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**Exploring the Advising Experiences of First Year, First-Generation Community College**

**Students: A Case Study**

by

Kristen S. Stradt-Johnson

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

in Higher Education Administration

May, 2023

Dissertation Committee:  
Jennifer B. Jones, Chairperson  
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## Abstract

The current study was conducted to better understand how first-time, full-time, first-generation community college students understand their experiences with academic advising in their first year of college. This study utilized a qualitative research design with a case study methodology to focus on how first-generation students experience academic advising and how their experiences reflect the expectations of their institution. The theoretical framework used for this study was Schlossberg's Transition Theory. Participants in this study are first-generation community college students and community college academic advisors, and seven first-generation students and two academic advisors participated in individual semi-structured interviews. Data collected also includes documents related to academic advising produced by the institution. This study's findings reveal connections and disconnections across the student experience and the institutional expectations, as well as significant elements of the first-generation transition into college. Although the role of academic guidance in advising is aligned across all data sources, the findings from this study indicate that first-generation students are also looking to academic advisors for emotional support and additional access to knowledge and resources. Findings from this study reveal that academic advisors are aware of these needs. Still, their preparation and training lack depth, and recommendations include more intentional, ongoing training for academic advisors. Suggestions for future research involve increasing the population size and scope. Further exploration of the impact of gender identity in academic advising is also recommended.

*Keywords:* first-generation, community college, academic advising, first-year, higher education

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In the fall of my senior year of high school, it suddenly dawned on me that everyone had decided where they were going to college. My peers were making announcements about their college plans all around me, and I realized I had no idea what to do next. Applying to college was a mystery to me, and it seemed I had already missed the boat. I had always assumed I would go to college, but I had never fully understood how one *got* into college. Thankfully, I was comfortable enough with my English teacher to ask a few questions, and she gave me enough information to get started. I applied to several state schools that did not require any admissions essays. It felt like I was applying for a job online, so I clicked the boxes and moved on. I was shocked when I received my acceptance letter for Western Illinois University (WIU). I had never been there and knew very little about the school, but the school colors were purple and gold. My favorite color was purple, and it was close enough to home that I could drive back on weekends to work. I assumed this was how most of my peers decided to go to college.

After I decided to attend WIU, I felt an immediate sense of relief, followed by another wave of panic. I thought, “Okay, now what do I do?” My parents offered me support through their excitement, but otherwise, they were unsure how to proceed. Thankfully, I read through every piece of information WIU sent me with my acceptance letter and discovered I needed to complete something called the FAFSA. It was already the end of April in my senior year, so I had to act fast. However, I had no clue where to start. I am still not sure how my dad and I got through the FAFSA to this day. I remember crying and having no idea what I was doing, but I knew that financial aid meant I could go to school. Years later, I realized I took out loans I never needed. As a first-generation student, I did not understand student loans, and my parents did not

have the experience to warn me. It was not until I graduated that I learned what a student loan meant, and I am still paying on those loans all these years later. However, at the time, I only understood that with financial aid, I was able to attend college, and that was good enough for me.

Once I arrived at WIU, I felt like I had an out-of-body experience. I knew I was there, but it was as if I was watching myself from afar. I recognize now that feeling was disconnection. I was surrounded by peers who seemed to know exactly why they were there – who never once questioned why they *should* be there. I was an undecided student, so I was required to meet with my academic advisor to discuss my goals within the first few weeks of school. I had no clue what an advisor was – or what my goals were, for that matter – but I never missed something required, so I went.

As an academic advisor now, I would like to say that my first advising session was groundbreaking for me, but I do not remember much about it. We went through a prescriptive set of questions designed to determine a major of interest, none involving questions about myself. I left feeling just as unsure as before. I was not sure what an advisor was supposed to do, and I was not aware of the types of questions I could – or should – ask this person. It was not until a year later, when I met with an advisor in the English department, that I started getting asked questions that prompted me to think more deeply about my experience in college and how the classes I was selecting could shape that experience.

After declaring my major in English, I began working with this advisor every semester. As the semesters passed, she began to nudge me toward class options that she felt might provide me new opportunities. One semester in my junior year, while meeting to prepare for registration for the next semester, she suggested I use one of my electives to participate in an experiential

learning course that focused on undergraduate writing centers. In the course, students would focus on the theory and administration of undergraduate writing centers, and in the last eight weeks, each student would work in the writing center as a tutor. My initial reaction was terror. I could not imagine this would be something I could do – why would my advisor suggest it? As she talked through the requirements, she mentioned that this was not a course she shared with every student but felt it was something I would excel at and push me to be a better student. Despite how terrified I felt, something about her confidence in me led me to enroll in the course. If she believed I could do it, maybe it was worth a shot – even if this opportunity was one I would never have sought out on my own.

Looking back on my advising experiences in college, I realize this experience sticks out to me the most because of my relationship with my advisor. As a first-generation college student, I would have never taken a chance on myself by enrolling in a course that took me so far out of my comfort zone. If I had not had an advisor who took the time to get to know me, would she have even offered this opportunity? Looking at this experience through my lens as an academic advisor, I must wager that she would not have. As an advisor, I often share opportunities with students I know might need the extra push. Yet, I only do this in circumstances where I know I have built a relationship with a student that allows that level of trust. The relationship provides an opening to share opportunities that make the most sense for each student.

Looking back on how I navigated the transition into my first year of college, moving from one academic advisor in an undecided major to finding my home in the English department, I find myself lucky to be where I am today. I did not know it at the time, but my experience was *not* like my peers. However, my initial advising experience is a representation of how advising

may start – and may always be – for a first-generation college student. In my case, I found an academic advisor who helped me make the most of my undergraduate experience, and ultimately, I made it to graduation. For many first-generation college students, completing a baccalaureate degree never becomes a reality (Chen, 2005; Radunzel, 2018). Accordingly, I used this study to explore why first-generation students are nearly twice as likely to leave college without a degree (Engle et al., 2006) compared to their peers with parents or guardians holding college degrees.

### **Study Background**

Community colleges represent a distinct and unique aspect of the American education system (Meier, 2018). Over 41% of undergraduate students in the United States enroll at community college institutions to begin their educational journey (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). Designed to provide educational opportunities to all, regardless of educational background or goals, community colleges evolved to serve some of the most diverse students in the United States (Malcom-Piqueux, 2018). Within this group of diverse students, many of them are first-generation college students. Definitions of first-generation college students exist in various ways in the literature, ranging from having parents with no education post-high school to parents with some education but no degree. For this study, I defined first-generation students as individuals who have parents who have not completed a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001).

First-generation college students represent many undergraduates in the United States, with nearly 56% of undergraduate students identifying as first-generation (RTI International, 2019). First-generation college students are more likely to be low-income, female, have



dependent children, and be financially independent from their parents (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Additionally, first-generation students are more likely to begin their educational journey at a community college, with nearly 64% of first-generation students enrolled in a public 2-year institution (RTI International, 2019).

Given the large percentage of first-generation students, research in the past several decades has begun to focus on who these students are and how they perform in higher education amongst their continuing-generation peers (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nomi, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation students are more likely to take fewer credit hours, enroll part-time, be employed, and have dependent children (Choy, 2001; Nomi, 2005). With these enrollment patterns, first-generation college students meet various barriers that prevent them from completing their education goals, most notably, their intent to graduate with a credential. These barriers become more noteworthy when combined with the research that indicates that compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students arrive at college with disproportionately lower levels of academic preparedness (Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nomi, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). These factors include low test scores, lack of rigor in the high school curriculum, and less guidance and support from parents (Chen, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nomi, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004).

Due to the range of obstacles that first-generation students meet once enrolled in college, a variety of support services and programs have been discussed as potential solutions to increase first-generation students' retention and completion numbers. These strategies include increasing student engagement involvement (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004), building

relationships with staff and faculty (Engle et al., 2006), and the role of federally-funded programs such as TRIO Student Support Services (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Fike & Fike, 2008). Based on the success of advising in TRIO Student Support Services, research suggests academic advising is an opportunity to connect first-generation students to resources and help assist them in making the transition from the first year of college to graduation (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons et al., 2019; Swecker et al., 2013).

Although academic advising has been an aspect of the college experience for decades, the role of advising has evolved over the years. Initially provided by faculty members, the role of academic advising has shifted with the changes in the academic curriculum, and who provides advising varies depending on both the institutional type and culture (Kuhn, 2008). While the substantive goals of academic advising have remained focused on supporting students through the curriculum, the demands on academic advising have changed. Advisors – particularly at the community college level – are being asked to provide more holistic and intrusive support to their students (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018). Despite the increasing demands placed on academic advisors, the problems that have plagued the role, including high student-to-advisor ratios and short appointment times, persist (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018).

Despite the increased role of academic advising on college campuses, the body of research that focuses on academic advising is considerably small compared to other campus services (Alvarado & Olson, 2020). Much of the existing research focuses on advising satisfaction, with some research focused on the advising preferences of students (Allen & Smith, 2008; Braun & Zolfagharian, 2016; Smith & Allen, 2006; Walker et al., 2017). With the

increased attention that the first year of college elicits, some research has begun to focus on the role of advising in the first year of college (Alexitch, 2002; Bitz, 2010; Donaldson et al., 2016; Ellis, 2014; Fike & Fike, 2008; Griffin et al., 2019; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Schwebel et al., 2008; Smith, 2002; Swecker et al., 2013; Workman, 2015). Despite the growing number of studies that focus on this area, there are still few studies that explore the impact of academic advising on first-generation students. While some focus on the first year of college, few cover the intersection of first-generation community college students in their first year of college (Alvarado & Olson, 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

Academic advising is often cited as a support for students as they transition into college (Alvarado & Olson, 2020). While all students may encounter difficulty transitioning into college, the first year of college presents first-generation students with unique challenges that often lead to an unsuccessful transition into college (Pratt et al., 2019). Despite the growing research on the impact of advising on the retention of students, few studies explore the experiences that students have with advising at the community college level (Alvarado & Olson, 2020). Few studies cover the intersection between academic advising, community college, and first-generation students (Alvarado & Olson, 2020; Karp, 2013). Although 64% of undergraduate students who identify as first-generation (RTI International, 2019) choose to begin their pursuit of higher education at a community college, the number of first-generation students who reach degree completion has not kept pace with the degree completion of continuing-generation students (Ishanti, 2006; Pratt et al., 2019, Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Since few studies explore the advising experiences of first-generation students attending community colleges, this study sought to address that gap and

explored the perceptions that first-generation students have regarding their advising experiences as they transition through their first year of community college.

### **Purpose**

Although the transition into higher education brings about different experiences for all students, the transition into the first year of college presents first-generation college students with unique cultural, social, and academic challenges (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). Many students begin their college experience filled with nervous excitement and utilize their support system to get back on their feet when confronted with concerns early on. Without parents who have experienced college, many first-generation college students may be unsure who to turn to for support when faced with academic concerns. These academic issues can lead to dropping out or stopping out of school for many first-generation students. This problem is evident as first-generation college students graduate at considerably lower rates than their continuing-generation peers (Engle et al., 2006; Radunzel, 2018; Shapiro et al., 2013). Academic advising can step in and assist with this challenge. Academic advisors have a unique opportunity to create relationships and guide students in their first semester and throughout their college experience. This opportunity is of utmost importance for first-generation college students who may have no support system to help them navigate the college experience. Despite the growing body of literature surrounding the impact of academic advising in the first year of college, academic advising at the community college level is often overlooked or understudied as a tactic to support first-generation college students as they transition into college (Alvarado & Olson, 2020; Karp et al., 2020). To advance the research on first-generation students enrolled in community college, this qualitative study explored the advising experiences of first-generation

students attending community college in their first year of college. This qualitative study explored the experiences that first-time, full-time, first-generation college students attending community college have with academic advising to understand better the role of advising in the first year of college.

### **Research Questions**

To advance the research on first-generation students enrolled in community college, this qualitative study explored the advising experiences of first-generation students attending community college in their first year. To fulfill that purpose, this study explored the following questions:

1. How do first-time, full-time, first-generation students attending community college describe their experiences with academic advising in their first year of college?
2. How do the advising experiences of first-time, full-time first-generation students reflect the expectations for advising in the first year of college established by the student services office at one, two-year public community college in the Midwest?

### **Overview of Methodology and Methods**

Given the focus on the individual experiences that first-generation community college students have with academic advising in their first year of college, this study employed a qualitative research design. This study used a case study methodology to explore the experiences that first-generation community college students have with academic advising in their first year at one, two-year public community college in the Midwest. Through semi-structured interviews with participants and analysis of documents related to the academic advising role, I reviewed the

participants' experiences in relation to the context in which they are happening. The following section outlines the reasoning behind the methodology and methods selected for this study.

## **Methodology**

The worldview that shaped this study, social constructivism, played a significant role in the methodology selected. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “Basically, qualitative researchers are interested in *understanding the meaning people have constructed*; that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 15, emphasis in original). Given the focus on understanding how the participants in this study understood their advising experiences, I employed a qualitative research design. Furthermore, a qualitative case study design served as the best mode of inquiry to answer the research questions of this study due to the importance of the context in which the participants experienced academic advising. This study explored the advising experiences of first-generation community college students at one, two-year public institution, creating a bounded case (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In this study, the focus was on the advising experiences of the participants and how they understood these experiences. I could not manipulate these experiences, and a case study approach illustrates how the participants understood these experiences.

## **Methods**

In qualitative case study research, multiple sources of data collection are pertinent to providing a rich description of the case and enhancing the credibility of a study (Yin, 2018). Given the importance of the participants' individual experiences, each participant in this study took part in one semi-structured interview, lasting between 23 minutes and 60 minutes. The interviews focused on learning more about how each participant experienced academic advising

and the implications these experiences had on their first year of college. In addition to interviews, I also collected and analyzed documents related to the advising model at the research site. These included the advisor training manual, advisor job description, material from orientation – including in-person and online orientation materials, advising meeting agendas and minutes, new student checklist, emails to advisors from leadership related to advising topics, and the website. These documents served as context for the expectations and structure of advising at the research site.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Schlossberg (1984) presents a theoretical model related to transitions that helped frame this study's purpose. This theory, initially focused on the transitions of retiring adults, has been used as a theoretical framework to explore the transition experiences of college students (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Lazarowicz, 2015; Messer, 2008; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Wheeler, 2012). Schlossberg's (2011) transition model consists of three main parts: approaching transitions, taking stock of coping resources, and taking charge (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Approaching transitions “identifies the nature of the transition and provides an understanding of which perspective is best for dealing with it” (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 26). Schlossberg (1984) defines transitions in three ways: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events.

The second part of Schlossberg's (1984) transition model, taking stock of coping resources, outlines how individuals experience and handle transition differently using the 4 S System – situation, self, support, and strategies. Schlossberg et al., 1995 describes each of the 4 Ss as follows:

(1) the Situation variable – (What is happening? For example, the transition to retirement differs from the transition of having a first baby.); (2) the Self variable – (To whom is it happening? Each individual is different in terms of life issues and personality); (3) the Support variable – (What help is available? Supports and available options vary for each individual.); the Strategies variable – (How does the person cope? People navigate transitions in different ways.) (p. 47)

Each of these variables plays a role in how a person handles a transition. Finally, the last part of Schlossberg's transition model, taking charge, explains how an individual experiencing a change can strengthen each of the 4 S variables to assist in navigating through a transition.

Although Schlossberg's transition model does not apply exclusively to higher education transitions, Schlossberg's acknowledgment of the importance of analyzing support systems in relation to transitions provides a lens to examine the role that academic advisors can play in assisting first-generation students with the transition into college. Schlossberg's theoretical model notes the importance of strengthening one's resources to support a change, and this study explored the use of academic advising as one of those resources.

### **Research Terms and Definitions**

*Academic Advising* – This study defined academic advising as, “situations in which an institutional representative gives insight or direction to a college student about an academic, social, or personal matter. The nature of this direction might be to inform, suggest, counsel, discipline, coach, mentor, or even teach” (Kuhn, 2008, p. 3).

*Advising Approach* – Advising approaches are not theories, but instead are derived from theories and include strategies that advisors may use in their advising practice. Examples include,



advising as teaching, learning-centered advising, developmental advising, prescriptive advising, appreciative advising, strengths-based advising, proactive advising, and advising as coaching (Drake et al., 2013).

*Advising Model* – This study defined an advising model as how a particular institution organizes its advising program. An advising program typically uses the advising model to guide how advising is structured, is aligned with the mission, vision, and values of the respective institution, and is coordinated by a person or department (King, 2008).

*First-generation student* – This study defined a first-generation student as an individual whose parents have little or no college and have not achieved a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

*First-time student* – This study defined a first-time student as an individual who enrolls in college with less than 30 credit hours completed.

*Full-time student* – This study defined a full-time student as an individual enrolled in 12 credit hours or more in a 16-week semester.

*Retention* – This study defined retention as a student maintaining enrollment from one semester to the next until they are awarded a credential from the institution.

### **Chapter Summary**

There is no doubt that first-generation college students represent a significant portion of the undergraduate population in the United States. Many of these students choose to begin their educational journeys at a community college in hopes of transitioning into higher education successfully. Despite these hopes, the evidence shows that first-generation college students graduate at considerably lower rates than their continuing-generation peers (Engle et al., 2006;

Radunzel, 2018; Shapiro et al., 2013). Various support services exist to assist students from all backgrounds as they transition into and through higher education. Some studies propose academic advising as a specific area of focus, yet studies related to the advising experiences of first-generation students enrolled at community colleges remain sparse (Alexitch, 2002; Alvarado & Olson, 2020; Bitz, 2010; Donaldson et al., 2016; Ellis, 2014; Fike & Fike, 2008; Griffin et al., 2019; Karp et al., 2020; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Schwebel et al., 2008; Smith, 2002; Swecker et al., 2013; Workman, 2015). The purpose of this study was to fill a portion of this gap by exploring the experiences that first-generation students have with academic advising as they transition into their first year of college, utilizing Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a theoretical lens.

The literature review in chapter two presents the existing scholarship surrounding community colleges, first-generation students, and academic advising. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology I used to conduct this study. Chapter 4 reviews the findings from this study, including detailed descriptions of the participants. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings, implications, limitations, future research directions, and final thoughts.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Community college campuses are host to some of the most diverse and unique students in the United States (Malcom-Piqueux, 2018). These students bring a variety of needs, expectations, and assumptions with them. Academic advisors are the individuals at the front lines prepared to meet these students, handle their questions, and start them off on their journey. Amidst the changing needs of today's college students, academic advisors guide and support students toward meeting their goals. Today, students enrolling in college push the boundaries of the "traditional" college student definition as they represent an increasingly diverse and underrepresented student body (Archambault, 2017). Within this growing diversity lies a group of students who are the first in their family to attend college – first-generation students. According to RTI International (2019), in the 2015 – 2016 academic year, 56% of undergraduates attending higher education institutions identified as first-generation. While there are many types of research related to first-generation students, the focus of the literature review in this chapter is to understand studies that review the experiences of first-generation community college students.

To begin, I discuss a review of the creation and evolving purpose of the community college as an institution, along with the current literature surrounding the retention of community college students and the outcomes that community colleges produce. From there, a discussion of the characteristics of first-generation community college students follows. This leads to a review of the literature on the common experiences of first-generation students, including the attrition and persistence rates of this student population.

As this study focused specifically on first-generation community college students in their first year of college, the literature reviewed will also emphasize academic advising in the first year of college. The role of academic advising in the first year leads to a discussion on the limited number of studies that reflect on the advising experiences of first-generation college students and the importance of understanding how first-generation community college students experience academic advising. A discussion of the support services that have proven successful with first-generation students demonstrates a need for additional research specific to academic advising. Finally, in the last section of this chapter, Schlossberg's Transition Theory, the theoretical framework for this study, is discussed. A detailed review of studies that have utilized Schlossberg's Transition Theory are addressed to set the foundation for this study's use of Transition Theory.

### **Community Colleges**

To understand the experiences of first-generation community college students, a review of the historical role of the community college and how its initial creation and evolving mission impact the retention, persistence, and overall outcomes for the students they enroll is critical. Community colleges – a uniquely American idea – were initially created to provide students with the first two years of a liberal arts education before transferring to a university (Boggs, 2011; Thelin, 2019; Vaughn, 1982). Initially coined as junior colleges in 1901, this term has evolved to include the ever-changing civic and vocational needs of the communities in which these colleges were located (Cohen et al., 2013). Beginning in the 1960s, the term community college became more broadly associated with the two-year college system and represents a large segment of the comprehensive public institutions represented across the country today (Cohen et al., 2013).

According to Bragg (2018), of the 1,108 community colleges in the United States, 89% are public institutions. Many public, two-year community colleges still provide alternatives for students looking to join the workforce in the form of vocational credit and noncredit courses, now often defined as career and technical education (CTE). This sector of community college focuses specifically on technical coursework and represents a different segment of the community college tied to the economic and workforce needs of the community, most often focused on the applied associate degree, certifications, diplomas, or even formal apprenticeship programs (Boggs, 2011; Bragg, 2018).

### **Open Access Mission**

Although community colleges were initially created to be an institution “for the people,” solidifying their foundation as open access institutions (Boggs, 2011; Roueche & Hurlburt, 1968; Thelin, 2019), it was not until the passing of the GI Bill in 1946 and the 1947 President’s Commission on Higher Education for American Democracy, otherwise known as the Truman Commission, that community colleges became central to expanding educational access across the nation (Vaughn, 1982). After World War II, community colleges experienced a boom in enrollment that led to the creation of statewide systems with the goal that community colleges would be convenient, affordable, and available to all individuals (Boggs, 2011). This open-door mission continued to evolve with the addition of remedial education, English language acquisition courses, and certificate programs (Boggs, 2011; Thelin, 2019). With these additions and the ability for anyone to enroll, it is not surprising that community colleges began to enroll the most diverse student body in every possible demographic, a feature of community colleges that continues to this day (Boggs, 2011).

Given the open admissions policies of community colleges, enrollment has grown tremendously over the past several decades, with over 41% of undergraduate students in the United States enrolling at community college institutions (American Associate of Community Colleges, 2020). Although community college enrollment continues to shift and change in reaction to the ongoing global pandemic (Carrasco, 2022; Whitford, 2022), a significant portion of high school graduates choose to begin their college career at a community college (Irwin et al., 2021).

