

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF MATTERING IN ACADEMIC ADVISING SETTINGS

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## ABSTRACT

Mattering is defined as feelings of significance and importance (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Mattering can be enacted through feeling dependent on others and sharing in celebrations of achievement or periods of frustration. Moments of mattering can mediate the complex challenges that college students face through the duration of their academic career. Academic advisors act as facilitators of these moments of mattering for students; especially at institutions where students are required to meet with advisors prior to course registration. As undergraduate students are confronted with academic, social, and personal stressors that require assistance, they can turn to academic advisors for trusted support as they navigate through their academic and personal journeys.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how students experience moments of mattering in academic advising settings. Using a constructivist post-phenomenological approach, I interviewed 15 participants, three times each, for a total of 45 interviews. Data were analyzed through a post-phenomenological lens and a priori theme development. The findings suggest that students experienced moments of mattering in small nuanced interactions with their academic advisor. More specifically, spoke to the individualized attention, recognition, and affirmation academic advisors provided them with during meetings together. Taken together, these concepts generated feelings of mattering for the students who participated in this study. Further, students' felt that mattering to themselves, first, was an important factor in how they described mattering to others.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated my parents, Gerard and Vicki Latopolski. Thank you for your unconditional love and constant support. You are everything good in this world. I am proud and honored to have parents who are the kindest and most compassionate individuals I have ever known. Thank you for believing in me, supporting me, and for everything you have ever done with me in mind, as it has allowed me to pursue my dreams.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Academic advising is a critical component of students' academic success and personal development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As noted in previous scholarship, academic advising has proven to increase student retention and persistence to graduation (Egan, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975). Academic advisors assist students with their curricula, goals, academic issues such as policies and procedures related to grades, course substitutions, and course scheduling. Furthermore, advisors routinely engage in conversations with students about their life outside of the classroom as well. For example, academic advisors assist students through nonacademic components of their lives such as cocurricular and work involvements, interpersonal relationships, and an array of additional factors contributing to students' academic, developmental, and personal successes or challenges (Kuhn, Gordon, & Webber, 2006).

Academic advising has been identified as a major contributor to students' academic success (Egan, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975). Students' academic success is often measured by outcomes or how much success students attain based on standard academic measures, such as their grade point average (GPA), retention, and progress through the curriculum. However, outcome based measures of academic success are not all encompassing. For example, there are more components to academic success than students' GPA attainment. Researchers have unveiled several definitions of academic success (e.g. Kuh, Kinzie,

Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Tracey, Allen, & Robbins, 2012; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshadet, 2005) that comprise aspects of students' educational achievements outside of their GPA. York, Gibson, and Rankin (2015) expanded the definition of academic success to include six factors that contribute to the term, academic success. These factors include: (1) academic achievement, (2) satisfaction, (3) acquisition of skills and competencies, (4) persistence, (5) attainment of learning outcomes, and (6) career success. As a functional area, academic advising strives to support the holistic development of a student's education (Hutson, He, & Bloom, 2014). Therefore, I defer to York and colleagues (2015) when referring to academic success. Academic success defined encompasses students' academic achievements and is inclusive of their overall satisfaction, the acquisition of new skills and competencies, persistence through to graduation, attainment of learning outcomes, and students' career success post-graduation.

The hallmark of effective academic advising is the unique ability for advisors to reach every student at a college or university (White, 2015). Academic advising is a functional area that can assist every student as it directly relates to the academic curricula of a college or university. While other staff and faculty members provide critical resources and offer students support, students may not need to use those services in the same way they do academic advising. College and university policies can dictate that all students are required to meet with academic advisors before students are able to register for their classes (White, 2015). This mandate offers the potential to connect every student with a university representative in the form of an academic advisor.

The meetings students have with academic advisors may be the only communication and interaction they have with university personnel outside of the classroom. Students can make themselves widely known across campus with staff and faculty by attending campus events,

office hours, and requesting time to meet with university personnel. On the other hand, students can be as anonymous as they choose while enrolled in classes, and they are not required to attend office hours or seek assistance in their educational endeavors. However, if students are required to meet with an academic advisor prior to course registration, it ensures that they have intentional contact with a staff or faculty member once per semester. Through the course of these meetings academic advisors are tasked with assessing students' academic, cocurricular, and personal needs, and encouraging students to become educational voyagers in their own right (White, 2015).

