higher education, like most other fields, has experienced record staff turnover that comes at great costs, financial and otherwise. Research on employee turnover is abundant; however, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to professional staff in higher education. Academic advisors are professional staff members who play a significant role in the success of college students and therefore the success of HEIs. Retention of these staff members is beneficial to students and the institution. Staff turnover can impact student connections to the institution as well as retention and completion.

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological (IPA) study is to investigate staff retention in higher education by focusing on the retention of academic advisors; specifically on the policies or procedures that influence retention, how advisors describe their reasons for persistence in the profession, and how they make sense of their persistence. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to identify themes that answer the following research questions.

Research Questions

The qualitative research study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do academic advisors who stay in the field for five or more years make sense of their persistence when so many others leave?
2. What personal factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?
3. What professional factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?
4. What institutional factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?

Conceptual Framework

A primary theoretical framework did not emerge during my literature review on employee retention in higher education. A theoretical framework can provide the structure and framework for a study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014); however, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) does not typically rely on a predetermined theory during the collection and analysis of data (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Researchers must remain open to the idea that a theory may emerge through inductive reasoning during the analysis. As an approach, IPA is considered an experiential method and consists of three primary theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). IPA researchers seek to gather detailed accounts about the participant's experience, identify the meaning assigned to those experiences through intense data analysis, and then communicate those findings to readers (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Although I did not identify a primary theory that addressed employee retention in higher education, I understand the importance of identifying a conceptual framework and will elaborate on the theories that influenced my views and research in the following discussion.

A theoretical framework serves as a blueprint for a study and supports the decisions made throughout (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Given that IPA does not rely on a predetermined theory, I will present a conceptual framework that outlines how the problem of staff retention in higher education might be best explored through the lenses of social constructivism, social exchange theory, job embeddedness theory, and the unfolding model of turnover. These theories and models together have guided my thought processes, decisions, and plans “as a system of concepts, assumptions, and beliefs” (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 17; Miles et al., 2020).

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism is a “worldview wherein individuals seek understanding of their known world in a manner that is of their own experience” (Boyland, 2019, p. 30). Researchers can build a socially constructed understanding based on the “collective experience” without expectations of universality (Boyland, 2019, p. 30). Instead, social constructivist theorists are concerned with lived experiences and practical use of findings (Boyland, 2019). My worldview and perspective on research were shaped by the idea that reality can be different for each individual and that social conditions and lived experiences can impact that reality. To make sense of why an academic advisor stays in their position, social constructivism allows for the collection of rich data and insights that are not captured in a quantitative survey generally used to study staff turnover and retention.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory (SET) is useful in understanding the lived experiences of academic advisors. A sociological theory used in organizational behavior research, SET can be used to understand workplace persistence and is “among the most influential conceptual paradigms for understanding workplace behavior” (Cropanzano et al., 2017, p. 874). Three key

assumptions of social exchange theory are of particular interest to this study: (1) The desire to increase gains/positive outcomes and avoid loss/negative outcomes motivates behavior (costs/rewards), and (2) mutual dependence leads to development of exchange relations where one party expects benefits of some type in return for their work (fairness/equity), and (3) people engage in reoccurring and reciprocal interactions with one another over a period of time (reciprocity) (Cook & Rice, 2007).

Advisor behavior and persistence may be impacted by the desire to build and maintain relationships with their advisees and/or colleagues. Relationships with students are often reciprocal in that the advisor provides support and guidance and the student then engages in the advising process. Seeing students succeed is rewarding for the advisor and reinforces their belief in the work that they do (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008). The potential loss of these relationships or the possibility of impacting a student in a negative way may increase the possibility of staying at the institution. Teamwork and collaboration with colleagues are fostered by social exchange theory in that both require reciprocity within the relationship where the employee makes contributions and feels rewarded for their investment in the relationship or project.

Academic advisors may also decide to stay based on perceived exchange of benefits for their work at the HEI. For example, employees expect reciprocity or fair rewards such as compensation, recognition, or advancement opportunities in exchange for their work. Lack of reciprocity may impact commitment levels. When they feel valued, the employee is more likely to reciprocate with increased commitment and loyalty (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008).

Social exchange theory is just one lens that helped understand why some academic advisors decide to stay in the profession when so many others leave. Likewise, job embeddedness theory was also useful.

Job Embeddedness Theory

The concept of job embeddedness was first developed by Mitchell et al. (2001) to explore how one becomes entrenched in an organization and examine who stays. Links, fit, and sacrifice are the three essential factors identified to contribute to embeddedness. Links refers to the ties or connections that an employee has with colleagues, team members, and even the community. Fit refers to the compatibility or comfort with the job. And sacrifice is used to explain what one might have to give up, tangible or psychological, if they were to leave (Holtom & Darabi, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2001).

The three primary factors are interwoven and together have been shown to be a better predictor of turnover than either satisfaction or commitment in why people remain in their position or organization (Mitchell et al., 2001). The binding effect of job embeddedness can benefit higher education institutions when employees experience adversity or a negative event in the workplace (Holtom & Darabi, 2018).

Unfolding Model of Turnover

The unfolding model of turnover was useful in understanding how events impact the turnover process and the ease with which links can be broken. Lee and Mitchell (1994) introduced five different paths in the turnover process using the unfolding model of turnover. This model recognizes that there are different forces at play, referred to as shocks, in the employee turnover process (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). These shocks are events that construct meaning or provide information about the job that then becomes part of the employee's views of their employment and may cause an employee to leave (Holtom et al., 2017). Employees who experience shocks may begin the decision process of leaving.

Further studies have shown that shocks may be personal or work-related and that the decision to leave post shock may be, but is not always, abrupt. Personal or “non-work-related shocks include childbirth, a death in the family, elderly care, marriage and divorce” (Grotto et al., 2017, p. 4) among other life events. Work-related shocks may include organizational changes, psychological contract breaches, and new human resource (HR) practices (Grotto et al., 2017, p.4; Hom et al., 2012). Given the historic level of disruption to both personal and work environments during the COVID-19 pandemic, the unfolding model of turnover is useful in understanding the increased number of staff leaving higher education since 2020.

Significance of the Study

The loss of professional staff can be disruptive, expensive, and have long-term detrimental effects on an institution (Graham, 2012; Jo, 2008; Marshall et al., 2016). Student retention is a top priority for institutions as should be staff retention, given the impact that staff have on student growth, development, retention, and persistence (Graham, 2012; Jo, 2008; Marshall et al., 2016). However, there is limited research on staff turnover and retention, specifically academic advisors, and the impacts on these areas and the institution. Academic advisors are integral to an institution’s mission in terms of student success and persistence which means that attrition of these staff members can be costly in many ways (Lowenstein & Bloom, 2016).

This qualitative study adds to the literature on staff retention in higher education, provides recommendations for administrators who struggle with this issue, and adds to the limited body of research on academic advising (Hagen et al., 2010). The study shows why some professional staff stay in their positions when so many others leave academic advising or higher

education. This research can be practically applied as administrators seek to create policies and practices that support and improve the retention of professional staff at their institution.

Scope and Delimitation

The scope of this study focused on the sensemaking of academic advisors in higher education who have persisted in the field. It specifically looked at the ways participants described their workplace persistence, factors they identified as contributing to their persistence, and how they made sense of their desire to stay in the field. Eleven professional staff members in higher education whose primary role is advising and who have been in the field for at least five years participated.

Assumptions and Limitations

This study assumed that academic advisors who have been in the field for five or more years are committed to the profession and would be willing to share their perspectives. I primarily solicited participants through the international professional organization for academic advisors in higher education, National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). Data were not available on the number of academic advisors who are not members of the organization across the United States. I used professional contacts at HEIs across the country to try to reach academic advisors to capture the unique perspective of those who are not part of the professional organization. Time was a limitation as I needed advisors to volunteer in a timely manner to allow time for the interviews and analysis.

Conclusion

This qualitative IPA study sought to understand how academic advisors who choose to stay in the profession make sense of their decision when so many others leave the field. The first chapter introduced the problem and the significance of the study. Chapter two will present

a literature review that outlines research on employee retention, turnover models, and the impact and significance of professional staff on student success. Chapter three will outline the research design, methods, and positionality. Chapter four will detail the findings of the study and chapter five will discuss the findings.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines research pertaining to staff retention. It includes a brief history of academic advising as a profession, recent turnover rates since COVID-19, trends in staff retention overall and specifically in higher education, factors that are known to impact attrition in higher education, and research on employee turnover.

Academic Advising

Academic advising is an intentional educational practice that is based in theory and pulls from several disciplines. It is rooted philosophically in pragmatism and sociologically pulls from interactionist theory, both of which see meaning as being developed through an individuals' experiences and interactions with others (Kimball & Campbell, 2013). Good advising relies on developing an educational plan and directing students toward learning experiences that allow them to build knowledge and expertise while developing their own meaning. Historically, advising was considered an additional duty for faculty whose primary responsibilities were research and teaching; however, more recently, academic advising has been identified as a fundamental tool for promoting student development, success, and persistence (Cate & Miller, 2015; Kuh, 2008). It was in the last two decades that academic advising came to be recognized as a profession with the creation of a global network (NACADA), a developing body of research in the field, and the application of theories and approaches to the practice (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016).

Academic advisors are responsible for assisting students with planning and making decisions regarding their academic program including major, courses, and career goals; as well as helping students navigate personal issues (Hughey & Pettay, 2013). A large part of the advisor's role is referring students to resources offered by campus partners which requires the

advisor to be knowledgeable about all aspects of the university. Advisors serve as a bridge to help connect students to the university and show that someone is personally invested in their wellbeing (Kuh, 2008). This connection contributes to a student's sense of belonging and overall success (Yenney, 2020). Research strongly ties academic advising to the success of college students (Cate & Miller, 2015; Kuh, 2008; Wallace & Wallace, 2016); however, the position is not without its challenges.

Academic advisors often carry a high caseload which can make it challenging to provide the level of personalized attention they would like to give each student. Recent studies show that most professional undergraduate advisors have a caseload between two and four hundred students. However, some advisors report caseloads up to two to three times that size (McMurtrie & Supiano, 2022). NACADA does not recommend caseloads because it depends on the institution's individual and the expectations for advisors. Factors considered include mandatory or voluntary advising, depth of student engagement expected of advisors, difficulty of majors advised, student levels, and team-based advising versus individual advising (McMurtrie & Supiano, 2022).

As advisors partner with students to resolve academic issues, address personal struggles, and make life decisions, advisors can become overtaxed by emotional labor and may lose sight of their own wellbeing (Jerg-Bretzke et al., 2020) or experience compassion fatigue (Winfield & Paris, 2021). Additionally, as competition for resources increases on college campuses, academic advisors are often asked to do more with less including less training and development, less staff, and lower compensation. Academic advisor responsibilities can vary by institution and even by department within an institution. Advisors are expected to maintain consistent engagement with students, stay updated on degree options and requirements, know university

policy and processes, and assist students in making academic and professional decisions (Couture & Tyson, 2022). Additional duties might include assisting with recruiting and retention activities, assisting with orientation activities, serving on committees, supporting faculty advisors, providing academic support, or providing information related to disability services or financial aid (Couture & Tyson, 2022; Imbeah, 2017). An academic advisor is expected to become a master of institutional knowledge who understands the varying needs of students, campus partners, and administrators. They must use a variety of advising approaches and theories to connect with students to identify and meet their needs (Miller, 2016).

Professional staff positions at postsecondary institutions are historically underpaid (Marshall et al., 2016; McClure et al., 2023). Academic advising has a median annual salary of \$50,370 and some positions start at less than \$35,000. This can be compared to NACE's report of the average salary for a college graduate with a bachelor's degree of about \$55,000 (Hawes & Reynolds, 2022). Whereas advising positions typically require a bachelor's degree, most institutions prefer a master's degree (Couture & Tyson, 2022) and more than 80% of members of NACADA hold at least a master's degree (Wilson et al., 2020). Caseloads, salary, required responsibilities, and wellbeing are all factors that play a key role in academic advising's status as one of the professions in higher education with the fastest turnover, with an average career of just three years (Brantley & Shomaker, 2021).

Employee Attrition during COVID-19

Employee attrition increased drastically since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020 as businesses began to experience what has come to be known as The Great Resignation. In 2021, almost 48 million employees in the United States, almost four million per month, left their jobs (Raza et al., 2022; Society, 2022). Many employees were suddenly forced to work remotely,

even in fields where it was once thought to be impossible, and many found it difficult to return to their previous place of employment after becoming accustomed to the benefits of remote work (Bichsel et al., 2022; Hawes & Reynolds, 2022; Weinstein & Hirsch, 2023). Professional staff played an integral role in the response of HEIs to the pandemic but were often underappreciated (McClure et al., 2023) and even viewed as “second-class citizens” despite their work (Cho et al., 2023, p. 1395). While furloughs and retirements make up a portion of the large amount of exits, most employees who quit go to other organizations and continue to work, they do not simply leave the workforce altogether (Weinstein & Hirsch, 2023). Employees leave when they realize that they do not have to remain loyal to an organization that is bad for their overall safety and wellbeing and that they can take their talents elsewhere to improve their overall quality of life.

Postpandemic, staff shared concerns that decisions made by administrators during the pandemic illuminated an incongruence between the institutions’ purported values and the way they were treated during the pandemic (McClure et al., 2023). Employees were faced with this reality as their employers made decisions daily in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic that impacted their safety and wellbeing, as well as that of their family (Winfield & Paris, 2021). According to unfolding theory as identified in Lee and Mitchell’s (1994) seminal work on attrition, the pandemic can be classified as a shock and predictor of high turnover, in that it caused employees to consider their employment alternatives. The model helps understand how employees who experience this type of event will reassess their current job and may consider leaving as so many did during The Great Resignation.

Employee Attrition in Higher Education

HEIs felt the impact of The Great Resignation as leaders were forced to reimagine how higher education might serve and educate college students in new and diverse ways during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kaplan, 2021). Institutions moved to online, remote learning as campuses shut down across the country. Employees accustomed to working long hours with little flexibility quickly realized that they could work remotely, accomplish their goals, and uphold the mission of the institution, while also experiencing a better work-life balance (Bichsel et al., 2022). Many HEI employees were willing to work long hours for little pay because they believed they were passionate about their work and the students they served. Often, they accepted the fulfilling nature of the work as recompense for a low salary and a poor work-life balance as part of the job in higher education (Marshall et al., 2016). When staff asked for additional resources or support during the pandemic, they felt that the administration attempted to appeal to their passion and dedication to the work rather than giving the support needed (McClure et al., 2023; Schmiedehaus et al., 2023). The opportunity to work from home, find balance, and feel supported brought a new awareness that sparked a reimagining of what work could be (Bichsel et al., 2022).

Globalization, the willingness of employees to relocate, and the possibility to work remotely has made it possible for organizations to attract and recruit qualified employees from all over the world (Allen & Vardaman, 2021; Sharma & Mann, 2018). However, these same factors have increased employment opportunities and made it more challenging for organizations to retain employees. Employee retention is not a new issue, but long-term loyalty to a company or organization is no longer the norm as it was during the “Paternalistic Era” when employees aspired to be a “company man” (Bowman & Mulvenon, 2019; Stewart et al.,

2017; Webb & Adler, 2013, p. 65). Work opportunities are drastically different to what they were just fifty years ago and with technology consistently improving, employment will continue to change. Notice that in Table 1, Webb and Adler (2013) accurately predicted the current state of the world of work in 2024. Employers must now look for new and better ways to manage employee satisfaction and to encourage employees to connect and remain with their company.

Table 1

Through the years: The changing world of work

1960	2013	2020
Work locally	Work from anywhere	Hyperconnected: global orientation
Job for life	Ten to fourteen jobs by age thirty-eight	Wired, seamless, in constant search-and-find mode
9 to 5	24/7 (if you like)	Collaborative
Single income	Dual income	Many income streams
Work and home are separate	Work at home	Immediate, on-demand access

Note: Table information is from *Rebooting Work*, by M. Webb and C. Adler (p.74), (2013). San Jossey-Bass. Copyright 2013 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

There are a wide variety of factors identified to influence staff attrition in higher education. Among the most common are the economy, job satisfaction, lack of a sense of being valued, lack of institutional support (King et al., 2018), dissatisfaction with supervisory skills among leadership (Jo, 2008; Zhang & Stewart, 2017), limited flexibility in work-life policies (Jo, 2008), personal wellbeing, salary issues, and a lack of advancement opportunities (Bichsel et al., 2022; Chessman, 2021; Kodama et al., 2021). Also identified as a factor leading to attrition is the new employee orientation process as it contributes to the employee's connection to the university (King et al., 2018; Zhang & Stewart, 2017). In HEIs, a sense of identity was identified as being a key factor in career commitment and entrenchment for professional staff.

The failure of employees to develop a sense of identity may lead to low morale, career discontentment, and a desire to leave the field altogether (Wilson et al., 2016).

Different types of attrition can have different impacts on an organization. Voluntary attrition refers to an employee who decides to leave of their own volition; whereas involuntary attrition occurs when the organization terminates employment. Internal attrition occurs when an employee moves among positions in the same organization. And finally, when an employee leaves their position for one in a new organization it is known as external attrition. With all types of attrition, there is much to be learned from studying the attrition rate (or number of employees that leave) (Raza et al., 2022, p.2). For this study's purpose, attrition will be used as a general term assuming voluntary separation or exit on the employee's behalf. There are many factors that may contribute to the attrition of professional staff in higher education, but this study will focus on the reasons advisors are retained in their positions.

CUPA-HR Higher Education Employee Retention Survey

The inaugural (CUPA-HR) 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey reported eight primary reasons professional staff sought other employment shortly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Reasons from most reported to least include pay/salary increase, opportunity to work remotely, flexible schedule, promotion or more responsibility, a new challenge, working with different people, relocation, and better benefits (Bichsel et al., 2022).

The survey also found that “more than half (57%) of the higher education workforce is at least somewhat likely to look for other employment opportunities in the next 12 months” (Bichsel et al., 2022, p. 19). The employees surveyed occupied nonfaculty positions such as administration, professional staff, and nonexempt staff. Respondents reported the top reason they would consider other opportunities was an increase in salary, followed by remote

opportunities, flexibility in their work schedule, and either a promotion or increase in responsibility. Most respondents (71%) felt that their work could be completed remotely and 69% would like the opportunity to work remotely at least part of the workweek; however, only 37% reported that they have that option (Bichsel et al., 2022, p. 19). Further, staff in higher education reported taking on additional work for employees who recently exited and because of the pandemic. In addition to dissatisfaction with the remote work policies, employees also reported a high level of dissatisfaction with: “investment in career development, opportunities for advancement, recognition for contributions, fair pay, parental leave policies, childcare discounts or subsidies, and schedule flexibility” (Bichsel et al., 2022, p. 20).

Despite these concerns, most employees who completed the CUPA-HR survey in 2022 were satisfied with their benefits, supervisor relationships, the job, and institution overall. Most also felt that their work had purpose, reported that they felt valued, and had a sense of belonging (Bichsel et al., 2022). All these factors play a role in the staff member’s sense of identity which, if lacking, can lead to a feeling of not contributing (Kodama et al., 2021), low morale, discontent, and a desire to leave higher education (Wilson et al., 2016).

The survey was administered for the second time in 2023 with similar results. Most respondents reported being at least somewhat likely to look for a new position in the coming year. Instead of eight top reasons to seek new opportunities, the report included nine: pay/salary increase, remote work, promotion, flexible schedule, new challenge, new supervisor, better benefits, relocation, and different coworkers. The primary difference between the original eight reasons and the updated nine is “working with different people” (Bichsel et al., 2022) split into “want a new supervisor” and “want to work with different coworkers” (Bichsel et al., 2023).