### **Criticism and Completion**

Due to community colleges' affordable and accessible nature, community colleges began to receive criticism for trying to be everything to everyone (Roueche & Hurlburt, 1968; Thelin, 2019; Vaughn, 1982). While the open access mission of community colleges continued to grow, critics and scholars alike began to highlight the significant gaps in persistence and retention for community college students. Created to provide access for all, community colleges fueled the concept of higher education as a right, leading to high numbers of enrollment from students typically considered to be underprepared academically and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Thelin, 2019; Vaughn, 1982). To many, community colleges came to be considered “second chance” institutions (Dougherty et al., 2017; Karp et al., 2008; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015), and some believed they were designed to “cool-out” students, effectively leading students to the realization that they would not complete a degree (Clark, 1960; Thelin, 2019).

Although community colleges educators and administrators argue that due to the diverse enrollments at their institutions, they should not be held to similar review standards as 4-year

institutions (Bailey et al., 2006; Thelin, 2019), the literature reflects significant gaps in completion for community college students (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2021), the six-year graduation rate for students who enrolled at community colleges in the fall of 2014 with the intention to graduate was 34.8%. Community college students are more likely to enroll part-time, take fewer credit hours, complete fewer courses, and often apply later when compared to their university peers, all factors that researchers have connected to lower retention levels (Calcagno et al., 2007; Craig & Ward, 2008; Fike & Fike, 2008; Freer-Weiss, 2004; Nomi, 2005; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015).

### **Community Colleges Today**

Today's community college institutions meet the Truman Commission's goals from 1947. Community colleges exist throughout the country and provide educational opportunities to everyone through open-admissions policies, both in person and online, via state systems and branch campuses (Cohen et al., 2013). Although this aspect of the community college mission has not changed, the country has undergone – and continues to experience – significant economic and demographic changes that promise to drastically impact the role of higher education in the United States (Alexander, 2020). Community colleges are not exempt from these trends. They will experience these upcoming changes in the context of increasing pressure to conform to the social and political expectations of the public they serve (Kater & Kisker, 2018). The community college population continues to be the most diverse in the country and requires increasingly higher levels of assistance as they come in less prepared academically (Cohen et al., 2013; Perin, 2018; Thelin, 2019; Vaughn, 1982). When reviewing the demographics of the students attending community college with the increased attention on

completion rates, research examining the experiences of community college students is needed. Although community colleges have begun to receive more attention in the literature, a substantial amount of higher education literature still focuses on the more traditional university setting (Cohen et al., 2013; Karp et al., 2020), requiring more research within the community college environment.

### **First-Generation Community College Students**

Various definitions exist to describe first-generation students within the literature. Some reports describe these students based on the level of education completed by the student's parents, such as no education beyond high school or some college education with no degree. Others even include the education level of their siblings. For this study, I defined first-generation students as individuals whose parents have little or no college and have not achieved a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Of the nearly 56% of undergraduate students who identify as first-generation, 64% enrolled in a public 2-year institution (RTI International, 2019). Studies show that first-generation students are more likely than their continuing-generation peers to attend a community college (Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Nomi, 2005).

### **Demographics**

Compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation college students are more likely to be female (Chen, 2005; Engle et al., 2006; Holland, 2020; Nomi, 2005; Radunzel, 2018), have dependents (Nomi, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996), and be older than traditional college age students (Engle et al., 2006; Nomi, 2005). First-generation students are also more likely to be Hispanic or African American (Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Holland, 2020; Radunzel, 2018). In addition to these characteristics, first-generation students are also



disproportionately low-income (Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Radunzel, 2018; Thayer, 2000). First-generation community college students rely on financial aid as their main source of funding for college, compared to their continuing-generation peers who report their parent's income and savings as a significant funding source (Nomi, 2005).

### **Enrollment Patterns**

Much of the research regarding the barriers that first-generation students face while working to stay enrolled in college also reveals specific enrollment patterns that contribute to the likelihood of first-generation students leaving college without completing a degree. First-generation students enroll in and complete fewer credits in their first year of college than their continuing-generation peers (Chen, 2005; Nomi, 2005). These findings are consistent with studies that indicate first-generation students are more likely to enroll part-time in college (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004; Radunzel, 2018). One explanation for why first-generation students likely take fewer credit hours and enroll part-time is the increased number of first-generation students that work while attending college (Choy, 2001).

First-generation students attending a community college are also more likely than their peers to be employed full-time and support dependents (Nomi, 2005). With these additional responsibilities, first-generation college students often prioritize home and work over any school commitments, including studying or co-curricular activities. Studies reveal that first-generation students are less likely to get involved in academic and social engagement activities (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Radunzel, 2018). Studies also indicate they are less prepared academically (Engle et al., 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). These enrollment patterns highlight a need to examine the

experiences of first-generation students who begin their academic journey at a community college.

### **First-Generation Community College Student Experiences and Trends**

While the characteristics of first-generation college students can be outlined through data points related to their demographics and enrollment patterns, the experiences of these students are also important. We may have an idea of who first-generation students are, but how do they experience the community college environment? Despite increased attention to first-generation college students and the knowledge that first-generation students are overrepresented in the community college sector, the experiences of this student population are underrepresented (Karp et al., 2020). In this section, several aspects of the first-generation community college experience are explored, including first-generation students' level of preparedness for college, their goals and motivations for attending college, their challenges and strengths, and their persistence and attrition rates.

#### **Academic Preparedness**

The research is clear in stating that compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students – and particularly those who begin at a community college – arrive with disproportionately lower levels of academic preparedness (Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nomi, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). Researchers suggest low test scores, lack of rigor in high school curriculum, and less guidance and support from parents as reasons that first-generation students tend to arrive less academically prepared for college (Chen, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nomi, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004;). Given the lower levels of academic preparedness, first-generation students tend to struggle more with the

academic transition into college than their peers (Terenzini et al., 1994). The challenges that first-generation students face as they transition into college indicate a need to understand what happens in the first year of community college for first-generation students. A closer look at the first year is critical as fewer first-generation students enroll after their first year and complete a degree at lower levels compared to their continuing-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Inman & Mayes, 1999).

### **Goals and Motivation**

Although the literature shows how first-generation students are different than their continuing-generation peers in many ways, one significant difference that the literature reflects is in the goals and motivation this population brings with them to college (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Karp et al., 2020; Nomi, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1994). While attending college to secure a job may fall towards the top of the list for many students, in one study 87% of first-generation community college students reported seeking to obtain a steady, secure job, as their main goal for attending community college, compared to 77% of their continuing-generation peers (Nomi, 2005). This finding aligns with a recent study conducted by Karp et al. (2020) that found first-generation community college students to be more “outcome-focused in order to create a path to economic security and stability” (p. 23). Another common goal for attending college that many first-generation community college students report is increasing their confidence and self-esteem. In contrast, their continuing-generation peers focus on making friends and getting involved (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Terenzini et al., 1994).

## **Challenges and Strengths**

First-generation students are presented with a series of challenges when they enter higher education. They are disproportionately from underrepresented ethnic and racial backgrounds, have lower levels of academic preparedness, are less likely to receive financial support from parents, and are more likely to have numerous obligations outside of college, including but not limited to work and family (Cataldi et al., 2018; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nomi, 2005). Along with these challenges, first-generation community college students also face a variety of systemic institutional barriers, such as the bureaucratic nature of most processes in education, a lack of understanding or knowledge of college services and resources, and the various jargon and terminology that permeates higher education (Karp et al., 2020). These campus structures present just a handful of the difficulties that first-generation community college students face in their progression toward degree completion. Without understanding how and when to access campus services, first-generation students often lack a sense of belonging on campus, making them less likely to seek out help and resources on campus (Karp et al., 2020).

Despite these challenges, the literature also highlights the strengths and abilities that first-generation students bring with them to the community college environment. First-generation students arrive at community college with differing backgrounds, motivations, and goals. Their experiences, albeit different, provide them with unique perspectives and some research has shown this to enhance their resiliency, illustrating how first-generation students often work fiercely to beat the odds (Karp et al., 2020; Pascarella et al., 2003). Although the structures of higher education may be stacked against them, first-generation students often are eager to

become engaged in the community, but are frequently unaware of how to do so (Davis, 2010; Karp et al., 2020).

### **Attrition and Persistence**

The literature surrounding first-generation students also indicates that compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students are not only at a disadvantage when they start college but also as they work to remain enrolled in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). According to Engle et al. (2006), first-generation students are more than twice as likely to leave college without earning a degree. These figures are consistent with several other studies that indicate that first-generation students are severely lagging compared to their continuing-generation peers in completing a degree (Cataldi et al., 2018; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Radunzel, 2018). The first year of college, specifically, is challenging for first-generation students. They are nearly four times more likely to drop out after the first year than their continuing generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

### **Academic Advising**

At the inception of American higher education, the concept of academic advising as it is today simply did not exist. In higher education, the responsibilities and tasks commonly associated with advising can be described in a multitude of ways and vary depending on both the institutional type and culture. As outlined by Kuhn (2008), academic advising can include the responsibility “to inform, suggest, counsel, discipline, coach, mentor, or even teach” (p. 3). Although this work is not new to higher education, in the early years, with low enrollments and a standard, specific curriculum, students primarily received this guidance from faculty members and perhaps the president of the college (Kuhn, 2008). Yet, as higher education in the United

States began to shape its identity as a prominent destination for American citizens to learn, grow, and gain the skills and experience necessary to launch a career path, the concept of academic advising also began to take shape.

### **Academic Advising Identified, But Undefined**

As college enrollments started to grow, the need for additional personnel increased, and so emerged “the new student affairs officials” (Thelin, 2019, p. 198). Then, with the publishing of the American Council on Education’s (1937) *The Student Personnel Point of View* came the introduction of student affairs and the early identification of academic advising and its purpose within the student experience. With student personnel work more clearly defined, the beginnings of academic advising began to emerge as traces of advising duties started to become identified. For example, *The Student Personnel Point of View* (ACE, 1937) mentions the need for an individual “to determine upon his courses of instruction in light of his past achievements, vocational and personal interests, and diagnostic findings” (p. 41). Despite identifying a few aspects of advising in *The Student Personnel Point of View* (ACE, 1937), academic advising remained largely undefined even after this publication.

Although the role of academic advising within higher education was still unclear after the publication of *The Student Personnel Point of View* (ACE, 1937), the need for guidance did not diminish. As it did after World War I, enrollment began to increase after World War II, with the student population rising to around 2.7 million (Thelin, 2019, p. 261). Now, students began to feel the impact of larger enrollments and responded with feelings of just being seen as a number by administration and faculty (Thelin, 2019). Yet again, the ACE responded and published a revised version of *The Student Personnel Point of View* (1949). The revised version identifies

advising more specifically under the term counseling. The ACE (1949) outlines, “Through a rich program of experiences and skillful counseling, the student may acquire an understanding of himself, his abilities, interests, motivations, and limitations. With such understanding, the student...grows personally and, in the process, makes constructive social contributions” (p. 23). Although *The Student Personnel Point of View* (1949) identifies advising, they only highlight the need for advising – or, in this case, counseling – to assist students. There is yet to be any mention of a united purpose or definition of best practices within academic advising. This is clear in how advising was executed during this time, as overloaded faculty members continued to be the primary source of advising throughout the 1940s and 1950s (Cook, 2009).

Despite this lack of purpose, what *The Student Personnel Point of View* (ACE, 1949) does provide is the beginnings of the foundation upon which advising will eventually align itself – that higher education must embrace a developmental process and “treat students as individuals, rather than as entries in an impersonal roster” (p. 19). Since the publication of *The Student Personnel Point of View* (ACE, 1937), the basic tenets of academic advising, such as the role of guidance through the college curriculum, have remained largely the same; however, as higher education in the United States has developed, so too has academic advising.

### **Foundations of Academic Advising Emerge**

In response to the call for student personnel workers to focus on the development of students as an entire person (ACE, 1949), the foundational groundwork for academic advising began to emerge with the publication of two foundational articles – “A Developmental View of Academic Advising as Teaching” (Crookston, 1972/2009) and “An Academic Advising Model” (O’Banion, 1972/2009). These articles not only set the tone for academic advising as a field, but

they also established a dichotomy between prescriptive and developmental advising that continues to influence the field today. Crookston (1972/2009) states that up until this point, academic advisors functioned in a purely prescriptive manner and defined this by stating, “As implied by the term itself, the relationship is obviously based on authority; the advisor is the doctor and the student the patient” (p. 78). Essentially, advisors released all responsibility to the student, and if the student chose not to take the advisor's advice, it would fall back on the student. Crookston (1972/2009) argues that the logic behind this concept for advising does not hold as prescribing a solution ultimately does not help the student solve problems. Instead, he introduces an alternate framework for advising – developmental advising. Crookston (1972/2009) outlines 10 central components that make up this advising approach and highlights that at the core of developmental advising is, “the belief that the relationship itself is one in which the academic advisor and the student differentially engage in a series of developmental tasks, the successful completion of which results in varying degrees of learning by both parties” (p. 79). Finally, a foundation for academic advising began to emerge.

Along with Crookston’s (1972/2009) introduction of developmental advising, the publishing of O’Banion’s (1972/2009) article builds upon a developmental framework for academic advising that includes course selection and the holistic development of a student throughout their college years. O’Banion (1972/2009) promotes the use of developmental advising stating that, “The purpose of academic advising is to help the student choose a program of study which will serve him in the development of his total potential” (p. 83). In this foundational article, O’Banion (1972/2009) goes on to outline a process of advising by providing five steps – exploration of life goals, exploration of vocational goals, program choice, course



choice, and scheduling courses – and argues that “Many programs of academic advising flounder because they begin at step three with ‘program choice’” (p. 83). With these two articles, a sense of purpose begins to emerge for academic advising that is not only published but is also grounded in theory and opens the door for advising to continue to grow.

Although faculty advising had reigned as the main source of advising up until this point, the newfound frameworks for academic advising provided an opportunity for growth within the field, and with that growth came the emergence of the terms primary-role advisor and professional advisor alongside faculty advisors (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016). Now, individuals who performed academic advising began to thirst for more definition surrounding the work that they were doing with students. This desire for dialogue led to establishment of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), which was incorporated on May 2, 1970 (Grites & Gordon, 2009). Now known as the Global Community for Academic Advising, NACADA established a space for individuals who performed the task of academic advising to converse and gain a better understanding of how advising was happening on other campuses. Along with working to build upon the scholarship in the field, NACADA was to be a professional home and support system for advisors and “an essential feature...of NACADA is the Association’s dedication to *advising* rather than *advisors*, the purpose being to emphasize the broader process and function and to view advising as a professional discipline” (Beatty, 1991, p. 2). Therefore, despite the emergence of professional advisors among faculty advisors, NACADA sought to define the field of advising within the student experience – regardless of *who* was doing the advising. With the birth of NACADA, the field of advising was ready to be explored.

### **Academic Advising Explored – What is Advising and Who Does It?**

As NACADA began to find its identity as an association, advising also sought to find its identity as a profession. The emergence of NACADA thrust academic advising under a microscope. During the 1980s, institutions began to look at the structure of advising at their campuses. Although NACADA had made it a point to focus on advising instead of the advisor (Beatty, 1991), higher education institutions wanted to know who exactly should be doing advising. As Beatty (1991) describes it, “The 80s held great promise, but that promise was accompanied by threats...and ‘firefights’ among faculty, professional advisors, and counseling centers about what advising should be, who should do it and who does it best” (pp. 4-5). Wesley Habley led one effort to combat these “firefights” with his 1983 article, “Organizational Structures for Academic Advising: Models and Implications”. Habley (1983) recognized that who should be doing advising was unclear for many institutions and provided seven organization models for academic advising. The faculty-only model, the supplementary advising model, the split advising model, the dual advising model, the total intake model, the satellite model, and the self-contained model. Each model outlined a different way to structure advising, whether it be between faculty advisors, professional advisors, or a combination of the two. Although Habley (1983) acknowledged that the faculty-only model was still the main model for advising, his article illustrated how the field of advising was growing and changing to accommodate primary-role advisors. Additionally, his article called for further studies of these seven organizational models to provide research to back what models may work best for which institutions. This call for research could be seen across the field as academic advising earned an ERIC descriptor, and the first issue of the NACADA Journal was published in 1981 (Cook, 2009).

Despite the role of NACADA in establishing academic advising within the realm of research, there was still much work to be done. Academic advising was adjusting to its newfound place in the limelight within higher education. Yet advising was still “generally unorganized, unrecognized, unrewarded, and grossly underfunded” (Beatty, 1991, p. 7). Although it was clear that advising played a major role in student success, the profession still lacked a definition of advising and with the varied advising models came a variety of different goals and structures. However, NACADA continued to strive toward a set of guidelines and on October 8, 1994 the initial Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising was published (Grites & Gordon, 2009, p. 44). These guidelines provide an example of the work that NACADA was striving toward in terms of defining academic advising and as the association moved toward the 21<sup>st</sup> century this became the focus of the profession.

### **Advising (Partially) Defined**

Although academic advising had grown tremendously both as a field and profession by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was still a glaring lack of definition that many advisors looked to NACADA to provide. As the premier voice of academic advising by this time, NACADA recognized it was time to respond, and in 2003 NACADA leaders formed a task force to develop a definition of academic advising (Grites & Gordon, 2009). After several years of discussion and debate, NACADA produced a definition of academic advising – partially. Instead of a concrete definition, NACADA outlined a concept for academic advising. When NACADA formed the task force, the challenge at hand was that the role of an academic advisor varies so much between institutional types. Due to this differentiation, there simply could not be just one clear cut definition for advising; therefore, the board of directors approved the Concept of Academic

Advising in 2006 (Grites & Gordon, 2009). Today, the Concept of Academic Advising on the NACADA website outlines that:

Regardless of the diversity of our institutions, our students, our advisors, and our organizational structures, academic advising has three components: curriculum (what advising deals with), pedagogy (how advising does what it does), and student learning outcomes (the result of academic advising). (NACADA, 2006, para. 1)

Although not a concrete definition, this concept illustrates the culmination of NACADA's goal to create a professional identity for academic advising within higher education. Now that NACADA had accomplished that goal, it was time to return to another focus – the importance of continuing to build a scholarly framework for academic advising.

In the early stages of NACADA's development, much of the literature on advising focused on the foundational articles published by Crookston (1972/2009) and O'Banion (1972/2009) and the dichotomy between prescriptive and developmental advising. Building upon these frameworks, new research began to spring up surrounding the concept of advising as teaching. In Lowenstein's (2005) article, he acknowledges that the term "advising as teaching" is introduced in the title of Crookston's (1972/2009) article; however, he argues that Crookston's article provides no further dialogue on this topic. Lowenstein (2005) suggests a learning-centered paradigm for advising as teaching in which advising focuses on learning outcomes and builds these outcomes into their interactions with students, particularly regarding choices surrounding their education (2005). This example of the advising as teaching approach represents the type of scholarship surrounding academic advising that is needed, but it also highlights the need for research surrounding how these approaches impact the work that advisors do.

### **Academic Advising Research Outcomes and Impact**

Despite the many variations in advising practices, structures, and approaches, the body of academic advising scholarship has remained small in comparison (Alvarado & Olson, 2020; Lowenstein, 2005). Nevertheless, academic advising has surfaced as an important aspect of the student experience. According to Light (2001), “Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience” (p. 81). Despite the call for enhanced research on the impact of academic advising, one aspect of academic advising permeates the literature regarding academic advising – student satisfaction with advising.

Overall, the literature shows that while students believe academic advising is important to their success, they tend to rate their satisfaction with advising low (Allen & Smith, 2008; Braun & Zolfagharian, 2016; Smith & Allen, 2006; Walker et al., 2017). Student expectations for academic advising vary, with some using their high school experiences to gauge how advising should work (Ellis, 2014; Smith, 2002; Walker et al., 2017). Student preferences for advising highlight the importance of accurate information (Allen & Smith, 2008; Smith & Allen, 2006) and relationship-building (Bitz, 2010; Coll, 2008; Donaldson et al., 2016; Mottarella et al., 2004; Walker et al., 2017) as it relates to student satisfaction with their advising experiences. Research indicates that as students move through their college career their advising needs shift as they become more involved in the decision-making process (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013; Smith, 2002; Workman, 2015).

Although student satisfaction with advising is an important facet of the advising experience, scholars have continued to call for more literature surrounding the impact of advising on retention. Academic advising has been tied to student success and retention throughout the

literature, with varied results. Some studies report a positive connection between academic advising and retention using factors such as GPA (Young-Jones et al., 2013), sense of belonging (Soria, 2012), or cognitive and affective learning outcomes (Smith & Allen, 2014). Others have suggested that the frequency of advising outreach has no significant impact on the retention of students (Schwebel et al., 2012). While these studies represent the relatively mixed empirical evidence regarding the relationship between academic advising and retention, academic advising continues to emerge as a recommendation for student success.

Given the varied approaches, frameworks, and structures of advising, scholars continue to call for increased research on the impact of academic advising and student outcomes (Alvarado & Olson, 2020). Few studies highlight the student experience with advising (Ellis, 2014) and instead provide a quantitative perspective that focuses on satisfaction or the number of interactions with an academic advisor (Schwebel et al., 2012; Swecker et al., 2013). Due to the subjective nature of advising (Soria, 2012), additional insight into the perception of advising is necessary, including the influence it has on various student characteristics as the college population continues to grow more diverse (Smith & Allen, 2006).

### **Importance of Academic Advising in the First Year**

Due to the importance of the first year of college as it relates to student persistence and success (Braxton et al., 2007), there has been an increase in studies focused on determining the role of academic advising regarding the persistence and success of first-year college students (Alexitch, 2002; Bitz, 2010; Donaldson et al., 2016; Ellis, 2014; Fike & Fike, 2008; Griffin et al., 2019; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Schwebel et al., 2008; Smith, 2002; Swecker et al., 2013; Workman, 2015). Despite the growing number of studies that highlight the critical role

of academic advising in the first year of college, few studies explore the impact of academic advising on first-generation students, whether during the first year of college or beyond (Alvarado & Olson, 2020). Some of these studies, such as one conducted by Swecker et al. (2013), investigate the relationship between the number of meetings with an academic advisor and first-generation students' retention in their first year of college. Although Swecker et al. (2013) determined that the odds of retaining a student go up by 13% each time a student meets with an academic advisor, more research is needed to illustrate the content of advising meetings and provide depth to the research. Other studies focus on TRIO Student Support Services, and while TRIO provides advising, it is not always the primary focus of the study (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engle et al., 2006).

Additionally, many of the advising studies that concentrate on the first year of college not only do not focus specifically on first-generation students, but they also do not look at the first year of college for community college students. Instead, much of the research focuses on four-year institutions (Alexitch, 2002; Bitz, 2010; Ellis, 2014; Schwebel et al., 2008; Smith, 2002; Swecker et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2017; Workman, 2015). While research cites academic advising as a critical support service for community college students (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018; Karp et al., 2008), first-generation community college students are rarely at the center of the research. Instead, first-generation students serve as a suggested demographic for enhanced advising support (Bailey et al., 2006; Booth et al., 2013; Dougherty et al., 2017; Karp, 2013; Karp et al., 2008). This gap creates a need to explore the experiences that first-generation college students have with academic advising, not just in the first year, but in the first year at a community college.