### **Background**

There is a rich history of academic advising infused throughout the beginning of higher education in the United States starting with the founding of Harvard College in 1636 (Thelin, 2011). Acknowledging the history of academic advising contextualizes the field of advising today and assists in the understanding of the professional organization, as well as how advising has evolved as a profession.

### **Academic Advising**

Understanding the history of higher education in the United States allows a broader perspective of academic advising as a specified functional area, which can be housed within academic or student affairs, depending on the institution. Given the positive effects academic advising has across students' academic success (Egan, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975), extending beyond students' academic outcomes, academic advisors partner with other offices and departments on campus to direct students for additional means of support and resources. Through conversations with students in academic advising, situations may arise where students need to be referred to campus partners in student affairs such as housing and residential

life, the student counseling center, career center, or student involvement, for example. Due to the shared responsibility across campus to facilitate students' academic success, personal development, and persistence to graduation, academic advising must build cross campus relationships with partners in student affairs to support their endeavors. Furthermore, academic advising relies on the campus-wide partnerships developed across an institution for continued support and development for students' benefit. Therefore, a situated relationship between academic advising and student affairs must exist regardless of which domain academic advising is housed in across institutions. Next, I will review the history and evolution of academic advising as a functional area in higher education.

Higher education in the U.S. began with the founding of Harvard College in 1636 (Thelin, 2011). During this time, faculty served as students' mentors, advisors, and teachers (Cook, 2009). In the 1830s, when women were admitted to higher education, positions titled Dean of Women were created. These positions launched the creation of the student affairs facet of university life. Through the employment of student affairs, many advisor positions were formed. In 1841, the first formal system of advising was introduced by Kenyon College. The students at Kenyon College were paired with a faculty member who served as their advisor (Cook, 2009).

Beginning in 1869, academic advising became a defined functional area within colleges and universities; however, it was largely left unexamined at the university level. Charles Eliot, President of Harvard University, introduced an expanded elective system at this time. Electives gave way to greater student autonomy and choices in their ability to choose courses while navigating the curriculum (Thelin & Hirschy, 2009). As a result, advisors were needed to help guide and advise students while making these decisions. During this period, teams of faculty

advisors were introduced; freshman advisors for first-year students were created, and Dean Griffin at Johns Hopkins University advocated for all institutions of higher education to have counselors or advisors for students (Cook, 2009).

Moving into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, veterans returned from WWI and enrolled in higher education. As a result of the war, staff members from various backgrounds were hired as support for the increasing student enrollments. More specifically, counselors, deans, and mental health professionals were enlisted to work with student veterans (Cowley, 1937). As student enrollments continued to increase and the curriculum in higher education became more vast and intricate, the need for individual attention and specialization was recognized by higher education administrators (Cook, 2009). Higher education administrators began investigating multiple facets of students' experiences during this time. Administrators explored students' experiences outside of the classroom and specifically addressed students' transition to higher education. As a result, higher education administrators implemented orientation programs, founded personnel services departments, and students participated in out of classroom experiences such as vocational training and counseling. Cook (2009) noted that the foundation of academic advising was established from the student personnel work and much of what we now term advising philosophy stems from student affairs, and namely student development.

As veterans were using their education benefits afforded to them by the GI Bill, specific personnel were hired to attend to students' mental health, career prospects, and academics were recruited to higher education institutions (Thelin, 2011). In the late 1950s, academic advising became increasingly more defined and was intentionally examined as a specialized function of higher education. As a profession, advising continued to evolve and progress throughout institutions across the United States. While faculty members were still the primary vessels for

advising, new student support centers were created, which were tailored to provide comprehensive student support.