Since the 2022 administration was a pilot survey, there is no comparison data for a similar population pre-pandemic. The historic increase in staff attrition across all fields, known as The Great Resignation, could potentially be explained using Lee and Mitchell's unfolding theory in which a "shock," personal or "non-work related" can cause employees to consider other alternatives for employment (Grotto et al., 2017; Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Society, 2022). Of the top three reasons identified in the CUPA-HR survey, pay/salary increase is a consistent factor in the literature on motivation for seeking other employment (Kodama et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2016) which is not a shock. However, opportunity to work remotely and have a flexible schedule was a recent change for most in higher education stemming from the pandemic that may be classified as a shock because the employee learned something new about their position that led to the decision to leave (Bichsel et al., 2022; Lee & Mitchell, 1994).

The CUPA-HR survey identified many factors that are impactful on professional staff turnover. These factors may be personal, professional, or institutional in nature; however, most overlap in all three categories and can be key to understanding why some advisors stay when others choose to leave.

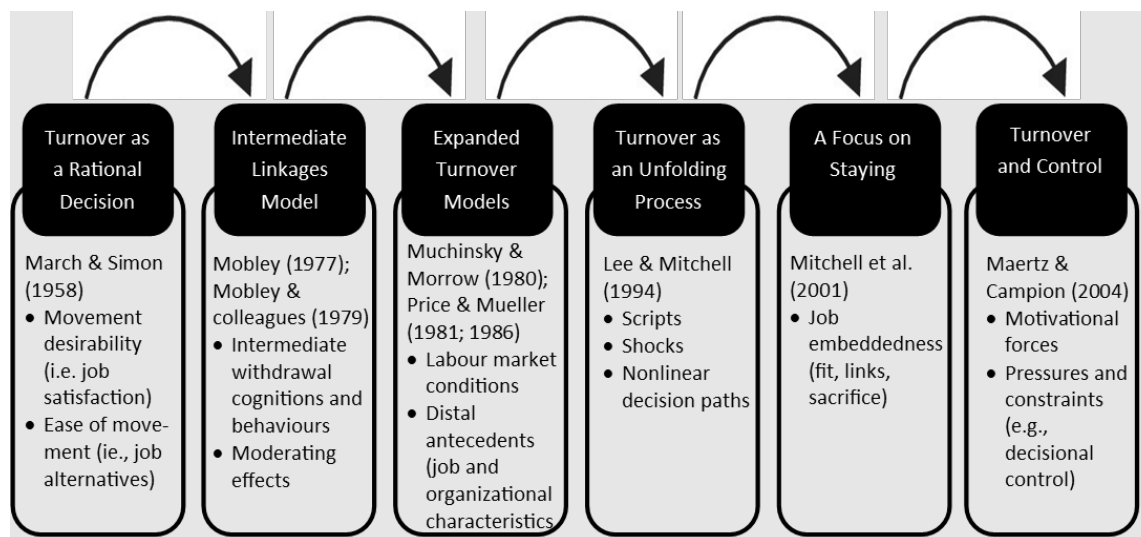
Research on Employee Turnover

Decades of research on employee retention, outlined in Figure 1, could be useful in understanding the causes and implications of the growing rate of turnover in higher education. The seminal work of March and Simon (1958) has served as the basis for additional research and thought. March and Simon suggested that, based on the rational decision-making process of administrative theory, employee attrition and retention could best be viewed through the lens of organizational equilibrium. An employee may consider exiting the organization when they perceive the rewards outweigh their contributions to the organization. The imbalance of rewards

versus effort throws the balance in the employee/employer relationship out of equilibrium as employees consider the movement desirability (job satisfaction) compared to ease of movement (job availability) (Grotto et al., 2017; March & Simon, 1958).

Figure 1

Themes and components of influential turnover models



Note: This image is adapted from Grotto et al., 2017.

Building upon the work of March and Simon, Mobley et al. (1979) expanded the model to outline how an employee might act as they experienced a decline in job satisfaction. Their proposed intermediate linkages model posited that a series of cognitive and behavioral steps would take place from the time an employee experiences job dissatisfaction until they terminate employment (Grotto et al., 2017; Mobley, 1977; Mobley et al., 1979). The model, connecting job dissatisfaction and other opportunities with turnover intentions and attrition has been built upon in multiple studies since (Hom et al., 2012; Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Maertz & Griffeth, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2001; Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980; Price, 1977; Price & Mueller, 1986). Many of these studies used the model to identify and investigate withdrawal cognitions, defined as “thoughts about quitting, the expected utility of leaving and psychological withdrawal from work” (Grotto et al., 2017, p.2) and withdrawal behaviors, defined as actions taken when an employee “becomes physically and/or psychologically disengaged from the organization where they work” (Elshaer et al., 2022, p.3). Examples of withdrawal behaviors include tardiness and

absenteeism, searching for new employment (Grotto et al., 2017), unscheduled breaks, failure to meet deadlines, and lack of devotion to the job or organization (Elshaer et al., 2022).

The next decade of research on employee retention shifted focus to distal antecedents, such as organizational and environmental factors, which impacted employee turnover. The seminal work of Muchinsky and Morrow (1980) suggested that an employee's perceptions of job options and therefore, turnover, are indirectly influenced by the labor market. Price and Mueller (1986) continued research on distal antecedents and proposed a variety of "job and organizational characteristics that shape employee attitudes" (Grotto et al., 2017, p. 3; Price, 1977; Price & Mueller, 1986) which were supported with extensive research by others in the field. These turnover models increased understanding of the reasons employees leave, although it was also limited to a linear progression as a rational decision process (Hom et al., 2012). While many employees follow that linear process in their decision to leave, it is not so clear for others, as researchers in the 1990s would explain.

Lee and Mitchell (1994) recognized that there are different forces at play in the employee turnover process. As previously mentioned, they created the unfolding model of turnover which described the development of the turnover process over the course of time, often in relation to shocks which begin the decision process of leaving (Grotto et al., 2017; Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Further studies have shown that shocks may be personal or work-related and that the decision to leave post shock may be, but is not always, abrupt. Personal or "non-work-related shocks include childbirth, a death in the family, elderly care, marriage and divorce" (Grotto et al., 2017, p. 4) among other life events. Work-related shocks may include organizational changes, psychological contract breaches, and new human resource (HR) practices (Grotto et al., 2017, p.4; Hom et al., 2012). Given the historic level of disruption to

both personal and work environments during the COVID-19 pandemic, the unfolding model of turnover may be the most useful in understanding The Great Resignation.

Building on that model, the concept of job embeddedness was introduced as a reason some people do not react in the same way to a shock. Embeddedness focuses on context, both the greater community and the work environment, both of which are key factors in whether an employee will be retained by an organization (Mitchell et al., 2001). The three components of job embeddedness include links, fit, and sacrifice. Links, also known as relational ties, are those connections made with people in the organization or the immediate community that lead to a lower attrition rate. Links include mentoring relationships, social networks, the perception of support from colleagues, employee satisfaction with their colleagues, the perception of support from supervisors, type of leadership, and volunteer work (Grotto et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2001). Fit is defined as an “employee’s perceived compatibility or comfort with an organization and with his or her environment” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104). Based on the job embeddedness construct, an employee must align their values, goals, and future plans with the greater institutional culture and demands of the position and if closely aligned, the fit will cause the employee to feel more satisfied and connected to the organization. Sacrifice, the third component of embeddedness, refers to what will be lost or given up if an employee leaves the organization or community. Practices or policies that positively impact job satisfaction such as competitive wages and benefits, opportunities for training and professional development, opportunities for advancement, and supervisor support are related to lower turnover (Grotto et al., 2017; Mitchell & Lee, 2001). These components are instrumental in understanding why an employee might stay or leave their position as is the additional research conducted by Maertz and Griffeth (2004) just after the turn of the century.

In addition to job embeddedness, Maertz and Griffeth (2004) developed the notion of decisional control in which motivational forces play a key role in the decision-making process and will forecast turnover. Six forces that impact turnover include: affective forces, calculative forces, alternative forces, moral/ethical forces, constituent forces, and human resource management. Further, an employee may experience external factors that influence their ultimate decision (Grotto et al., 2017; Hom et al., 2012; Maertz & Campion, 2004). These constraints include legal forces, normative forces, behavioral forces, alternative forces, job protection systems, performance enhancing human resource management systems (HRMs), and just termination practices (Hom et al., 2012; Maertz & Campion, 2004). Additional research categorized employees into four categories based on their preference for leaving or staying and their level of control as identified in Table 2. Despite the many professional staff who leave, there are still many who decide to stay.

Table 2

Categorization of leavers and stayers

Group	Preference	Level of Control	Outcome
Enthusiastic stayer	Prefers to stay	High control	Wants to stay and does not feel pressure to leave
Enthusiastic leaver	Prefers to leave	High control	Wants to leave and can/will
Reluctant leaver	Prefers to stay	Low control	Leaves out of necessity
Reluctant stayer	Prefers to leave	Low control	Stays out of necessity but would prefer to leave

Note: Sourced from “Employee turnover and strategies for retention” by A.R. Grotto, P.K. Hyland, A.W. Caputo, and C. Semedo, in H.W. Goldstein, E.D. Pulakos, J. Passmore and C. Semedo (Eds.) *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of the Psychology of Recruitment, Selection and Employee Retention* (p.451), 2017, Wiley Blackwell. Copyright 2017 by John Wiley & Sons.

Stayers

In a discussion about why staff leave, it is useful to consider why other professional staff members choose to stay at an institution. Potential loss of benefits, fit, career satisfaction, job

availability, risk aversion, and being geographically bound have all been identified as key factors influencing professional staff's decision to persist (Verbruggen & van Emmerik, 2020). Some institutions have implemented cost effective retention programs such as flexible schedules and staff recognition programs, both monetary and nonmonetary, that increase satisfaction and persistence among staff members (Jo, 2008). Other universities were savvy enough to develop orientation programs and professional development opportunities to address and assuage the issues that professional staff may encounter. These types of programs have been shown to set the tone for the employee's tenure by providing structure and a connection to the university (King et al., 2018) Still others have realized that enhancing the satisfaction and morale of professionals may encourage them to stay at the institution and better serve the students (Rosser & Javinar, 2003) and have made this a priority for their institution.

Summary of the Literature Review

As one of the largest groups of employers in the country, HEIs employ over 3.8 million people nationwide, and staff make up more than half of that number (IES/NCES, n.d.). The Great Resignation that started during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 increased the issue of staff retention for HEIs and most other organizations. There is a large body of literature on employee retention dating back over seventy years; however, research on staff turnover and retention in higher education is much more limited. Much of the literature about employee retention in HEIs focuses on faculty (Bray & Williams, 2017; Gander et al., 2019; Graham, 2012; Jo, 2008; Kodama et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2016).

The College and University Professional Association for Human Resources recognized this growing issue and administered the CUPA-HR 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey. The first of its kind for staff in HEIs, the survey was created to “better understand the

proportion of the higher ed workforce that is at risk for leaving their current jobs, why these employees are considering leaving, and what higher ed institutions can implement to increase retention and improve the higher ed workforce” (Bichsel et al., 2022, para 1). Results showed that most employees in higher education are considering the possibility of looking for a new position in the next year. These results and the consistent findings in the 2023 administration of the survey speak to the need for additional studies and research into staff retention given the great responsibility and impact that professional staff have on the culture and mission of the college or university (Gander et al., 2019; Graham, 2012). Academic advisors play a significant role in the success of college students and HEIs, yet they have an average term of less than three years. Continual turnover of this important group impacts students, remaining staff, and the overall institution.

The wealth of literature and empirical studies on employee turnover and retention ranges from the work of March and Simon in the 1950s that focused on exit decision-making from a rational decision perspective to the more recent research of Sharma and Mann (2018) focused on a multigenerational, diverse workforce. This extensive research is useful in understanding factors that led to The Great Resignation and the issues the recent high rates of turnover have on HEIs. This trend in turnovers provides a prime opportunity to dive into the impact that a pandemic, potentially viewed with unfolding theory as a shock (Lee & Mitchell, 1994), has on academic advisors and other HEI staff.

Additional research, like this interpretative phenomenological study, could help HEI administrators better understand the reasons behind the current turnover trends and to make “informed decisions about developing effective retention practices that result in the reduction of turnover” (Takawira et al., 2014, p. 2). The limited research on professional staff attrition in

higher education focuses on the reasons staff members leave their position or the institution.

This study focuses on the reasons professional staff members, specifically academic advisors, stay in their position.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research uses an inductive approach to interpret or make sense of an individual's lived experience based on their own perceptions (Mertens, 2020). Qualitative researchers are concerned with not just measurable data, but with the meaning constructed and interpreted by those involved (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002). Phenomenology is a qualitative methodology used to investigate lived experience and to create an understanding of a particular human experience (van Manen, 1990). I chose this approach to study why academic advisors make sense of their decision to stay to better understand the unique experience of each individual. Phenomenology, and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) specifically, are ideal for this study.

Phenomenology

Originally developed by Husserl, phenomenology extended modern science concepts and methods to better investigate consciousness and the human experience (Wertz et al., 2005, p.167). Phenomenology is concerned primarily with essence or the way an individual experiences their world and the way that they make meaning of those experiences. It requires researchers to suspend their own beliefs and preconceptions to fully immerse themselves in the experience of the participants (van Manen, 1990). Researchers focus on the meaningful experience of the phenomenon and not the specific facts or details of the event.

Husserl contended that one must adopt a phenomenological attitude, which includes suspension of one's natural attitude. This suspension, known as bracketing, requires the researcher to suspend judgment and be open to a better understanding (Smith et al., 2009). The concept of bracketing, borrowed from mathematics, became an important tenet of the interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology.

Husserl's work was continued by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre who moved away from the transcendental to focus on the individual as entrenched in a world that consists of objects, relationships, language, and culture (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger believed that discovering meaning required moving beyond the initial account and defined phenomenology as hermeneutic (Smith & Nizza, 2022) and an interpretative process.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), grounded in phenomenology, is used to understand how an individual makes sense of their lived experience in the context of their own world (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA began as an approach for psychological studies but has expanded to other disciplines since. The primary goal of IPA is for the researcher to get as close to the experience as possible to gain insight into what it was like from the participant's point of view. The method relies heavily on eliciting rich descriptions and emotions from the participant to understand how they make sense of the experience and how it relates to their world (Smith & Nizza, 2022). I chose IPA as the methodology for this study because of the opportunity to engage closely with the participants and because of the similarities to advising practice. As an undergraduate student in sociology, I developed an interest in studying groups of people and communities. This interest carried over into graduate level work as I studied creative nonfiction writing and learned to tell the stories of others. IPA immediately appealed to me as a researcher because of the ability to build upon those skills as well as the skills I use in advising and leadership.

I appreciate the ways that IPA can help identify the "ambiguity and tensions in people's reactions to what is happening to them" (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 4). Quantitative studies, like the CUPA-HR 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey, can quantify the reasons

staff leave or consider leaving, but IPA has the potential to build on quantitative findings and elicit deep and nuanced answers to the research questions. In addition to phenomenology, IPA relies on two additional underpinnings: hermeneutics and idiography. The research processes in IPA are anchored in the theoretical ideas of these three approaches (Larkin et al., 2006; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. Hermeneutic significance is developed as individuals remember their experience and assign memory to those experiences. Heidegger, a student of Husserl, believed that discovering meaning required digging deeper beyond the initial account (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Much like a detective, the IPA researcher must search for clues to identify the meaning in an individual's experience. In this way, IPA research involves a double hermeneutic where the researcher is making sense of the participant's sense making. Hermeneutics is a concept familiar to advisors who should regularly practice self-reflection while asking open-ended questions and probing students for more information (Champlin-Scharff, 2010). A large part of my role as an advisor included informally interviewing students to better understand their history, goals, and unique needs. Relationship building is a large part of the advising process, and these conversations were critical to understanding the student's perspective, establishing trust, and building a foundation for future work with the individual student whose experience will be uniquely their own.

Like advising, an idiographic approach is key in IPA. This approach requires a focus on the particular, either a single participant or a single event (Larkin et al., 2006). IPA concentrates on the individual participant as they make sense of a particular experience. Focusing on the single experience can uncover similarities and differences across similar cases and can identify

patterns of convergence or divergence as cases are combined (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA studies usually include only a few participants due to this intense focus on the individual. With the intensive focus on each individual, researchers must consider how they will handle their own beliefs and preconceptions.

Idiography

IPA goes beyond general phenomenology in its idiographic approach. Idiography refers to research that focuses on a single participant or a single event in great depth (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). It allows for cautious development of general claims rather than vast generalizations based on findings. This requires contextualization of the personal experience to understand the role that an individual's environment plays. This aligns closely with IPA which seeks to carefully explore the unique experiences of the individual (Shinebourne, 2011). The IPA researcher analyzes one person's experience before looking for convergence or divergence between the cases. Individuals may experience the same phenomenon with distinctly different impressions or memories. In doing so, each experience is respected and honored, as is each individual participant (Miller et al., 2018).

Bracketing, Bridling, and Sensitivity

Bracketing, a term borrowed by Husserl from mathematics, is the act of suspending one's own beliefs to fully engage in phenomenological study (van Manen, 1990; Wertz et al., 2005). It is not expected nor possible to completely forget everything that one knows about a subject to conduct phenomenological research. Instead, phenomenology requires that the researcher make their knowledge, assumptions, and biases explicit to remain open-minded and nonjudgmental as participants share their own experience. Bracketing is iterative in nature and requires effort to neutralize the researcher's biases, experiences, and knowledge.

Bridling, a nuanced approach to Husserl's idea of bracketing, requires the researcher to slow down and regularly reflect and investigate their own beliefs or presuppositions. Bridling relies on the researcher's ability to move between objectivity and subjectivity rather than completely setting aside their own beliefs. It is an iterative, reflective practice that capitalizes on the researcher's connection to the phenomenon and relies on a heightened sense of self-awareness to allow for new understanding (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2019; Stutey et al., 2020). Dahlberg (2006) noted that bridling is an ongoing effort where the researcher gives attention to the understanding of the phenomenon through the entire study. Although I was not aware of this terminology to label it, both bracketing and bridling are skills that I honed as an advisor and now use regularly in my leadership role. When dealing with individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences, I find it best to put aside what I believe I know and listen instead for their perceptions of their experience. This also requires sensitivity. Sensitivity is a key tenet of IPA research that requires the researcher to be attuned to and empathetic towards the experiences and perspectives of participants (Shinebourne, 2011). IPA researchers must be empathetic as they attempt to understand participants' emotions, perspectives, and experiences. These tenets of IPA were all necessary considerations when designing the study.

Methods

I used a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design that included the collection and analysis of qualitative data through individual interviews. IPA allows researchers to understand the lived experiences of participants and how they make sense of that experience (Smith et al., 2009). I created the interview protocol and interview questions for this study with the goal of allowing participants the space to create their own meaning from their experiences in the field of academic advising. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis

allowed me to immerse myself in the responses of the participants to identify themes to address the following research questions.

Research Questions

This qualitative interpretative phenomenological study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do academic advisors who stay in the field for five or more years make sense of their persistence when so many others leave?
2. What personal factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?
3. What professional factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?
4. What institutional factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?

Positionality

I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman who is educated and upper-middle class. I grew up in a lower-middle class family and was the first in my family to attend college; however, I did not earn a degree during my first attempt. When I returned as a nontraditional student in my late twenties, I realized that nontraditional transfer students did not receive enough support or guidance and I often felt like I was forging my own way. I intended to use my education to start a career in the field of social services based on a desire to be in a helping profession. It was while pursuing my undergraduate degree that I realized I wanted to work with college students in some capacity. I believe that the people who are fortunate enough to work with these students can have a significant impact on their success, future, and their family's future. I share this information to acknowledge my biases, personal perspective, and experience with higher education and to acknowledge how they might influence my analysis. Reflecting on

positionality this way can improve reflexivity and transparency and ensure the study's trustworthiness.