## **First-Generation Students and Academic Advising in the First Year**

Despite the growing number of studies that highlight the critical role that academic advising plays in the first year of college, little research explores the impact of academic advising on first-generation students, whether during the first year of college or beyond (Alexitch, 2002; Bitz, 2010; Donaldson et al., 2016; Ellis, 2014; Fike & Fike, 2008; Griffin et al., 2019; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Schwebel et al., 2008; Smith, 2002; Swecker et al., 2013; Workman, 2015). One study, conducted by Swecker et al. (2013), investigates the relationship between the number of meetings with an academic advisor and first-generation students' retention in their first year of college. Although Swecker et al. (2013) determined that the odds of retaining a student go up by 13% each time a student meets with an academic advisor, more research is needed to illustrate the content of advising meetings and provide depth to the research. Additionally, Swecker et al. (2013) conducted this study at a four-year institution. Many of the 56% of undergraduate students who identify as first-generation (RTI International, 2019) choose to begin their pursuit of higher education at a community college. Studies show that first-generation students are more likely than their continuing-generation peers to attend a community college (Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Nomi, 2005). This enrollment pattern highlights a need to examine first-generation students' advising experiences who begin their academic journey at a community college.

The research indicates that first-generation students lack the knowledge and language necessary to navigate the transition into college successfully (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pratt et al., 2019). Additionally, since much of the research shows that first-generation students are more likely to drop out after their first year of college (Chen, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pratt et al.,



2019), the need to examine the role that academic advising may play in supporting first-generation students as they transition into college is more important than ever. This study aims to address the gaps by providing insight into the advising experiences that first-generation students have within their first year of attending a community college.

### **Support Services for First-Generation Students**

The research surrounding first-generation college students recommends various support services to support this student population. These strategies include increasing student engagement involvement (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004), building relationships with staff and faculty (Engle et al., 2006), and the role of federally-funded programs such as TRIO Student Support Services (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Fike & Fike, 2008). Compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students report that academics are their biggest challenge as they transition into college yet do not feel that the faculty provides them with the support they need to succeed (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Nunez, 2005). Navigating the bureaucratic structure of college – including understanding the language and procedures that go along with course enrollment – has led many scholars to recommend academic advising as a support for first-generation college students (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons et al., 2019; Swecker et al., 2013). Although academic advising has been an aspect of the college experience since the early origins of higher education in the United States (Cook, 2009), the body of literature surrounding student success is limited and often focused on student satisfaction instead of success (Coll, 2008). For this reason, additional research into the impact of advising on first-generation college students is necessary.

## Theoretical Framework

This study primarily focuses on first-generation students and the academic advising experiences in their first year of attending a community college. Beginning college is a significant life event that presents various changes and challenges in an individual's life (Clark, 2005; Hiester et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2010; Terenzini et al., 1994). Schlossberg (2011) presents a theoretical model related to transitions that helps frame this study's purpose. Schlossberg (2011) outlines four categories in her Transition Theory that relate to change, which she calls the 4 Ss: situation, self, supports, and strategies. According to Schlossberg (2011) "The Transition Model provides the structure for analyzing any transition" (p. 161). Schlossberg's (2011) theoretical model outlines the transitions people experience by identifying:

(1) the degree to which one's life has been altered (changes in roles, relationships, routines, assumptions); (2) where one is in the transition process (considering a change, beginning the change, 2 years after the change); and (3) the resources one can apply to making it a success. (p. 161)

Although this model does not apply exclusively to higher education transitions, Schlossberg's (2011) acknowledgment of the importance of analyzing support systems in relation to transitions provides a lens through which to examine the role that academic advisors can play in assisting first-generation students with the transition into college. Schlossberg's (2011) theoretical model notes the importance of strengthening one's resources to support a change, and this study aims to explore the use of academic advising as one of those resources.

Although the transition into higher education brings about different experiences for all students, the transition into the first year of college presents first-generation college students with

unique cultural, social, and academic challenges (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). Despite the transition from high school to college being one of the main areas of research interest in the first-generation literature (Pascarella et al., 2004), few studies examine the transition into higher education through the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1984), despite its potential to provide insight into the transitional experiences of first-generation college students (Overton-Healy, 2010). Scholars use Schlossberg's Transition Theory to explore how student athletes transition out of collegiate sports (Moreland-Bishop, 2009; Smith & Hardin, 2020) and navigate student support services (Noboa, 2020). Other studies have explored how student veterans' transition into the college environment (DiRamio et al., 2008; Jenkins, 2020; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015; Wheeler, 2012) and how transfer students experience the transfer process (Berner, 2012; Ivins et al., 2017; Lazarowicz, 2015). These three populations offer a window into the benefits of examining the lived experiences of college students experiencing transition through the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory and provide the groundwork for exploring the transition into the first year of college for first-generation students using Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a guide.

In the following sections, I provide an overview of how Schlossberg's Transition Theory is used to understand the transitional experiences of student athletes, student veterans, and transfer students in college. The transition experiences of these student populations reveal the importance of enhancing student support services in preparation for, during, and after a transition (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Lazarowicz, 2015; Noboa, 2020). A review of how these student populations experience transitions provides a necessary foundation for this study on the transition experiences of first-generation students in their first year of college.

## **Student Athletes**

The experiences of student athletes as they transition in, through, and out of collegiate sports provide insight into the opportunities and challenges that transitions present to college students. Smith and Hardin (2020) found that as student athletes transition into and through college, their athletic identity is often their most salient. Saxe et al. (2017) found that coaches and administrators emphasize the athlete side of a student athlete's identity. While nurturing the athletic aspect of a student's identity is essential, an overemphasis on the athlete part of the student athlete identity can cause a lack of focus on academics and ultimately neglects the emotional and mental needs of a college student (Saxe et al., 2017). For many student athletes, the transition into college is tied directly to their college sport, and they feel that their role as an athlete is what makes them belong on campus (Smith and Hardin, 2020). Therefore, as they prepare to transition out of collegiate sports, research indicates that an emphasis on mental health is imperative to a successful transition (Moreland-Bishop, 2017; Saxe et al., 2017; Smith and Hardin, 2020). The connection between the sense of belonging and identity when moving out of collegiate sports provides insight into the transition process and the importance of providing mental health resources. Research indicates that a sense of belonging is significantly related to mental health for first-generation students (Stebbleton et al., 2011). The challenges of student athletes as they transition out of collegiate sports illustrate an opportunity for college administrators to highlight mental health support services as a resource for students in transition.

Along with renegotiating identity during the transition out of collegiate sports, student athletes also report how the changing role of teammates and coaches impacts their mental health during their transition (Henderson, 2013; Moreland-Bishop, 2017). In a mixed-methods study

conducted by Moreland-Bishop (2017), student athletes describe how the transition out of sport also signaled the loss of their support network, including mentors, coaches, and teammates. For student athletes who transition out of their sport but remain enrolled in college, former teammates may be accessible; however, the changing dynamics of the relationship outside of sports can lead to a drifting apart (Henderson, 2013). Although the loss of teammates may create a need for mental health resources for student athletes transitioning out of sports, for student athletes transitioning from community college to Division 1 institutions, teammates are instrumental in the process of coping and help to ease the transition (Burgess & Cisneros, 2018; Flowers et al., 2014).

Regardless of the role that teammates might play in the transition process, one common resource appears throughout the literature - family (Covington, Jr., 2017; Flowers et al., 2014; Messer, 2008; Saxe et al., 2017). The supportive role of family members motivates student athletes to persist through challenges in transitioning into college while balancing the role of student athlete (Flowers et al., 2014; Messer, 2008). Family can also serve as a support as student athletes prepare to transition out of collegiate sports (Covington, Jr., 2017; Saxe et al., 2017). Although the role of positive family support appears in the literature, Noboa (2020) found that for some athletes, the pressure to succeed from family members can lead to additional stress and anxiety when undergoing a transition. The complex role of family support for student athletes in transitions connects to a critical area of focus for first-generation students. Family support is a crucial resource for first-generation students as they navigate the first year of college (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Nuñez, 2005; O'Shea, 2016). However, first-generation students also report family members can enhance stress, mainly due to a lack of understanding regarding the college

environment (Gibbons et al., 2019; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008).

Along with studies that highlight the ways that student athletes rely on teammates and family amidst transitions into college or out of a collegiate sport, several studies also focus on the role of support services and their impact on student athlete persistence as they move in and through college (Burgess & Cisneros, 2018; Messer, 2008; Noboa, 2020). Findings from Noboa's (2020) study indicate that the time commitment involved with playing college sports interferes with a student athlete's ability to select a major, participate in interericanships and study abroad experiences, and ultimately navigate the academic side of college successfully. For student athletes, the academic aspects of college, including academic support services, take a backseat to their focus on athletics. As one participant in a study conducted by Burgess and Cisneros (2018) described, academic support services such as tutoring were a "luxury" that student athletes could not afford as they navigated the transition into college and, more importantly, collegiate sports. This difficulty in navigating the academic aspects of college is further explored in Messer's (2008) quantitative study explicitly focused on African American male student athletes. Findings from Messer's (2008) study illustrate how time commitment in a collegiate sport has a significant impact on persistence and graduation and highlights the importance of integrating academic support services into student athletes' sports schedules. To balance support services with athletic obligations, a reliance on time management skills is necessary. Although first-generation students report lower levels of engagement with extracurriculars and tend to focus more on academics (Nuñez, 2005), they struggle to balance work commitments with accessing needed academic support services (Gibbons et al., 2019;

Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Pratt et al., 2019). The challenges of student athletes navigating academic support services as they transition into higher education provide insight into the need to investigate the vital role of support services, specifically as students transition into higher education.

While most of the literature focuses on student athletes transitioning into college or out of collegiate sports (Burgess & Cisneros, 2018; Flowers et al., 2014; Noboa, 2020; Smith & Hardin, 2020), Buckner (2017) conducted a qualitative study on the experiences of Black male former football players transitioning back into college after stopping out using Schlossberg's transition theory as a theoretical framework. While the importance of athletic identity is a core focus in other studies (Saxe et al., 2017; Smith & Hardin, 2020), Buckner's (2017) study explores how former athletes navigate the anticipated transition of returning to college to complete their degree after parting with their student athlete identity. This study provides both a perspective on transitioning back into college and transitioning away from the student athlete identity and reveals a different perspective on how student athletes – in this case, former student athletes – perceive and access student support services. Participants describe an enhanced sense of personal accountability when transitioning back to college, resulting in increased use of academic support services and a more serious take on academics (Buckner, 2017). This renewed sense of motivation and purpose found in former student athletes transitioning back into college resembles the elevated levels of academic focus that many first-generation students demonstrate compared to their continuing generation peers (Nuñez, 2005; Smith & Zhang, 2010). While the important role that family support plays in student athlete transitions is often cited in the literature (Covington, Jr., 2017; Flowers et al., 2014; Messer, 2008; Saxe et al., 2017), Buckner's

(2017) study offers the perspective of former student athletes who report the need to serve as a role model for their family, including their children, to show they can finish what they started.

### **Student Veterans**

Another student population that has benefited from the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory is student veterans. The transitional experiences of student veterans are worth exploring as they experience unique challenges (Kirchner, 2015; Ryan et al., 2011) that add to the collective picture of the student transition experience. While the transition out of collegiate sports causes a shift in identity for student athletes (Smith & Hardin, 2020), veteran students also report unique challenges in adjusting to the college environment regarding identity and shifting roles (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Specifically, when student veterans' transition into college, they also transition from military life to civilian life and, subsequently, student life. Rumann and Hamrick's (2010) qualitative study explores the transition experiences of six student veterans returning to college after wartime deployment. One of the major themes in their research revealed the anxiety participants felt around how to reconcile their "military role" with their "student role," particularly when determining how to interact and connect with their peers. Other student veterans describe the role change from military personnel to college students as "dramatic," making it challenging to focus on school (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Reconciling the differences between military life and student life as student veterans transition into college offers insight into the transitions of first-generation students. First-generation students also report challenges with negotiating their shifting roles between family and school as they begin college and work to build connections with their peers (Sy et al., 2011). These experiences indicate a common thread between navigating identity and



integrating into the college environment during student transitions and the need for further exploration.

Student veterans describe the challenges that come with trying to connect with their peers in terms of their identity and their classroom experiences (DiRamio et al., 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Jenkins, 2020; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Wheeler, 2012). Despite feeling welcomed in the classroom, student veterans' experiences in the military often lead to feeling that they do not have "common ground" on which to connect with their peers (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). These feelings are amplified by how student veterans describe their peer's behavior in the classroom. Participants in multiple studies (Jenkins, 2020; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014) describe a lack of maturity in their college peers who do not seem to take college seriously. The age difference between student veterans and their peers also serves as a source of disconnect. Participants in one study referred to their classmates as "kids" and described their lack of experience in the world as a frustration (Wheeler, 2012). Similarly, DiRamio et al. (2008) conducted a multicampus study on student veterans transitioning from active duty in Iraq or Afghanistan to the role of a college student. They found that participants cited their recent combat experiences as a contributing factor in their struggle to connect with their peers. However, participants noted that they were often close in age with many of their fellow students. The ways student veterans describe the disconnect with their peers relates to similar feelings that first-generation students describe when entering the college environment (Pratt et al., 2019). Classroom participation has been found to impact whether first-generation students feel a sense of belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017). The experiences of student veterans in

transition indicate a need to consider how sense of belonging relates to peer interactions and how it is relevant to college students in transition.

Although student veterans struggle to connect with their non-veteran peers, the desire to build relationships with other student veterans is evident (DiRamio et al., 2008; Jenkins, 2020; Wheeler, 2012). In a study conducted by Jenkins (2020), participants shared their frustrations in connecting with other students and how they missed the “camaraderie” of military life. To fill the gap that military life provided, many student veterans turn to student veteran organizations to build community with other college students who share their experiences (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Jenkins, 2020). Although student veterans are often vocal about the need for a student veteran organization, many institutions are still behind in implementing one, leaving student veterans to seek opportunities to connect with other student veteran peers on their own (DiRamio et al., 2008; Wheeler, 2012). Despite the need for visible student veteran organizations on campus, some student veterans indicate a desire to connect with other student veterans but often are juggling multiple responsibilities, including family and work, and therefore do not have the extra time to dedicate to a student organization (Schiaivone & Gentry, 2014). These findings align with first-generation and transfer students who are often less engaged in student organizations and co-curricular activities due to family and work commitments (Lazarowicz, 2015; Nuñez, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). While the desire to get involved in college is there, not all students have the option to engage. Involvement in student organizations and co-curricular activities often lead to better outcomes, particularly within the first year of college (Tinto, 1999). The experiences of student veterans demonstrate the value of

exploring the role of involvement opportunities as students transition into the first year of college.

Despite the challenges that student veterans face in transitioning to college and connecting with their peers, there are aspects of their military experiences that prove beneficial in the transition process. Time management is a common theme throughout the literature (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). Although the literature describes the challenges that student veterans have in balancing coursework with family life as previously mentioned (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014), they also cope better with anxiety due to the organizational skills, time management skills, and training they received in the military (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). Others report that academic life does not feel as stressful compared to the rigor of military life (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). Maturity, while sometimes seen as a barrier in connecting with peers (DiRamio et al., 2008; Wheeler, 2012), is viewed by other student veterans as a positive factor. In a study conducted by Rumann and Hamrick (2010), student veterans highlight how they felt that they took college more seriously after wartime deployment, ultimately making the transition more manageable. The heightened focus on academics that student veterans report as they transition into college is similar to first-generation students (Pratt et al., 2019). However, first-generation students report more challenges with time management as they transition into college (Gibbons et al., 2019). These connections offer insight into an anti-deficit perspective and encourage research on students in transition that champions an approach that identifies positive attributes that benefit the transition experience and not simply barriers.

## **Transfer Students**

The transfer from a community college to a 4-year college or university is inherently filled with various transitional experiences. Just over 80% of the students who begin at a community college indicate that they plan to transfer and eventually earn a bachelor's degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). This has led several higher education researchers to pursue what it takes for students to successfully transfer (Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Walker & Okpala, 2017; Wang, 2012). With such a significant number of students hoping to transfer, their transitional experiences, as described through Schlossberg's Transition Theory, help illuminate the transition process for other student groups, such as first-generation students. The maturity and seriousness with which student veterans and first-generation students approach their academics (Pratt et al., 2019; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) is also represented in the transition experiences of transfer students (Lazarowicz, 2015). Through a series of interviews with transfer students in their first semester upon transferring, participants in Lazarowicz's (2015) study attributed their maturity levels to their decision to begin at a community college. They felt they took their education more seriously due to this experience, ultimately assisting in their navigation of the transition into the university setting. Using Schlossberg's Transition Theory, maturity is a coping mechanism for transfer students (Lazarowicz, 2015) and student veterans (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). While first-generation students report a more serious outlook on their academics (Nuñez, 2005; Pratt et al., 2019), the role of maturity as it relates to their transition experiences would benefit from further exploration.

Despite reporting enhanced levels of maturity compared to their peers, transfer students still identify maintaining a balance between academics and personal responsibilities as a critical

concern in transitioning from community college to a university setting (Berner, 2012; Burgess & Cisneros, 2018; Lazarowicz, 2015). Anxiety surrounding finances are high for transfer students, requiring many of them to work while attending school (Ellis, 2012). Transfer students describe balancing work hours with the time they need to study as overwhelming, particularly in their first semester of transferring (Berner, 2012; Lazarowicz, 2015). For some transfer students, hours worked results in less student organization participation (Lazarowicz, 2015). Other studies found that if transfer students could find time to participate in organizations on campus, this helped them transition into their new environment (Berner, 2012). Participation in student organizations enhances outcomes for first-generation students in the first year of college, yet they also report high concerns regarding finances and tend to work higher hours while attending school (Demetriou et al., 2017; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pratt et al., 2019). The experiences of student veterans (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Jenkins, 2020) provides insight into the benefits and challenges of providing these opportunities as a form of support through the transition into college.

While finding a balance between involvement and academics is one way that transfer students navigate the transition from community college to the university, they also find support in their family relationships (Berner, 2012; Byrd, 2017; Sklyar, 2017). Transfer students report that family provided a positive role in their transition (Berner, 2012) and they often rely on their family to make important decisions regarding their transfer (Sklyar, 2017). However, in some instances, transfer students described their family as both a support and a source of pressure (Byrd, 2017). Transfer students who lived at home also explained how family members could often serve as a distraction, particularly if they did not understand the student's desire to transfer

(Lazarowicz, 2015). The complicated dynamics of family support and pressure in transition experiences is also described by student athletes (Noboa, 2020). First-generation students describe the complex role that family plays in transitioning into college as well, particularly when family members do not have college experience (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016).

Although the role of family support in the transition experiences of transfer students is complicated, the literature consistently supports the importance of student support services in navigating the transfer process (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). However, transfer students often struggle to navigate these resources. In some instances, transfer students report a lack of understanding about what resources are available to them and share they were unaware that academic advising and transfer centers were offered (Sklyar, 2017). Others accessed these services late in the transfer process, causing unique difficulties and frustration (Berner, 2012). Regardless of whether transfer students access support services, one common theme emerged throughout the literature on transfer students – a reluctance to ask for help (Berner, 2012; Byrd, 2017; Lazarowicz, 2015; Sklyar, 2017). Some transfer students cited personal responsibility and felt that regardless of resources available, the decision to be successful was in their hands (Lazarowicz, 2015). Others reported apprehension surrounding asking for help because they felt they would be perceived differently or that they would be a bother to faculty and staff members (Berner, 2012; Byrd, 2017; Sklyar, 2017). The hesitation with which transfer students approach asking for help during a transition is of interest. First-generation students also report reluctance in asking for help as they transition into college (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Many first-generation students report feeling that asking for help from faculty members would label them as a hindrance or perceive that faculty members are not concerned (Longwell-Grice &

Longwell-Grice, 2008; Terenzini et al., 1996). Accessing support services, both social and academic, is critical to success in the first year of college (Tinto, 1999), warranting further investigation into how to enhance support services in transition, particularly within the first year of college.

### **Toward an Understanding of the Transition Experiences of First-Generation Students**

Across the literature covered in these sections, researchers have found that students who navigate the transition into and through college – whether they be student athletes, student veterans, or transfer students – experience unique challenges and opportunities depending on the type of transition they experience (Clark, 2005; Hiester et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2010; Kirchner, 2015). Student athletes work to renegotiate their identity and find a sense of belonging when transitioning from collegiate sports (Saxe et al., 2017; Smith & Hardin, 2020). Student veterans struggle to connect with their peers while also capitalizing on their strengths from the military (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). Transfer students strive to balance personal responsibilities and academic opportunities (Berner, 2012; Burgess & Cisneros, 2018; Lazarowicz, 2015). Each of these populations has two overarching commonalities – their stories have benefited from the lens of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, and each has direct connections to the transition experiences of first-generation students (Demetriou et al., 2017; Gibbons et al., 2019; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). Yet, studies that focus on first-generation students in transition do not use Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to understand their findings. The experiences of the populations explored in this literature review provided the groundwork to delve further into the transitions of first-

generation students in the first year of college. This study sought to fill a portion of this gap by exploring the experiences that first-generation students have with support services, specifically academic advising, as they transition into their first year of college utilizing Schlossberg's Transition Theory.

### **Chapter Summary**

Published research related to first-generation students attending community college is limited (Karp et al., 2020). Although research exploring the experiences of first-generation students has continued to increase, studies related to the experiences of first-generation students enrolled at community colleges as it relates to academic advising remains sparse (Alexitch, 2002; Alvarado & Olson, 2020; Bitz, 2010; Donaldson et al., 2016; Ellis, 2014; Fike & Fike, 2008; Griffin et al., 2019; Karp et al., 2020; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Schwebel et al., 2008; Smith, 2002; Swecker et al., 2013; Workman, 2015).

First-generation students continue to be more likely to attend a community college than their continuing-generation peers. While they continue to represent a significant portion of the community college population, the number of degrees they achieve has not kept pace (Chen, 2005; RTI International, 2019). Although students enroll in community college for various reasons, many often enroll to obtain a bachelor's degree. Yet, continuing-generation students who begin at community colleges continue to complete bachelor's degrees at nearly five times the rate of first-generation students who begin at community college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This reality emphasizes the importance of exploring the experience of first-generation community college students. Through this exploration, researchers can begin to understand what factors play



a role in the persistence of this population, specifically the impact of support services, such as academic advising.