The 1970s were a hallmark decade for academic advising. Changes to higher education in the 1970s brought newfound diversity to the field. Community colleges, federal financial assistance, and open enrollment led to transformations in students' demographics of those who were able to enroll in higher education as a direct result of these initiatives. Access to a college education greatly increased for first generation students, lower socio-economic students, academically underprepared students, adult and nontraditional students, and students with disabilities. This increase in student diversity prompted the development of specialized student services centers including academic advising (Cook, 2009). Additionally, three important events occurred in 1972, which assisted in highlighting and legitimizing academic advising as a crucial aspect of students' experience in higher education. First, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education recommended that greater stress should be placed on the importance of academic advising (Cook, 2009). This recommendation led to the expansion of community colleges, open admissions, and an increase in federal student aid, which led to rapid growth in enrollment for students coming from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds. The Commission recognized the unique needs of students that stemmed from the expansion of community colleges and new federal programs. Second, Crookston (1972) and O'Banion (1972) published articles, claiming student development as the foundation of academic advising. Last, the University of South Carolina created a University 101 course for incoming first-year students. This course was an extended orientation that helped students acclimate to the university by providing them with information regarding study skills for academic success. Third, in 1979, the National Academic Advising Association was established (NACADA). The primary goal of NACADA was to

facilitate quality academic advising at colleges and universities nationwide. To achieve this goal, NACADA encouraged the professional development and continued growth of academic advisors and advising as a field (Beatty, 1991).

Currently, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, increased pressure for accountability measures in academic advising has grown. The rising cost of higher education, large student enrollments, and an unstable economy has put pressure on academic advisors to decrease student attrition and increase persistence to graduation. This task has taken the focus away from the experiences of students in academic advising settings and placed it on academic outcomes such as retention and graduation rates. Higher education funding remains turbulent as states are beginning to disinvest from higher education and federal dollars are attempting to cover difference (Hackett, 2015). Amidst these calls for assessment and accountability, advisors continue to work with students holistically, through all facets and critical moments of their undergraduate careers while advocating for their professional development and honing in on defining academic advising as a profession.

## **NACADA**

The first national advising conference was held in 1977 in Burlington, Vermont (Cook, 2009; Grites & Gordon, 2009; Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leville, 2010). After a successful conference marked by overwhelming attendance and presentations, NACADA, was formed shortly thereafter, in 1979. The vision and purpose of this national association is to serve as a professional organization that provides support and professional development opportunities to academic advisors in an effort to enhance quality academic advising nationwide (Grites & Gordon, 2009). The professional association for academic advising is currently known as the Global Community for Academic Advising as its audience has stretched beyond the United

States and to its goal is to serve a broader more inclusive global community. Yet, the organization continues to use the original acronym, NACADA.

From its formation to present, NACADA was intimately involved in the literature, assessment, policies, and implementation of academic advising practices in higher education. For example, NACADA partnered with The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) in an attempt to bring cohesive and integrated advising practices to the academic advising community. CAS aims to promote quality uniform standards and good practices of student and academic affairs professionals in functional areas within the field of higher education (Mitstifer, 2015). The Council was founded in 1979 (Mitstifer, 2015; Robbins, 2014). In 1986, after members of NACADA deliberated, they came together and collaborated with members of CAS to publish quality academic advising standards (Grites & Gordon, 2009). CAS standards continue to inform best practices and principles of academic advising including advising students holistically and incorporating their academic and co-curricular experiences into their advising sessions (Robbins, 2014). Rust (2011) underscores this notion of advising across mediums (both academic and co-curricular) and they each relate to one another. Meaning, students' activities, decisions, and behaviors in out of classroom spaces are not removed from their in-class experiences.

Once CAS standards of advising had been established, NACADA moved onto their next task, defining the primary function of academic advising. As an organization, NACADA has had difficulty defining academic advising. In 2002 then President Betsy McCalla-Wriggins assigned a task force to determine the definition (Grites, 2013). The task force concluded that defining academic advising was too limiting. Instead, they resolved that an academic advising concept statement was more appropriate to speak to the many facets that academic advising encompasses.

The NACADA Board of Directors officially endorsed the Concept of Academic Advising in 2006 (National Academic Advising Association, 2006). While the task force was cautious to avoid promoting any specific advising approach, there are tenants of developmental advising laced throughout the language in the Concept, which is an academic advising approach that is championed throughout the advising community. The Concept of Academic Advising and the approaches that followed were the beginning of many benefits to come to members of the NACADA organization.