Insider Status

Professionally, I am an advising administrator at a midsized regional public institution in the south. My 17 years of experience in higher education have been at the same institution; however, I have worked in several positions that provided a broad view of the operations of the institution. For the last five years, I have served in an administrator role and now manage a team of 27 staff members (advisors and advising directors). I chose to research staff retention, particularly why academic advisors stay in the field for this dissertation, based on recent turnover rates at the HEI where I am employed and across the country (Bichsel et al., 2022; Walton, 2022) and because of the potential impact advisors have on the success and persistence of undergraduate students.

Through my work with advisors, I have witnessed firsthand the impact staff attrition has in the field of advising, from the stress on the employees who remain (Figuroa, 2015) and assume the responsibilities during the vacancy to the loss students feel when their advisor leaves (Graham, 2012; Marshall et al., 2016). I acknowledge that because of my insider status, I have preconceived biases when it comes to the significant role that staff have in the success of students. I also believe that not everyone that enters the profession is a good fit for the role and believe some attrition can be good attrition. During the study, I attempted to manage my biases and beliefs through consistent journaling (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Population

The population of interest for this study was staff members whose primary role at the HEI is that of academic advisor and who have been in the field of advising for a minimum of

five years. I chose a minimum of five years because the national average for an advisor to stay in one position is three years.

Recruitment

I received approval from Coastal Carolina University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to begin recruiting participants. My insider status as an advising administrator gave me access to participants that easily facilitated recruitment (Smith & Nizza, 2022). I recruited participants through the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), the international professional organization for academic advisors, and through colleagues in HEIs across the United States. I shared an infographic with access to the interest form link to multiple NACADA Facebook groups as well as my own social media page. Participants were offered a 25 dollar gift certificate for their participation in the interview process. The infographic is presented in Appendix A. Multiple colleagues in advising and other areas of higher education shared the post with their contacts. I originally planned to use the NACADA listserv for additional distribution, but through snowball sampling with the social media posts, 204 professionals in HEIs completed the form to indicate interest in the study. I was able to reach respondents from all regions of the country who have persisted in the profession with this one form of outreach. The Coastal Carolina University informed consent form (Appendix D) and recording authorization (Appendix E) were provided via the interest survey (Appendix B) to all interview volunteers.

I reviewed the 204 survey responses and omitted those that did not provide all the requested information. The purpose of IPA is to develop a deep understanding of a specific experience and to do so requires participants who are more alike than they are different (Smith & Nizza, 2022). To create a more homogenous sample, I selected participants from public, four-

year institutions with an enrollment between 0-15,000 and narrowed the sample down to advisors with at least a master's degree.

I first invited 12 participants via email and received responses from seven who committed to an interview time. After one week without a response from the remaining five advisors, I then invited four additional volunteers, all of whom committed to an interview time. Participants were given the chance to ask questions of me and my dissertation chair before the interview.

Advisors at Coastal Carolina University (CCU) were not recruited given my status as their supervisor. Interview participants were recruited based on their expressed interest via the invitation link and through snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling helped ensure selected participants met the criteria of primary role as academic advisor at a U.S. institution (Channing, 2020). I recruited a diverse group of interview candidates based on a request for demographic data in the interest form. These data were also used to report the demographics of the sample chosen to participate in interviews. Identifying information such as name or employer was anonymized using pseudonyms chosen by the individual (Ivankova & Stick, 2007).

A good sample size for a doctoral study using interpretative phenomenological analysis is 10 to 12 participants due to the time-consuming nature of the process (Smith & Nizza, 2022). A small sample size is essential because the analysis process in IPA is intense, time-consuming, and requires a great deal of focus on the details (Smith & Nizza, 2022). I recruited 12 participants who all surpassed the average tenure (Brantley & Shomaker, 2021) and are considered a homogenous group since they have this accomplishment in common (Smith et al., 2009). This study included 12 interviews with analysis based on 10 of the 12. One participant was omitted from the study after it was found that he was not who he claimed to be, and another

was omitted because she confided that she was leaving the profession. All participants were required to have at least five years' experience as an academic advisor, where advising was their primary responsibility. Table 3 includes demographic information on the participants and their current institutions.

Table 3

Participant Demographics and Institution Information

Name*	Region of U.S.	Advising Caseload	Institution Size	Highest Degree	Gender Identity	Age Group	Ethnicity
Aiden	Northeast	Less than 200	5,001-15,000	Master's	Male	45-54	White
Alex	Northeast	Less than 200	More than 15,000	Master's	Male	35-44	Asian
Alexandra	Southeast	201-400	5,001-15,000	Master's	Female	25-34	Two or more
Dali	Southeast	More than 400	More than 15,000	Doctoral	Female	45-54	Hispanic or Latino
Grace	Northeast	More than 400	5,001-15,000	Master's	Female	35-44	Asian
Iris	Southeast	Less than 200	5,001-15,000	Master's	Female	35-44	White
Jack	Southeast	201-400	More than 15,000	Master's	Male	35-44	White
Kelly	West	Less than 200	5,001-15,000	Master's	Female	45-54	White
Patrick	Northeast	More than 400	More than 15,000	Master's	Male	45-54	White
Sophia	Midwest	201-400	5,001-15,000	Master's	Female	35-44	White

*Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity and privacy of participants.

Participants

Participants in the study are academic advisors with at least five years of experience in the field who currently work at a public, four-year institution with enrollment of at least 5,000. Demographic and institutional information for each participant was provided in Table 3. The following introductions will review that information and additional background for each advisor.

Aiden

Aiden is a white male working in a midsized institution in the northeast. He explored different majors as an undergraduate student and did not feel that he had guidance during that time from an advisor. He worked in several different industries before returning to higher education and earning a master's degree. His professional experience in higher education includes work in admissions and placing student teachers in internships. He has worked at his current institution in advising since 2013 and was promoted to an assistant director position where he carries a full caseload of advisees and oversees a team of advisors. He now enjoys mentoring and developing staff in the same ways that he mentors students. He is about to begin the dissertation phase of his doctoral program and has no plans to leave higher education or advising soon.

Alex

Alex is an Asian male working at a large institution in the northeast. He completed a graduate program and worked outside of higher education for several years. He returned to work in advising at his alma mater where he feels very connected as a first-generation graduate of the institution. After advising undergraduate students for more than a decade, he now advises graduate students. In this role, he sees students through the entire process from admission to graduation. While he has contemplated leaving higher education, he feels a strong connection to the institution and his colleagues. He also feels that advising is a way to honor his mother who had a deep respect for education and serving others.

Alexandra

Alexandra is a mixed-race woman working at a midsized institution in the southeast. As a first-generation college student, she never considered working at a college as a career choice. While resources were available at her undergraduate institution, she did not feel like she

received the guidance that a first-generation student would need to connect with those resources and believes that struggle is what ultimately led her to advising. She pursued a master's degree while living abroad for her husband's career and found that she regularly assisted other students and family members in navigating higher education. She then began a position as a school liaison in an education center through the military, next moved into an advising role in a community college and is now at her current institution where she has advised for five years. She attributes her connection to her university to her students and colleagues. She will have to leave the institution soon based on her husband's career but plans to stay in advising and higher education.

Dali

Dali is a Hispanic woman working at a large institution in the southeast. She recently completed her doctorate degree and describes herself as "fatigued but intrigued." She has worked in higher education since earning her undergraduate degree over 20 years ago, first with an internship with immigration advising, then in international advising, and she now works primarily with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) students. She is still drawn to helping students navigate the rules and regulations of the institution after 20 years in the field. At the end of each semester, she considers leaving for a different position or field, but she thrives on a great amount of interaction with students and has not found anything that would give her that like advising.

Grace

Grace is an Asian female working at a midsized institution in the northeast. She worked in a different field briefly after earning her undergraduate degree and has now been in higher education for almost 20 years. Before becoming an advisor seven years ago, she worked in

different areas within the institution such as admissions, enrollment, student support services, the dean of students' office, and the chancellor's office. She currently has a caseload of more than 800 business majors. While she struggles with burnout with the large caseload, she feels that advising is the right fit for her skills and has intrinsic benefits that keep her connected. She does not have any plans to leave the field in the near future.

Iris

Iris is a white female working at a midsized institution in the southeast. She began her professional career as a public education teacher before moving to her current advising position over 10 years ago. Her husband works with an affiliate of the institution, and she feels connected to the area and community. She has found contentment in the position and enjoys the opportunities to get involved with campus partners and policymaking through committee participation. Her relationship with her colleagues and the chance to contribute to a team are important in her connection with the job. She has no plans to leave advising or the institution.

Jack

Jack is a white male working at a large institution in the southeast where he earned both his undergraduate and master's degree. After earning a law degree, he decided that was not the path he wanted to pursue and worked in sales for several years. He found that the financial benefits of that work were not as important as the opportunity to work with students in higher education and made the move to his alma mater as an adjunct professor. He began his advising career almost eight years ago and finds the intrinsic benefits of the job far outweigh the financial benefits of his previous career choices. He feels strong ties to his alma mater, the city, the students, and his colleagues and plans to retire from that institution.

Kelly

Kelly is a white female working at a midsized institution in the west. She has worked with biology majors at the institution for over nine years following several years as a stay-at-home parent. She earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees in biology and did not intend to have a career in advising until after starting a family. Her husband is a faculty member at the same institution and her children are comfortable in their school system, both of which keep her tied to the area. She feels the administration showed investment and belief in advising by sparing advisors in recent, deep budget cuts. She also thrives on her relationships with faculty and colleagues. Kelly does not plan to leave advising in the near future.

Malia

Malia is a white female working at a midsized institution in the west. She discovered her interest in working with college students during her undergraduate program. She began her career in the community service office of her alma mater and then began a master's degree with the plan to continue a career in higher education. She completed an advising internship during that program that solidified her plan to work in advising at her undergraduate alma mater. She returned there and has worked in advising for over six years. Findings of the interview with Malia *will not* be included in this data analysis because she accepted a position outside of higher education and left her position in advising shortly after our interview.

Patrick

Patrick is a white male working at a large institution in the northeast. He had no plans to work in higher education and worked in several other industries before beginning his career in higher education 20 years ago. He called his first position a general staff position where his responsibilities included a variety of responsibilities and is where he found a special connection to advising. He then made the decision to pursue a master's degree with the plan of continuing

his career in advising. He has been at his current institution for over eight years and recently considered a move toward academic consulting for high school students who are preparing for college. He has no immediate plans to leave advising and attributes that to the gratitude he has for the opportunity to help students succeed.

Sophia

Sophia is a white female working at a midsized institution in the Midwest. She has strong ties to the institution as it is where she completed her undergraduate and master's degrees. She began work at the institution in admissions before moving to a student services role in the graduate school. She has served in her current position as a professional academic advisor for undergraduate majors in education and human sciences for almost nine years. During her time as an advisor, she considered a move to teaching but decided to stay in her current position because it fits her strengths, provides flexibility for work-life balance, and gives her the opportunity to work with a strong team. Having worked at her alma mater all her career, she cannot imagine working anywhere else.

Data Collection

To collect data, I created an interview protocol and interview questions. The protocol included a script for the interview and the Coastal Carolina University informed consent documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Before starting data collection, I reflected and journaled about my own preconceptions and processes, and documented my initial thoughts (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith & Nizza, 2022). I completed a practice interview with a colleague and upon completion of the interview, I immediately reviewed the recording and sought feedback from that colleague to identify areas for improvement in the interview process before interviewing the first participant.

I requested demographic and institutional data from all respondents to identify a diverse sample of participants for the interviews. Information requested included: institution type and size, advising caseload, minimum degree required, highest degree earned by participant, gender, age range, and ethnicity. The interest form is provided in Appendix B. The demographic and institution data are shared to illustrate the social representation of the participants (Mertens, 2020). The interview participants were diverse in race, gender, and ethnicity.

I reviewed all aspects of the process with each participant on the day of the interview before proceeding with questions. With permission from the participants, I recorded the interviews using Zoom which also transcribed the conversation. With participant permission, I retained the recordings to use audio clips in my presentation of findings. A verbal record is integral to the IPA process as analysis requires a focus on not only what is said, but also on word choice, pauses, and other verbal cues (Smith & Nizza, 2022). I journaled and kept memos throughout the entire process to both work through my biases and assumptions, and to reflect upon the interviews (Smith & Nizza, 2022; Vicary et al., 2017). I used respondent validation (member checking) to assess research quality by allowing participants to review their interview transcript and summary of themes that emerged from the analysis of their interview (Rowlands, 2021).

I developed the interview protocol (Appendix C) based on my review of the literature on employee turnover, academic advising, and interpretative phenomenological analysis. Questions were worded in “open and expansive” ways to steer the participant toward responses that assist in answering the research questions (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 20). The interview protocol provided structure for the conversation, but I remained flexible and allowed the conversation to move naturally in the event a participant raised an unexpected topic. I used the questions to

bring them back to their personal experience if they began to speak too generally about the topic.

Data Analysis

Phenomenology research relies on the understanding of individuals' shared experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018) which is one of the primary goals of this study. IPA allowed me to get as close to the lived experiences of the participants as possible during data analysis. I followed the series of steps outlined by Smith and Nizza (2022) to ensure that the process could be easily identified and followed. This called for an idiographic approach and analysis of each individual interview that took about five to six hours per participant and then a cross case analysis to generate group experiential themes. My process for data analysis is outlined in detail below.

Step One: Reading and Exploratory Notes

IPA focuses on everything said by the participant as well as the pauses, false starts, and other verbal cues so I used Zoom to transcribe each interview verbatim. I verified the transcript against the audio file by listening carefully to the recording while reading the transcripts. This step took a considerable amount of time because the Zoom transcription was inconsistent and often inaccurate. In addition to correcting the transcript during this review, I anonymized the data by replacing the participant's identifying information with a pseudonym and eliminating institution and location information. I completed this process for all participants before beginning the next step of the analysis.

Next, using an idiographic approach, I performed a single case analysis for each interview beginning with reading the transcript while also listening to the recording (Larkin et

al., 2006). This process allowed me to reconnect with the participants and their words (Smith & Nizza, 2022) before starting the analysis of the transcript.

I then read the transcript in-depth and recorded my initial reactions in the expanded margins of the transcript. I looked for key concepts, insights, and meanings and included descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes (Smith & Nizza, 2022). In this process, I also identified the objects of concern such as events, relationships, concepts, and processes that mattered to the interview participants and the experiential claims expressed. This part of the process also included identification of the meaning for the objects of concern and potential characterization of the participant's view in relation to those things (Larkin et al., 2006).

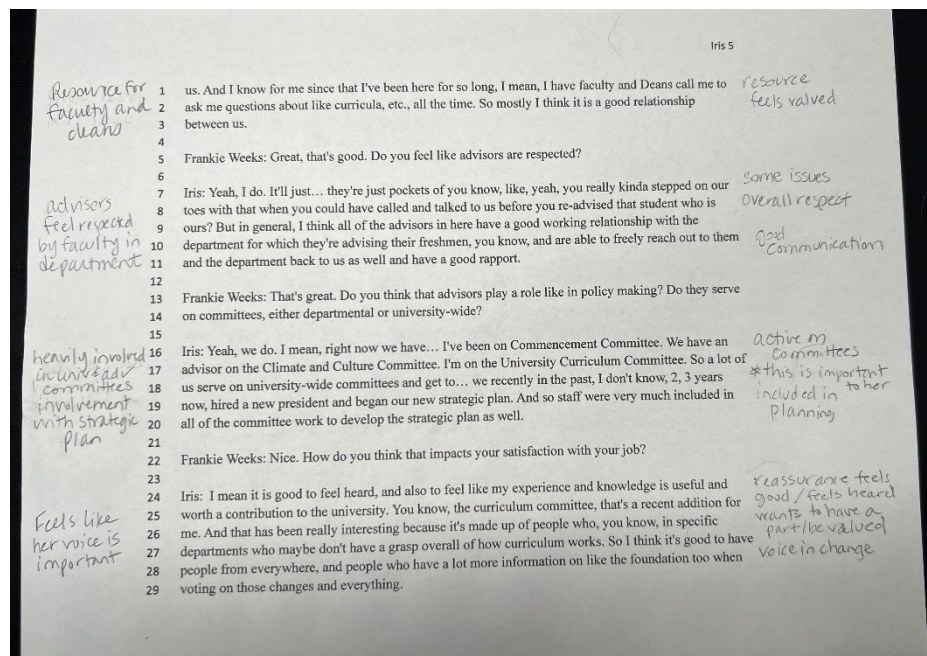
Step Two: Formulating Experiential Statements

The second step in the IPA process involves formulating experiential statements. I used the exploratory notes created in step one to identify experiential statements, or concise summaries of what I perceived as important in the corresponding part of the transcript. According to IPA, statements should be “dense and rich” with relation “to both the important psychological process and the context or content of that process being invoked by the participant's response” (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 39). Experiential statements can highlight parts of the interview that elaborate on or contradict another element.

During this process, I read each of the participant's responses and identified an experiential statement that corresponded to either the entire response or to a selection of lines in the transcribed response. I recorded these statements in the left margin of the expanded transcript as shown in Figure 2. This process allowed me to begin developing an understanding of the participant's experience and to identify those experiences in an iterative way.

Figure 2

Example page from a transcript with initial reactions on the right and experiential statements on the left.



Step Three: Finding Connections and Clustering Experiential Statements

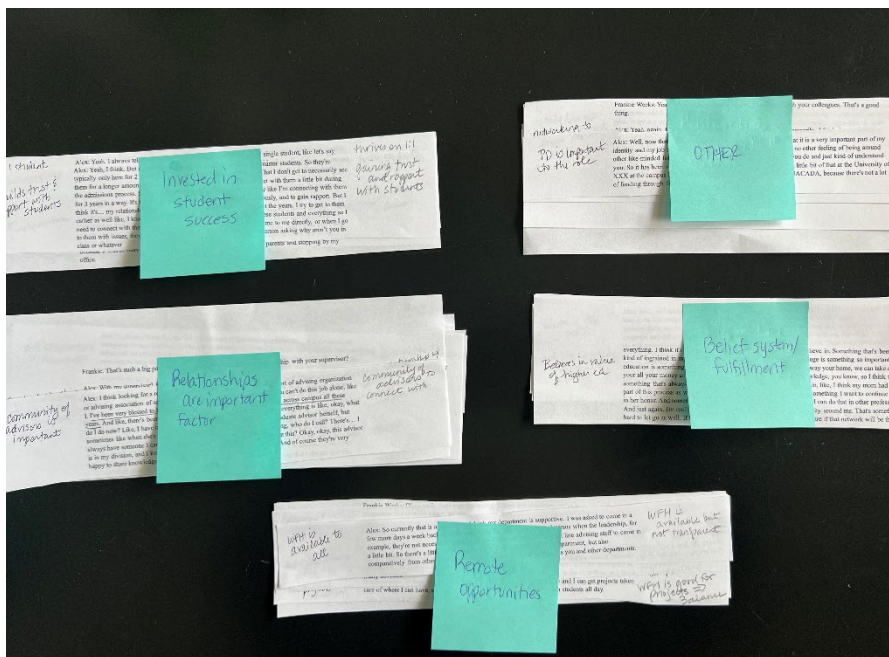
The next step of analysis, known as clustering, is meant to more clearly identify the key elements of the experience that the individual shared. My process for this step varied slightly from what Smith and Nizza (2022) identify as their preferred approach for clustering. They suggest typing up the identified experiential themes and cutting them into strips for clustering. Instead, I cut the transcript with the experiential statements listed in the margin and clustered them into categories or themes using the question “what should go with what? (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p.43). Clustering the statements in this way allowed me to identify both similarities and differences in the responses. Using the transcript clippings versus only the identified experiential theme allowed me to reference the words of the participant and my initial reactions when clustering.