This chapter sets the foundation for understanding the community college environment, the first-generation student population, and the current understanding of the experiences that first-generation community college students have, including an overview of the support services that support this population. An understanding of academic advising and the role it plays in the first year of college provides a backdrop to understanding what is known about the experiences that first-generation students have with academic advising. This understanding exposes where the gaps exist related to first-generation community college students' experiences with advising as they transition into their first year of community college. Chapter 3 will outline the methodology used to guide this study on first-generation community college students' experiences with academic advising in their first year of college.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter identifies the research methods used in this study. The chapter begins with a restatement of the research questions that guided this study. The first section outlines the epistemology that guided this study and the role of the researcher in the form of a positionality statement. A detailed explanation of why I selected a qualitative research design and how using a case study methodology aligned with the questions I sought to answer in this study follows. The following section outlines the research methods used for this study, including the participant selection process, the research site, and the data collection and data analysis procedures. The last section focuses on trustworthiness and an outline of the timeline for this study.

#### **Research Questions**

To advance the research on first-generation students enrolled in community college, this qualitative study explored the advising experiences of first-generation students attending community college in their first year. To fulfill that purpose, this study explored the following questions:

1. How do first-time, full-time, first-generation students attending community college describe their experiences with academic advising in their first year of college?
2. How do the advising experiences of first-time, full-time first-generation students reflect the expectations for advising in the first year of college established by the student services office at one, two-year public community college in the Midwest?

#### **Epistemology**

Before I began outlining my research design, it was crucial that I reflected on how I think about research and its role in this study. Creswell (2014) defines worldviews as “a general

philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study” (p. 6). In my experiences working in higher education, I have had the opportunity to work directly with community college students, whether first-generation or continuing-generation. Creswell (2014) describes one worldview, social constructivism, as a way for individuals to make sense of the world through the places they live and work. As I considered this study and my role as a researcher, higher education professional, and academic advisor, the worldview that ultimately shaped this inquiry was a social constructivist view.

Creswell (2013) notes that in a social constructivist worldview, individuals “develop subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed toward certain objects or things” (p. 24). He states, “These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas” (p. 24). Researchers who use this paradigm understand that their own experiences shape their interpretation of the data they collect. Yet, they also recognize that their experience is just one version of many that exist. In this study, I wanted to understand how first-time, full-time first-generation community college students viewed their experiences with academic advising in their first year, not just what I assumed or believed they were experiencing.

To focus on the participant’s multiple perspectives, the questions I asked were broad and open-ended, allowing each participant to share their personal experience. As Creswell (2013) highlights, the goal of research through a social constructivist worldview is to rely as much as possible on the participant’s understanding of the situation. These experiences were subjective. In my experience working as an academic advisor over the years, I have realized I can rely on one thing. Each student I interact with is different. If I try to approach every student similarly, I

take away their individuality. This study was no different. Each participant experienced academic advising differently and constructed meaning based on their individual experience. When using a social constructivist worldview, Creswell (2013) states that “The researcher’s intent, then, is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world” (p. 24). To that end, if I did not give voice to the participant’s individual experiences and view them as experts in their understanding, I would not have provided a true window into how they experienced advising in their first year of college. Furthermore, the use of a case study methodology provided the context necessary to best interpret the experiences the participants had with academic advising, as the subjective experiences of the participants in this study took place within one specific environment – the student services office at one, two-year public community college in the Midwest.

### **Positionality Statement**

Given my role as the primary researcher for this study, I must share how my experiences impact my approach to this topic. Although I did not attend a community college, I identify as a first-generation college student. While I have my undergraduate and master's degrees to remind me how far I have come, this aspect of my identity remains salient as I pursue my doctoral degree. With each degree earned, I have felt that I might be able to shed this part of my identity and begin to feel more confident. Yet, as I began my doctoral journey, I found the same feelings of inadequacy resurfacing as I wondered how I would navigate this experience successfully. Moving through my doctoral coursework, I have realized that this piece of me will always be present in academic settings, and I must work to reconcile them as they emerge.

As the primary instrument for data collection in this study, this aspect of my identity impacted how I interacted with the participants and reflected on the interview data. Some phrases or stories resonated with me more deeply, especially when they resembled my experience or a feeling I had as a first-time, first-generation college student. Due to my personal history with this subject, it was critical that I shared this piece of my identity in the study as it is a part of who I am and why I continue to seek more information to assist first-generation students.

In addition to my identity as a first-generation college student, I currently serve in an academic advising role. I have held this role for over six years. This study explored how first-generation students experience and understand academic advising. It is essential to note this aspect of my identity. My role as an academic advisor drives my desire to learn more about how academic advising impacts first-generation students.

Additionally, I have a strong passion for academic advising. My advising experiences over the past six years drive my desire to learn more about how this role can help students persist through college. Despite the passion that my role as an academic advisor provides to this study, I would be remiss if I did not mention that this role also affords me power in the form of my familiarity with the hierarchy of higher education. This aspect of my identity results in a unique position that I needed to be aware of as I interacted with the participants in this study. Specifically, it was essential to note this as I asked the participants questions regarding their advising experiences.

### **Research Design**

Given that this study explored the individual experiences of first-generation community college students, this study utilized a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is “a way

of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). While quantitative research designs hinge on the concept that the answer is already out there, waiting to be discovered, qualitative research designs center on the idea that individuals construct knowledge as they experience a phenomenon or engage in an activity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since this study aimed to understand better how first-generation community college students experience academic advising, a qualitative approach was a logical choice.

### **Case Study Methodology**

I conducted this study using a case study research design to explore the experiences that first-generation community college students have with academic advising in their first year at Midwest Community College. A case study was most appropriate for this study for three specific reasons. First, according to Yin (2018), a case study method provides a “distinct advantage” when “a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which a researcher has little or no control” (p. 13). In this study, the focus was on the advising experiences of the participants and how they understood these experiences. As the researcher, I could not manipulate these experiences, and a case study approach served to illuminate and explore how the participants understood their experiences.

Second, a case study method provides “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Binding the case outlines what the scope of the research project does and does not include (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This study focused on the advising experiences of first-generation community college students attending one two-year community college in the Midwest. Academic advising is administered through the student services office at

MCC, and expectations for advising, including policy and procedures, are set within this office.

For this reason, the student services office served as the bounded system in this study.

Finally, a case study method allows for an investigation into “a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context” (Yin, 2018, p. 15). Specifically, this study sought to understand how first-generation students experience academic advising. A case study methodology assumes that “such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to your case” (Yin, 2018, p. 15). A case study approach was essential in this study because while the advising experiences of first-generation community college students were the focus, I could not consider these experiences without the context, and more specifically, the advising expectations set by the student services office at MCC. In this case, I could not dismiss the context of the office.

In qualitative research, various methods exist to choose from when building a research study. The distinguishing features of a case study methodology guided the selection of the methods used in this study. This study took the topic of advising experiences and explored it through the bounded context of a case study methodology (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Focusing on a bounded system is a case study's most distinctive methodological feature. Additionally, qualitative case studies provide understanding through thick description, experiential understanding, and multiple perspectives (Stake, 1995). Case study research utilizes multiple forms of qualitative data sources, such as interviews, document analysis, observation, and a specific focus on the environment or context to achieve this understanding (Jones et al., 2014). Given the reasons above, I used a qualitative case study methodology to guide this study.

## **Research Methods**

In this section, I will outline the details of the research site where this study took place, the participant selection process, and the data collection and analysis procedures that I used.

### **Setting and Environment**

The site for this study, Midwest Community College (MCC; a pseudonym), was a medium, public, two-year community college located in the Midwest. MCC is one of three community colleges within a larger district system, serving the most significant number of students between the three main campuses. In addition to the three main campuses, the district has centers in seven different communities within a geographic area that stretches more than 120 miles from north to south.

MCC was founded in 1966 and enrolls more than 4,500 students each academic year in career and technical education (CTE) and transfer courses. For the Fall 2021 semester, MCC enrolled 4,887 students. In terms of sex, 52.6% identified as female, with 43.8% identifying as male. MCC is a predominately White campus, with 63.7% of students identifying as white. The average age of students on campus is 25, and if removing dual-enrolled students, 49.1% attend full-time, and 50.9% attend part-time. In fall 2021, MCC welcomed a total of 748 new students. As of the fall 2021 semester, 41.4% of MCC students identify as first-generation.

I made a purposeful decision to select a setting for this study that provided an optimum environment to answer the research questions of this study (Stake, 1995). MCC has a considerable portion of first-generation students and a significant full-time population. According to the AACC (2020), among the 6.2 million students enrolled in community colleges across the United States, 35% are considered full-time. Given that 49.1% of MCC students



attend full-time, MCC offers an ideal setting to study full-time students. My positionality also factored into selecting MCC as the setting for this research study, based on my previous experience working at a public, two-year community college. MCC satisfied these criteria, and provided an ideal setting to explore the advising experiences of first-generation community college students.

### **Participant Selection**

I recruited participants for this study at a two-year community college in the Midwest, referred to throughout this study as Midwest Community College (MCC). The first group of participants in this study consisted of students. When prospective students apply to MCC, they answer questions about their parents' highest degree earned on the general application. MCC uses this information to determine which students identify as first-generation. Working with the dean of students, I received a list of students who identified as first-generation and enrolled in the fall of 2021 for the first time. After the dean of students identified potential participants, he sent me their names for further screening.

I reached out to the potential participants via email to determine their interest in participating in the study from the names I received. When interested students responded, I provided them with an overview of the study and answered any questions. Eight students responded to the initial recruitment email, and seven committed to an interview. Each participant answered basic demographic questions and I confirmed that they identified as a first-generation college student and were enrolled for the first time in the fall of 2021.

This study's second group of participants were full-time academic advisors employed at MCC in the student services office. Working with the dean of students, I received a list of

advisors in the office. After the dean of students identified potential participants, he sent me their names. I emailed each advisor individually to determine their interest in participating in this study. Two advisors responded to the initial recruitment email for the advisor interviews, and I provided them with the details of the study and answered any questions. Both advisors committed to an interview.

### **Data Collection**

Multiple sources are a trademark of a good case study methodology (Yin, 2018). Each source provides another layer of understanding to explore the case, ultimately contributing to a greater understanding of the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In case study research, collecting data through various sources can be both attractive and dangerous, as accumulating more data requires increasingly rigorous data management and organization (Baxter & Jack, 2008). To balance the desire to provide a rich understanding of the case with the need to review all data sources, I focused on interviews and document analysis for this study. According to Yin (2018), “One of the most important sources of case study evidence is the interview” (p. 118). The use of semi-structured interviews in this study provided the most direct way to understand the participants' perspectives. In addition to interviews, document analysis provided additional context related to the setting of this study.

### ***Interviews***

For the student interviews, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant. In these interviews, I learned more about how they experienced academic advising, including how they made meaning of their experiences through retelling their encounters with advising and the implications these experiences had on their first year of college. Along with gathering

background information, I also asked questions designed to explore the participant's basic understanding of advising, such as, "How would you define what an advisor is?" and "What role do you believe academic advising plays in your college experience?" These questions prompted participants to provide information about how they define academic advising and came to understand their experiences with academic advising.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant for the academic advisor interviews. These interviews focused on understanding the academic advising experience from the advisor's perspective. Along with gathering information regarding each advisor's approach to advising, I asked questions related to how each advisor experienced advisor training at MCC, how advisors discuss academic advising at MCC, and what the advising expectations are from an advisor perspective. Additionally, I used these interviews to gauge how academic advisors perceive students' advising experience.

After agreeing to participate in an interview, participants completed a short demographic survey and then scheduled a time to meet with me to complete the interview. I interviewed each participant one time for this study. Interviews were conducted throughout October and early November 2022 in person and via Zoom. Each interview lasted between 25 – 60 minutes. After greeting the participant, I provided them with an overview of the study, answered any questions they might have regarding the study, and had them review and sign the consent form. With participant permission, each interview was recorded using either a cell phone or the recording feature on Zoom. I transcribed each interview verbatim. Participants were sent a copy of their interview transcript and asked to make any comments or changes. Two student participants submitted requests for changes, both were related to spelling. One advisor participant submitted

a clarification. After any requested change was made, I would send it back out for a final review. Once I received confirmation from each participant that their transcript was accurate, I began data analysis.

### ***Document Analysis***

Document analysis provided additional information to corroborate information from individual participant interviews. I used documents to support my overall understanding of the case and to identify any discrepancies. Items collected and reviewed include the advisor training manual, an advisor job description, material from orientation – including in person and online orientation materials, advising meeting agendas and minutes, a new student checklist, emails to advisors from leadership related to advising topics, and the website. Examining these documents provided more context and understanding of how MCC outlines the role of academic advising for both academic advisors and students at MCC. The academic advisor job description, advising meeting agendas and minutes, emails to advisors from leadership, and training materials provided valuable insight into the expectations for advisors. The new student checklist, orientation materials and information collected from the website outlined the expectations advisors have for students within the advising relationship.

### **Data Analysis**

In the first step of data analysis, I read through each interview transcript to familiarize myself with the transcript and highlighted any mention of academic advising. This allowed for me to gain a general understanding of each participant's experience before delving into coding. After my initial read-through, I used descriptive coding and In Vivo Coding (Miles et al., 2020)

to label common phrases throughout each transcript. I completed this process for each interview transcript.

Once all interviews were coded, I looked at all the codes generated from the student interview transcripts and grouped them into broad themes that captured the overall experiences the student participants had with academic advising. I then followed this same protocol for the advisor interviews to gain a sense of their overall experience as academic advisors. Once themes were generated from both student participant interviews and advisor interviews, I reviewed all themes to look for commonalities, as well as discrepancies, between the student and advisor experiences.

In addition to interviews, I collected documents and reviewed Midwest Community College's website to provide additional context to the study. Items collected and reviewed include the advisor training manual, an advisor job description, material from orientation – including in person and online orientation materials, advising meeting agendas and minutes, a new student checklist, and emails to advisors from leadership related to advising topics. Information reviewed from the website included any mention of academic advising.

For data analysis, I followed a similar protocol as the interviews. I read through and reviewed each document to familiarize myself with the content and highlighted any mention of academic advising. After I read through each document, I used descriptive coding and In Vivo Coding (Miles et al., 2020) to code each document. Once all documents were coded, I looked for commonalities and grouped the codes into themes. These themes served to expand on the data collected through interviews or to corroborate stories shared through the interview portion of data collection.

After I had analyzed all student interviews, advisor interviews, and documents, I took the emergent themes from each data source and looked for common themes across all three sources. As I began to group the common themes together, I noticed that there were also themes that did not appear to be similar. Instead, these themes illustrated a disconnect between the student experience with advising and the advisors' expectations for advising. Furthermore, in some situations, the advising experiences of the students and the advisors' understanding of their role aligned but also deviated from the institution's expectations for academic advising. Finally, I noticed some themes represented essential aspects of first-generation community college students' experiences with the transition into college. Although they did not represent a connection or disconnection between advising experiences and expectations, they emerged as significant findings from the data. Through this final data analysis, three categories emerged to organize the findings – connections, disconnections, and first-generation college student transition experiences.

### **Trustworthiness**

To enhance this study's trustworthiness, I used member checking strategies throughout this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995). After initial data collection, I sent each participant a transcript of their interview for their review and encouraged them to send any comments or corrections. As I began data analysis, I shared my emergent findings with participants to ensure that the interpretation of each participant's story aligned with how they recounted their experiences during their interview. Finally, as I completed my work on this study, I shared a copy of the final manuscript with each participant for a final review before

submission. This process ensured I stayed true to each participant's experiences and served as a check to confirm that my own biases did not impact my data interpretation.

### **Chapter Summary**

This study explored the experiences that first-generation community college students have with academic advising in their first year of college. I used a qualitative research design to highlight the individual experiences that the participants had with advising. Given that this study took place at one public two-year community college in the Midwest, the use of a case study methodology highlighted the bounded nature of this study. Through multiple readings of each interview, common patterns emerged and formed into themes that illustrated the participant's experiences with academic advising. Chapter 4 will discuss these findings in depth.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The experiences that first-generation community college students have with academic advising in their first year of college was the primary motivation for this study. I wanted to gain insight into how they understand advising to better inform the higher education community and, more specifically, those who practice academic advising. Additionally, using Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1984) as a lens, I wanted to gain an understanding of how first-generation community college students perceive academic advising as a support through their transition into, and through, their first year of college. To best understand the student experience with advising, in addition to hearing from first-generation community college students, I also spoke with academic advisors employed at the institution to gain an awareness of the institutional priorities regarding academic advising. The information obtained in these interviews, along with documents from the student services office, provide context to the experiences these students shared.

This chapter begins with a summary of the methodology used to conduct this study. This summary is followed by a detailed section on the participants of this study, including demographics, for both student and advisor participants. The findings from this study are presented in themes derived from the three primary sources of data collection – student interviews, advisor interviews, and document analysis. These themes are categorized into three sections – connections, disconnections, and first-generation college student transition experiences to best illustrate the ways in which first-generation community college students experience academic advising and how those experiences reflect the expectations of their academic advisors and the institution. Implications related to Schlossberg's Transition Theory



(1984) will be discussed in the final chapter, including how first-generation community college students experiences with academic advising as a support through their transition into the first year of college.

### **Methodology Summary**

Findings for this study were gathered through two methods. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with first-generation community college students and community college academic advisors from the same institution. In addition to interviews, I collected documents and reviewed Midwest Community College's website to provide additional context to the study. Items collected and reviewed include the advisor training manual, an advisor job description, material from orientation – including in person and online orientation materials, advising meeting agendas and minutes, a new student checklist, the institution's website, and emails to advisors from leadership related to advising topics.

After I had analyzed all student interviews, advisor interviews, and documents, I took the emergent themes from each data source and looked for common themes across all three sources. As I began to group the common themes together, I noticed that there were also themes that did not appear to be similar. Instead, these themes illustrated a disconnect between the student experience with advising and the advisors' expectations for advising. Furthermore, in some situations, the advising experiences of the students and the advisors' understanding of their role aligned but also deviated from the institution's expectations for academic advising. Finally, I noticed some themes represented essential aspects of first-generation community college students' experiences with the transition into college. Although they did not represent a connection or disconnection between advising experiences and expectations, they emerged as

significant findings from the data. Through this final data analysis, three categories emerged to organize the findings – connections, disconnections, and first-generation college student transition experiences.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study fit into two categories – students and advisors. I interviewed a total of seven students and two academic advisors. The following section provides a brief summary of each participant group, followed by detailed descriptions of each participant.

#### **Student Participants**

All student participants are students attending Midwest Community College (MCC). They all enrolled at this institution for the first time in the Fall 2021 semester. I recruited the student participants via email, with the assistance of the Dean of Students in providing me with a list of eligible participants. Eight students responded to the initial recruitment email, and seven committed to an interview. All seven students completed an interview. Three interviews were completed in person, and four were conducted over Zoom. The interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 60 minutes in length. After the seventh student interview, I did not pursue further interviews as I was no longer receiving new information but hearing similar experiences from each student. At this point, I realized I had reached data saturation and stopped working to recruit additional student participants for the study. Table 1 provides a brief snapshot of each participant, including demographic and degree information, followed by a detailed description of each participant. All student participants are identified with a pseudonym.

**Table 1***Student Participant Details*

| Participant | Age     | Ethnicity              | Sex    | Degree Program                          | Degree Intention |
|-------------|---------|------------------------|--------|---|------------------|
| Hannah      | 18 – 24 | White                  | Female | American Sign Language Interpreter, AAS | AAS              |
| Ashley      | 18 – 24 | White                  | Female | Business Management, AAS                | AAS              |
| Mindy       | 25 – 34 | Asian/Pacific Islander | Female | Associate of Sciences                   | BS               |
| Shay        | 18 – 24 | White                  | Female | Associate of Arts                       | BS               |
| Ellie       | 18 – 24 | Hispanic/Latinx        | Female | Associate of Arts                       | BS               |
| Lucy        | 18 – 24 | White                  | Female | Biology Transfer Major, AS              | MD               |
| Jenna       | 18 – 24 | Hispanic/Latinx        | Female | Associate of Arts                       | BA               |

***Hannah***

Hannah graduated high school in 2020 and took a year off between high school and college to work. After working at a Christian bible camp for nine months, she enrolled at Midwest Community College to pursue their American Sign Language Interpreter program. This program lasts three years and results in an Associate of Applied Science degree, which is Hannah’s ultimate goal. During Hannah’s first semester at MCC, she was not working, but by her second semester, she picked up a part-time job along with her classes. Hannah shared that her mother has an “associate’s equivalent” from a trade school and that her father graduated from high school and then joined the military.

***Ashley***

Ashley graduated from high school in 2020 and took a year off between high school and college to work. She works at McDonalds and has a manager position, a job she has continued to work while attending school. Ashley is pursuing the Business Management program at MCC, which will result in an Associate of Applied Science, Ashley's end goal. Ashley considered various degree programs before landing on Business Management, including Psychology and Sonography. Ashley shared that she hopes to open her own business someday. Ashley's father works in the construction business and has no college experience.

***Mindy***

Mindy provides the most diverse experience within this study as her high school education is from India, her home country. She completed three years of university in India but could not complete her degree. Several years ago, after moving to the United States, she completed an English as a Second Language program at another local community college. Her experience at MCC is her first pursuit of an undergraduate degree in the United States. Mindy is pursuing an Associate in Science and plans to transfer to a local university to complete a Computer Science degree. She is married and has two young children. Both of her parents live in her home country, and she shared they run a family business but did not attend university in India. Mindy helped with her family's small business when she lived in India, but she is not currently working while attending school.

***Shay***

Shay graduated high school in 2018 and shortly after completed a certificate to become a Medical Assistant. After working for a short time in that role, she realized it was not what she

wanted to pursue long-term and took a job working at a daycare. While working there, she decided to return to school but was still determining what she wanted to pursue. She initially began at MCC in the Supply Chain and Logistics program but then switched to an Associate in Arts. She now plans to graduate and transfer to a state university to pursue a degree in teaching. Shay's mom attended a trade school for hair, but instead of following that path ended up opening a trucking company and now works for the family's construction business. Shay's father is a mechanic for the family business and has no college experience.

### ***Ellie***

Ellie graduated high school in 2021 and enrolled at MCC the following fall. Initially, she was unsure if she wanted to attend college to go Pre-Med or pursue a Forensic Science degree. She is now pursuing an Associate in Arts and plans to transfer to a university to complete a degree in Forensic Science. Ellie is the youngest of four children. Ellie's father is a first-generation immigrant from Mexico and completed up to a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade education. Ellie's mother briefly started college but did not stay enrolled long as her parents started a family, and she has not returned to finish.