NACADA has provided innumerable benefits to its members. For example, NACADA offers its members professional growth development opportunities through webinars, national, international, and regional conferences, and advances advising scholarship through the NACADA journal. At the heart of NACADA is its mission to support diversity efforts in all aspects of the association. Diversity and inclusion efforts permeate all features of the organization including conferences, workshops, outreach, research, leadership positions, publications, and membership. As diversity and inclusion are promoted and supported in all aspects of NACADA's membership, it speaks to the notion of advising and how academic advisors should embrace the values that NACADA has set forth.

### **Academic Advising as a Profession**

The legitimacy of academic advising as a profession has been greatly contested in recent literature. The founding of NACADA was the catalyst of discerning academic advising as a profession (Cook, 2009). Shaffer and colleagues (2010) considered academic advising a white-collar profession that affords a high level of esteem upon entry into the field. Academic advising garnered entry into higher education as a specialized functional area (Cook, 2009; Hughey & Hughey, 2009). However, there has been great debate between what defines academic advising

as a profession. As Lowenstein (2015) noted, individuals enter into the field of academic advising from an assortment of educational and career backgrounds. The call for academic advising to be recognized as a profession among the higher education community has been made to establish standards among the global advising community and to call attention to the credibility and responsibility advisors have when working with students (Kuhn & Padak, 2009; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). In doing so, advisors' presence is legitimized on college and university campuses and their contributions to student progression and degree attainment is recognized. Additionally, the professionalization of academic advising comes with understanding that advisors are knowledgeable professionals as they work in the capacity of student services. The professionalization of academic advising also acknowledges the quest of academic advisors to pursue professional growth and development opportunities.

According to Shaffer and colleagues (2010), the demands for academic advising as a full time occupation were first required after the increase in student enrollments after WWII. The growing numbers of students entering higher education along with the expanding curriculum and elective options gave way to the need for academic advisors to assist students in guiding them through the terrain of the curriculum (Cook, 2009). NACADA membership has increased rapidly over the past 30 years and as a result of member involvement, annual conferences, and the opportunities for professional growth and development, academic advising has been recognized as a professionalization since the founding of the organization (Shaffer et al., 2010). However, academic advising as a profession is considered young and up and coming as of 2010. Executive members of NACADA called to increase the credibility of academic advising as a profession and made requests for academic advising to establish a qualifying feature (Shaffer et al., 2010). For example, Kuhn and Padak (2009) have called for requiring academic advisors to have master's

degrees as the next steps toward effective professional practice. Likewise, Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) advocated for academic advisors to work as scholar-practitioners in their field, by producing scholarship and demonstrating baseline knowledge of theories, practices, and techniques related to the profession. These calls for credibility have gone unanswered and the field of advising continues to exist without a qualifying feature.

### **Academic Advising Approaches**

Due to human nature, namely the various personalities and ways in which people interact, there is no uniform advising approach that will be applicable to all students. Developmental advising is currently one advising approach championed among the greater academic advising community as it has documented student benefits in terms of attrition, retention, and graduation rates (Crookston, 1972). Developmental advising and appreciative advising, defined below, are practiced widely and there has been research conducted within the advising community, which has addressed the benefits of these approaches (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008; Hutson et al., 2014). There has been less documented research surrounding prescriptive and proactive advising approaches, which are described in more detail in the following section. However, students respond to various advising approaches and interactions differently; again, there is no one approach that will work with every student. Scholars and practitioners support and advocate for specific advising approaches they favor. In what follows, I will elaborate on four advising approaches: (1) prescriptive, (2) developmental, (3) proactive, and (4) appreciative.

#### **Prescriptive**

Advisors form relationships with students through the experience of their academic advising appointments. The nature of these relationships differs depending on the advising approach one subscribes to in these appointments. The instrumental work by Crookston (1972)

described in detail the benefits of cultivating meaningful relationships between students and advisors. Prescriptive advising is information-based advising (He & Hutson, 2016), where the advisor takes the role of the teacher and the student remains that of a learner. In this approach, students assume the role of passive information receivers while advisors maintain their role as an authority figure. Students' primary motive for attending these appointments is to receive information regarding their schedule and pathway to graduation. The relationship between student and advisor is limited to the basic interaction strictly surrounding their course selection.