This process was iterative as I would begin a cluster and then realize that a particular statement might be better aligned with a new cluster that developed. I combined clusters when

there was significant overlap, a process Smith and Nizza (2022) refer to as clustering the clusters. I journaled throughout this process to record the analytical process and my decision-making process. Smith and Nizza's (2022) recommendation of 3-5 personal experiential themes per participant guided my efforts in narrowing the themes. When I felt the process was complete and reflected the experiences shared by the participant, I labeled each of the clusters as a personal experiential theme (PET) as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Example of labeled PETs after the clustering process



Step Four: Compiling the Table of Personal Experiential Themes

Next, I created an electronic spreadsheet of the personal experiential themes and added the experiential statement, page, and line numbers from the transcript under the PET as a reminder of the participant's response that prompted it. During this process, I began to identify subthemes or groups of statements within a theme that were significant. I repeated steps one

through four for each transcript and finished with a separate sheet in the Excel file for each participant. Depicted below is an example of the experiential statements and PETs for one participant.

Table 4

Example of personal experiential theme and supporting experiential statements from spreadsheet

Table of Experiential Themes for Aiden (not first job)		
Theme 1. Advising is an important part of his life	Page/Line	Quotes
Found his purpose through advising	10, 16	it's a hard thing to explain to someone unless they've actually like felt that you found the thing you're meant to do
Enjoys life conversations with students	5,1	I think that's where I really kind of shine as an advisor is like, let's talk about life
Has a true passion for the work	9, 26	I absolutely love what I do
	10, 1	I don't see myself doing anything else
Acknowledgement from students is fulfilling	10, 23	that just kind of confirmed that this is where I'm meant to be
Impactful and purpose-driven work	21, 1	I'm really trying to help folks understand the value and the purpose...they see it and how it does make an impact on students' lives
Benefits are greater than financial	3, 27	He makes twice as much as I do but he is not any happier in like than I am because I get so much fulfillment out of what I do
Advising is important aspect of his life	20, 14	There isn't anything out there that interests me at the level that what I do now does... what I do is so much part of my life

Step Five: Cross-Case Analysis

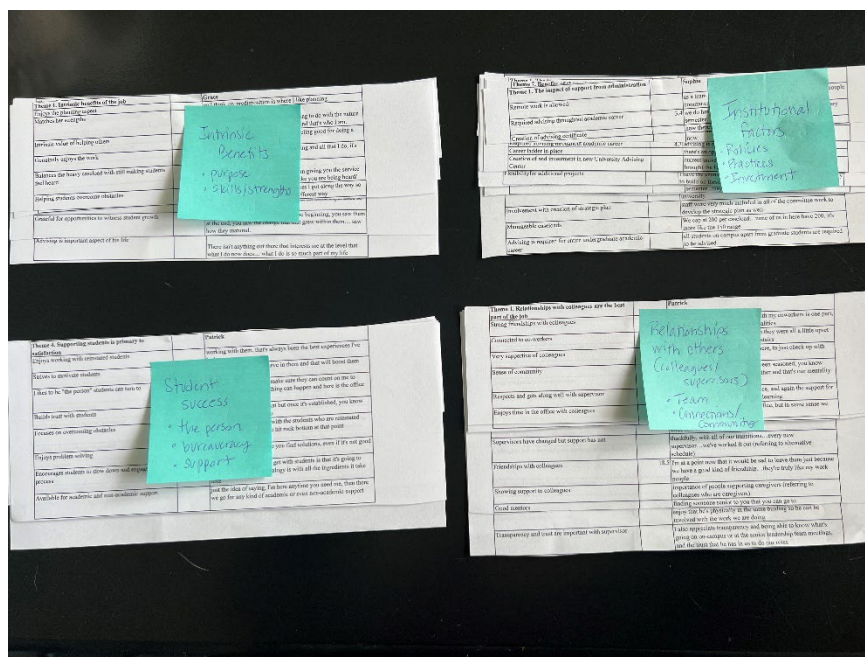
Following the analysis of all individual transcripts and identification of personal experiential themes and subthemes, I conducted a cross-case analysis to identify overlaps and similarities among the cases. I reviewed the personal experiential themes for all participants to refresh my memory and reorganized themes in the spreadsheet to make cross-case analysis

easier. Next, I printed all the personal experiential themes with supporting experiential statements for each person and cut them apart. I laid them all out so that I could compare and identify any connections or similarities. Like in step four, I sorted the PETs into clusters based on similarities either in the PET itself or in the experiential themes that supported it. Again, this was an iterative process that took time as I tried to best identify convergence and divergence among the themes and the ways that participants described their experiences. Some personal experiential themes were unique to the individual and did not make it into a group experiential theme.

Once satisfied that the group experiential themes represented the experiences shared by the participants, I created labels for them (as shown in Figure 4) and added them to the original spreadsheet. I copied the supporting personal experiential themes and statements from each individual's analysis and pasted it below the GET for support. During this process, I also identified the subthemes that emerged from the combination of the individual findings into group findings. These themes and subthemes will be reported in Chapter Four.

Figure 4

Personal experiential themes clustered into group experiential themes.



Ethical Considerations

IPA researchers have historically relied on in-person interviews to achieve the in-depth level of disclosure needed to fully understand the experiences of their participants. However, in recent years, virtual interviews have become more common. Researchers conducting virtual interviews must be cognizant of the ethical concerns raised when using this format and ensure that they show the same duty of care as if the interview was in-person (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Interview participants were required to consent to the interview and Zoom recording via the informed consent form. The use of their audio in my presentation was optional as participants might not have been comfortable with this additional step; however, all participants agreed to the use of recordings in the presentation of the findings, as long as their identity remained confidential. Participants were assured confidentiality using pseudonyms for names and HEIs. I anonymized all written transcripts and deleted all Zoom video recordings after the presentation of findings. I stored the audio recordings in a password protected file with no identifying information.

Study participants may benefit from sharing their experiences, reflecting on their career and decisions, and contributing to the literature on staff retention and academic advising. I asked participants to take part in a one-hour interview and to review the transcript for accuracy. I left the option open for a follow up interview if either party believed it was necessary. Overall time commitment may have been an inconvenience for the participant, but other risks associated with participation were minimal. As with any introspective or reflective activity, participants may have revealed emotional or stressful memories that they have not previously put into words as they made sense of their experiences (Taylor et al., 2015). However, all participants seemed eager to share and reflect on their experiences.

IPA naturally relies on the double hermeneutic where the researcher makes sense of the participant's sensemaking (Larkin et al., 2006). The process is meant to be interpretative, but because of my insider status, I needed to be even more cautious of my biases. I journaled and reflected throughout the research process to keep these biases from impacting my interpretation of the participants' experiences.

Credibility

Credibility was ensured in the study through member checking (Rowlands, 2021). First, I sent participants their transcript for review before I began my analysis to ensure that it accurately reflected their experiences. Of the five participants who responded, two did not request changes, two made minor updates to language specific to their institution, and one requested that I omit information about their supervisor. These changes did not impact the findings. After I completed the data analysis, I emailed the participants a brief introduction that I planned to share in the findings along with the PETs that emerged from the analysis. I offered them the opportunity to request changes or make corrections. The member checking email can

be viewed in Appendix F. Six participants responded and three requested minor changes to word choice. Again, these changes did not impact the findings.

A small sample size is expected in IPA because of the intensive, time-consuming nature of data analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022). I found that by the seventh or eighth analysis, I had achieved data saturation where no additional themes were emerging (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2018). I completed the analysis of the remaining interviews and confirmed that while the findings reinforced the previous themes, there were no new themes. In qualitative research, it is possible that the next participant reveals something unique; however, the group experiential themes that I identified were consistent among all participants instilling confidence that data saturation was met.

Trustworthiness

I ensured trustworthiness in several ways. First, as I did earlier in this chapter, I acknowledged my positionality and insider status with each participant to establish transparency. Second, I relied heavily on journaling and notetaking to practice reflexivity and bridling throughout the process. Bridling is the practice of intentionally reflecting on preconceived knowledge and ideas and was useful when journaling after each interview to acknowledge my thoughts and feelings so that they would not interfere with the analysis ((Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2019; Stutey et al., 2020). Further, bridling is inherent in the iterative process of IPA which requires the intensive line-by-line reading of the transcript to identify meaning and notetaking process (Stutey et al., 2020).

Limitations of the Study

The sampling strategy in IPA requires identification of a closely defined set of people who will have common meaningful experiences to share. Often this requires participants to be

more similar than they are diverse. This study relied on the advisor role's homogeneity in a public, four-year institution with enrollment up to 15,000 as the similarity in hopes that the participants will still be demographically diverse in race, gender, and ethnicity. Given the study's time constraints, it was not possible to recruit as diverse a sample as ideally intended.

Conclusion

In chapter three I further discussed IPA and the reasons I chose it for this study. I shared my positionality and discussed the importance of acknowledging biases and personal connections to academic advising, specifically. I provided information on the participants and recruitment process before detailing the data analysis process with a focus on credibility and trustworthiness. In chapter four, I will share the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to give academic advisors the opportunity to explore and share their lived experiences as professionals in higher education in the hopes of identifying themes that explain their persistence in the field. The study was conducted using semi structured virtual interviews. Thorough analysis of each interview and reflective journaling resulted in four themes and eight subthemes.

All themes and subthemes can be used to address the first research question: *How do academic advisors who stay in the field for five or more years make sense of their persistence when so many others leave?* The first theme, institutional factors, included two subthemes: *administrative policies or practices support advising and investment in advising*. The second theme, relationships with colleagues and supervisors, also had two subthemes: *strong connections are impactful and restorative* and *there is great value in being part of a team*. The third theme, intrinsic benefits, included two subthemes as well: *a sense of purpose in the job* and *using strengths and skill sets*. And finally, the fourth theme, commitment to student success, included two subthemes: *being a resource for students* and *helping students overcome obstacles and achieve goals*.

The remaining research questions were supported by different combinations of the identified themes. Themes one and three and the subthemes address the second research question: *What personal factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?* Themes one, two, and four along with the subthemes can be used to address the third research question: *What professional factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?* Lastly, theme one and its subthemes directly address the fourth research question: *What institutional factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?*

This chapter details the four themes and eight subthemes that emerged from analysis of the interviews and excerpts from the interviews that support each theme.

Themes

IPA relies on the double hermeneutic where the researcher must make sense of the participant's sensemaking. Thorough analysis of each individual interview allowed for the identification of at least three personal experiential themes (PETs) for each participant. Through a cross-case analysis of the PETs, four group experiential themes (GETs) that address the research questions emerged. An additional eight subthemes were identified. Table 5 provides an overview of the group experiential themes.

Table 5

Group Experiential Themes

Theme	Subthemes
Institutional Factors	1. Administrative Policies and Practices that Support Advising 2. Investment in Advising
Relationships with Colleagues and Supervisors	1. Strong Connections are Impactful 2. Great Value in Being Part of a Team
Intrinsic Benefits	1. Sense of Purpose 2. Uses Strengths and Skill Set
Commitment to Student Success	1. Being a Resource for Students 2. Overcoming Obstacles and Achieving Goals

Theme One: Institutional Factors

Participants regularly cited institutional policies and support for advising as a factor in their satisfaction with the job. Whether it be a voice in policymaking, inclusion in campuswide committees and projects, policies that support work-life balance, or a notable investment in advising services, this theme was expressed by all participants. Two subthemes emerged as

evidence of institutional support: *administrative policies or practices support advising and investment in advising.*

Administrative Policies or Practices Support Advising

Each participant discussed the importance of work-life balance in some capacity, but most prominent in the discussion was their administration's continuation of remote work policies. All participants worked at their institution before the pandemic and could compare pre-pandemic and post-pandemic practices. Patrick cited the administration's decision to continue remote work policies post-COVID as a key factor in his work-life balance and wellbeing:

And so satisfaction skyrocketed because we were at home, we didn't have to commute, we could spend time, you know, we could pick up our kids. We could, you know, make lunch at home. We could start dinner. We could exercise. We could do these things that were those hours because it takes an average of an hour or more to get to work each way in the city.

Patrick shared that the commute to and from his institution could take hours each way given city traffic and while he appreciates his time with students and colleagues, he feels that advisors are still effective and efficient in remote situations. The ability to use commute hours in better ways and to spend more time at home has become invaluable to his wellbeing.

Alex expressed a similar sentiment regarding work-from-home opportunities and the need for balance in an advising position:

Yeah, I think personally, from a kind of work-life balance perspective, I actually love the hybrid model where I feel like I do need to come into the office because I will connect with my colleagues as well as connect with my students in-person. I also like working from home at the same time, so I like a few days working from home where I

don't have to deal with the commute, and I can get projects taken care of where I can have set aside time and not necessarily be talking with students all day.

Alex appreciates the institutional support for work-life balance through the hybrid model that allows him to be home more, but also gives him the opportunity to be in the office with students and colleagues.

Alexandra agreed that remote work opportunities are good for her and her staff's mental health and helps to reenergize them. She also shared the downside of remote work which comes from the need to cover walk-ins in the advising office for advisors who are remote on a given day. Despite this challenge, she still believes the benefits of remote work are greater than the costs. Alexandra also cited institutional support of advising that includes a requirement for all students to meet with an advisor each semester and a welcome culture change at her institution from a transactional experience to an appreciative advising framework that develops relationships more fully. The advising requirement and culture shift shows that the institution values the services and support offered in advising as Alexandra explained here:

I don't want to say policies or procedures, but basically making it part of their [administrators] work with their student body that advising is valued and that advising is part of the student experience beyond a transactional need. I know that's the culture shift that we have started here and is, in my opinion, doing successfully.

Additional evidence for institutional support for advising at Alexandra's institution was the administration's decision to move professional advisors from advising only first-year students to now advising sophomores. Often these types of changes can be controversial if there are faculty members who feel slighted by the change. The fact that the administration was willing to make the move shows that they value advising and believe in its impact on student success.

Iris appreciates the institutional support at her institution which is evident in manageable caseloads, requirement of advising for the entirety a student's time at the institution, and opportunities for advisors to participate in university-wide committees and projects. She said, "I mean it is good to feel heard, and also to feel like my experience and knowledge is useful and worth a contribution to the university." She elaborated further on the impact of being involved outside of the advising office:

And I think that really was just a good start for me, to keep getting responsibility and to learn more and have more opportunities on campus. The advisors in our office did not previously hold roles on committees and I was the first advisor here to have a role on a committee and then that kind of started others being able to have roles on committees. She also felt that she and other staff were well represented in the creation of the university's new strategic plan. Opportunities for participation in decision making and representation on university-wide committees show institutional support for advising, but also encourage collaboration with campus partners and provide a break from what can become routine work.

Examples of institutional policies or practices that support advising include remote opportunities, the ability to participate in decision making and planning through committee membership, required advising for specific groups or all students, and administrative review of advising models to improve services. All participants felt strongly that their institution supported advising through policies or practices such as these.

Investment in Advising

While policies and processes that support advising can also be viewed as an investment, several participants expressed ways that their institution shows support for advising specifically through financial investments. For example, Grace shared that she witnessed this support at her

institution with new advising positions. Efforts are underway at her institution to identify areas for improvement with consideration for different advising models to best serve their students which will require even more positions. She appreciates this investment because she would like more time to develop relationships with students and though she does her best to nurture connections, it is challenging given the high caseload of advisees she currently manages.

Opportunities for advancement were viewed as institutional support by Alexandra, Aiden, and Iris. Alexandra's institution created a step up from the entry-level advisor position since the COVID-19 pandemic and has adjusted some of the requirements for the next level to increase advisor retention. Iris shared that the additional opportunities to promote at her institution have kept her engaged at the university and she aspires to continue to promote to the director level.

Jack noted that he also felt institutional support of advising through both a career ladder which allows for promotion and advancement within the advising role as well as the creation of a new university advising center during his tenure at the institution. He shared:

Our current university president, he was part of the task force that brought the university advising center into existence, so I certainly have every reason to believe that he is in support of advising here at the university.

This level of investment in advising services shows that the administration fully supports the efforts of Jack and his colleagues and is willing to allocate funding despite competing needs from across the institution. Jack felt this administration support aligned with his professional and personal goals of supporting students. Similarly, during deep budget cuts at Kelly's institution, she and other advisors were spared when positions were eliminated, and instead the institution restructured advising to better provide student support. Kelly shared that this is just

one way her institution has shown support, and she appreciated the decision to continue investing in advisors.

Institutional factors such as financial investment in advising played a key role in the participants' continued persistence. The factors varied from institution to institution, but each advisor cited the factors at their institution that had the most impact on them. Investment in advising was evident from Kelly, whose job was spared during a time of deep financial cuts, to Alexandra, who has benefited from the addition of positions in the department, to Jack and Iris who appreciate the advancement opportunities. Investments in advising were reassuring and rewarding for all participants and played a key role in how each person made sense of their decision to stay.

Institutional factors impact advisor persistence. The participants identified specific administrative policies and practices as well as ways in which the institution invested in advising that exhibit institutional support for academic advising. The support reinforces belief in their work and plays a role in their persistence in advising. The next theme covers a rewarding aspect of the job, the opportunity to connect with colleagues and form lasting relationships.

Theme Two: Relationships with Colleagues and Supervisors

The second theme that emerged from the analysis was also consistent among all participants. Advisors stressed the importance of and binding impact that relationships with colleagues and supervisors have on their continued persistence in their current position. Regular interaction with colleagues, sharing information, and collaboration were all mentioned as factors. Concerning supervisors, the participants expressed the importance of a good relationship with supervisors in relation to their persistence, especially those who encouraged

learning and who were compassionate and understanding. Participants' relationships with faculty were mostly positive and also played a role in persistence although at least one advisor would like more interaction with faculty. Two subthemes emerged: *strong connections are impactful and restorative* and *there is great value in being part of a team*.

Strong Connections are Impactful and Restorative

The connections between the participants and their advising colleagues play a critical role in the participant's persistence in their position. These relationships can be viewed as both personal and professional factors that influence persistence. For example, after 20 years at her alma mater, Sophia shared the significant role her colleagues play in her satisfaction:

I really like my coworkers. I'm at a point now that it would be sad to leave them just because we have a good kind of friendship and work friendship where we don't do a lot outside of work, but they're truly my work people, so I really like that.

Sophia has developed a strong bond with her colleagues which she believes reinforces her bond to the institution and encourages her persistence. Regarding supporting her colleagues, she was proud to share that she collaborated with a colleague on a conference presentation on caregiving where they discussed the importance of recognizing that everyone is a caregiver and needs support. Sophia stated:

...we [advisors] give care to our students, but we're all caring for pets, parents, family, nieces, nephews, all that kind of stuff. So, we, as coworkers, thought it was important to present on how you care for your colleagues who are caring for others...

This concept of caring for one another, especially during trying times, is one that is not often discussed and may be overlooked or taken for granted, but for Sophia it is a crucial factor in her connection to her position and to her wellbeing. In a position that requires a great amount of

giving to others, she finds the relationships with her peers to be restorative and a primary connection to the institution.

Likewise, Jack feels he developed deep connections with his colleagues in advising as they faced adversity when advising was restructured at his institution. He stated:

I would say that I have a very good professional relationship with most of my colleagues. You know when we talk about my colleagues in advising, I have lifelong friendships with the first-year cohort [a group of colleagues that all began as advisors at the same time].