### ***Lucy***

Lucy graduated high school in 2021 and enrolled at MCC the following fall. She plans to become a doctor and is pursuing the Biology Transfer Major at MCC, an Associate in Science degree. Transfer majors are designed to help students transfer smoothly within the state by pursuing a pathway program explicitly created for transfer. Lucy is a twin, and her sister attends another local community college. Lucy's father did not complete high school, and her mother completed high school and never attended college.

***Jenna***

Jenna graduated high school in 2021 and enrolled at MCC the following fall. She is still unsure what path she would like to pursue but is currently working on her Associate in Arts at MCC. She shared that she does plan to transfer to a university and is currently considering Marketing as a potential major. Jenna is the youngest of four children, and Jenna's parents are first-generation immigrants from Mexico. Both of her parents are the oldest of many children in their families, and she shared that both parents only completed up to 6th grade before they had to drop out of school to take care of their younger siblings.

**Advisor Participants**

Both advisor participants are employed full-time at Midwest Community College. I recruited the student participants via email, with the assistance of the Dean of Students in providing me with a list of eligible participants. Two advisors responded to the initial recruitment email for the advisor interviews, and both committed to an interview. The interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 60 minutes in length, and both were completed in person. Table 2 provides a brief snapshot of each advisor, including years of advising experience and degree background, followed by a short description of each participant. All participants are identified with a pseudonym.

**Table 2***Advisor Participant Details*

| Participant | Years Advising | Ethnicity | Sex    | Degree                          |
|-------------|----------------|-----------|--------|---------------------------------|
| Megan       | 1.5            | White     | Female | MS, Higher Education Leadership |
| Elizabeth   | 1.5            | White     | Female | MBA, Business Administration    |

***Megan***

Megan is an academic advisor in the student services office at Midwest Community College. She started at MCC in July 2021. Before this role, she served as an admissions counselor at a private four-year institution in the area. Her undergraduate degrees are in Business and Spanish, and she has a master's in Higher Education Leadership. Megan is a member of NACADA (The Global Community for Academic Advising) and has a special interest in exploring diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in higher education.

***Elizabeth***

Elizabeth is an academic advisor in the student services office at Midwest Community College. She started at MCC in July 2021. Before this role, she served in various admissions roles at a private four-year institution over the span of 20 years. Her experiences working with transfer students in that role sparked her interest in jumping into the advising realm within community colleges. Her undergraduate degree is in Business Administration, and she also has an MBA in Business Administration.

## Findings

The findings from this study represent data collected through three main sources – student interviews, advisor interviews, and document analysis. I conducted interviews with seven first-generation community college students to better understand the student experience with academic advising at Midwest Community College. In addition to student interviews, information obtained through interviews with two academic advisors provided insight into the advisor’s perspective of how they understand their role as academic advisors and how they view the role of academic advising. Along with student and advisor interviews, an analysis of various documents provided context to the information collected through interviews. Items reviewed include the advisor training manual, advisor job description, material from orientation – including in-person and online orientation materials, advising meeting agendas and minutes, new student checklist, emails to advisors from leadership related to advising topics, and the website. Examining these documents provided an understanding of how MCC outlines the role of academic advising for both academic advisors and students. The academic advisor job description, training materials, meeting meetings, and email communications provided valuable insight into the expectations for advisors. The orientation materials, the new student checklist, and the website outline how the advising relationship is explained to students.

Through the interviews with student and advisor participants and the analysis of the documents provided by Midwest Community College, six main themes emerged – academic guidance, emotional support, access and availability for first-generation students, lack of depth in advisor training, opportunity, and adjusting to college. In this section, I have organized the themes into three categories – connections, disconnections, and first-generation college student



transition experiences. The first category represents how the experiences of first-generation community college students align with the expectations of the advisors and the institution. The second category highlights the themes that reveal how the student advising experience deviates from the advisors' understanding of their role, as set forward by the institution. The third category includes themes from the data analysis that do not necessarily connect across data sources but emerged as significant findings from the data. This category is labeled as first-generation college student transition experiences.

### **Connections**

Across the three sources of data collection – student interviews, advisor interviews, and document analysis – a clear alignment emerged regarding the student experience with academic advising and the advisor and institutional expectations for the academic advising role. In this section, I expand on the theme of academic guidance that reflects this alignment. This theme will be described below and supported by quotes from students, advisors, and the documents reviewed during data analysis.

### ***Academic Guidance***

The most significant area that emerged when the student participants discussed their experiences with academic advising surrounded the advisor helping with course selection and academic planning. Hannah described a moment with her advisor that illustrates how she felt about the guidance she received, sharing:

It was a Zoom appointment and she showed me all of the classes I would have to take for the next two and a half years. And she said, 'Hey, some of these classes you might want to take earlier, some of them you might want to take later. You can't rearrange a lot of

your classes because they build on each other, but the ones that you can, I would advise you to rearrange...then you already have all that set up for every semester of your college career.’ And I was like wow, this is amazing. I didn’t even know what I was going to be studying in my career, in my degree, but now I do.

Once Hannah found an advisor who helped her plan her degree, things clicked into place.

While guidance through the academic plan is essential, many participants associated their academic advisor with putting them on the path to graduation. Shay’s interview highlights this as she states, “I would just say they’re going to put you on the right track and get you set up with the classes that you need to graduate...they just give you opportunities and get you set up for success.” This idea of an advisor putting you “on the right track” also came up with Lucy as she shares:

I think a lot of what I want to do, I kind of already had an idea of, going into my meetings with her, but she helps me, like set on the right path. I don’t know, I think it would be a lot harder if she was not there to figure out how to do what I want to do.

In Lucy’s case, she highlights how the advisor does not necessarily tell her what to do but instead guides her toward the best path to execute her plans.

In several cases, participants planned to finish their degrees and transfer to another institution. Although they were not yet there, many discussed how important it was to receive assistance from their community college advisor to keep them on track toward their long-term goals of a bachelor’s degree. Shay shares:

She set me up to have all these classes that I'm taking right now be applicable to [transfer school] and meet their requirements so I can graduate from there on time and not have to retake any courses and just so I don't waste any time.

Again, Shay focuses on the importance of advisor guidance to ensure she's taking the correct classes at the community college to graduate in the future. In Mindy's case, the guidance she received from her community college advisor was instrumental in navigating a connection between her transfer school. Mindy states:

She communicates to me, and she communicates to [transfer school] and the advisor from [transfer school] and then my advisor sends me the details. She is the mediator, right?

The main person. If she's not there, how do you know in the community college?

For these students, guidance through academic planning was necessary not just for the classes they would take at the community college but also for the courses they would take at their transfer institutions.

Ultimately, guidance through signing up for classes and building out an academic plan for graduation emerged as some of the most significant aspects of advising for the student participants. For these students, feeling secure with their academic plan and taking the right classes is critical to graduation and future degrees. Despite the important role of the advisor here, it is also worth mentioning that guidance is selected purposefully, as the students all recognized their role, too. Jenna says it best when she states, "So, I would say definitely being a good guide. But in a way it's like guiding you, they're not the ones in front. It's like they're letting you. They're not pushing you, but they're like, it's okay." Here, Jenna highlights that guidance is

crucial because although the advisor is there to help navigate the path, she recognizes that as the student, she is behind the wheel.

When I asked each advisor participant how they would describe an academic advisor, their answers also centered around guiding students. According to Megan, “But I would just say generally an advisor is someone...that is a representative, obviously, of the institution of some sort, that guides the students through the process and helps them navigate that.” Elizabeth echoed this sentiment in her interview when asked what an advisor does, saying, “Usually trying to walk them through the process...and I talk with the student about, you know, what they want to do and why they’re here. And to help them follow their path.” Megan and Elizabeth use the term “process” to articulate the experience they guide students through. Elizabeth expanded on what this “process” entails a little further in her interview sharing:

Basically, in my eyes, I feel like we’re the first stop for a student to enroll. And we’re kind of the one stop shop, you know? We’re here to make sure the student has everything in for the application, the transcripts, reminding students about FAFSA...so we’re basically the first point in order to set up the student for success.

Although both advisors chose to describe their role using the term guide many times, they also used other names to describe guidance. For example, Megan states:

As an advisor, I think it’s [the advising role] very important and I think that we are, like I said, the ones that are introducing students to a lot of different resources and a point person...in a lot of different ways.

When asked about the role that academic advising plays in a student’s overall college experience, Elizabeth stated, “I think it plays a very important role...the academic advisor, I

think, does a lot of the work that drives a student to do well. I mean, it's their cheerleader, basically." Overall, each participant emphasized the important role of guide, or navigator, that the advisor plays early on, assisting in getting students enrolled into the college and helping them manage the various resources they are introduced to at the beginning of their college experience.

While each advisor began with discussing the initial enrollment process, eventually, they also discussed their role of guiding students through registering for classes. When asked about a typical advising session, Elizabeth shares:

So usually I just ask them questions about themselves, what they want to do, why they're here.... And then, basically I ask them if they want to be registered for classes and if they don't, just say, 'Hey, let's schedule another appointment.' But if they do...just kind of walking through the process and getting registered.

Elizabeth later goes on further regarding registration, sharing that is her understanding of the expected outcome of advising appointments. She explains, "That's my understanding of my role – you know, get the student registered, if they want to get registered, make sure they're happy with the schedule, and make sure that they understand the responsibilities of everything as well, too."

Even when registration was not yet possible, guiding students through the process of preparing for registration was also a major focus of academic advising appointments. For example, when describing advising appointments, Megan distinguished between "registration appointments" and "info session" appointments. When describing informational sessions, Megan shared these are:

Appointments which are not enrolled students or applied students by any means. It could be anyone just wanting to come in and talk... Which in an info session that outlines, 'Hey, this is what we're talking about. We're not registering for classes in this.' And I make sure to reassure that because that's another common thing is that people want to come in and usually talk through the whole process and register and that is usually, even in an hour, not possible.

So, although Megan explains some appointments are not necessarily designed for registration, that often is the expectation from the student – or prospective student – side and something that academic advisors have to prepare to guide students through.

Elizabeth also mentioned information sessions as a precursor to the advising appointment, sharing, "Yeah, because sometimes the first meeting we have with them it's their first time on campus.... So just kind of more informational sessions. And then having the actual advising session later on, where you actually register the student." Elizabeth ties the "actual advising session" to the act of registration, illustrating her understanding of the advising appointment. Ultimately, whether intentional or planned, both advisor participants outlined that the focus of advising appointments is often centered on guiding students through the registration process and ensuring they understand the expectations their schedule entails.

When reviewing the documents related to academic advising, a focus on academic guidance also emerged immediately, particularly regarding course registration. The academic advisor job description lists several areas for which an academic advisor is responsible, and one of the top bullet points lists, "assist a diverse student population with course selection, creation of academic plans, [the] registration process, and facilitating the transfer of students to four-year

colleges/universities.” Course selection and registration are specifically mentioned in relation to “professional guidance” in a list of terms provided to the academic advisor within their training process. In this list of terms, an advisor is defined as follows:

Advisors provide students with professional guidance in just about any area that might be related to your college success. This could mean anything from determining your program of study, selecting and registering for courses required for degree completion, to the development of better study skills, to assistance with serious personal issues.

While it is clear that academic advisors are responsible for many things, academic guidance through course selection is high on the list of responsibilities as determined by the institution.

As I moved further through the advisor training manual, the role of academic guidance through registration continued to emerge. The first section begins with a page titled “What do we do?” and is immediately followed by a section on registration procedures and is the first aspect of the advisor role that is described to new advisors. This section outlines, “Registration cards and the Student Planning Module are used to register a student in Student Services.” The decision by the institution to immediately focus on registration provides advisors with the understanding that guiding students through registration is a task central to their role as academic advisors.

Along with the materials provided to advisors during training, student-facing documents also highlight academic guidance as an important aspect of advising. I reviewed the transcript for an orientation session that provides students with information about the resources they need in college. In this session, advisors are discussed at the very beginning as follows, “Advisors can assist you with a variety of academic tasks including: course registration, academic planning, and

transfer planning.” While students attend this session at an in-person orientation, I also reviewed materials provided to students who participate in orientation online. The section related to advising provides several bullet points that indicate what an advisor can do. One of the first points is, “Assist in scheduling courses for the next semester,” which again sets the focus on academic guidance within academic advising for students.

In a review of Midwest Community College’s website, an area that provides academic information related to advising for students also highlights the importance of guidance through course registration. At the top of the page, it reads, “All students...will meet with an Academic Advisor who can assist them in enrolling in the correct classes.” The website emphasizes that “Your advisor will be familiar with your chosen field of study and can help you in: Making a Class Schedule. Your advisor will make sure you enroll in the proper classes and get you on the path to success.” The website aims to highlight the focus on guidance to ensure that students associate academic advising with the process of selecting courses and enrolling in those courses. Ultimately, through an analysis of the documents, MCC makes it abundantly clear to both students and advisors the connection between registration and academic advising.

Although registration emerged as a significant theme within the guidance category, both advisor participants also spent time explaining how they assist students in navigating future course planning related to preparation for graduation. Elizabeth outlines that in an advising appointment, she is also “Making sure they’re taking the right courses in order to graduate. If things change, [I] help them with making the switch to the other degree plan that they want to go into.” Navigating degree plans and helping with course planning was described as something that might happen more often in later appointments, as advisors work to help students build



confidence and understanding around their academic planning. Megan described her approach, stating:

If it's the student's second- or third-time meeting with me and we've done this for a couple semesters now, or even after sometimes one semester, I encourage them to log in and...I walk them through it and have them add the stuff to their course plan and navigate that, so that they're more comfortable. Because I found once students are a little bit more empowered to figure out where to find that information, then our conversations have even more space to go into a bit more depth.

Megan's indication that course planning may come in later appointments highlights planning as a potential long-term goal of academic advising appointments – something that comes after the advisor guides the student through the initial enrollment and registration process. Additionally, this insight from both advisor participants illustrates how the advisor expectations for advising align with the student experience, as students focused heavily on academic planning towards graduation in their interviews.

While academic advisors may not move immediately into long-term planning with students, documents from MCC also reinforce the pivotal role of academic planning in advising. Looking first at the training materials provided to academic advisors, I saw that the training manual lists academic planning immediately after registration. In this section, the manual outlines:

We believe highly in planning out a student's time with us at MCC. There are many studies that show that if a student has a clear path of where they are going and how they are going to get there they will be more successful.

Later in the training manual, planning comes up again concerning transfer institutions. “When an advisor knows what schools a student is thinking about we can try to build their academic plan to meet both requirements for MCC and their transfer institution.” The information provided in the advisor training manual sets the expectation for advisors in training that academic planning is also a significant focus of their role, and aligns with the student experience with transfer advising, as demonstrated by Shay’s experience with planning classes with her advisor for her transfer institution.

The emphasis on planning within the academic advising role is also outlined for students in various places. One of the first documents provided to a student when preparing to enroll is the new student checklist. Step five on this checklist is related to meeting with an academic advisor. The checklist reads:

You will meet with an academic advisor to discuss academic plans, review placement scores, create a degree plan, and register for your term’s classes. Your advisor will assist you in creating a plan that gets you started on the right track to degree completion.

While registration is mentioned, an emphasis on planning is highlighted several times, including planning as a way to stay on “the right track” to graduation.

This idea of staying on track is also mentioned several times on the website in relation to academic advising. In a section focused on what advising can help with, the website outlines, “Your advisor will help you stay on track so that you don’t waste your time taking classes you don’t need or taking them out of sequence which might delay your graduation.” Additionally, regarding transfer planning, the website highlights, “If you intend to transfer to a four-year institution once you graduate from here, your advisor will keep you on the right track there, too.”

Along with this area of the website, there is also a section specifically dedicated to academic planning, including resources for planning classes. The top of this section outlines, “Academic Planning is an often overlooked but important step in academic success. With the help of an advisor, students can create an academic plan that serves as a roadmap towards completion.” The emphasis on academic planning in the documents provided to students during the early stages of their enrollment provides an explanation for why the student participants focused on guidance so heavily within their interviews.

Overall, through the various documents I reviewed, along with the findings from both student and advisor interviews, guidance emerged as a significant aspect of advising, specifically related to academic planning, course registration and selection, and enrollment. The connection of academic guidance that surfaced throughout all sources of data illustrates a significant relationship between the experiences that students have with academic advising and the expectations that advisors and the institution have for the role.

### **Disconnections**

Although the theme of guidance that is discussed throughout the student interviews, advisor interviews, and documents from Midwest Community College presents a strong understanding of how academic advising is experienced from the student perspective and aligns with the expectations that academic advisors and the institution have surrounding the advisor role, the findings from this study also highlight several inconsistencies between the data sources. These differences represent the areas in which the understanding and expectation that first-generation community college students, and in some cases their advisors, have for academic advising conflict with – or extend beyond – the expectations of the institution. These areas of

disconnection are critical in understanding the aspects of academic advising that first-generation community college students value. In this section, I expand on the themes of emotional support, access and availability for first-generation students, and lack of depth in advisor training. These themes will be described below and are supported by quotes from students, advisors, and the documents reviewed during data analysis.

### ***Emotional Support***

Although ensuring that the correct classes are picked and building a path to graduation are critical aspects of advising, the student participants shared another aspect of advising that advisors did not mention, but that plays a vital role in each student's academic journey – the role of emotional support. In many cases, this support surfaced as having someone listen to them. After having a negative advising experience, Ellie highlights this when discussing her new advisor when she shares:

I felt like there was more structure. They felt like they were more organized, and they understood more and...they understood what my goal was and how I wanted to do certain things. And they listened to my point of view, they didn't just say like, 'Yeah, you need this to get into this and do this. Go.'

Despite planning being important, Ellie's need to have someone listen to her also mattered. Ellie expands on this further when she describes a meeting with her advisor. Ellie shares:

That's one of the biggest things is being under pressure causes me a lot of stress and a lot of anxiety. And I'm the person that shuts down when I get under stress, and she doesn't make it feel like that. She's like, 'Well, sometimes you just need a break, that's fine.'  
And it doesn't feel like she's rushing me to get out of the door. She makes me feel like

she wants me to stay in college and get where I want to go and where I need to go.... And she feels like a friend that you can relate to, relate with.

For Ellie, having her advisor support her through difficult situations and view her as not just a student, but also as a person, greatly impacted her. Jenna emphasized many of these similar feelings in her interview, sharing:

They're there to listen and kind of give you advice if they need to, you know what I mean? They're there to be that second person to always kind of be like, it's okay. Or, in a way they're always listening, I guess. It's just a person who's just really attentive to your situations and stuff.

Jenna also recalled a situation in which her advisor helped her through a specific personal moment, sharing:

And I remember especially with me losing a loved one and kind of having those outside factors and hardships, she definitely reached out to me....And she gave me kind of like a talk, you know, like sometimes things happen, and kind of giving me moral support, I would say, in a way that I definitely needed at that time....So yeah, it's definitely like, I want to say having a friend, but having someone there, you know what I mean?

In Jenna's experience, her advisor provided her with kind words to get her through a difficult time. Jenna also uses similar wording as Ellie when describing how her advisor has supported her, likening her advisor to a friend. The additional support provided to these students when dealing with real personal struggles illustrates how advisors offer more than just assistance with class scheduling.

In addition to providing a listening ear, other student participants shared the role that their advisor played in building their confidence throughout their first year. Hannah shares this well, stating:

I've gained a lot of confidence.... But it's like I said, coming into my first semester, I really didn't feel like I had that confidence. I felt pretty blind. But now, I've learned something. I feel comfortable stepping out.... And so that's been a huge thing of just having someone who knows the things that can teach them to me. She's given me confidence.

Lucy echo's a similar feeling when she shares the impact her advisor had on her first year. Lucy shares:

I think she made me feel a lot more confident in my first year. Because I really was like, obviously brand new to it. I had no idea what I was doing, but meeting with her and her being so experienced made me feel like I...could figure it out and everything would be okay.

Ellie takes this a step further and equates her support from her advisor to her confidence and her feelings about the institution as a whole. Ellie states, "And having a good one [advisor], I feel more confident in my schoolwork and everything that I'm doing here. And I definitely feel more connected with the school as well." In each of these students' experiences, having an advisor they could rely on for emotional support led to feelings of empowerment regarding their academics and, in some cases, a better connection to the school. While academic guidance is critical to first-generation students, having advisors provide them with emotional support made all the difference in making these students feel important.

### *Access and Availability for First-Generation Students*

While feeling supported by their advisors is a critical aspect of the advising experience for first-generation students, student participants also shared another area in which academic advising impacted their first year. Through their interviews, students discussed how advisors provided them access, whether that be access to the actual advisor, access to information, or access to the institution. For several participants, just being able to connect with a person that was designated for them was significant. Hannah describes it well, stating, “Convenience. She’s not always available, but she always seems available. If I email her, she gets back to me...if I say I need an appointment, she goes, ‘Here’s my calendar, pick a day, I’ll be there.’” Mindy mentions this sense of always being accessible when she shares, “Yeah, definitely it’s very helpful and they’re very kind...they’re patiently giving the reply. Immediately. Email or phone call. I mean, like any kind they [are] immediately replying to you. I like that.” This sense of having someone available to answer their questions emerged as a significant aspect of the advisor role for these students.

Although having access to their advisor is critical, the other significant area that many participants also discussed is how their advisor provides them with access to information and resources. Sometimes, this would be information about things happening at the college. As Jenna shares, “[My advisor] does reach out a lot...I mean that’s a good aspect because you’re always reminded of stuff...because I would usually forget sometimes when it’s like, say an announcement happening on campus or something... [my advisor] will message me.” For other participants, it was about making information accessible about other colleges. Hannah explains this in a story about potentially changing her plan:

And she sat with me through that and just made information accessible to me and I brought my personal information, and she brought the school's information and together we worked out all of the options...and then I was able to make an informed decision about my future...that was huge for me.

For Mindy, gaining access to resources was critical as she shares, "And she's showing me the, what is that? Scholarships? She's showing me scholarships, also.... She is pushing me to go and talk to other persons also and pushing to other resources." Scholarships also came up with Shay, who shares, "She was really good about sending me scholarships and she checked in a lot." For these students, having access to the essential information for their situation was significant, as there was often a lot to consider as they navigated the college environment.

Ultimately, the student participants acknowledged that having an advisor provided them with crucial information to move forward. In Hannah's interview, she describes this access to information particularly well. Hannah shares:

She is the person who knows all the things in either one of two senses...she knows the things, or she knows the person who knows the things. And that is huge. I have one person that I can reach out to that will send me to the next person I need to know. I don't have to search for access, she gives me access. She is my access and that is amazing to have.