Working through adversity with a team made Jack's connection to the institution even stronger and the friendships he formed crossed over between his professional and personal life. After some time reflecting in the interview, Jack wondered if his lack of ability to build those types of relationships with new colleagues is in part due to the continuous turnover in the advising staff:

You're actually making me reflect on this right now. This [advisor turnover] may have had some kind of subconscious impact on my seeking out really strong relationships with people. Because now all of those people who I'm so close to are all over the country at this point from that 2016 group. And so, it's really difficult to stay in communication with one another, and perhaps at a subconscious level, knowing that all these new advisors that I'm meeting are probably only going to be here for a year or 2 years, maybe 3 at most, can sometimes make it more challenging to establish this kind of more personal friendship.

This concern regarding personal investment in relationships with new colleagues who may only be around for a short time manifested itself in different ways with a few of the participants. Jack questioned his subconscious reasons for resisting connections with new advisors, Alex

expressed concerns regarding new advisors' opportunities to bond when turnover happened so quickly, and Patrick wondered about the impacts of remote work for new advisors on the ability to form close bonds. Each concern exemplified the importance of relationships to participants and the difficulty of frequent turnover. They value the relationships they have formed with their peers to such an extent that they worry about the impact not having these connections has on them and their new counterparts. As they reflected and tried to make sense of their own persistence, they questioned if turnover was not in fact breeding more turnover as opportunities for deep connection decreased.

For Alexandra, relationships with colleagues are the key to her persistence in the field. In addition to noting that she values connectedness, she also stated, "I think just having groups of people who care about you beyond your work makes a huge difference, and they keep me in the field of advising." She elaborated further and credited her colleagues with keeping her connected to the university even when faced with adversity and challenges in the job:

Currently, I don't know if I would necessarily leave advising because I have a great group of coworkers for support. If I didn't have them, I would consider it maybe for the sake of the complexity of academic advising at our institution.

Alexandra was forthcoming with the challenges she and other advisors faced at her institution in terms of bureaucracy and policies that do not always support student success. She admitted that it can be challenging to stay motivated when it feels like she must put energy into solving issues that should not have been problems to begin with. Despite those challenges, she attributes her persistence to her coworkers because she highly values connectedness and enjoys working with others to problem solve.

Alexandra also expressed positive thoughts about her relationship with her supervisor. Like many of the others, she said it is important to her that she have a good relationship with her supervisor to stay motivated. For her, the supervisor sets the tone for the employee's relationship with the institution and plays a key role in retention of the employee. She believes there is a true sense of mutual trust and transparency in her relationship with her supervisor.

Alexandra shared:

I would say I have a positive relationship with my executive director, and I like that they, not saying that you have to be physically in the same building, but I do enjoy that he's physically in the same building so he can be involved with the work in which all of us directors are doing in our success teams. And I also appreciate the transparency and being able to know about what's going on on-campus or at the senior leadership team meetings, and the trust that he has us to do our roles.

Trust, transparency, and effective communication are all key factors that Alexandra feels strengthen the relationship between her and her executive director. These factors are impactful for her as she advises students and leads a team of advisors.

Similarly, other participants had positive relationships with their supervisors. For example, Iris shared how her supervisor advocated for the team when it came to negotiating remote opportunities and how that advocacy impacted morale. She said, "I really appreciate my boss because she knows that we want this [remote work] and that we enjoy it, she's committed to doing what she can to make it work for us." Iris also stated that her supervisor goes out of her way to show appreciation for advisors:

She [Iris's supervisor] is really good at giving us affirmation, telling us that we're doing a good job. She realizes that one thing that we do all want is raises, and that's not on the

table right now. She's been giving us occasionally 2 free hours of leave that we can take... so doing little things here and there to raise morale with us and to let us know we're appreciated.

Although the supervisor could not provide raises, she made it a priority to recognize and show appreciation for the advisors in other ways. This support from a supervisor helps keep staff motivated and reenergizes them. On the topic of supervisors, Grace shared that not only is her supervisor supportive and understanding, but that she is also knowledgeable and able to help problem solve based off her own experiences in advising.

Knowing the material - that helps, that's very supportive. It's a key person of like you're my encyclopedia. If I have a question, I can ask her [Grace's supervisor] and that definitely helps. That's a very supportive professional piece, someone who just knows the job and has done the job.

Advisors are expected to know a wealth of information about all aspects of the university so it does not come as a surprise that many of the participants, like Grace, expressed appreciation for a supervisor who can serve as a resource and who has experience with advising. The ability to rely on a supervisor as a mentor or source of knowledge and to be comfortable seeking assistance from that individual is impactful for advisor persistence. For example, Aiden shared that he has a good relationship with his supervisor and feels appreciated and understood. He also expressed the benefits of having a supervisor who has experience in the field:

All those [departments] funnel up to my supervisor, who at one point was our director of our academic support center so she knows what it is that advisors are doing... she really wanted to shift this from being just the appointment factory to let's get advisors involved in the things that they want to get involved in. She knows the good work that we're

doing, and she is always championing, is our champion to say this is why the academic support center is so important.

His relationship with his supervisor is impactful in that he feels like he has an advocate who will represent advisor needs. Likewise, the way that his supervisor seeks to engage advisors in projects that interest them helps him and others to recharge and stay motivated.

Each participant shared these types of positive experiences with their colleagues, supervisors, and campus partners and expressed the significant impact the relationships made on their satisfaction and decision to stay. Many felt that relationships with faculty were also positive most often because they provided a service or were a resource for faculty members and administrators. For example, Iris said:

I think it's [relationship with faculty] mostly good, but sometimes it's hard to see the mostly good when you know people who complain are the loudest. I think overall we have a respectful relationship between us. And since I've been here for so long, I have faculty and deans call me to ask me questions about curricula, etc., all the time. Mostly I think it is a good relationship between us.

Iris feels like her relationship with faculty is good and enjoys being a resource for them. Sophia agreed and described the relationship with faculty as 50/50 as some faculty appreciate the professional support of advisors while others are resistant to turn over the responsibility of advising. She was hesitant to describe the relationship at first, but then elaborated, "...depends on what we're doing to interact. Sometimes we're the bad guys because we say you can't do that. Other times we are helping a lot by saying let's figure out how to get rid of this full section." Like Iris, Sophia enjoys working with faculty but does not view connections with them as having the same meaning as with the other advisors and her supervisor. Alexandra shared the

same sentiment and said that the one thing she would like to change about her job is the opportunity to work closer and more often with faculty.

Kelly is an embedded advisor who works in the department of the major she advises so she gets much more interaction with faculty than other advisors. She strongly values her relationships and interactions with the faculty. She feels like an integral part of the department and explains, “They are very inclusive. They include me in department meetings...for me, it ties me into the department, and I know they care about my opinion.” For Kelly, the faculty members are one of the reasons that she stays at the institution because she truly values the connections they share on both a professional and personal level. The connections and relationships forged with colleagues, supervisors, and faculty impact the persistence of the advisors and help them stay engaged and motivated. In addition to strong relationships, the participants also place a great amount of value on being part of a cohesive team.

There is Great Value in Being Part of a Team

It is not surprising that participants who value relationships with others at their institution would also greatly value the opportunity to be part of a team. Teamwork looks different for each of the participants; however, it plays a role for them all in how they make sense of their decision to stay. For example, Iris expressed appreciation for opportunities to collaborate and problem solve with her colleagues. She acknowledged that it is important to learn how to work with diverse types of people. Regarding her experience with colleagues, Iris shared, “But that's what I love when we have an issue, and we all come together, and we solve it together. I just love that. I love the teamwork.” For Iris, problem-solving and collaborating is a professional factor in her position that impacts her decision to stay.

Grace expressed a similar appreciation for being part of a team and the safety that she feels with her colleagues. When asked about the importance of being part of a team, she shared:

Very important, the advisors do stick out for each other. We do and we do support each other. And it's just a little unit, a subunit in a big unit. I can say it's safe for sure, meaning the people who I had before when we were a team of 8, it worked out well, because we knew as a fact that even though you're doing first year and second year, we're all advisors and we're all on the same team. We're gonna stick together and if there's any changes we like or don't like, we will voice in a uniform way.

As Grace shared, it is important to feel a sense of camaraderie when dealing with challenges at work and she appreciates knowing that her colleagues are there for her even if they work with different populations of students. Her office has not had as much turnover as some of the other participants, and she attributes that partially to the team's strength as a unit.

Aiden expressed a similar sentiment regarding teamwork and sharing information. After years of experience in the field, he enjoys being a resource for his colleagues and referred to himself as the in-house librarian. For him, being part of a team means working together to learn and solve problems, but also supporting each other when new opportunities arise. Aiden prides himself on helping others develop and pursue their goals even if it means they leave the field of advising. He also finds satisfaction in being part of the greater advising community and working as a team with NACADA members to author articles and develop conference presentations, and to mentor others. Teamwork plays a significant role in his persistence.

Along those same lines, Alex likes that he can ask questions of other advisors and share information freely to be the best he can for students. He felt extremely fortunate to have incredibly supportive people around him when he first began advising because he did not have a

good idea of what was expected in the new role. Alex said, "...having advisors that I can count on to ask questions, to throw ideas off of... I think that having that community is really important to me." The network of contacts and advisors that he has developed during his tenure at the institution is of utmost importance to him. He stressed that advising is not a job that one can do alone and that he has "been blessed to have connected with so many different advisors across campus". The importance of that team was made even more clear for him during the pandemic when everyone moved to remote work. He found comfort knowing that his colleagues were just a call, email, or text away and that they could all rely on each other despite not being physically located in the same space. As mentioned previously, he expressed concern for new advisors who are starting their positions with a hybrid option and who have not had the in-office opportunities to build their team given that teamwork plays an essential role in how he makes sense of his own persistence.

Patrick echoed the importance of teamwork and being there for his colleagues after recently moving from one advising role to another at his institution. The move required him to expand his knowledge of the academic programs offered along with learning in-depth admissions and financial aid information. When asked about support from his teammates during the transition, Patrick shared:

That's the kind of way it is... we always support each other. At least we exchange information so that what we give is kind of on the level... We have a language that kind of stays universal to the students so that we could know about the policies as somebody finds something out. As we refer to each other, we ask questions for each other. How long we've been there from the newbies to the to the ones who've been seasoned, we know we've got each other and that's our mentality.

Advisors often find themselves the last to know essential information regarding policy or procedure changes. Patrick takes comfort in knowing that he and his teammates will share information as they receive it and will ask questions on one another's behalf that will help them all do their jobs successfully. This sense of teamwork, support, and camaraderie creates a positive work environment and can increase commitment and satisfaction.

Advising is a profession that requires a tremendous amount of time and energy to be invested in others which can be depleting for some individuals. The participants consistently gave their colleagues credit for helping them reenergize and stay motivated. They appreciated the opportunity to collaborate and share information and attributed much of their connection to the job to the relationships they formed with others. In addition to the daily interactions with colleagues, many of the participants sought additional professional opportunities to engage with others through committees, professional organizations, and projects with campus partners.

All participants felt strong connections to their colleagues and expressed gratitude for the relationships they cultivated in their time in advising. These relationships emerged as a strong enough theme to stand on their own but could also be considered an intrinsic benefit among others discussed next.

Theme Three: Intrinsic Benefits

The third theme that emerged from analysis of the interviews was consistent among all participants as they expressed feelings that the intrinsic benefits of being an academic advisor often outweighed the desire for a higher salary. Intrinsic benefits included such things as a sense of purpose, an alignment of personal values and the work, playing a role in student success, development of meaningful relationships, and continuous learning. The theme included two subthemes: *a sense of purpose in the job* and *using strengths and skill sets*. All participants said

they feel a powerful sense of purpose in their work and explained what that means to them. Many also described how they feel the work of advising makes good use of their personal strengths and skill sets which reassures them that they are in the right field.

A Sense of Purpose in the Job

Participants expressed the intrinsic benefits they receive from advising in various ways. For example, Dali shared that after twenty years in higher education, she still thrives on helping students and feels like the job is naturally rewarding. She considers herself a partner in the student's education and finds motivation in helping students reach their goals. Dali stated:

I think every semester, really, we do get a reward, and I think it's that perseverance from the student. And overall, I think that there's a lot of reward to seeing someone become a professional. I think those are just the rewards of helping someone go into society and maybe hoping that they also make a productive change.

Not every interaction is positive and not every student succeeds, but Dali believes there is value even in those experiences as even failure is an opportunity to connect and learn. She recently earned a doctoral degree and has considered other career options; however, she is not interested in any job that does not allow her to work closely with students and has no plans to leave advising for that reason.

Sophia expressed a similar sentiment regarding the partnership she tries to cultivate with students beyond basic advising and the benefits she gets from that relationship:

I believe in what I do... I believe in higher ed, I really believe people should go to college, I believe in career fit and transferable skills, and all that kind of stuff. I find myself talking to people about you're going to apply for a new job? What does your

resume look like? Have you worked on your interview? Have you practiced for your interview? I just really believe in what I do.

Her passion for the work is evident as she talks about how much she values higher education and assisting students throughout the academic career. Sophia also shared the joy that she gets from seeing students find the right fit for themselves and succeeding:

I really enjoy seeing students that come back and say this is what I should be doing. I'm enjoying the classes so much more than my last major, going out to some of their practicums and field experiences and teaching experiences and stuff, and just hearing their positive feedback about that. Like, yes, I like going! Yes, I love meeting with children! That's all really, really great. And then I love seeing them graduate... there's no better joy than being like, you're done!

Since Sophia works with education majors, she takes pride in knowing that she is not only impacting the individual student but also the students they will teach in the future. She also expressed the importance of working at her alma mater and giving back to an institution that gave her so much.

Aiden believes that advising and his work is a big part of who he is. He held higher paying jobs in the past and knows that other higher paying opportunities are available to him, but he questions the fulfillment he would get from those jobs:

But my brother, he's an engineer...he makes twice as much as I do, but he is not any happier in life than I am because I get so much fulfillment out of what I do. And now that I get to supervise and mentor staff, it's even double.

Several times in the interview, he expressed the belief that supporting students in their educational journey is what he is meant to be doing. Aiden said, "I'm not alone, but it's a hard

thing to explain to someone unless you've actually felt that you found the thing that you're meant to do." The intrinsic rewards were far more important than a higher salary or prestigious title.

Jack shared this feeling and expressed a direct connection between the intrinsic benefits of the work and his intention to stay in the field when he said, "I truly believe that I chose this occupation for the right reasons, I mean, for me I find purpose and fulfillment in what I do and that makes it something that's very, very difficult to walk away from." Kelly agreed and explained that advising is a way for her to feel useful and that it is good for her mental health. She also talked about the other intrinsic benefits of advising and explained, "I care about helping students, that's my priority. That gives me a lot of... it fills my bucket, I guess, to help students and when people are appreciative..." This is a sentiment shared among all participants, many of whom also feel that advising is a good fit for them personally. The sense of purpose that advisors experience in their daily work directly impacts their persistence in advising.

Usings Strengths and Skill Sets

Many of the participants felt that their current role in advising was a good match for their personal skill set and strengths. Several discussed their love for planning, for processes, for continuous learning, and even for navigating bureaucracy. The repetition of meeting with students and discussing the same type of plans and processes each day may seem monotonous; however, several of the participants thrive in the routine. For example, Grace stated:

Meaning, regardless of everything and all that I do, I don't know if it's [advising] just maybe a good match of just who I am. Maybe that's what it is, meaning, I don't want to give a fluffy sentence... "well, I'm a change maker and I do this." I don't want to give

you that. I think it's just a good match. It's maybe something to do with the nature of the job being a little process driven. And that's just who I am. I like to analyze.

Grace finds it rewarding that she can use her analysis and planning skills to help students meet their goals. She acknowledged that it is not a good fit for everyone, and she has known advisors who struggled because they did not appreciate the processes and routine in the way that she does.

Alexandra and Aiden are both invested in academic advising as a discipline and attribute some of their job satisfaction to the need for continuous learning to stay abreast of current information. Since academic advising is a relatively new discipline and one can always develop one's skills further, there is always something more to study and learn. Alexandra said, "...it's not uncommon to say, okay, now we're going to be able to do some development on this topic where we're going to have different journal articles from here or we're going to be reviewing these webinars." She also commented on the opportunity to help develop new advisors when she shared, "The other component that I really love just about the role itself, is just the culture of learning since we're doing the work with them." In addition to her own love of learning, Alexandra appreciates that she gets to share her knowledge with other advisors. Likewise, Aiden was invested in the literature on student success and advising since early in his career and strives to continue learning to best support students:

I was spending the time diving into the literature because I feel that you could work at mastering your craft as an advisor, but we never master it. Our students keep changing so I'm always trying to get better.

Continuous learning is important to Aiden and he feels fortunate that his role allows him the time to engage with the literature in order to stay abreast of changes. He likes to partner with colleagues to develop and present on different topics and enjoys helping others do the same.

Patrick also appreciates learning and finds opportunities to do so while serving students in regular interactions. He shared:

It's not mindless repetition but having to repeat the same information 100 times does not get boring, because it's the same information, but it's not to the same person. It's not to someone with the same experience so it is dynamic...

The myriad of learning opportunities that comes with working with a diverse population of students is one of the factors that keeps Patrick engaged in his work. The other participants shared Patrick's perspective and enjoyed the challenges that each day could bring given the diversity of their students and the many challenges bureaucracy can produce.

In a profession that requires a great investment of energy and care for others, intrinsic benefits are a personal factor that contribute to sustaining that energy and engagement with the profession. The participants shared unique examples of their experiences that illustrate how the intrinsic benefits outweigh negative aspects of the work and keep them connected to the profession. The advisors' deep sense of purpose helps them stay motivated in their work with students. They are also cognizant of the ways their personal strengths and skills align with those needed to be a successful advisor. The combination of a sense of purpose and alignment of personal strengths plays a role in the persistence of the participants. The fourth and final theme will build on these factors with a discussion of the participants' commitment to student success.

Theme Four: Commitment to Student Success

The fourth and final theme that emerged from the analysis is the advisors' commitment to and investment in student success. The theme of intrinsic benefits speaks to the fulfillment and satisfaction the advisors got from their work in higher education, while this theme focuses on the importance of working with college students and supporting them in their academic, personal, and professional goals. The participants were highly invested in creating strong relationships with their students, creating an environment that is conducive to providing holistic services, and being a resource throughout students' college careers. Most mentioned a particular aspect of working with students that they were most drawn to such as overcoming obstacles, academic planning and finding the right path, career planning, navigating bureaucracy, and general mentoring. This discussion led to the emergence of two subthemes: *being a resource for students* and *helping students overcome obstacles and achieve goals*.

Being a Resource for Students

Advisors are unique in that their contact with students is most often one-on-one and spans the course of multiple semesters. The participants' work assignments varied with some only having two semesters with their advisees and some having multiple years. Several mentioned that they would like more time to develop even deeper relationships. Similar to the others, Sophia likes the opportunity to work one-on-one with students and feels that the advising relationship is different than the faculty/student relationship because advisors do not grade their advisees and can focus on the student holistically. She has considered a career in teaching but likes the fact that she can be a resource and mentor for her students given the consistent contact advisors have. On being a resource for students, Sophia shared:

I hope that students see their advisors maybe as the first stop, a place to go to get other resources, a place to go to ask questions if you feel like you don't even know who to ask. So that's how I just want students to be comfortable coming to me with questions, truly, and not feel like, oh, this is a stupid question or oh no, I didn't go to the right place. I just kind of hope they see me as somebody there supporting them. I'm part of their team.

Sophia likes being part of the students' success team and thrives on being able to assist them when questions come up. She advises students beginning in their sophomore year and gets to see them through to graduation which she finds personally rewarding.