Hannah's statement highlights that for first-generation students, no matter what information is provided, the advisor either has it or knows the person who does, giving them access to anything they might need through their academic advisor.



Although both advisor participants focused on their general academic advising approach in their interviews, the desire to provide first-generation students with the additional time needed to give them access to resources and information also emerged. Despite first-generation students not being identified explicitly in advisor caseloads, both participants shared that this often comes out in conversations with students regarding their comfort level with college. Once a student identifies as first-generation in an appointment, both Megan and Elizabeth shared their desire to provide extra attention to the student. According to Elizabeth:

I try to be a little more informative, and...I try to schedule for a longer time with the student, just to make sure they feel comfortable, and they understand what is needed to be done. And that way they can ask questions too, because it's scary for them, you know?

This idea of providing additional time for questions came through in Megan's interview as well.

When working with first-generation students, Megan shared:

I usually try to first explain that like, 'Hey, I may be saying something at this point in time or in this process that to me, I'm following along with because I have this information and this knowledge. If I'm ever getting to a point where I'm saying something and it's not clicking or it's not there, that's okay. Please just stop me and we can backtrack on this' and creating that space so that they know it's not intentional. I'm not trying to just talk in circles and give them lots of keywords and buzzwords that don't many any sense.

Megan and Elizabeth's emphasis on creating extra time and space for questions highlights a desire to provide more attention to first-generation students if needed, even though the documents from the institution do not suggest this as an expectation or requirement for advisors.

Despite the disconnect between academic advisors' practice and the institutional expectations, this additional time provides space for first-generation students to access resources and information that they desperately need and, based on the student interviews, desire.

This additional attention to working with first-generation students also translates to each participant's advising appointments, specifically in what they share with the student or how they follow up with the student. According to Elizabeth:

I...just spend a little bit more time with them and maybe give them a little more guidance on the resources that colleges offer and...you know, some of the students I meet with that are first gen, they're like 'We see movies and we're really scared. Is this really how the classroom is?'

In response to these questions, Elizabeth later states that it is important to spend time "talking through their fears and just kind of reiterating what we have...to make sure that [they know] we're not here to fail you." While Elizabeth focused on spending additional time in appointments reassuring students, Megan highlighted the importance of following up with first-generation students. According to Megan:

I would say in terms of questions or setting up an appointment or how I structure my appointment, it doesn't change a ton, but I would say that sometimes it's usually more follow up or like, 'Hey, why don't we touch base like second week of class?' Or things like that. Those are the students that I'm usually a little bit more attentive of, of like, okay, we probably need to schedule follow up.

In either case, both advisor participants emphasized the need to provide additional time, information, and support to the first-generation students in their caseloads to ensure they have

access to the resources they need to feel comfortable moving forward. The recognition from advisors that this student population requires additional care and awareness supports the perspectives of the student participants, emphasizing the importance of going beyond academic planning to create a personal connection with students.

### ***Lack of Depth in Advisor Training***

Although building a personal connection between student and advisor is critical, this relationship is not always formed immediately. For several of the student participants, the enrollment process began with some confusion, in some cases related directly to who they met with for their first advising experience. In Hannah's experience, she came in with a clear idea of what program she wanted to pursue but did not feel she was able to communicate that effectively. She shared, "I had a completely different advisor for my first semester, and she was awful. I had no idea what she was trying to communicate to me, and she had no idea what I was trying to communicate to her." Hannah went into more detail, stating:

Like she knew what she was doing, but she didn't know my program well enough to advise me well in it. So, I felt blind. I felt pretty blind going in...I just felt like I was thrown into something kind of blindly, spun around with a bandana around my head and just, here you go, I'm going to college.

Although Hannah was able to get enrolled and begin classes, she went on to share that in her first semester, she did not know who her advisor was or how to contact them. Hannah shared:

And then, the signs actually around the school were really helpful because I didn't even know how to reach out to my advisor.... I was like, 'How do we do that actually? Is there like a way? I don't even remember her name. We haven't talked for months.'

In Hannah's experience, the initial enrollment process left her with more questions than answers. Although she made it through, she ended up navigating her first semester of college on her own.

In Ellie's situation, she also experienced a communication breakdown when she met with her advisor to enroll in her first semester of classes. Ellie shared:

There was definitely no communication by any means. It would've been nice to actually go to orientation or know that there was a school orientation because I did not know that existed. Well, I knew it had to exist, but I didn't know when it was or anything like that...Because I literally just walked straight into her office. She's like, 'Oh, sit down.' And I told her what I wanted to do, or what the plan was...and she just was like, 'Well, here's the classes I got. Here you go, take this to financial aid and the student services office and get enrolled.'

With the little information Ellie was given as she navigated the college enrollment process, she shared how this experience felt. Ellie stated:

I was scared, and it was so hectic, and I was also very confused on how something could be so disorganized or not fully communicated...It made me feel like I wasn't prepared for this by any means, that I didn't want to do it. And I was ready to give up, like I was ready to be done.

Although Ellie persevered through her first semester and, ultimately, the year, her initial enrollment was challenging.

While Hannah and Ellie both shared very specific challenges related to their first enrollment experience and connected it directly to an advisor, other participants also shared some challenges related more to a general sense of confusion around advising. Shay shared:

I really was kind of confused on what I was supposed to do and what they were going to do for me....But I just didn't know what my jobs were and what her jobs were going to be and so when she was telling me you need to register for these classes and stuff, I was like, 'Okay, but how do I do that?' It was just hard to know what I'm supposed to be doing.

In Shay's situation, her confusion stemmed from trying to understand the roles everyone plays within the college, including the role of an academic advisor. Lucy also describes a similar experience, stating:

I had a really hard time enrolling in the first place.... And so, when I actually started taking classes and everything, I was very shocked to find out that I had one advisor assigned to me.... But the whole enrollment process really confused me, so I had no idea what I was doing.

Similar to Shay – and reminiscent of Hannah's depiction of not knowing how to contact her advisor – Lucy completed the enrollment process and was unaware she had an assigned advisor. Although each participant ultimately made it past their initial advising confusion, the fact they each shared this enrollment challenge highlights a common experience within the transition into college.

The insights that the advisor participants shared illustrate a possible explanation for the enrollment challenges that student participants highlighted. While both advisor participants outlined the importance of providing first-generation students with additional access to them, their interviews also revealed that their training experiences needed to be improved to better

prepare them for these responsibilities. Simply put, the training for advisors is ill-equipped to provide them with the resources and skills needed to manage student expectations.

Megan and Elizabeth shared that they did one-on-one training with another advisor in the office but then shadowed or observed multiple advisors within student services in preparation for taking on an advising caseload. Both advisors started in July, which led to them taking on appointments right before the beginning of the fall semester – a hectic time for community college advisors. Despite having a two-week training period, both Megan and Elizabeth shared feelings of solitude in their training experience. According to Megan:

Now while I had a two-week structured training, there was a lot of time in that that it was just like, okay, you can kind of exist on your own. So, I just sat in an empty office...and tried to get to know people.

Elizabeth described her training experience similarly, sharing it was, “Just one on one with another advisor.... Shadowing, let’s say, what they did, and then maybe a little bit of shadowing other advisors, but not too much. And yeah, just trying to figure out a lot of it yourself.”

In addition to figuring things out individually, Elizabeth reflected on the pace of training. She shares:

It was kind of the start of the year, so you were kind of thrown into it.... We didn’t get trained in all the programs, which was hard. You’d have a few programs that you kind of knew a little bit about, but the other ones that would come on your caseload, you’re like, I have no idea what this entails.

Given the amount of information advisors are responsible for, Elizabeth's comment about having students on her caseload in programs she knew nothing about highlights potential holes within her training and aligns with Hannah's initial advising experience.

In Megan's interview, she does not go in-depth regarding program knowledge. Instead, she highlights an overall lack of cohesiveness in how the advisor training handles learning how to approach advising appointments. According to Megan:

I think I felt it led to a lot of confusion, and I think going back to that idea of everybody does something different based on their own beliefs and practices, and everybody did something different. It didn't really seem like there was a common thread. And I think that for me, learning to navigate the systems and learning to interact with students, I felt like, well I don't really know what I'm supposed to be doing because everyone's doing something differently and it's not that any of those ways were bad, it was just that I didn't know which one I needed to pull stuff from.

While Elizabeth does not reference the advising approach in her description of the training, when asked about learning to work with students she shared, "I mean, you have the brain, but it's just kind of like you learn on the job, basically." Although advising approaches can vary from person to person, both advisor participant interviews highlight a lack of cohesion in what the overall goals of advising are for the advisor, leaving them to develop their own understanding instead.

Along with advisor training needing a clear set of guiding principles, Megan also shared her experience with ongoing training for advisors. According to Megan:

I think we get more training on the technical information of like, this is the policy or procedure, and this is why students have to pay this amount of money after they withdraw

after this type of date.... And yes, that has to do with advising, but it's not the practices that we're actually implementing.... It's just...the regurgitation of information and those types of things.

Megan's experience with ongoing training seems to align with her initial training experiences and Elizabeth's. These experiences highlight an opportunity to not only enhance the advisor training program to better support advisors, but also illustrates a possible explanation for the challenging advising encounters that student participants shared from their early enrollment experiences.

In addition to the advisor interviews, many of the documents reviewed reinforce the need to enhance advisor training and provide context to why student experiences with advising can be challenging early in their transition. For example, within several of the internal documents, including advisor agendas, meeting minutes, and emails to advisors from leadership, a clear emphasis on the importance of policy and the ability for advisors to use that knowledge when walking students through forms and procedures supersedes any discussion of soft skills or advising approach. When reviewing the meeting minutes from advisor team meetings, the main focus was on updates for various forms, with topics including "Add/Drop and Record Update Forms Reminder," "Updated Student Assistance Request Form," and "Financial Aid Appeal Form." Additionally, many meeting minutes include conversations about processes and how advisors should handle them. For example, in one meeting, the topic of a new incentive for students came up, and the minutes represent a focus on how advisors will navigate the process:

What if we forget to have a student fill out the form? Will someone catch it so they can still receive it? Can the form simply be available on the website for students to submit so



advisors don't have to complete it during the appointment? General consensus that advising should have been consulted in the creation of this process, since the responsibility appears to fall on the advisors.

This example represents many of the minutes reviewed from advising meetings, focusing on how advisors should navigate various processes with students. Although the minutes are from advising meetings, little discussion takes place on implementing advising practices – or in other words, the soft skills necessary to work with students through these forms – but instead focuses strictly on the procedure.

Another example that highlights the focus on policy or procedural knowledge is an email to advisors on how to use a retention alert tool. Before outlining of the process, the email reads, “Note that these are not intended to create more work, just to provide some guidance/clarification on the process.” The email explains how advisors should acknowledge retention alerts depending on the type of contact they can make with a student. However, the email does not go into any detail on how the advisor should handle the conversation about the cause of the retention alert with a student. This example highlights the importance placed on advisors' understanding of the process or policy instead of a discussion on how they should engage with a student regarding the reason that led to the discussion. The findings from these documents, as well as the student and advisor interviews, illustrate a disconnect between what students expect from the advising relationship, how advisors are prepared for their role, and the expectations of the institution on the advisor, providing context to why students may experience some initial confusion surrounding advising during their transition into college.

## **First-Generation College Student Transition Experiences**

Although several of the themes that emerged from this study illustrate connections and disconnections between the first-generation student experience with advising and the expectations outlined for advising from academic advisors and the institution, some findings surfaced that did not cut across data sources but still serve to illustrate a significant aspect of the first-generation community college student experience. In this section, I discuss the two themes that fall into the first-generation college student transition experiences category – opportunity and adjusting to college.

### ***Opportunity***

For many of the participants I spoke with, their decision to attend college as first-generation students ultimately tied to increased opportunities in the future and better choices for them. Ashley relates this directly to financial class, sharing, “Basically, it means I have the better opportunity to become more and get out of the class, like the financial class my dad is in.” Ellie expands on this concept further when she articulates how her decision to attend college impacts not only her but also her family, stating:

It’s showing that my family is better than where we were.... She’s [Ellie’s mom] influenced me to be a better person and want to go farther in life.... And so, with him [Ellie’s father], knowing that I’m building a better future for myself and for my future family, it makes him happy.

Shay also commented on the importance of building a better future for her family, sharing, “I didn’t have that option. And I want my kids to be able to feel like they can do whatever they

think is best and I'll be able to help them make that choice." Mindy adds a little more perspective to this as a mother sharing:

And now my kids are also coming, right? Now I want to help my kids, okay? I don't want to stay, like cooking. I mean, it's important. I need to help them.... That was the main reason for me to go on to college and do something like that.

In Mindy's case, her motivation in attending school relates directly to her desire to be able to empower her children to be more. Something she feels she cannot do without an education of her own.

Although many of the participants focused on the positive opportunities associated with being the first in their family to attend college, a couple of participants highlighted the anxiety that comes with being the one to move their family forward. Jenna shared:

So, it's an indication of like, I'm not going to suffer from those hardships as much as my parents. But it's also an indication of me leading the way and I don't want to say it puts me on a pedestal, but in a way it kind of does...and it's something that I'm not going to take for granted. It's something that I'm proud of, but it's also something that's really scary, I would say.

Lucy also shares some of these feelings stating:

And so, I think being a first generation, it kind of puts a lot of pressure on me from my family because they all want me to graduate now...and I know I'm going to, but there's just added pressure...but it is also kind of special in a way too because none of my, well, neither of one of my parents have gone to college and so it's something I can say that I did, and they didn't.

In this study, almost every participant tied their decision to attend college as a first-generation student to becoming something more than their parents, something that would open doors for themselves and their future – or current – children. Although the opportunity to attend college brings some added pressure, participants felt it was worth it. Ultimately, the shared feeling to become more than their past represents a key aspect of the first-generation student experience and a significant motivator to persevere through early challenges in the college enrollment process.

### *Adjusting to College*

In addition to their collective desire to go further than their parents before them, many participants shared a common challenge in getting adjusted to college. Altogether, of the seven students interviewed, all worked at least part-time except for one, who balanced school and a family, which led to challenges as they navigated the transition into college. Several participants named time management directly when asked about the transition into college. Shay shares:

So, it was different just because I hadn't gone to school...in like two years, so it was hard to get back into the swing...and it look like a week or so to get back into the groove and the routine...really just time management for me.

Lucy also focused primarily on classes stating, “Time management is very difficult because some classes have strict schedules...so that can be kind of difficult.” Mindy adds a layer in with her focus on navigating school and her family, sharing “Yeah, so mostly [it's] time management, scheduling, and spending time...because the kids are very small.” For these students, adjusting their personal life, and in Mindy's case, childcare, directly impacted their ability to navigate classes.

For a couple of participants, balancing work with school was more of an issue concerning adjusting to college. For Ashley, her job as a manager at McDonald's – something she'd been doing full-time for a year before starting college – often caused conflict as she navigated the transition back into school. Ashley shares:

So, it would be where I had a plan of what to do and I'm like, okay, I took another day off every week so that I can get homework done. And then there I am getting called in on those days.... It was overwhelming.

Ashley brought this up again later as it related to staying on task for her classes, sharing “Because you go to work...eight hours of standing on my feet the whole time, possibly getting a break, possibly not...so, I don't really feel like doing homework after doing work-work.” In Jenna's case, she started school without a job, but picked one up quickly after the reality of costs hit after the first semester. Jenna shares, “And so, I ended up picking a job and I feel like with the job especially, it's made things a little more difficult because I feel like I took that time for granted a little bit.” Overall, discussing the transition into college led the conversation toward time management and the new experience of navigating courses, children, and work. For first-generation students, learning to navigate the college environment is a significant factor in their transition into college, and these findings represent their experiences in adjusting to college. While these experiences are deeply personal for first-generation students and academic advisors cannot necessarily change them, understanding the transition experiences that first-generation community college students have can significantly impact the way advisors work with this student population.

## Chapter Summary

The findings from this study present the first year of college as a challenging yet rewarding time for first-generation community college students. Participants in this study recounted their stories to provide context to how they understand the role that academic advising plays in their college journey. When asked about what it meant for them to attend college as a first-generation student, they shared reasons that revolved around the opportunity to make something of themselves that would be more than their parents, to hopefully provide a brighter future for their future or current children, while also acknowledging the pressures and challenges that come with being the first.

Along with these findings, all participants shared common challenges with enrolling in college, whether with academic advising, time management and fitting college into their busy lives, or a combination of both. Despite these challenges, all seven student participants persevered through their first year of college and re-enrolled the following year. Through their first year of college, they shared how they learned what the role of an academic advisor is in their college career. Their stories revealed how advisors guided them through course selection, registration, and academic planning. For some, this also included planning for future transfer institutions. Although the findings from this study show that course selection is critical, student participants also recalled the supportive role that their advisors played for them in personal times, as well as the comfort and confidence they gained in knowing someone at their institution was on their side. And finally, as first-generation students with little knowledge of the college process, they discussed how academic advisors provided them with access to information, resources, and opportunities that they may not have previously learned.

In addition to the student participants, the findings from interviews with academic advisors provided context to the expectations that advisors and the institution have for academic advising. Advisors shared their expectations for guiding students through enrollment, registration, and course planning. Their discussion of advisor training left much to be desired regarding how they were prepared to support students through college, providing context to the enrollment challenges that students shared through their experiences. Regardless, both advisor participants emphasized the importance of providing additional time and attention to first-generation college students. The focus on additional time supports the findings from student interviews that highlight how first-generation students depend on their advisors for more than just academic guidance, particularly when they encounter issues in college that they haven't experienced previously.

Through reviewing the documents provided by the advising unit, a focus on academic tasks and policy knowledge emerged. While an emphasis on academic tasks such as registration and course planning support the findings from both student and advisor interviews that the advisor role is instrumental in guiding student through college, the focus seems to be on policy and procedural knowledge, versus advisor growth or development. The importance that is placed on policy knowledge provides a glimpse into why academic advisors may feel inadequately trained in some areas to work with students. Furthermore, this connection offers additional context to the enrollment challenges that student participants shared in their interviews.

Chapter 5 will include further discussion of these themes as they relate to the research questions and the conclusions drawn from this study. The implications for theory and practice, as

well as the limitations of this study, will also be discussed. Finally, chapter 5 will conclude with further research opportunities and concluding thoughts.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications**

First-generation students consistently represent a significant portion of the community college population (RTI International, 2019). Despite their growing numbers, first-generation community college students continue to arrive less academically prepared for college, leading them to struggle more with the academic transition into college than their peers (Chen, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nomi, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004). Given the tumultuous nature of the transition into college, this study explored how first-generation students navigate the transition into college and through their first year. Furthermore, while academic advising is often suggested as a support for students in the first year of college, few studies explore the impact of academic advising for first-generation specifically (Alvarado & Olson, 2020). This qualitative case study focused on the experiences that first-generation community college students have with academic advising in their first year of college. A qualitative study in educational research provides an opportunity to showcase the individual experiences of these students through their own words. A case study method allows for the context in which these participants' experience advising to be thoroughly explored.

In this chapter, I provide an interpretation of my findings and the implication of these findings on the transition experiences of first-generation community college students and advising practice. This chapter begins with a summary of all findings, followed by an in-depth discussion of the themes related to the research questions driving this study. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings on theory, specifically the conceptual framework guiding this study, Schlossberg's Transition Theory, and the implications for

practice. Additionally, this chapter will provide the limitations of this study and future research directions. This chapter concludes with a chapter summary and final thoughts.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study focused on the advising experiences of first-generation community college students in their first year of college. The themes that emerged from the student interviews, advisor interviews, and documents provided by Midwest Community College highlight the advising experiences of first-generation community college students and the expectations that academic advisors and the institution have for the academic advisor role. The six main themes that emerged – academic guidance, emotional support, access and availability for first-generation students, advising challenges reflect advisor training deficiencies, opportunity, and adjusting to college – represent connections across advising experiences and expectations, as well as significant disconnections amongst the ways the institution outlines the role of advising and how students and advisors interact. Additionally, the findings from this study highlight how first-generation community college students experience the transition into college.

The theme of academic guidance resonated across all sources of data. Through student interviews, the importance of having their advisor guide them through course selection and academic planning emerged as essential aspects of how they came to understand academic advising. Academic advisors also understood the critical role of academic guidance in their position, emphasizing the importance of guiding students through their initial enrollment, course registration, and academic planning. The documents provided by MCC reinforced the experiences of all student participants and the expectations of academic advisor participants.

Advisor training materials, orientation information, and the website clearly articulated the expectation that academic guidance is central to academic advising.

Despite the clear alignment between students, advisors, and the institution regarding academic guidance, this study also revealed several aspects of the student experience that deviate from the institutional expectations of advising. This disconnect is evident through the themes of emotional support, access and availability for first-generation students, and lack of depth in advisor training. While academic guidance was a critical aspect of the student interviews, first-generation student participants also emphasized the essential role their advisor played for them in providing emotional support in their first year of college. Additionally, student participants focused significantly on how their advisor provided them access to resources, information, and even the institution, particularly given their limited knowledge of the college process. Although the academic advisor participants did not focus on emotional support in their interviews, they also emphasized the importance of providing first-generation community college students additional time and attention to ensure they received access to the information and resources they needed to succeed. Despite the value of emotional support and access for first-generation students, the institution, as evidenced by the documents provided by MCC, does not touch on these areas. Instead, the documents provided by MCC illustrate a focus on policy knowledge and procedures. This context is further illuminated by the advisor interviews in which they share a general discontent with their training. This information sheds light on the early advising challenges that student participants shared in their interviews, revealing the impact of advisor training deficiencies on the student experience.

Finally, some of the findings from the student interviews highlight significant aspects of the first-generation community college experience but do not focus specifically on academic advising. Instead, the themes of opportunity and adjusting to college demonstrate critical elements of the first-generation community college experience as it relates to the transition into college. These themes provide depth to the first-generation student experience and illustrate this student population's challenges.

To best organize the findings from this study, the themes will be discussed below in relation to how they address the research questions guiding this study.

***Findings from RQ1: How do first-time, full-time, first-generation students attending community college describe their experiences with academic advising in their first year of college?***

The experiences of first-generation community college students in the first year of college are represented by the six main themes that emerged from the student interviews, advisor interviews, and document analysis: (a) lack of depth in advisor training, (b) academic guidance, (c) emotional support, (d) access and availability for first-generation students, (e) opportunity, and (f) adjusting to college. Each theme is discussed below as it relates to the literature.