Other participants also expressed their desire to be "the person" that students could count on for answers, resources, and support. This theme carried through each of the conversations in different ways. Jack elaborated on this idea of being "the person":

The whole intention behind it [the advising center] was to provide more holistic advising, to try and move away from this very transactional exchange of information, here's the classes you're going to take, see you next semester. And I knew that I would have the opportunity to really try to foster relationships with students and help to mentor them. And particularly, this is part of why I wanted to work with the undeclared student population is to help them figure out what the right questions are to be asking, how to really engage in that process of introspection to try and figure out who they are as individuals so that they can make better decisions with respect to the kind of persons they want to try to become.

Jack enjoys working with students who have not decided on a major because he gets to help them explore different options and eventually find their path. Meetings with that population of

students are usually longer than for declared students to give ample time for connections and for learning more about the student's goals.

Alexandra echoed Jack's focus on the holistic student and acknowledged that as a first-generation college student herself, she wants to fill the void that she felt when it came to having someone to turn to with questions: "...part of the reason why I'm an advisor is not that I had a bad advisor, but I wanted to be the person I didn't have." Alexandra also shared:

And I'm a developer at heart, and I enjoy having deeper connections. So that's where I think the love for advising came into play because it wasn't just getting them into the institution, or maybe only helping them with one specific challenge or issue or problem. It was being able to have those lasting type of connections and relationship building for a period of time at least, whether it was one year or two years. I think all of these small moments led to landing in advising and continuing to love advising for the nature of that work of being able to have more genuine authentic relationships with students on a long-term basis.

Alexandra values connectedness and the opportunity to see students develop over an extended period. She takes pride in being a resource for them and ensuring that they have someone to turn to.

Alex agreed that student connections are the best part of his job as he strives to understand their needs. He was also a first-generation college student who was not aware of the various resources, so he wants to be sure students are knowledgeable about the resources available to them. Regarding being "the person" he said:

Sometimes I have to take a step back because I just remember, I myself was in this place once. I was a first-generation college student. I had no idea what was going on. I didn't

know the vast array of resources that are available, especially here at the University of XXX because we're such a large institution people can get lost because, even though we throw out the word resources all the time, sometimes we need to direct people to certain kinds of resources, because it's just an overwhelming vast of stuff that's out there. I think part of it is also directing students to what they are needing.

Alex uses his own experience as a first-generation student and alumni of his institution to connect with his advisees. In his current role, he sees students through from admission to graduation and greatly values that long-term engagement.

Aiden shared his genuine love for working with students and learning as much as possible about them to best help them identify and achieve their goals. He was shocked early in his career by how much students will share but has found that the more they share, the better he can help them. He said, "I think, in general, what students will share with the advisor even in the first meeting is very personal and deep information. It helps us as advisors to how I can better support my students." An appreciation for this type of opportunity to learn about the student beyond academic and career aspirations was evident in each of the conversations. The participants shared their experiences with students and the ways they build connections and trust. They expressed their desire to be a consistent resource for students and an integral part of their success team. It was evident that the connections and investment in their students went well beyond the academic planning aspect of selecting classes.

Helping Students Overcome Obstacles and Achieve Goals

Obstacles for college students come in many forms. Students may contend with personal, family, academic, financial, and many other types of issues. When faced with adversity or challenges, many students are unsure how to proceed or who they can rely on for

guidance. Academic advisors are on the frontlines assisting students and teaching them skills to cope and address various life issues. A large part of the advisor's job is referring students to other resources on campus, but they also spend a great deal of time coaching students through a problem, process, or challenging situation that is not directly related to academics.

A common challenge discussed by participants was the bureaucracy of higher education and the hurdles it causes for students. Common issues include processes that are cumbersome, inflexible policies that are not student friendly, delayed decision making when it comes to requests and appeals, among others. When dealing with these situations, Patrick said that he encourages students to take their time and engage in the planning and learning process. He thrives on being "the person" to help students navigate bureaucracy and overcome obstacles and described it here:

I know how the bureaucracy can be and I'd say I want to be able to kind of solve it... you hear students all the time about all the bureaucracy... if a student needs a form, if the student needs advice, the student needs just some help getting things done then I'm going to get it done and make sure they can count on me to navigate. This sort of thing can happen and here is the office you can go to... so be the solution to that, that's what really works.

Several times he expressed how the bureaucracy and processes in higher education can be daunting and even a hindrance to student success. He strives to be the person that a student can rely on to guide them through. While it might seem that bureaucracy might be a reason he would leave the field, he sought out advising as a career because he wanted to help other students find their way. Interestingly, it is a professional factor that keeps him engaged in the role.

In addition to her relationships with colleagues, Iris believes supporting students through challenges is one of the best parts of her job. She shared, “I also really enjoy getting to know my students and helping them through whatever they’re going through”. She and her colleagues have become known for being able to resolve issues when campus partners do not know who else to turn to. She shared that it can be tiresome, but it is worth it to help a student. Likewise, Sophia said that she really likes the career planning part of advising. She said, “My favorite conversations with students are helping them find majors or find career fit and working with them through that career crisis.” She described herself as a calming force, at least on the outside, as she approaches problems with an open mind and can share that calm and optimism with students to help them learn to manage difficult situations.

Several advisors expressed their desire to impact the student’s future approaches to adversity through their work. For example, Aiden finds the conversations with his students fascinating and often tries to share his own life experiences to inspire grit and persistence in them. He said that the lesson he tries to leave them with is “if we stumble or if we have hurdles, that doesn’t mean that we can’t do the thing. How we tackle those hurdles is going to define who you are in life.” This level of support cannot happen in a brief meeting and often requires multiple contacts with the student. Aiden’s institution has manageable caseloads which makes deep conversations and follow-up possible. Like the other participants, he feels that caseloads are an institutional factor that can greatly influence staff persistence.

Every participant shared about the fulfillment that they receive from helping students, whether it is being the person the students turn to for resources or helping a student through a challenging situation. Student connections play a prominent role in the decision to persist for each advisor. Many of whom shared that they were unsure of what the advising role would

entail and were pleasantly surprised that years into their career they were even more deeply invested in supporting students.

Conclusion

This chapter shared findings from the interpretative phenomenological analysis detailed in Chapter 3. Four group experiential themes and eight subthemes were presented, summarized, and supported with quotes from individual interviews. The four GETs identified are Institutional Support, Relationships with Colleagues and Supervisors, Intrinsic Benefits, and Commitment to Student Success. Participant stories made clear that there are many similarities among advising experiences and their perceptions of their persistence in the field.

Chapter five will discuss the findings in relation to the research questions, existing literature, and the conceptual framework. The discussion will include potential application of the findings for administrators who seek to improve professional retention and advisors who wish to persist in the field. Finally, opportunities for future research will be presented.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Staff attrition in higher education reached record levels since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. The continuous turnover of staff comes at a great cost to HEIs, in financial terms and otherwise. Academic advisors are professional staff members who currently have one of the fastest rates of turnover with most leaving their position in less than three years. Advisors play a significant role in the success of college students and therefore the success of the institution, which suggests that retention of these staff members is worth understanding more thoroughly. This qualitative study explored the ways academic advisors make sense of their experiences in advising and persistence in a high turnover field. Individual interviews were conducted with 10 academic advisors who have been in the field for a minimum of five years. Each interview was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, experiential themes were identified, and then a cross-case analysis was completed to identify group experiential themes.

This chapter will discuss the group experiential themes that emerged during analysis, personal accounts of the participants, recommendations for application of the findings, and opportunities for future research. Existing literature on the retention of academic advisors and other professional staff is limited despite research affirming the impact that advisors have on student development, success, and persistence (Cate & Miller, 2015; Kuh, 2008). This chapter will tie the findings to existing literature discussed in Chapter 2 and research published since the study began.

It has only been in the last two decades that the role of academic advisor has emerged as a profession grounded in theory, research, and best practices (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016). Academic advising responsibilities were historically handled by faculty as an additional duty beyond teaching and research. The roles and responsibilities of academic advisors vary across

institutions and are still evolving as research continues about the impact of advising on the mission of the institution and student success. This interpretative phenomenological study gave academic advisors at public, four-year institutions across the United States the opportunity to examine and reflect upon their experiences in the field and to make sense of their persistence in a field with an average tenure of just three years (Brantley & Shomaker, 2021). The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do academic advisors who stay in the field for five or more years make sense of their persistence when so many others leave?
2. What personal factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?
3. What professional factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?
4. What institutional factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?

Summary of the Findings

The following sections give an overview of the findings regarding the four research questions. A combination of the group experiential themes can be used to address each of the questions as described in chapter four. The summary will be followed by a discussion of the findings.

How do academic advisors who stay in the field for five or more years make sense of their persistence when so many others leave?

Academic advisors who participated in the study openly shared their experiences in advising. Thorough analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in the identification of the following group experiential themes that can all be used to understand how the advisor makes sense of their persistence in a high turnover field: institutional factors, relationships with colleagues, intrinsic benefits, and commitment to student success. Most of the participants

shared that they have witnessed high turnover rates at their institution. Jack said that he was the only advisor left from a cohort hired several years ago. Alexandra's experience is similar as her institution has hired ten new advisors in the last few years as turnover continues to increase. Alex admitted wondering if he should be considering other career options as he witnesses the short tenure of new hires at his institution. All participants expressed concern over the high turnover rates at their own institution or across the country which, in part, led them to respond to the invitation to participate in this study and explore reasons for their own persistence.

The participants were eager to explore their experiences in advising and to reflect on those experiences to make sense of their persistence. While none of the participants began their professional careers in academic advising, each felt sure that they were now in a field that aligns with their personal and professional goals, as well as values and beliefs. They cited specific institutional policies or processes that made them feel supported in their career such as advancement opportunities, professional development, opportunities to engage in policymaking and strategic planning, and policies that support work life balance. They also discussed at great length the intrinsic values of advising and the ways in which the rewards are much greater than financial. Aiden and Jack were previously employed in higher paying positions outside of higher education but did not get the same level of fulfillment from those positions. Dali agreed that she feels rewarded every semester when she sees students succeed even in small ways. Alexandra expressed gratitude that she gets to train and mentor new advisors so they can then help even more students.

When asked about institutional policy on remote opportunities post-pandemic, the participants were happy to report that their institutions still offered flexible work from home possibilities. Both Patrick and Alex talked about how the continuation of remote work improved

their quality of life since it omitted the time-consuming commutes associated with living in a city. Alexandra appreciated the remote opportunities for her advising staff because it helped to replenish them when they needed a break from the daily interactions and could help diminish burnout. At Iris's institution, advising is the only department that still has the opportunity for remote work. She spoke highly of her supervisor who advocated for the opportunity since it was important to the staff.

The importance of strong relationships with colleagues and supervisors was a consistent discussion throughout the interviews. Participants all reported excellent relationships with the other advisors and other campus partners. Aiden, Patrick, and Grace talked about the lifelong friendships they developed through their position. Alexandra, Kelly, Alex, and Sophia all attributed their persistence in advising directly to the relationships with their colleagues. In addition to forming strong friendships, the opportunity to collaborate and solve problems with others was also mentioned as a factor in job satisfaction.

Supervisor relationships were also key to job satisfaction for the participants. While several mentioned that they appreciate the autonomy of their position, they also stressed that they appreciate having a supervisor who is available and knowledgeable when needed. As mentioned, Iris shared that her supervisor is a strong advocate, as did Sophia who feels supported personally and professionally by her supervisor. Alex and Grace shared that they appreciate having a supervisor who was previously in the advising role because they can understand and relate to the current advisors as well as provide valuable information or advice.

Not surprisingly, the participants also cited their commitment to student success as an essential aspect of their persistence. In addition to the intrinsic rewards already mentioned, the participants were fully invested in building strong relationships with their advisees that often

extended well beyond graduation. Alex said that connecting with students and understanding their needs is the best part of his job. This sentiment was echoed by others like Kelly and Aiden who strive to help students avoid mistakes they made in their academic careers. There was a consistent theme of a desire to be “the person” that students can turn to when they need resources, academic assistance, or someone to listen.

The participants each gave an answer when directly asked why they persist in the field (see Table 6 for responses), but it was clear that many have not reflected on the reasons extensively. In conclusion, the interviews revealed that the participants make sense of their persistence based on institutional factors that show support for advising, relationships with their colleagues, the intrinsic values of the position, and the opportunity to support students.

Table 6

Primary reason cited by participants for persistence in their position.

Participant	Reason	
Aiden	Passion for the work	
Alex	Relationships with colleagues	<i>What personal</i>
Alexandra	Amazing coworkers	
Dali	Students	<i>factors influence</i>
Grace	The job is a good fit for her	
Iris	Comfort in the known	<i>an academic</i>
Jack	Relationships with students	
Kelly	Embedded in community	<i>advisor's</i>
Patrick	Making a difference in the lives of students	
Sophia	A great team	<i>persistence as an</i>

advisor?

Like the first research question, multiple themes address the question of what personal factors influence an academic advisor’s persistence in the field. The participants discussed institutional policies that supported work-life balance and career and professional development. They shared how the intrinsic benefits were reaffirming and good for their mental health as they used their strengths and skill sets to support students. There was also discussion of the value of

higher education and the ways in which supporting students aligned with their values and their family's values. Connections to the institution and community were also valued and cited as a reason for persistence. In conclusion, the findings show that personal factors such as work-life balance, using identified strengths and skill sets, doing work that aligns with personal and family values, and relationships influence advisor persistence.

What professional factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?

Professional factors identified through the study that influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor include opportunities for professional development, policies that encourage work-life balance, opportunities for advancement, relationships with colleagues, a voice in policymaking, the ability to enact change, and opportunities for additional projects outside of advising. These factors were expressed in all four themes that emerged. Several of the advisors shared the importance of working on additional projects to challenge themselves professionally. They also valued the opportunity to continue learning more about the field rather than through literature, conferences, or graduate-level work at their institution. Everyone felt that the administration at their institution supports professional growth even if it could not always be funded. Several participants discussed the importance of being part of a professional community like NACADA for learning and support. In conclusion, professional factors such as professional development and growth opportunities, connection to a professional community, a voice in policymaking, career advancement, and institutional support of work-life balance all impact advisor persistence.

What institutional factors influence an academic advisor's persistence as an advisor?

Institutional factors is a broad theme that was used to summarize factors mentioned by the participants such as institutional policies or processes that support advising, opportunities

for advancement, a voice in policymaking, opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and campus partners, support for professional development, financial investment in advising through additional staffing, manageable caseloads, trust, and flexibility. In terms of institutional policies and processes that support advising, every participant shared ways they feel that advising and advisors are supported at their institution. For example, five of the ten participants shared that their institution requires academic advising for all students before they can register each semester. This shows that the administration respects and values the services that advisors provide as an essential support for student success. In conclusion, the participants expressed the importance of a combination of these factors in their satisfaction with the job and therefore their persistence in the field.

Discussion of the Findings

The group experiential themes that emerged through analysis directly related to the research questions as described above. The following discussion will describe how the findings connect to existing literature and confirm the expectations of the conceptual framework for the study. This discussion begins with comparison of the findings to the second CUPA-HR Survey completed in 2023.

CUPA-HR Survey Comparison

The 2023 CUPA-HR Survey identified nine primary reasons that professional staff in higher education sought other employment (Bichsel et al., 2022). Each of those reasons were addressed by the themes that emerged as factors for persistence among this sample which supports the CUPA-HR findings.

Reason 1: Pay/salary increase: Participants reported that the intrinsic benefits of their work outweighed the need or desire for more money. Several expressed that they while they

would like a salary increase, they would not leave for a position simply because it pays more. Jack worked in higher paying fields and did not feel the fulfillment that he does with advising. Aiden has other opportunities currently that would pay more but does not want to sacrifice the intrinsic benefits that working with students and his colleagues allow.

Reason 2: Opportunity to work remotely: The participants all work for institutions or departments that allow remote work at some level. Some have hybrid models that allow for two days at home each week while others have a more informal as-needed understanding with their supervisors. This opportunity was viewed highly as a benefit that helps manage wellbeing and work-life balance. Of the ten participants, only one declined the opportunity to work from home in favor of being in the office full-time. Further, two participants noted that prospective employees have asked about the remote opportunities and stated that it was a key factor in recruiting candidates.

Reason 3: Promotion and or more responsibility: Half of the participants have been promoted at their institution or moved into a different type of advising role that entails more responsibility. They cite those opportunities as contributing to their persistence. Others cite the advancement opportunities built into advising through a career ladder or similar structure as a factor as well.

Reason 4: Flexible schedule: In addition to the flexibility that comes with remote work, the participants cited other scheduling options that have impacted their persistence. Kelly is part-time and can adjust her schedule according to peak times and needs. Sophie negotiated a nine-month contract after the birth of her first child which allowed her to be more available to her family throughout the summer. She recommended the change at a time when the administration was looking for creative ways to trim budgets and found that it worked for

everyone. Several of the participants also expressed appreciation and satisfaction with the autonomy they have in their daily work, which allows them to design their own daily schedule.

Reason 5: A new challenge: Opportunities for new challenges and professional growth were highly important to the participants and achieved in their current roles in numerous ways. Iris serves on several university communities including the staff senate, relishes chances to collaborate and problem solve with colleagues, and regularly discusses ways to challenge herself with her supervisor. Jack and Aiden immerse themselves in research on advising, career planning, and other topics related to student success. Patrick seeks projects outside of advising that allow him to take a break from the daily routine of meeting with students. Several participants are in the process of or recently completed additional graduate work. Dali recently earned her doctoral degree through her institution, and Jack is enrolled in his doctoral program. All the participants expressed ways that they seek new challenges and make it a priority.

Reason 6: Want a new supervisor: The participants expressed respect and appreciation for their current supervisors and for the administration at their institution. Aiden, Alexandra, and Sophia all appreciated their supervisor's knowledge of academic advising and policies and stated that it was reassuring to have someone they could turn to with questions. Dali mentioned that she felt like her supervisor deeply appreciated advisors and supported her in diverse ways.

Reason 7: Relocation: Many of the participants expressed connections and ties to the institution or the area that extended beyond their employment. For example, Alex, Sophia, and Jack are alumni of their institution and have strong ties to it and the university community. Others have partners who work on campus or children in the school district that tie them to the community. Alexandra was the only participant who mentioned relocation as an option and that

stems directly from being a military family and not from a desire to leave or relocate. Overall, the participants were satisfied with the area and the institution and had no desire to relocate.

Reason 8: Better benefits: Like *Reason 1: Pay/salary increase*, participants stressed the importance and impact of the intrinsic benefits they get from working with students. They also felt that advising allowed them to use their skills and strengths in ways that other positions could not. Dali shared that she feels like she gets a reward every time a student succeeds. Additionally, the participants felt supported in their professional development and career goals.

Reason 9: Working with different coworkers: Contrary to this idea of leaving for the purpose of working with others, the participants greatly valued their relationships with their colleagues, and many attributed their persistence to those relationships. Alexandra said that her colleagues “keep her in the field of advising” and described her colleagues as “the joy of why I come here a lot of the time.” This feeling was echoed by Jack and Patrick who have developed lifelong friendships with their colleagues in advising.

The findings show that these participants are satisfied with their work at their current institution and plan to persist in the field. None of the ten expressed any of the issues or concerns reported in the CUPA-HR findings (Bichsel et al., 2022).