**Theme: Lack of Depth in Advisor Training.** In the first year of college, first-generation students encounter various academic challenges (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). The findings from this study provide insight into the role that academic advising plays in navigating these challenges. Through the stories shared by student participants, one of the themes that emerged involved initial challenges surrounding academic advising. Academic advising is often suggested as a critical support for first-generation students, yet the student

participants in this study were initially unsure of the role of an advisor or how they should use academic advising (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons et al., 2019; Swecker et al., 2013). Some were confused by the process; others didn't know they were assigned an advisor. While the research shows that first-generation students are more likely to drop out after their first year of college based on characteristics such as demographics and enrollment patterns, the findings from this study expose the lived experiences of first-generation community college students in their first year of college and offer insight into how the individual encounters they have can impact their experience in college (Cataldi et al., 2018; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Radunzel, 2018). Ellie's interview is particularly illuminating as she shared how she felt after her first meeting with an academic advisor did not go well, stating, "I was scared, and it was so hectic.... I was ready to give up, like I was ready to be done." Although all seven student participants completed their first year of college and returned for their second year, the experiences they had in their initial transition into college exposed a challenge that numbers cannot measure. These early experiences reveal the importance of providing first-generation students with information about the role of academic advising early and often to decrease the confusion that can occur early in the first year of college.

**Theme: Academic Guidance.** Despite initial enrollment challenges, as the student participants moved through their first year of college, they gained an understanding of advising as they worked with their academic advisor. A significant theme that emerged from all participants was a clear understanding of the guiding role that academic advisors serve in understanding their academic path. While few studies in the literature cover the intersection between community college, academic advising, and first-generation college students (Alvarado

& Olson, 2020; Karp, 2013), the importance of guidance in academic advising has remained steady since the publication of *The Student Personnel Point of View* (ACE, 1937). Participants used the words “guide,” “guidance,” and “path,” various times when describing how their advisor assisted them through their first year of college. Although these findings reinforce the advisor’s important role in making sense of the academic plan, hearing the student participants describe it illustrates how this guidance extends beyond a transactional relationship. Jenna describes this well in her experience when she shares, “So, I would say definitely being a good guide. But in a way it’s like guiding you, they’re not the ones in front. It’s like they’re letting you.” Jenna’s emphasis on the advisor placing the student “in front” highlights how academic guidance takes the form of a relationship – one in which the advisor helps the student navigate the path by providing them with the tools to be successful. Still, ultimately the student is the one making the decisions. These findings provide insight into student expectations of advising and add to the literature on student preferences for advising (Bitz, 2010; Coll, 2008; Donaldson et al., 2016; Mottarella et al., 2004; Walker et al., 2017).

**Theme: Emotional Support.** The literature emphasizes the critical role that academic advisors play in guiding students through their academics (Gibbons et al., 2019; Swecker et al., 2013). While the students in this study also echoed the importance of academic guidance, their experiences highlight how academic advising goes a step further. In this study, student participants shared how their academic advisors provided emotional and moral support, allowing them to build confidence in themselves and their academic journeys. Lucy stated it best when sharing, “I think she made me feel a lot more confident in my first year...meeting with her and her being so experienced made me feel like I...could figure it out and everything would be

okay.” The literature indicates that many first-generation students attend college to increase their confidence, and the findings from this study reinforce that (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Terenzini et al, 1994). The ability of academic advisors to inspire confidence in these students highlights how academic advising goes beyond course planning, creating relationships with students that impact their attitudes toward themselves. The relationships that advisors form with students also emerged in another way for students. Several participants used the term “friend” when discussing their academic advisor. For example, Jenna used this term when talking about how her advisor helped her through the difficult loss of a loved one. This study sought to provide insight into students’ conversations with advisors in an academic advising appointment, and Jenna’s story demonstrates an advisor’s critical role in the student experience. The literature indicates that first-generation students often need help finding a sense of belonging on campus, ultimately making them less likely to seek out resources (Karp et al., 2020). In situations like Jenna’s, having an academic advisor that she felt comfortable discussing her situation with demonstrates the important role advisors play in helping first-generation students feel connected to someone at their institution. The findings from this study illustrate how crucial the role of an academic advisor can be for these students, providing them with not just a guide through academics but emotional support that can increase their sense of belonging on campus.

**Theme: Access and Availability for First-Generation Students.** The relationships that advisors can build with their students also emerged in the student interviews in the form of access and availability. The capacity for academic advisors to provide access to resources, knowledge, and even the institution, played a significant role in advising students. This theme highlights how academic advising does play a critical role in the first year of college, particularly

as the literature indicates first-generation students often struggle to navigate the college environment (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pratt et al., 2019). Since the challenges in the first year of college often lead to first-generation students dropping out, the findings from this study provide insight into how critical it is for first-generation students to have a person they feel they can reach out to for anything – a person who does not just open the door to college for them, but also helps them know which doors to open at what time (Chen, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pratt et al., 2019). In Hannah’s interview, she phrases it best when she states, “I have one person that I can reach out to that will send me to the next person I need to know. I don’t have to search for access, she gives me access. She is my access and that is amazing to have.” When most research focused on academic advising is centered around student satisfaction, Hannah’s emphasis on her advisor providing access demonstrates how advising impacts student success in the first year of college, particularly for first-generation students who are learning to navigate an unfamiliar environment (Coll, 2008). The theme of access and availability for first-generation students supports the recommendation that academic advising is a significant support service for students by providing them with the tools to succeed in college. While studies have shown that meeting with an academic advisor can increase the retention of a first-generation student, these findings highlight what exact aspects of the advising relationship first-generation students find most beneficial when navigating their first year of college and beyond (Swecker et al., 2013).

**Theme: Opportunity.** In addition to the themes related to students’ experiences with academic advising, student participants shared in their interviews a common understanding of why they decided to enroll in college – to increase their opportunities in the future. For some students, this manifested in how they hoped to elevate themselves out of their parents’ financial



class; for others, it was about showing their parents that everything they sacrificed was worth it. Participants used words such as, “pressure,” “hardships,” and “scary” when describing what it means to be a first-generation student and the expectations they have for themselves, as well as the expectations of their family members. Despite the stress of these expectations, students used this as fuel to work towards a better future for themselves. The findings from this study reinforce the research that focuses on the resiliency that first-generation students display when confronted with challenges in higher education with which they are not familiar (Karp et al., 2020; Pascarella et al., 2003).

**Theme: Adjusting to College.** Another theme that emerged from the student interviews unrelated to their advising experiences but significant in their transition experiences in the first year relates to how they adjusted to college. For several student participants, finding a balance between their current responsibilities – including work and family expectations – required a bit of an adjustment period. The phrase “time management” arose for several participants, particularly as they navigated how to find time to complete their coursework. Ashley highlights this well in her interview when she shares, “So, it would be where...I took another day off every week so that I can get homework done. And then there I am getting called in on those days.... It was overwhelming.” These findings align with the literature surrounding first-generation students that indicates this student population is often more likely to have numerous obligations outside of school (Cataldi et al., 2018; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engle et al., 2006; Nomi, 2005). Although this aspect of their first year of college does not represent how they interacted with their advisors, it illustrates a significant aspect of the first-generation community college experience. These findings add depth to the first-generation student

experience that extends beyond demographics and retention data, assisting in creating a complete picture of the first-generation community college experience in their first year of college.

***Findings from RQ2: How do the advising experiences of first-time, full-time first-generation students reflect the expectations for advising in the first year of college established by the student services office at one, two-year public community college in the Midwest?***

The expectations for advising in the first year of college established by Midwest Community College's student services office are represented by themes that emerged from academic advisor interviews and the documents collected for analysis. Together, these findings provide context to the experiences that the student participants shared. The expectations for advising are represented by three main themes that emerged from the advisor interviews: (a) academic guidance, (b) lack of depth in advisor training, and (c) access and availability for first-generation students. Each theme is discussed below as it relates to the literature. Additionally, this discussion includes how these themes connect or disconnect from the ways these themes emerged within the student interviews.

**Theme: Academic Guidance.** While academic guidance emerged as a significant focus within the student interviews, it also surfaced with the academic advisors' interviews. While the student interviews identified how their advisors guided them through academic planning as well as various challenges beyond academics, the academic advisors focused on the more commonly discussed aspects of academic advising – guidance through enrollment, registration, and academic planning. The concept of guidance within academic advising has been a standard practice for advisors since the publication of *The Student Personnel Point of View* (ACE, 1937). While the findings from this study align with the literature, hearing directly from the academic

advisors provides depth to what is happening within an advising appointment, particularly at the community college level. When discussing guidance, both advisor participants in this study highlighted their important role in enrolling a student. In Elizabeth's interview, she shares, "Basically...I feel like we're the first stop for a student to enroll.... We're here to make sure the student has everything in for the application, the transcripts, reminding students about FAFSA...to set up the student for success." The findings from this study indicate that community college advisors play a substantial role in the enrollment process, looking at transcripts and financial aid, highlighting an aspect of advising that is not discussed often within the literature. These findings contribute to the dialogue on academic advising and how advisors often are involved in the early stages of a student's experience at a community college. In addition to the role that advisors play at the enrollment stage for first-generation community college students, findings from the advisor interviews provide additional context to the students' advising experiences as both advisor participant's discussed course registration in their interviews. Both advisors indicated that registration is one of the key areas for which they provide guidance to students. This is clear in Elizabeth's interview when she shares, "That's my understanding of my role – you know, get the student registered, if they want to get registered, make sure they're happy with the schedule, and make sure that they understand the responsibilities of everything as well, too."

The focus on academic guidance through course registration that was touched on within the academic advisor interviews also emerged from the document analysis based on the heavy emphasis on registration throughout several of the documents used at Midwest Community College. Course registration is a main component of the advisor job description, advisor training

materials, orientation resources, and information on the website. Registering in courses appears as the central component of advising in the documents I reviewed for this study, aligning registration and advising as the same in many cases. The alignment of registration with advising is reinforced not only for students but also with academic advisors. For example, in the advisor training manual, there is a section titled, “What do we do?” and course registration is the first aspect of the advisor role that is described. Together, the findings from the advisor interviews and documents collected from Midwest Community College highlight a core aspect of the expectations for academic advising at this institution.

While course registration is a critical component of the expectations for advising at Midwest Community College, the information gained from the student interviews demonstrates how the student experience shifts from the expectations of the advisors and the institution. Course registration is not mentioned throughout the student interviews as a significant aspect of their advising experience. Instead, student participants focused on other ways their advisor provided them with guidance, specifically in areas of academic planning, emotional support, and access. Looking at these findings together, a full picture of what takes place in an advising appointment begins to form. Academic advising is a highly subjective experience (Soria, 2012). The findings from this study provide context to that experience, highlighting how course registration – a main component of advising – is championed by the advisors and the advising unit. However, through the student experience, additional aspects of advising emerge. These findings create a complete picture of the advising appointment, adding much-needed depth to the literature (Ellis, 2014). Additionally, these findings shed light on the first-generation community college experience in a field of literature saturated by the four-year experience (Alexitch, 2002;

Bitz, 2010; Ellis, 2014; Walker et al., 2017; Schwebel et al., 2008; Smith, 2002; Swecker et al., 2013; Workman, 2015). Academic guidance is critical to advising, but this study reveals that for first-generation community college students, the value extends beyond course registration.

Although course registration is a crucial aspect of the advising role, the importance of planning for future semesters also emerged as an established expectation from the institution. Throughout the documents I reviewed, the phrases “clear path” and “on the right track” were used a variety of times to indicate that academic planning with an academic advisor was necessary to ensure that degree requirements were met and graduation achieved. The concept of staying on track is highlighted numerous times on the website and is related directly to academic planning. One section clearly states, “Academic Planning is an often overlooked but important step in academic success. With the help of an advisor, students can create an academic plan that serves as a roadmap towards completion.” These findings corroborate what the advisors shared in their interviews, specifically regarding keeping students on the path to graduation.

While the findings from the documents I analyzed align well with the advisor interviews, the most interesting connection falls between the documents and the student interviews. One of the most significant aspects of the student participants’ experiences with academic advising related to academic guidance and the terms that students used align almost identically with the language used in the documents I analyzed. For example, Shay shares, “I would just say they’re going to put you on the right track and get you set up with the classes that you need to graduate. Additionally, in Lucy’s interview, she shares, “I think a lot of what I want to do, I kind of already had an idea of...but she helps me, like set on the right path.” The use of the words “path” and “track” connect directly to the website and illustrate a clear understanding between students,

advisors, and the institution of the purpose of advising. In fact, students almost emphasize the importance of academic planning more than the advisors – especially given the advisors’ earlier emphasis on course registration.

For first-generation students, academic planning and understanding what is next for them are the most critical. Hannah shares this best in her interview when she describes an academic planning session with her advisor. At the end of this session, Hannah shares, “And I was like wow, this is amazing. I didn’t even know what I was going to be studying in my career, in my degree, but now I do.” Hannah’s experience highlights the impact that advising has on first-generation students within the first year of college (Alvarado & Olson, 2020). In this study, the emphasis on the student’s experience – versus student satisfaction or dissatisfaction with advising – fills a gap that is much needed in the research (Bailey et al., 2006; Booth et al., 2013; Dougherty et al., 2017; Karp, 2013; Karp et al., 2008).

Much of the literature on academic advising focuses on the number of times a student meets with their advisor instead of the content of the actual advising meeting (Schwebel et al., 2012; Swecker et al., 2013). The findings from this study demonstrate what an advisor’s goal for a student meeting entails, providing depth to the research. Through the advisor interviews, I learned what advisors focus on in their appointments and how they help their students build confidence in navigating their academic plans. In Megan’s interview, she shared how she walks students through academic planning to help them learn to navigate the process as they advance through college. Megan shares, “Because I found once students are a little bit more empowered to figure out where to find that information, then our conversations have even more space to go into a bit more depth.” This context provides depth to the understanding of an advising

appointment and aligns with what student participants shared regarding how their advisors helped them become more confident.

**Theme: Lack of Depth in Advisor Training.** Along with the content of what happens within an advising appointment, information obtained from advisor interviews also provides insight into the training and preparation that goes into becoming an academic advisor. A significant theme from the advisor interviews revolves around a need for more training in the early stages of advisor onboarding. Both participants described their training as an isolating time where “you learn on the job.” In Megan’s interview, she shares how “It didn’t really seem like there was a common thread...I felt like, well I don’t really know what I’m supposed to be doing because everyone’s doing something differently...I didn’t know which one I need to pull stuff from.” While the body of research on academic advising is lacking, this illustrates an area that may be worth diving into, particularly as it can directly impact the student experience (Alvarado & Olson, 2020). The impact of academic advisor training on the student experience became evident while analyzing the student interviews alongside the advisor interviews. This connection became apparent when looking at the student enrollment experience. In Elizabeth’s interview, she shares this sentiment regarding training stating, “We didn’t get training in all the programs, which was hard. You’d have a few programs that you kind of knew a little about, but the other ones...you’re like, I have no idea what this entails.” Reviewing Elizabeth’s training experience, I was reminded of Hannah’s depiction of her early advising challenges. Hannah had shared in her interview that communication with her first advisor had been “awful.” Hannah went on to share, “Like she knew what she was doing, but she didn’t know my program well enough to advise me in it. So, I felt blind.” Initially, Hannah’s experience read as a breakdown in communication, but

learning about the advisor experience, and specifically Elizabeth sharing how she did not learn about all the program offerings, illustrates a possible explanation for Hannah's early challenges with advising. While the stance within the literature emphasizes the important role of advising in the first year of college, these findings suggest an opportunity to explore how academic advisor training impacts the experiences that students have as they transition into college (Alexitch, 2002; Bitz, 2010; Donaldson et al., 2016; Ellis, 2014; Fike & Fike, 2008; Griffin et al., 2019; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Schwebel et al., 2008; Smith, 2002; Swecker et al., 2013; Workman, 2015).

In addition to the student and advisor interviews, aspects of advisor training deficiencies also emerged from the document analysis. These documents provide context to the expectations placed on academic advisors. When reviewing the documents, I noticed an emphasis on policy knowledge, particularly when reviewing the internal documents from advisor meetings and internal communications. Much of the time advisors spent engaged in meetings – demonstrated through the meeting minutes – focused on understanding various forms, appeals, and processes. In meetings and communications, the importance of the advisor's understanding of these policies and procedures emerged as the central focus, with little emphasis on engaging with students through the process. For example, in one document, the importance of how to acknowledge a retention alert is highlighted – specifically, the email focuses on the timeline in which alerts should be closed. However, no mention of how to engage with the student who is the subject of the retention alert is mentioned. Of course, the logistics of navigating the alert are important, but this information is interesting when combined with the findings from the advisor interviews. Specifically, Megan shares in her interview, “I think we get more training on the technical



information of like, this is the policy or procedure...but it's not the practices that we're actually implementing.... It's...the regurgitation of information and those types of things." In this case, the documents reviewed provide additional context to the advisor interviews, highlighting another aspect of the advisor training experience that could be improved for the advisor.

The impact of focusing on policy and procedure instead of how to engage with a student through a process is seen not only through the advisor experience but also the student experience. The findings from student interviews revealed several early challenges with advising for the participants of this study. In many cases, the initial advising experience was not always positive. For example, Ellie recounts her first advisor meeting quite negatively, sharing, "There was no communication by any means...and she just was like, 'Well, here's the classes I got. Here you go, take this to financial aid and the student services office and get enrolled.'" The findings from the document analysis provide some context as to why Ellie's experience may have been so negative. Although Ellie walked away from that experience with her advisor feeling confused, the information I gained from advisor interviews, along with the documents I analyzed, indicates that advisors may also be feeling negative about these experiences, given their lack of preparation in training and when they are introduced to new policies and procedures in meetings. Although in Ellie's case, she was able to bounce back and ended up working with a new advisor, for many first-generation students, an encounter like Ellie's could lead to further struggles, serving as a potential reason why many first-generation students are more likely to drop out of college in their first year (Chen, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pratt et al., 2019). These findings indicate a need to enhance the preparation that advisors receive during training and when new policies and procedures are introduced.

**Theme: Access and Availability for First-Generation Students.** Although both advisor participants focused solely on academic planning and enrollment when discussing the guidance they provide students, another significant theme that emerged from their interviews highlights the importance they place on providing first-generation students with a bit of additional time and attention. Both participants emphasized the importance of “creating space” and the need to “spend a little more time” with their first-generation advisees to ensure they felt comfortable and received the information they needed to navigate their college experience. In Megan’s interview, she emphasizes the language used with first-generation students, sharing, “I usually try to first explain that...I’m not trying to just talk in circles and give them lots of keywords and buzzwords that don’t make any sense.” The perceptions these advisors shared in their interviews highlight how these advisors work to address the knowledge gap discussed in the literature on first-generation students, particularly regarding the language necessary to navigate college (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pratt et al., 2019). While the findings from this study provide insight into how academic advisors support first-generation students, specifically in terms of spending more time and attention on these students, they also offer a window into what happens with an advising appointment. Elizabeth expands on this in her interview, sharing, “I try to be a little more information, and...I try to schedule for a longer time with the students, just to make sure they feel comfortable...because it’s scary for them, you know?” This insight into how advisors structure their advising meetings demonstrates how they contribute to a positive environment for first-generation students. Additionally, this insight connects to the experiences that students shared in their interviews, specifically when discussing their advisor’s role in providing emotional support and access. Several of the student participants emphasized the importance of

having their advisor take the time to listen to them or the value of having their advisor open the door to critical information they needed at the right time. The importance that advisors in this study place on spending extra time with these students provides context to the literature that encourages the use of advising as support for first-generation students as they transition into college (Bailey et al., 2006; Booth et al., 2013; Dougherty et al., 2017; Karp, 2013; Karp et al., 2008).

### **Implications**

The advising experiences that first-generation community college students in this study shared from their first year of college indicate that they encounter various challenges as they transition into college. Their resiliency through these challenges highlights their desire to create new opportunities for themselves and their family through a college degree. As they move through their first year and continue to work with their advisor, an emphasis on academic guidance, emotional support, and access become the core elements of the relationship with their academic advisor. Through academic advisor interviews and a review of documents provided by Midwest Community College, the institution's expectations provide context to the student experience, supporting the critical aspect of guidance that advising plays in the first year of college and revealing significant areas of improvement for advisor training. Given that the transition into college is a critical time for first-generation community college students, the findings from this study provide significant implications for theory and practice.

### ***Implications for Theory***

This study explored a significant transition experience for first-generation college students. First-generation students encounter various unique challenges when enrolling in

college, and this study sought to explore the role of academic advising in that transition (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). Schlossberg (2011) outlines four categories in her Transition Theory that relate to change, which she calls the 4 Ss: situation, self, supports, and strategies. Academic advising is often cited as a critical support service for first-generation students, but few studies explore the experiences that first-generation students have with advising, particularly in the first year (Bailey et al., 2006; Booth et al., 2013; Dougherty et al., 2017; Karp, 2013; Karp et al., 2008). The findings from this study reveal how academic advisors often provide critical academic guidance, emotional support, and access to first-generation students throughout their first year of college. However, in the early stages of transition, academic advisors can sometimes cause confusion when assisting first-generation students with enrolling into college. The stories that student participants shared in this study reflect the literature surrounding transition experiences for other populations, such as student athletes, student veterans, and transfer students, and add depth to the transition experiences of first-generation students.

All participants in this study shared some initial confusion regarding academic advising as they transitioned into college, and for several of the students, this was directly related to academic advising. One participant recounts how she felt after meeting with her advisor for the first time, which almost impacted her ability to remain in college, sharing, “I was scared...it was so hectic...It made me feel like I wasn’t prepared for this by any means, that I didn’t want to do it. And I was ready to give up, like I was ready to be done.” However, as this same participant continued to navigate her first year of college, her experience with academic advising shifted after she found a new academic advisor who could support her when needed. This participant

later shares, “And having a good one [advisor], I feel more confident in my schoolwork and everything that I’m doing here. And I definitely feel more connected with the school as well.” When looking at this situation through the lens of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, this student’s initial experience with an intended support system was challenging. Yet, as she continued to work through her transition into college, this perspective shifted, and the student’s academic advisor became a positive support for her. These findings indicate there is an adjustment period for students during a transition period, particularly as they learn to navigate a new environment, and demonstrates how as students move through their transition, the way they view support systems can shift over time.

For other participants, the initial experience with academic advising was not necessarily negative, but fraught with confusion. Another participant shares, “I really was kind of confused on what I was supposed to do and what they were going to do for me...it was just hard to know what I’m supposed to be doing.” In this student’s first advising encounter, understanding how to engage in the advising relationship was not immediately clear. This experience highlights the importance of hearing directly from first-generation students about their transition into college, particularly as they are often less familiar with college resources (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pratt et al., 2019). Confusion can be just as debilitating as having a negative encounter, as determined through studies highlighting the challenges transfer students have with transitioning into college and navigating support services (Sklyar, 2017). These early advising experiences demonstrate how the transition into college often has an adjustment period, and more specifically, first-generation students’ initial exposure to support services – such as academic advising – may

require additional attention as they work to navigate their transition into college and learn to navigate the resources at their disposal.