Theories Revisited

The findings can also be directly related to two of the three theories that make up the study's conceptual framework as shown in Table 7. Aspects of both Social Exchange Theory and Job Embeddedness Theory are clearly supported by the findings as described below. The third theory, Unfolding Model of Turnover, is not supported as a factor in persistence based on these findings; however, additional research may determine otherwise when it comes specifically to remote work and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Table 7*Theme Connections with Theories*

Theory	Elements of Theory	Supported by Findings?	Theme	Examples
Social Exchange Theory	Costs/rewards	Yes	Intrinsic Benefits	Jack: "I truly believe, that I chose this occupation for the right reasons, I mean, for me I find purpose and fulfillment in what I do and that makes it something that's very, very difficult to walk away from."
	Fairness/equity	Yes	Institutional Factors	Iris: "The university is working on a career development plan for staff as part of our strategic plan"
	Reciprocity	Yes	Relationships	Alex: "...having advisors that I can count on to ask questions, to throw ideas off of... I think having that community is really important to me"
Job Embeddedness Theory	Fit	Yes	Intrinsic Benefits	Grace: "I think it's just a good match. It's maybe something to do with the nature of the job being a little process driven. And that's just who I am."
			Commitment to Student Success	Dali: "the rules and regulations, really, I think it's my expertise"
	Sacrifice	Yes	Relationships	Sophia: "I'm at a point now that it would be sad to leave them just because we have a good kind of friendship... they're truly like my work people"
	Links	Yes	Relationships	Kelly: "They are very inclusive, they include me in department meetings... for me it ties me into the department and I know they care about my opinion."
Institutional Factors			Iris: "Staff were very much included in all of the committee work to develop the strategic plan"	
Unfolding Model of Turnover	Shocks	Not enough evidence to determine		

Embeddedness and Shocks

Job embeddedness has been shown to be a factor for persistence and can be cultivated through factors such as links, fit, and sacrifice (Mitchell et al., 2001), all of which were discussed by advisors in one capacity or another. In terms of links, one of the main themes that emerged is relationships with colleagues. Each of the advisors reflected on the importance of

links or relational ties in the form of friendships with colleagues, collaboration with colleagues, and a general feeling of being part of a team.

For example, Alex, Grace, and Sophia all shared that they feel supported by their colleagues and appreciate the opportunity to ask questions of others and to be a resource as well. Along those same lines, Kelly, Patrick, and Jack all reported that while they appreciate the flexibility of remote work, they enjoy time in the office with their colleagues as well. Further, Aiden and Iris shared that their relationships with campus partners and the ability to collaborate outside their office impacted their job satisfaction. This type of social integration provides a normative pressure to remain in a position (Mitchell et al., 2001) and is even stronger for employees who are older, married, or who have children. For example, several of the participants mentioned that they were tied to the community either through a spouse's career, family in the area, or children in the K-12 school system. These various links would be in danger of being severed if the advisor chose to leave their position or the institution.

Another aspect of embeddedness, fit is defined as "an employee's perceived compatibility or comfort with an organization and with his or her environment" (Mitchell et al., 2001, p.1104). An employee who feels that the institution's mission and culture align with their personal values will feel more connected to the institution. Employees choose jobs based on value congruence and the lack of or loss of congruence can lead to the decision to leave (Mitchell et al., 2001; Werbel & Johnson, 2001). Most participants expressed the ways in which the work aligns with their belief system and how the intrinsic benefits of their work are deeply satisfying. They shared a deep belief in both the value of higher education and helping others. For example, regarding the intrinsic benefits, Aiden shared that he has a true passion for advising and while he knows that he could earn more in a different field, it would not give him

the type of fulfillment that advising does. Similarly, Dali expressed that despite being fatigued after two decades in the field, there is a great reward in seeing someone succeed and impacting their future. Sophia and Alex echoed this feeling and shared that they genuinely believed in the mission of higher education and are grateful for the opportunity to be part of that mission.

Fit can also represent how an employee perceives their skills and strengths to match those of the position (Adams et al., 2010; Fuchs, 2022). Jack, Sophia, Patrick, and Alex discussed the numerous ways their position is an effective use of their skills and or strengths. Examples included a penchant for planning, ability to navigate difficult situations and find solutions, the ability to connect with students from diverse backgrounds, and navigating bureaucracy. Aiden is so confident in the match of his skills and strengths to the responsibilities of the job that he finds it hard to describe to others who have not experienced a similar connection in their career.

Institutional support for advising such as additional staffing, advancement opportunities, policies that support student success, and practices that impact work-life balance also help to reinforce the advisor's belief that the institutional culture aligns with their values and therefore represents fit (Fuchs, 2022). Jack provided an example of this when he discussed the ways in which the president of his institution showed support for advising through the creation of new university advising center, a center that Jack has contributed to in ways that he believes will be his own legacy to his alma mater. Further, he shared the importance of advancement opportunities at his institution through an established career ladder for advisors. Iris and Alexandra also cited opportunities for advancement as a type of institutional support that has kept them connected to their institution. Along these same lines, professional development opportunities show an institution's investment in the careers of advisors. All the study

participants felt professional and career development were strongly supported by their institution and immediate supervisor, even though it may not always be possible to fund opportunities at the level they would like. Professional development opportunities discussed by the participants ranged from on-campus workshops and seminars to professional conference attendance, to a reduced-rate or free doctoral program for both Dali and Aiden.

Sacrifice, the third specific force identified as connecting people to their career, is defined as “the loss of accumulated tangible and psychological investments that would be forfeited” if one left their position (Adams et al., 2010, 422). The academic advisors discussed their connections to the institution, the institutional community, and the area that they would not want to lose by leaving their position. For example, Iris and Kelly have partners who work at the same institution or for an affiliate. Along with Sophia, Aiden, and Jack, they also have children in the local schools and would not want a career change to disrupt their family’s routines. Alex, Jack, and Sophie all work for their alma mater and appreciate that they are giving back to an institution that gave so much to them. Sophie said that she is not sure how she could ever work somewhere else given her deep ties to her institution. Rather it be links, fit, or sacrifice, the participants’ persistence is clearly impacted by embeddedness.

In relation to embeddedness, Lee and Mitchell’s (1994) unfolding model of turnover includes five paths that may lead to an employee leaving and can help us understand the ways in which links can be easily broken when a shock occurs. Three of the paths include shocks as one of the prominent events that cause an employee to consider leaving their current position. In the first path, a shock occurs and activates a pre-determined plan of action. In the second path, a shock triggers the employee to reconsider their attachment to the institution because the event caused the employee to see their role or the organization differently. The third path is similar

but spurs the employee to begin looking at known options. Shocks can be a negative or positive event that is “significantly jarring that it cannot be ignored” (Holtom et al., 2017, p. 61). The shock constructs meaning for the employee and becomes part of the employee’s views of their employment (Holtom et al., 2017; Lee & Mitchell, 1994).

For an event to be considered a shock, it must trigger contemplation of leaving one’s position. COVID-19 can be categorized as both a personal and organizational shock given its significant impact on all aspects of life and the ensuing onslaught of resignations. This study did not delve into the significance of that shock on employees who left their jobs since the pandemic began since the focus was on those who stayed; however, it is brought up here in relation to embeddedness. As described earlier, participants expressed high levels of job embeddedness. Previous research shows that people with high levels of job embeddedness were less likely to have a plan for leaving compared to those who experienced a shock and did not have a high level of embeddedness at the time (Mitchell & Lee, 2001). The persistence of these academic advisors regardless of the shock may be attributed to the level of embeddedness at the time the pandemic began. Persistence is also impacted by the rewards or benefits an individual deems as important as explained by social exchange theory.

Social Exchange Theory

A primary tenet of social exchange theory (SET) is the expectation that a relationship will evolve into a “trusting, loyal, and mutual commitment” (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, p.875). SET can be used to understand the reciprocal nature of the relationship between advisors and students which emerged as a theme in the findings. The advisors consistently expressed the importance of relationships with students and playing a role in student success. SET can also be used to explain the importance of having a voice in policymaking for academic advisors. This

section will explore how SET can be used to understand factors that impact the persistence of academic advisors.

SET is one of the most influential conceptual paradigms used to describe employee behavior (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Key assumptions of SET applied to this study include 1) behavior is motivated by a desire to increase positive outcomes and avoid negative outcomes and 2) mutual dependence leads to development of exchange relations where one party expects benefits of some type in return for their work, and (3) people engage in reoccurring and reciprocal interactions with one another over a period of time (Cook & Rice, 2007).

Students

Advisor behavior and commitment is impacted by the desire to build relationships with their students, and they are motivated by the intrinsic rewards they receive in return. Advisors provide a myriad of resources and guidance to students and in exchange, students reciprocate by engaging in the academic planning process, following the advice, or showing gratitude. This mutually beneficial relationship includes costs and rewards for both advisors and students as both must invest in the process and relationship and both stand to benefit from the outcomes.

Student success or gratitude shown to the advisor reinforces the advisor's belief in their work and makes it worthwhile to continue (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008). While students may not always show gratitude, the advisors get satisfaction from being part of the student's academic journey and success. They may benefit from the reward of seeing the student succeed or overcome a difficult challenge. Professionals who invest in a relationship without receipt of what they deem appropriate outcomes may experience frustration and burnout (Schaufeli, 2006). The participants in this study spoke strongly about the intrinsic benefits they receive from working with students and feel empowered to continue the work. The intrinsic benefits

reinforce the effort put into building relationships and provide the reciprocity needed to make continuing those efforts meaningful.

Colleagues

Interaction with colleagues is a social exchange process that has the potential to be rewarding and factor into an employee's satisfaction; however, like with students, negative relationships or interactions can lead to burnout or dissatisfaction (Schaufeli, 2006). Even if only subconsciously, some individuals will keep score on the amount of support they give coworkers compared to the amount that they receive as they expect it to be a reciprocal relationship. When an imbalance is identified, employees may change their own behavior to reestablish balance. For example, "team members who experience an imbalance between their investments in and their outcomes from the work team are likely to withdraw psychologically by depersonalizing their colleagues in an attempt to restore reciprocity" (Schaufeli, 2006, p. 78). This withdrawal can lead to intentions to leave.

Participants in this study stressed the importance of strong relationships with colleagues and the significant impact they have on their persistence in advising. Factors cited as important included communication and mutual support. Advisors are tasked with knowing policies, processes, and institutional information that may change often. The ability to rely on colleagues to share information and to reciprocate builds confidence in the relationship and in the advisor's ability to do their job well. Relationships with their colleagues are viewed as mutually beneficial and worthwhile.

Power Dynamics

Social exchange theory can also be used to explain how professional staff in higher education navigate the power dynamics of their institution. Several of the advisors expressed the

need to participate in university-wide committees and to have a voice in policymaking. This opportunity to have a voice in decision making is a significant factor in SET. Staff who are actively involved in decision or policymaking perceive themselves as having a level of control over the outcome. They may also see their participation and acceptance in the decision-making process as a type of exchange where they provide expertise and knowledge in exchange for respect or recognition which enhances the overall relationship with the institution.

Like decision making, autonomy is a principal factor in SET that relates to the power dynamics of the institution. Participants in the study identified autonomy in their daily activities as a benefit of their current position that impacts their persistence. When an individual has autonomy, they are empowered to negotiate their role, responsibilities, and daily activities within the system without external forces at play and contribute to the system in ways they deem impactful.

Perceived Benefits

Employees who feel valued are more likely to reciprocate with increased commitment and loyalty to the social system or organization (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008). The minimum education requirement for academic advising positions is usually an undergraduate degree and often a master's degree; however, advisors are notoriously undercompensated. The findings show that while the participants were not satisfied with their pay, their persistence was impacted by institutional support of professional development and structured advancement opportunities.

Professional development opportunities allow advisors to develop their skills and knowledge often while networking with other professionals. The participants reported institutional and supervisory support for professional development although funding was not always available. Many of them placed a high priority on taking part in professional

development either as a participant, presenter, or mentor. The willingness to invest time, energy, and effort into their own development and that of others is often done expecting some reward. Rewards may range from personal satisfaction to improved knowledge and skill set to increased opportunities for advancement.

Advancement opportunities serve as motivation to invest time and energy into one's responsibilities and impact the perception of equity for professional staff in higher education. In a system that places immense value on faculty and reciprocates the work of faculty with tenure opportunities, staff often feel overlooked or less important. Institutional investment in the long-term career goals of professional staff is seen as an exchange that makes persistence worthwhile.

Unfolding Model of Turnover

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in drastic changes to the ways academic advisors complete their daily work. Of those changes, the ability to work remotely and meet virtually with students (either at home or in the office) were two of the most obvious and lasting. In the unfolding model of turnover, Mitchell and Lee define a shock as an event that constructs meaning or provides new information about the job that then becomes part of the employee's views of their employment (1994). For most in higher education, the possibility for remote work was never a consideration prior to 2020. The pandemic functioned as a shock as it showed that staff, specifically academic advisors, could continue their work seamlessly from their homes with the use of appropriate technology. For many, this realization fueled a desire to continue remote work at least part of the time.

The participants reported that their institutions continued the practice of allowing remote work in some capacity since their return to campus following the pandemic. Opportunities

among the ten participants ranged from one participant who can work at home on an as needed basis to another participant who works five out of every ten business days at home. All participants talked about the satisfaction they and their colleagues get from these opportunities even if they do not fully take advantage of it themselves. The CUPA HR surveys completed in 2022 and 2023 showed that a high percentage of professional staff are considering leaving their positions for the opportunity to work remotely (Bichsel et al., 2022; Bichsel et al., 2023). Given this information and the consensus among the participants that remote work is personally valued, the pandemic could be viewed as a shock that impacted staff persistence for institutions that did not recognize the importance of or continue the practices learned during that time.

Limitations

IPA sample strategy relies on a small number of participants due to the idiographic, time intensive approach to analysis. For this reason, the findings are not generalizable (Miller et al., 2018; Smith & Nizza, 2022), however, they are transferrable and can be used to further the study of staff retention or applied to other contexts. The purpose of IPA is to capture rich data from the small sample based on their unique experiences which was achieved in this study. The thick description and contextualized analysis of the participants' stories allows readers to discern the transferability to other contexts (Smith et al., 2009).

A diverse sample was recruited; however, the Black participants who indicated interest in the study through the interest form and met the criteria did not respond to the interview invitation. Despite this, 40% of participants were Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC); two participants reported Asian, one reported Hispanic, one reported mixed-race, and six reported white. This aligns with NACADA's (2019) most recent report on member demographic information that shows less than 32% of advisors are BIPOC.

Researcher bias and positionality is a natural limitation to qualitative research. Bridling, journaling, and member checking were used to minimize the influence of personal beliefs on the findings. Excerpts and quotes from the interviews were used generously throughout the findings to support claims and highlight the words of the participants. Thorough details were provided on the methods used so the study could be replicated, but IPA requires the researcher to make sense of the participants' sensemaking which leads to very individualized findings.

Participants were made aware through the recruitment document that this study would focus on why advisors stay in the field. This may have discouraged some advisors from participating, especially if they were feeling discontent in their position and therefore may not want to discuss the positive aspects of the career.

Implications for Practice

This study found that there are consistent factors that influence an academic advisor's persistence in the field. There is limited literature on the retention and persistence of academic advisors as a subpopulation of professional staff in higher education. The literature that does exist focuses on reasons advisors leave versus why they choose to stay in a high turnover field. The findings suggest that there are certain practices and policies that can inform advisor decision making and impact staff retention. This section provides points to consider for future and current advisors as well as supervisors and administrators who have an interest in improving advisor retention.

New and Current Advisors

The findings show that there are key factors that have led to the persistence of the participants. While the findings cannot be generalized to all academic advisors, some who seek to be satisfied and persist in their position could benefit from seeking opportunities to be

engaged in university-wide initiatives such as participation in university committees where they have a voice in policymaking or projects that involve collaboration with campus partners. Based on the importance of relationships with colleagues that was stressed by the participants, advisors may also benefit from building strong relationships with those they work closest with. This might include sharing information, seeking opportunities to get to know them better, and being open to sharing about themselves.

Advisors may also benefit from acknowledging the intrinsic benefits they get from their work. The participants were clear about the nonfinancial benefits of their work, which led to the belief that they had given it considerable thought before the interview. Advising is a field that requires vast amounts of mental and emotional energy which often results in burnout. Individuals who spend time reflecting on the benefits and outcomes of their efforts may be less likely to suffer burnout.

There are also implications for those who aspire to be an academic advisor. The findings of this study highlight the importance of institutional support and relationships on persistence. Aspiring advisors could consider these findings when researching career opportunities. Asking questions of the administration and current employees to gauge the culture of the institution and assess the types of support common for advising could provide pertinent information. Further, observing and asking questions about the relationships among the current staff may be telling of what future relationships would be like. Finally, aspiring advisors might assess their commitment to student success as it relates to problem solving and overcoming obstacles as described by the participants to identify if the career is a good fit for them.

Advising Administrators

The study also has implications for advising administrators who want to improve retention among academic advisors and other professional staff. The findings show that there are institutional policies and practices that impact persistence. This suggests that administrators should consider improvements to better support advisors and advising as an overall practice. They should also include advisors in policy and decision making when appropriate. Examples of opportunities for additional engagement and inclusion for advisors includes a seat on committees that create and review policies such as academic affairs, as well as assessment teams, curriculum committees, orientation and new student onboarding collaborations, and leadership teams within individual colleges.

Participants noted that they appreciate the ways their supervisor advocates for them. Iris, for example, reported that advising is the only department who still has remote work opportunities and attributed that to the advocacy of her supervisor on the advisors' behalf. As noted by Hawes and Reynolds (2022), managers have the greatest impact on employee mobility. They should be trained and developed in ways that allow them to successfully develop and retain their staff. As evidenced here, advocacy is not limited to fighting for extra pay but may take the form of voicing concerns for policy or processes that create additional work or are burdensome for the staff on the frontline responsible for the implementation. It may be ensuring that academic advisors have a voice and are recognized as important contributors to student success and the institution.

Regarding remote work, the advisors appreciated the flexibility and improved work-life balance that came with the opportunity to work from home occasionally. Several reported decreased stress levels and greater productivity that stemmed from not commuting each day.

Others felt that it gave them a chance to recharge and complete projects that might be more challenging in the office. Administrators can benefit from developing a plan for balancing the benefits with the negative aspects that were also addressed by the advisors. The first topic of concern is the loss of connection with colleagues, especially for new employees who have not had time to develop strong relationships. Given the importance of those relationships on persistence, administrators should create opportunities for engagement to form a cohesive team. The second item of concern is the additional stress that remote work can put on employees who remain in the office. For example, if a student drops in with a pressing need on a day that their advisor is working remotely, others in the office may need to step in and assist the student. During peak advising times, these situations can build up and cause more pressure on the staff. Administrators can have a plan in place to address these situations to alleviate potential issues.

The indication that administrators could impact persistence through the intentional creation of opportunities for engagement extends beyond just the need to counter effects of remote work. Participants made it clear that relationships with their colleagues and opportunities for collaboration and teamwork were important in their persistence. To facilitate these connections, administrators should consider where advisor offices are located on campus and if not conducive to relationship building, they should consider a centralized advising center where interaction would be a natural occurrence. Additionally, they would benefit from further encouraging and cultivating strong relationships among their staff members by implementing office policies or practices that encourage time during the day for social interaction, scheduled social activities, and team-building activities.

The findings of this study also demonstrated that advisors appreciate opportunities for professional development and felt that their institutions supported this endeavor. These findings

indicate that administrators should be supportive of career and professional development opportunities for the advisors in their charge. Support may be demonstrated in numerous ways including funding, allowing time away from the office, offering suggestions for readings and free development opportunities, and coordinating on-campus learning activities. This type of support shows investment in the advisor, offers occasions for engagement with colleagues and supervisors, and increases the knowledge and skills of the advisors overall. This investment in the career and professional development of staff helps them to feel inspired and will increase the likelihood that they will stay (Hawes & Reynolds, 2022). Further, development in the form of retreats and workshops allows for interaction and relationship building among the staff.