While the findings from this study provide a new perspective on how Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1984) informs the way first-generation students navigate the first year of college, several of the experiences that participants shared also adds to the existing literature surrounding student transition experiences. For example, both student athletes and transfer students share how family can serve as both a form of support and a source of pressure when navigating the college environment in studies that use Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a lens (Berner, 2012; Byrd, 2017; Covington, Jr., 2017; Flowers et al., 2014; Messer, 2008; Saxe et al., 2017; Sklyar, 2017). The findings from this study reveal that first-generation students also share similar feelings when discussing their motivations for attending college. Several student participants in this study focused on their families when describing what it means to attend college, but for some, that also generated feelings of stress. One student participant shares, "So, it's an indication of like, I'm not going to suffer from those hardships as much as my parents...it's something that I'm proud of, but it's also something that's really scary, I would say." For first-generation students, attending college to create better opportunities for themselves and their families is a significant support in their enrollment but also comes with a considerable amount of pressure. The findings from this study align with previous studies that use Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1984) to understand students' transition experiences and add the perspective of first-generation college students to the literature.

### *Implications for Practice*

Although the research on academic advising and its impact on student success in college continues to grow, few studies explore the influence of advisors on first-generation students, and even fewer explore advising experiences at the community college level (Alvarado & Olson, 2020; Bailey et al., 2006; Booth et al., 2013; Dougherty et al., 2017; Karp, 2013; Karp et al., 2008). Despite the limited research, academic advising has emerged as a critical resource for students in their first year of college, and while there are several variations of advising practices, structures, and approaches depending on the institution, advising continues to play a crucial part in the college student experience (Alexitch, 2002; Bitz, 2010; Donaldson et al., 2016; Ellis, 2014; Fike & Fike, 2008; Griffin et al., 2019; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Schwebel et al., 2008; Smith, 2002; Swecker et al., 2013; Workman, 2015).

College administrators, and higher education leaders, need to understand the value of academic advising and the role advisors play in shaping student success. It is easy for administrators to say academic advising is valued without putting any weight behind that statement. The findings from this study illustrate that value can be quantified through financially investing in academic advising training programs and professional development. Academic advising is often thought of as just course registration, which is transactional in nature and requires nothing more than a course catalog and the click of a button. Although advisors often assist students in navigating the curriculum and enrolling in courses, the responsibilities of their role extend far beyond course selection. Advisors help students in navigating the hierarchy of the educational system and build relationships with their students that create the space for academic and emotional support. An investment in ongoing academic advisor training that includes how to

navigate difficult conversations is just as critical as ensuring advisors understand how to thoroughly explain the curriculum. The findings from this study suggest that the role of an academic advisor is evolving beyond course selection and academic planning to include elements of emotional support and relationship building. While students are enrolled in college, life does not pause. Academic advisors are there to help students incorporate their academic goals into their everyday lives, helping them gain the skills and knowledge necessary to make informed decisions to find the best way to reach the end of their journey successfully.

While the impact of academic advising is felt throughout all student populations, first-generation students – particularly those who begin their academic pursuits at the community college level – are often most in need of the resources that academic advisors provide (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018; Karp et al., 2008). It is critical that all first-generation students are informed of what academic advising is, and how they can connect with an academic advisor immediately upon enrolling in college. I believe that this population does not have the liberty of waiting until they encounter a roadblock to start looking for resources – often, that first roadblock is all they need to believe that maybe college is not the right place for them. Although academic advising has been a component of the college experience since the early origins of higher education and variations of advising exist in some form through colleges and universities, the need to invest in academic advising resources is imperative, particularly as student expectations for advising begin to shift (Cook, 2009).

The investment in academic advising begins with the resources and training that academic advisors receive to prepare them to work with their students. In this study, student participants shared that early enrollment challenges often stemmed from an unproductive first



meeting with their academic advisor. Findings from advisor interviews revealed that academic advisors need a robust training program to equip them with the knowledge and soft skills to communicate effectively with their students. Although advisors and students alike eventually find their footing and develop a positive relationship, for some first-generation students, this initial communication mishap could result in their decision to drop out of college and pursue a different path, particularly as first-generation students are more likely to drop out within the first year of college (Chen, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pratt et al., 2019).

It is essential for institutions, and higher education administrators in particular, to understand the impact academic advising can have on first-generation students. The findings from this study contribute to the body of literature on academic advising and provide insight into what the relationship between student and advisor entails. While understanding how the number of times a student meets with an advisor impacts retention is important, what is discussed in an advising appointment – and how that helps a student navigate their college experience – is equally as important (Swecker et al., 2013). Suppose an understanding of the depth of knowledge an advisor needs to work with a student is better understood at the leadership level. In that case, an argument can be made for what advisors need to be able to do their jobs successfully. With additional financial and human resources allocated to advisor onboarding – and ongoing advisor training – the impact will be felt by academic advisors and most importantly, the students who experience academic advising.

In this study, all student participants were able to navigate through their early enrollment challenges - and confusion regarding advising and how it works – but they may have been the lucky ones. First-generation students are known for their resiliency and strength (Karp et al.,

2020; Pascarella et al., 2003). However, institutions cannot rely on that to ensure all students make it through the confusing transition into college. Enhancing advisor training and resources is a place to begin. Incorporating soft skills into academic advisor onboarding provides advisors with the necessary tools to navigate challenging conversations with students. Programs such as Mental Health First Aid Training could equip advisors with the resources to assist first-generation students through the difficult moments of transitioning into college, as well as to know when they need to make a critical referral (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2023). Furthermore, ongoing training for academic advisors should be encouraged through professional development opportunities through student affairs-orientation organizations such as NACADA, ACPA, and NASPA. These professional associations provide academic advisors with the opportunity to network with peers across similar institutions throughout their region, or even the country.

While higher education leaders can demonstrate their dedication to the ongoing development of advisors by providing financial assistance toward professional development, in a time of tight budgets and low reserves, a financial commitment may take longer to achieve. In this case, the findings from this study also demonstrate how capitalizing on human resources is a lever that institutions can pull to better support their academic advisors. For example, in-house professional development and staff meetings focused on discussing practice can assist in preparing academic advisors to meet the expectations of first-generation students. In this study, both advisor participants recognized that first-generation students need additional time and attention. Higher education administrators could encourage dedicating time each semester for advisors to reflect on their practice and share ideas with each other, providing a form of internal

professional development and ongoing reflection. These conversations could include the creation or review of what academic advising is, what the learning outcomes of academic advising are, and how each connects to the mission and vision of the institution. These conversations could help ensure that expectations for advisors are aligned with the goals that the institution has for student success, and how those expectations differ for various student populations.

This study illustrates how the experiences of first-generation students is directly connected to the level of preparation that academic advisors receive through their training. While a financial commitment to academic advisor training is ideal, taking the time to regularly assess what the role of academic advising is and how that role aligns with the goals of the institution is also a way for higher education administrators and leaders to demonstrate their support of academic advising. Ultimately, a commitment to the ongoing professional development of academic advisors is a commitment to first-generation community college student success.

### **Limitations**

While this study focused on the experiences that first-generation community college students have with academic advising in their first year of college, its scope was narrow. Limitations of this study must be examined as they influence the findings.

1. Community college students are some of the most diverse in the United States (Malcom-Piqueux, 2018). Given the broad demographics of community college students, the most desirable participants for this study would have been from various backgrounds. All seven of the student participants interviewed for this study identified as female. Six of the seven participants were between the ages of 18 – 24. These demographics narrow the scope of the findings from this study.

2. The advisor participants who responded to the email request and participated in interviews were less than two years into their first advising position. Varying experience levels in advising would have provided additional depth to the expectations of advising.
3. Academic advising is a highly subjective experience (Soria, 2012). This study explored the advising experiences of seven first-generation community college students. More experiences, themes, and connections could have emerged with more student participants.

### **Future Research Directions**

When I began this research, it was my goal to inform advisors, advising administrators, and higher education leaders about the experiences that first-generation students have with academic advising to create a more holistic understanding of how advisors support students as they transition into their first year of college. Individuals involved with advising – and those who make decisions about academic advising – may determine after reviewing my study that additional resources and attention to academic advising are essential in providing first-generation students with the tools to navigate the transition into and through the first year of college successfully.

My primary motivation for this study was to explore first-generation students' advising experiences to understand how they experience academic advising. Previous research on academic advising highlights the importance of academic advising in the persistence and success of first-year college students (Alexitch, 2002; Bitz, 2010; Donaldson et al., 2016; Ellis, 2014; Fike & Fike, 2008; Griffin et al., 2019; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Schwebel et al., 2008; Smith, 2002; Swecker et al., 2013; Workman, 2015). The participants from this study shared that although they often encountered early challenges with academic advising, as they

navigated through their first year of college and gained an understanding of academic advising, their advisor emerged as a critical resource for them in terms of academic guidance, emotional support, and access.

Based on the research, study, and conclusions formed from the interviews, the following recommendations for further research are suggested below:

1. **Increase the Population to Research:** Interview more students from various demographics to explore additional perspectives on academic advising. Increasing the number of students interviewed would provide further depth to the themes and potential new observations and experiences. Expanding the population ensures that the findings represent the community college population.
2. **Expand the Scope of the Interview Questions:** Expand the research questions to include the orientation process. Only one participant in this study mentioned orientation briefly, and given the role of orientation in the enrollment process, additional questions on this experience could expand the understanding of academic advising.
3. **Expand the Scope of the Research:** Expand the research timeline to extend beyond the first year of community college. How do students' experiences with advising in their first year of college impact their second year? How do their advising experiences shift as they approach graduation and beyond?
4. **Further Explore Gender in Academic Advising:** In this study, all participants – including students and advisors – identified as women. A qualitative study that explores the impact of gender on the advising experiences of students – and more specifically, the impact of gender roles on academic advising – may provide another layer of context to the

experiences students have with advising, as well as the expectations that advisors have for the role of academic advisor. This type of study should include students and advisors that identify as women, men, and nonbinary.

5. **Further Explore Academic Advisor Preparation:** A qualitative study focused on academic advisor experiences with training and professional development. Interview a more diverse group of advisors from various institutions to gain an understanding of how academic advisors are prepared to work with students across various types of institutions.
6. **Large Scale Quantitative Study:** A quantitative study focused on exploring the impact of academic advising on student success. A study involving measurable student outcomes such as GPA and graduation might provide significant evidence of the influence academic advising has on student success.

### **Chapter Summary and Final Thoughts**

The transition into college for first-generation students involves a variety of significant academic, cultural, and social challenges (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). Despite the increased interest in research on first-generation college students, limited qualitative studies explore the advising experiences that first-generation students have in their first year of community college. The need for these studies exists because first-generation students continue to make up a significant portion of the undergraduate population. This study provides an opportunity to share their stories in the hopes that they will inspire academic advisors, advising administrators, and higher education leaders to advocate for academic advising as a resource to support first-generation student success.

This study was conducted to explore the advising experience of first-generation community college students to understand how they experience academic advising and how their interpretation reflects the expectations for advising held by the institution they attend. The results of this study indicate that first-generation students often encounter enrollment challenges when they first transition into college, usually centered on their first advising encounter or their confusion surrounding how academic advising works. These students share a desire to better themselves that often motivates them to persevere through these early challenges. Once they pass their initial setbacks, their understanding of advising shifts as they navigate their first year of college and engage with their academic advisor. By the end of the first year of college, first-generation students' understanding of academic advising consists of three main roles – academic guidance, emotional support, and access and availability. Through these roles, their academic advisor becomes a critical resource to them. Hannah described the importance of this role, stating, “I don’t have to search for access, she gives me access. She is my access and that is amazing to have.”

Findings from this study suggest that academic advisors' understanding of their role is similar to their students. They emphasize the importance of helping students navigate enrollment, course registration, and academic planning. Furthermore, they understand that first-generation students need additional time and attention to navigate the college environment, as they are often most unfamiliar with its' landscape (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pratt et al., 2019). Although academic advisors understand they have significant responsibilities within their role, they share that the training they receive to prepare them is often insufficient – leading them to feel ill-equipped to serve all students within their caseloads. When comparing this experience to the

stories shared by first-generation participants, it is not surprising that students used the terms “confusing” and “disorganized” when describing their initial advising experiences. These findings illustrate how advisor training and preparation directly impact the student experience.

The use of document analysis for this study provided context to the student and advisor interviews, reinforcing the importance of course registration and academic planning in the academic advisor role. The materials from advisor training and orientation demonstrated the emphasis on academic guidance for both advisors and students. Additionally, a review of internal documents revealed the emphasis on policy and procedural knowledge versus advisor approach and practice, reinforcing the need to enhance the advisor training process and the ongoing development of advisors.

This study explored the advising experience of first-generation students in their first year of college through the lens of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1984). Through this framework, this study examined the role of academic advising as a support for students as they navigate the transition into college and through the first year of college. Using this framework as a lens, the findings from this study illustrate how first-generation students experience an adjustment period when transiting into college, which includes a shifting perspective on their support systems, such as academic advising, as they learn to navigate their new environment.

The findings from this study provide an opportunity to delve into the first-generation community college experience with academic advising and how it impacts the first year of college. Academic advising is often at the center of the student experience but often is overlooked as a transactional experience that involves course selection and a quick confirmation that degree requirements are met. In reality, academic advisors form meaningful, and sometimes



lifelong, relationships with their students. When these relationships are formed, the door opens for first-generation students to learn how to navigate their academic goals and maybe even goals they never anticipated they would achieve.

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## **Appendix A: Invitation to Student Participants**

Dear Students,

My name is Kristen Stradt-Johnson, and I am a doctoral student at St. Cloud State University. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about the experiences that first-time, full-time, first-generation community colleges students have with academic advising in their first year of college. You're eligible to participate in this study because you were enrolled for the first-time in the Fall 2021 semester as a full-time student and identified as a first-generation student on your application.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will complete a demographic survey and engage in a semi-structured interview with me either in-person or via Zoom. This interview should last about one hour. If you are interested in participating in this study, please email me at [ksstradtjohnson@go.stcloudstate.edu](mailto:ksstradtjohnson@go.stcloudstate.edu).

Sincerely,

Kristen Stradt-Johnson

Doctoral Student, Higher Education Administration, St. Cloud State University



## **Appendix B: Invitation to Advisor Participants**

Dear Advisors,

My name is Kristen Stradt-Johnson, and I am a doctoral student at St. Cloud State University. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about the experiences that first-time, full-time, first-generation community colleges students have with academic advising in their first year of college. You're eligible to participate in this study because you currently work as an academic advisor at XXX.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will engage in a semi-structured interview with me either in-person or via Zoom. This interview should last about one hour. If you are interested in participating in this study, please email me at [ksstradtjohnson@go.stcloudstate.edu](mailto:ksstradtjohnson@go.stcloudstate.edu).

Sincerely,

Kristen Stradt-Johnson

Doctoral Student, Higher Education Administration, St. Cloud State University

## **Appendix C: Student Interview Protocol**

### Introduction

- Overview of project/letter of consent
- Introductions
- Tell me a little about yourself?
  - Program of study
  - Educational background

### Prompt #1: First-Generation Experience with College Enrollment

#### Possible probes:

- How did you make the decision to attend college?
- Did you talk with your family about your decision to attend college?
- How would you describe your family's experience with college?
- What does being a first-generation student mean to you?
- What brought you to Midwest Community College?
- Tell me about how you chose your current program of study?

### Prompt #2: Community College Experience

#### Possible probes:

- How would you describe your transition into college?
- What have you enjoyed about college thus far?
- What has been difficult?
- How would you describe your first year of college?

### Prompt #3: Academic Advising (Big Picture)

#### Possible probes:

- When you began college, how did you understand the role of an academic advisor?
- How would you define what an advisor is now?
- How would you describe the way academic advising works at Midwest Community College?
- What role do you believe academic advising plays in your college experience?

### Prompt #4: Advising Experiences (Specific)

#### Possible probes:

- Tell me about a meeting with your academic advisor. What topics do you discuss?
- How would you describe your overall experience with your academic advisor in your first year?
- What do you like about your advisor?

- Did you experience any challenges with your advising experience in your first year?
- How has your academic advisor affected your first year of college?
- If you could give advice to future first-generation students about working with their academic advisor, what would you say?

#### Wrap-up

- Is there anything that we did not discuss that you feel is beneficial to this study?
- Do you have any questions for me?

## **Appendix D: Advisor Interview Protocol**

### Introduction

- Overview of project/letter of consent
- Introductions
- Tell me a little about yourself?
  - Educational background
  - Higher education job experience

### Prompt #1: Background Information

#### Possible probes:

- How long have you been an academic advisor?
- How did you become an academic advisor (or how did you get into academic advising)?
- What brought you to Midwest Community College?

### Prompt #2: Academic Advising (General/Institution)

#### Possible probes:

- How would you describe your personal approach to academic advising?
- How would you define what an advisor is?
- What role do you believe academic advising plays in the student college experience?
- What do you think are the most important characteristics for an academic advisor to have?
- How would you describe the way academic advising works at Midwest Community College?
- How many advisees do you have in your advising caseload?

### Prompt #3: Academic Advising (Training)

#### Possible probes:

- What specific training did your unit/office provide for your job?
- What was your experience with the training provided for academic advising from your unit/office?
- What guidance and support do you receive from your unit/office?
- What types of professional development do you participate in for your role?

### Prompt #4: Advising Experience (General)

#### Possible probes:

- Tell me about how you approach setting up an advising appointment – do you reach out and set up the meeting or does your advisee set it up?
- What do you typically do to prepare for meeting with your advisees?
- What are your expectations for students when you meet with them?
- How would you describe a typical academic advising appointment?

- What is your understanding of your responsibility in relation to the academic advising appointment?
- What is your understanding of the student's responsibility in relation to the academic advising appointment?

Prompt #5: Advising Experience (First-Generation Specific)

Possible probes:

- How are first-generation students identified in your caseload?
- How would you describe the way you approach advising a first-generation college student?
- Tell me about how you approach an advising appointment with a first-generation college student. How does it differ from an appointment with any other student?

Wrap-up

- Is there anything that we did not discuss that you feel is beneficial to this study?
- Do you have any questions for me?

## Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter



Institutional Review Board  
720 Fourth Avenue South, AS 101, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498

September 2, 2022

To: Kristen Stradt-Johnson  
Email: ksstradtjohnson@go.stcloudstate.edu

Faculty Mentor: Jennifer Jones

**Project Title: Exploring the Advising Experiences of First Year, First-Generation Community College Students: A Case Study**

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol to conduct research involving human subjects.

**Your project has been: Approved**

**Expiration Date:** N/A  
**Approval Type:** Exempt  
**SCSU IRB#:** 40053818

Please read through the following important information concerning IRB projects:

### ALL PROJECTS:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).
- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time

### EXEMPT PROJECTS:

- Exempt review only requires the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.

### EXPEDITED AND FULL BOARD REVIEW PROJECTS:

- The principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.
- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.

If we can be of further assistance, feel free to contact the IRB at 320-308-4932 or email [ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu) and please reference the SCSU IRB number when corresponding.

Sincerely,  
**IRB Chair:**  
William Collis-Prather

**IRB Institutional Official:**  
Dr. Claudia Tomany

Program Director  
Applied Clinical Research

Associate Provost for Research  
Dean of Graduate Studies

## Appendix F: Consent Form

### Informed Consent

**Title:** Exploring the Advising Experiences of First Year, First-Generation Community College Students: A Case Study

**Primary Investigator:** Kristen Stradt-Johnson

**Email contact:** [ksstradtjohnson@go.stcloudstate.edu](mailto:ksstradtjohnson@go.stcloudstate.edu)

**Faculty Oversight:** Jennifer Jones

**Faculty Contact:** [jbjones@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:jbjones@stcloudstate.edu)

### Introduction

A significant amount of today's college students identify as first-generation. While the experience of attending college can be daunting for any student, first-generation students – being the first in their family to attend college – may not know what questions to ask or where to go to gain assistance. The relationship between a college student and their academic advisor can help bridge the gap to success and help students acclimate to college. For first-generation students, this relationship may be even more critical. This qualitative case study will explore the experiences that first-generation students have with academic advising, focusing on the first year of college – a crucial time for new students. This study will produce data that provides insight into the advising experiences of first-generation college students. This data will add to the ongoing conversation surrounding first-generation students' persistence, specifically the role and impact of academic advising in the first year of college.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences that first-time, full-time, first-generation college students attending community college have with academic advising to understand better the role of advising in the first year of college.

### Study Procedures

As a participant in this study, you will take part in a brief screening to ensure you meet the criteria for the study. Once that has been determined, you will work with the primary investigator to set up a one-time, 30 – 60-minute semi-structured interview. In this interview you will be asked questions about your educational background, your experiences as a college student (or academic advisor), and your experiences with academic advising. These interviews will be either in-person or via Zoom, depending on your preference. The interviews will be recorded with your permission. After the conclusion of your interview, the primary investigator will transcribe the interview word-for-word and share that transcript with you for any comments or changes.

### Risks and Discomforts

No physical pain or discomfort will be caused by this study. However, you may experience emotional discomfort when discussing your experiences enrolling in college and your first year of college, depending on your specific experiences. Reasonable precautions will be taken to minimize any risk to you.

**Benefits**

Benefits from this study include providing you with a space to discuss your experiences with academic advising, as well as your experiences in college, which may ultimately help you make sense of your academic journey thus far.

**Compensation**

You will not be paid for completing this study.

**Confidentiality**

Data collected will remain confidential. Your name will not be disclosed nor will any other identifiable markers. Direct quotes will be used during the interview, but not include your name or identifiable markers. During the interview you may choose to decline to answer any question. Data from the interview will be kept in a safe and secure manner only available to the primary investigator. After the completion of the interview, you will receive a transcribed copy of the interview. If you wish to expand on any previous responses, a second interview may be set up in the same manner as the initial interview. Any data from this potential second interview would follow previous guidelines of confidentiality and security.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not impact your current or future relations with Midwest Community College, St. Cloud State University, or the researcher. If you choose to participate, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age, have read and agree to the above information, and you consent to participate.

If you have questions about this study, you may contact the Primary Investigator Kristen Stradt-Johnson at [ksstradtjohnson@go.stcloudstate.edu](mailto:ksstradtjohnson@go.stcloudstate.edu) or Faculty Oversight Jennifer Jones at [jbjones@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:jbjones@stcloudstate.edu).

Subject Name  
(Printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Subject  
Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_