Finally, the findings showed that the advisors appreciated a supervisor who was knowledgeable about advising, policies, and procedures. These findings indicate that administrators who directly supervise advisors can improve their relationships and build trust by keeping up with current university information and resources, and by being available when questions or problems arise to help find solutions. This may seem like a given, but it is common in higher education for staff to be supervised by faculty who do not have a background in the area. For example, embedded advisors often report to or work closest with a department chair who does not have a background in advising theory, research, or practice. Department chairs and faculty are excellent resources for major and department-specific information but may not be the best resource for advisor-specific needs. Advising administrators play a key role in the persistence and satisfaction of the academic advisors they supervise. Administrators who are interested in building a team of connected and invested professionals who are likely to persist can benefit from the findings outlined here.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study adds to the literature on staff retention in higher education and identifies factors that increase persistence for academic advisors. It supports the need for additional research on both staff persistence and academic advising. I found initial participant interest to be outstanding, which shows a high level of interest in the topic itself. A recommendation for further research is to test the identified themes among a larger sample of academic advisors through a quantitative or mixed methods study so that the findings could be generalizable.

Diving deeper into the findings, another recommendation for research focuses on the changes to advising since the COVID-19 pandemic. The opportunity to work remotely or advise virtually is still a relatively new experience since the pandemic began in 2020 and appears to be a practice that will continue. Most participants said that the opportunity for remote work was a factor in their satisfaction at the time of these interviews; however, one mentioned that it can be a strain on employees who are not remote, another said that they worry about the connection with students, and still another avoids it altogether even though he appreciates the option. It is likely that the practice will continue to evolve and change the way advising occurs. Further investigation into the impact and outcomes of remote work and virtual advising would be of interest based on the findings of this study. Given the significant impact that academic advisors have on student success, there are already studies on student perceptions of virtual advising (Houdyshell et al., 2022). From both the researcher and practitioner perspective, I believe it is also worthwhile to investigate the effect of this new practice and its long-term impacts on advisor satisfaction and wellbeing as well as the impacts on student/advisor relationships.

The most recent CUPA HR study reported that 20.7% of the employees who were likely to seek other opportunities in the coming year would do so because they want a new supervisor

(Bichsel et al., 2023). The participants of this study reported strong, respectful relationships with their supervisors; however, their leadership styles and practices were beyond the study's scope. Future research might focus on advising administrators and their individual managerial approaches compared to satisfaction of their staff and intent to persist in the field. My hope is that this study and others like it will call attention to the problem of staff retention in higher education and will encourage others to explore the causes and seek creative solutions.

Conclusion

Academic advisors play an integral role in the success and retention of college students. Data show that the average tenure of an academic advisor in higher education is about three years (Brantley & Shomaker, 2021) and turnover has increased in the last few years. The loss of academic advisors is detrimental to the students and the institution. This study focused on the personal experiences of ten advisors who have persisted in the field for at least five years and identified four themes that emerged from the interviews as impacting persistence: institutional factors, relationships with colleagues and supervisors, intrinsic benefits, and commitment to student success. The findings underscore both the importance of institutional support for academic advising and the importance of relationships, connections, and team support when it comes to retention of academic advisors. These findings have practical implications for advisors and administrators.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

ADVISOR RETENTION

Have you been an academic advisor for at least 5 years? If so, you are invited to take part in a study to learn more about why some advisors stay when so many others leave! One-hour interviews will take place on Zoom. Participants will receive a \$25 gift card.

MORE INFO

Frankie Weeks



843-902-0525



fmweeks@coastal.edu



Appendix B: Interest Form

Weeks Interest Surve

Staff Retention in Higher Education: Making Sense of Why Advisors Stay

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled "Staff Retention in Higher Education: Making Sense of Why Advisors Stay". This study is being done by Frankie Weeks from Coastal Carolina University. You were selected to participate in this study because you are an academic advisor.

The purpose of this research study is to learn more about why some advisors stay when so many others leave.

If you want to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete an online questionnaire and then participate in a one-hour interview via Zoom. The questionnaire will ask about demographic information such as race and gender, as well as information about your current position. It will take you approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. If selected for the study, you will then be contacted to schedule the interview for a one-hour block between now and January 15, 2024.

By agreeing to participate in this research study, you may benefit by sharing your experiences, reflecting on your career and decisions, and contributing to the literature on staff retention and academic advising.

During this research study, no risks or discomforts are anticipated.

For your participation in the interview portion of this research study, you will be provided a \$25 gift card.

Unless you provide consent to the contrary, the confidentiality of your participation in this research study, your responses or any individual results will be maintained by the PI and all members of the research team.

Note that confidentiality will only be violated when required by law or the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association. This usually includes, but may not be limited to, situations when your responses indicate that you, or another clearly identified individual, is at risk of imminent harm or situations in which faculty are mandated reporters, such as instances of child abuse or issues covered under Title IX regulations. For more information about Title IX, please see the University's webpage at: <https://www.coastal.edu/titleix/>.

The data collected for this study will be stored until November 2026. Results of this study, not any individual responses, may be shared through a final dissertation presentation and possibly through a publication or conference presentation.

You do not have to agree to participate in this research study. If you do choose to participate,

you may choose not to at any time once the study begins by simply closing out of the survey. There is no penalty for not participating or withdrawing from the study at any time. If you are a CCU student, your decision to participate or not will have no effect on your grade.

If you have any questions about this research study, please feel free to contact me by phone [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

My faculty advisor on this study is Dr. Sheena Kauppila and they can also be contacted by phone [REDACTED] or email [REDACTED].

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Services is responsible for the oversight of all human subject research conducted at Coastal Carolina University. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant before, during or after the research study, you may contact this office by calling (843) 349-2978 or emailing OSPRS@coastal.edu.

This research study has been approved by the IRB on November 17, 2023. This approval will expire on November 16, 2024, unless the IRB renews the approval prior to this date.

Consent

By clicking next below you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old, have read this consent form and agree to participate in this research study. You are free to skip any question that you choose. Please print a copy of this page for your records.

Q1 Are you currently employed as an academic advisor?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q2 Have you been employed in the field of advising for at least five years?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q3 Is academic advising considered to be your primary role?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Unsure (3)

Q4 What is your average caseload?

- Less than 200 (1)
- 201-400 (2)
- More than 400 (3)

Q5 Which of the following best describes your institution?

- Public (1)
- Private (2)
- For-profit (3)

Q6 Is your institution a two- or four-year institution?

- two-year (1)
- four-year (2)

Q7 What is the undergraduate enrollment at your institution?

- Less than 5,000 (1)
- 5,001 to 15,000 (2)
- More than 15,000 (3)

Q8 What is the minimum level of education required for academic advisors at your institution?

- High school (1)
- Associate's degree (2)
- Bachelor's degree (3)
- Master's degree or higher (4)
- Doctoral Degree (5)

Q9 What is your gender identity?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary / third gender (3)
- Prefer not to say (4)

Q10 How old are you?

- Under 24 (1)
- 25-34 years old (2)
- 35-44 years old (3)
- 45-54 years old (4)
- 55-64 years old (5)
- 65+ years old (6)

Q11 What is your ethnic background?

- African American (1)
- Asian (2)
- Hispanic or Latino (3)
- Native American (4)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)
- White/Caucasian (6)
- Two or more (7)
- Unknown (8)
- Prefer not to answer (9)

Q19 Name

Q21 Institution

Q20 Email

Q22 Phone

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me about your path to become an academic advisor?
2. What were your expectations of the position?
 - a. How have those expectations been met or not met?
3. What do you believe are the best parts of your position?
 - a. Are there benefits that you wish were part of your position? If so, what are they and why?
4. What is it like working with students in your role?
5. Can you tell me about an experience that was especially rewarding?
6. What has contributed to your success as an advisor?
7. What role do things like caseloads, working remote, flexibility, professional development opportunities, growth potential, and respect play in your satisfaction with the job?
8. How did your graduate degree prepare you for this role?
9. What challenges have you faced as an advisor?
10. Do you feel like you have adequate support from leadership at different levels?
 - a. What does that support look like?
 - b. What support do you wish you had?
 - c. What would make the job perfect?
11. How important is it to feel like you are part of a team?
 - a. How would you describe your relationships with your colleagues?
 - b. With your supervisor?

12. What advice would you give someone considering academic advising as a career and what should they look for in an institution?
13. Can you tell me about a time when you considered leaving the profession?
 - a. Why didn't you leave?
14. Ultimately, what would you say has kept you in the profession?
15. What else would you like for me to know about you and your experience in advising?

Appendix D: Informed Consent



INFORMED CONSENT FOR HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Introduction

My name is Frankie Weeks, and I am a doctoral student and advising administrator at Coastal Carolina University. This study is not being completed in my capacity in my professional role, but in my role as a student. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study entitled, *“Professional staff retention in higher education: Making sense of why advisors stay.”* You are free to talk with someone you trust about your participation in this research and may take time to reflect on whether you wish to participate or not. If you have any questions, I will answer them now or at any time during the study.

Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to investigate staff attrition in higher education by focusing on the retention of academic advisors.

Procedures

During this research study, you will be asked to participate in a ~60-minute virtual interview via Zoom that will be recorded and transcribed, you may also be contacted for additional clarification and for member-checking.

Duration

For this research study, your participation will be required for a one hour Zoom interview. An additional 30-minute interview may be requested if additional information is needed. You will also be asked to review the interview transcript for accuracy, which may take 30 more minutes.

Rights

You do not have to agree to participate in this research study. If you do choose to participate, you may choose not to at any time once the study begins. There is no penalty for not participating or withdrawing from the study at any time.

Risks

During this research study, no risks or discomforts are anticipated.

Benefits

By agreeing to participate in this research study, you may benefit by sharing your experiences, reflecting on your career and decisions, and contributing to the literature on staff retention and academic advising.

Incentives

For your participation in this research study, you will be provided with a \$25 gift card.

Confidentiality

Unless you provide consent to the contrary, the confidentiality of your participation in this research study, your responses or any individual results will be maintained by the PI and all members of the research team.

Note that confidentiality will only be violated when required by law or the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association. This usually includes, but may not be limited to, situations when your responses indicate that you, or another clearly identified individual, is at risk of imminent harm or situations in which faculty are mandated reporters, such as instances of child abuse or issues covered under Title IX regulations. For more information about Title IX, please see the University's webpage at: <https://www.coastal.edu/titleix/>.

Sharing the Results

As the Principal Investigator on this research study, I plan to share its results by presenting at the dissertation defense and a publication and/or conference presentation.

Contacts

If you have any questions about this research study, please feel free to contact me by phone 843-902-0525 or fmweeks@coastal.edu.

My faculty advisor on this study is Dr. Sheena Kauppila and she can also be contacted by phone (843) 349-4098 or email skauppila@coastal.edu

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Services is responsible for the oversight of all human subject research conducted at Coastal Carolina University. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant before, during or after the research study, you may contact this office by calling (843) 349-2978 or emailing OSPRS@coastal.edu.

This research study has been approved by the IRB on [insert date of approval letter]. This approval will expire on [insert expiration date from approval letter] unless the IRB renews the approval prior to this date.

Consent

I have read this form and have been able to ask questions of the PI and/or discuss my participation with someone I trust. I understand that I can ask additional questions at any time during this research study and am free to withdraw from participation at any time.

I agree to take part in this research study.

- I agree to allow my name or other identifying information to be included in reports, publications and/or presentations resulting from this research study.
- I DO NOT agree to allow my name or other identifying information to be included in reports, publications and/or presentations resulting from this research study.

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E: Recording Authorization



PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO OR AUDIO RECORDING AUTHORIZATION

I hereby release, discharge and agree to save harmless Coastal Carolina University, its successors, assigns, officers, employees or agents, any person(s) or corporation(s) for whom it might be acting, and any firm publishing and/or distributing any photograph, video footage or audio recording produced as part of this research, in whole or in part, as a finished product, from and against any liability as a result of any distortion, blurring, alteration, visual or auditory illusion, or use in composite form, either intentionally or otherwise, that may occur or be produced in the recording, processing, reproduction, publication or distribution of any photograph, videotape, audiotape or interview, even should the same subject me or my to ridicule, scandal, reproach, scorn or indignity. I hereby agree that the photographs, video footage and audio recordings may be used under the conditions stated herein without blurring my identifying characteristics.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Frankie Weeks by phone 843-902-0525 or fmweeks@coastal.edu.

The faculty advisor on this study is Dr. Sheena Kauppila and she can also be contacted by phone 843-349-4098 or email skauppila@coastal.edu.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Services is responsible for the oversight of all human subject research conducted at Coastal Carolina University. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant before, during or after the research study, you may contact this office by calling (843) 349-2978 or emailing OSPRS@coastal.edu.

I have read this authorization and have been able to ask questions of the PI and/or discuss my participation with someone I trust. I understand that I can ask additional questions at any time during this research study and am free to withdraw from participation at any time.

_____ Participant's signature:

_____ Date:

Appendix F: Group Experiential Themes and Sample Support

THEME 4: COMMITMENT TO STUDENT SUCCESS		
Participant/PET/Experiential Statement	Page/ Line	Quote
Patrick		
PET: Supporting students is primary to satisfaction		
Enjoys working with reinstated students	10.16	working with them, that's always been the best experiences I've had
Strives to motivate students	10.21	They will know that I believe in them and that will boost them enough to keep on trying
Likes to be "the person" students can turn to	3.6	I'm gonna get it done and make sure they can count on me to navigate, like this sort of thing can happen and here is the office you go to.
Builds trust with students	7.17	it takes a while to build that but once it's established, you know that they can count on you
Focuses on overcoming obstacles	9.22	I get a lot out of working with the students who are reinstated after dismissal, and they've hit rock bottom at that point
Enjoys problem solving	7.8	a fruitful day is one where you find solutions, even if it's not good news
Encourages students to slow down and engage in the process	6.22	and that's what you try to get with students is that it's going to take time... my recipe analogy is with all the ingredients it takes time
Available for academic and non-academic support	5.25	just the idea of saying, I'm here anytime you need me, then there we go for any kind of academic or even non-academic support
Aiden		
PET: Working with students is key to job satisfaction		
Helping navigate hurdles	3.3	if we stumble or if we have hurdles, that doesn't mean that we can't do the thing and how we tackle those hurdles is going to define who we are
Mentors students for future careers in higher education	3.9	I've had half a dozen former peer advisors who did find a way to higher ed much more directly than I did but that was because of the connection with me
Being available to students	5.1	the rapport I have with my students, it's an open-door policy. They always come to see me...
Builds relationships beyond academics	5.6	the life conversations is where it was like, wow this is fascinating to learn about your students, and to try to build that relationship
Students are the primary motivator	7.3	I personally still love my students and they're the whole, the main reason we do the work
Holistic support	5.2	what students will share with the advisor even in the first meeting is very personal and deep information. It helps us advisors to know how I can better support my students

Genuinely loves working with students	4.24	I knew that I just love working with students and help guide them on their pathway to whatever it may be
Alex PET: Invested in student success		
Builds trust and rapport with students	15.28	...my relationship with my students is strengthening throughout the years. I try to get to them earlier...I don't have a lot of time with these students so I need to connect with them earlier
Prefers one-on-one interactions with students	15.6	rather talk to them one-on-one for 30 minutes each or something versus a giving a big group presentation
Wants to be "the person"	5.6	that's also making sure that I'm available to students as well
Student connections are the best part of his job	4.22	I think really connecting with students and understanding what their needs are
Helping students with resources	4.29	people can get lost, because even though we throw out the word resources all the time, sometimes we need to direct people to certain kinds of resources
Dali PET: Students are primary reason she stays		
Advising is different every day	2.18	It's always a new day in advising...
Helping students navigate the bureaucracy	3.5	the rules and regulations, really, I think it's my expertise
Witnessing student growth is fulfilling	4.1	the best part of the job is just seeing that student grow throughout the years
Focus on the positive	4.12	it sort of balances itself out at the end...you just focus on the good things instead of the parts that maybe I dread... so the graduation and the student growth
Partnering with the student to succeed	6.7	every semester we get a reward and I think it's that perseverance from the student
Cultivating professionals and good citizens	6.8	a lot of reward on seeing someone become a professional...helping someone go into society and maybe hoping they also make a positive change
Interaction with students is essential	10.27	I like people so much that it has to be with students...if there isn't interaction with students then I don't want it
Iris PET: Helping students overcome obstacles and achieve goals		
Strong relationships with students	7.15	you get attached to these students and you don't want things to go wrong for them
Investment in students	7.1	that's the hardest part to me having a student crying because they feel like their dream has been taken away

Thrives on student interaction	7.9	I love having students in and out of my office all day and planning my email nudges during the semester so I can hear from them
Helping students through adversity	3.16	I also really enjoy getting to know my students and helping them through whatever they're going through.
Jack PET: Relationships with students are primary to satisfaction		
Building relationships through 1-1 interaction	22.5	opportunity to work 1-1 with students in terms of fostering those relationships and helping them ask the right questions
	6.3	The best part of my position? ...the 1:1 interaction with students
Mentoring students long-term	22.16	As much as I love teaching, I don't get to mentor students to the same extent in that role.
Working to find the best path for the individual	6.17	the thing that I find most rewarding is working with...the ones who are very genuine in acknowledging that they just don't know what the pathway forward for them is
Values time and conversations with students	6.3	always nice to have those subsets of students that you click with on a social level... able to establish a good rapport with...
Focus on holistic student not just academics	4.2	provide more holistic advising to try and move away from this very transactional exchange of information
	4.23	...really try to foster relationships with students and help to mentor them
Connections with students is more important than work-from-home opportunities	13.3	I prefer to have the face-to-face interaction. I find it much easier to establish rapport.
Kelly PET: Being "the person" for students		
Prefers in-person connections with students	21.1	And I feel like I don't make the same connections with people because...it's hard for us to look at a 2D picture (in reference to Zoom advising)
Empathetic with science majors	11.23	because I was in academics, I can talk to my students about what it's like to take these classes... I can empathize with yeah, organic chemistry is hard.
Being "the person" students can turn to	11.28	I know not everybody has that and so if I can be somebody for these students that can help them navigate...I feel like I can understand where they're coming from
Wants a longer connection with students	10.18	I'm looking forward to building a little bit more relationship with those students
Helping students has intrinsic value	5.16	I care about helping students, that's my priority. That...fills my bucket, I guess to help students and when people are appreciative
Mental health benefits of helping others	6.27	the mental health for me, having a job and feeling useful

More than academic assistance	15.14	So, I help students with those things too so then they don't make the same mistakes I made
Sophia		
PET: Relationships with students are primary to satisfaction		
Building relationships through 1-1 interaction	4.23	I wanted to be 1:1 with students so that's why I was interested in advising
Mentoring students long-term	6.2	I also think we have a unique relationship with students because we're not grading them
Working to find the best path for the individual	5.6	love helping students find their fit
Values time and conversations with students	6.14	hopefully just being somewhere that they feel like they can come and kinda tell me what they need to tell me... kind of a safe landing place
Focus on holistic student not just academics	6.17	I hope that students see advisors maybe as the first stop, a place to get other resources, a place to go to ask questions

Appendix G: Member-Checking Email

Dear Participant,

I'm writing to share a research update with you. I recently completed the analysis for my study and before completing the findings, I want to give you an opportunity to review the brief introduction I'll share in the findings as well as the personal experiential themes (PETs) that emerged. These themes are the product of an intense and very intentional analysis of your responses in the interview.

In the attached document, you can view the brief intro as well as the themes. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the process that I used, requires identification of experiential statements that are then grouped into PETs. In the chart, you will see the PETs in bold and then the supporting experiential themes below. I also included excerpts from your responses that initiated the experiential theme.

Please review the information and let me know if you believe anything was misinterpreted. I understand if you do not have time or are not interested in reviewing the information. I wanted to be sure you had the opportunity before I proceed. If you do not respond, I will assume that there are no changes or questions. Please respond by Tuesday, March 5, 2024.

Finally, I want to thank you again for taking the time to take part in this study. This project would not have been possible without wonderful volunteers like you!

Sincerely,

Frankie

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