One of the primary critiques of the prescriptive approach is the impersonal effect it can have on students' experience (He & Hutson, 2016). Paul and Fitzpatrick (2015) referred to prescriptive advising as "class recommendation and one-way communication," (p. 28). However, prescriptive advising works well for students who have anxieties about future course selection and their path to graduation, though it leaves little room for students' personal decision making (Anderson, Motto, & Bourdeaux, 2014; Hale, Graham, & Johnson, 2009; He & Hutson, 2016). It may work well for students who prefer to see an advisor who abides by the prescriptive approach because they find greater satisfaction through this type of advising experience (Anderson et al., 2014).

### **Developmental**

When considering advising approaches on a spectrum in terms of relational interactions with students, developmental advising is on the opposite end of prescriptive advising. Whereas prescriptive advising is considered to be an authoritarian one-sided relationship involving course scheduling, developmental advising is considered a holistic approach (He & Hutson, 2016). The cornerstone of developmental advising is the relationship between advisor and student (Crookston, 1972). Moreover, it is the mutual construction of knowledge advisors and students

generate together throughout the advising process (Grites, 2013). Backed by those within the advising community, developmental advising was secured as a staple approach in the field after the classic work by Crookston (1972) and O'Banion (1972). In their respective pieces, both scholars promoted student development theory as the foundation of academic advising, which academic advisors at large have lauded.

Student development theory, primarily work from scholars Chickering (1969) and Perry (1970), undergirds the founding of developmental advising, which posits that learning occurs in in academic and non-academic spaces, contexts, and environments (Grites, 2013).

Developmental advisors adhere to this understanding of learning as those who practice this approach with students inquire about their holistic experiences in and out of the classroom.

Because the tenets of developmental advising rest on the rapport advisors build with students, the knowledge they generate together, and the consideration of a student's holistic experience, developmental advisors inquire about students' lives and personal experiences related to their academic achievements and obstacles.

### **Proactive**

Formerly known as intrusive advising, proactive advising (Varney, 2013) poses several thoughtful questions to students through the duration of their advising appointments. Hailed as an intervention-based (He & Hutson, 2016) approach, rather than reactive, proactive advising attempts to address student issues and concerns before they occur. Proactive advising combines facets of prescriptive and developmental advising to collaborate with students in a direct fashion to provide support and outreach before reactive efforts become necessary (Earl, 1988).

There are multiple advantages to proactive advising including an open advisor-advisee relationship, early intervention, increased student response, and greater attention to academic

planning (Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016). As there is “frequent communication” with this advising approach, it has been effective when advisors work with academically underprepared or at-risk students (He & Hutson, 2016, p. 216; Vander Schee, 2007). Studies by Ryan (2013) and Smith (2007) indicated an increase in proactive advising and student retention, while Museus and Ravello’s (2010) work uncovered benefits to increasing proactive advising especially with students belonging to racial and ethnic minority populations. Donaldson and partners (2016) found that students positively responded to mandatory proactive advising and degree planning. In doing so, students avoided taking unnecessary courses and were able to understand their academic trajectory early on in their undergraduate tenure. Additionally, students reported that they enjoyed participating in degree planning with an advisor as it offered them an opportunity for personalized support.

### **Appreciative**

Appreciative advising is a more recent advising approach that was formed in 2004 when it was applied to student retention and academic success programming (Kamphoff, Hutson, Admundsen, & Atwood, 2007). It has similar tenets of developmental advising, while adding a unique approach to the field. Appreciative advising confronts deficit-based advising approaches by focusing on students’ strengths (Hutson et al., 2014). Positive psychology and appreciative inquiry are the foundation from which appreciative advising has grown. Drake, Jordan, and Miller (2013) referred to this work as strengths-based advising while others (e.g. Bloom et al., 2008; He & Hutson, 2016) referred to this as appreciative advising. Both approaches require building on students’ inherent strengths and abilities to make decisions that will elicit academic success. Appreciative advising and developmental advising are closely related as they share the core elements of students’ holistic experience and the co-construction of knowledge and meaning

making. However, appreciative advising differs in its focus on students' strengths and the individualized approach, where every student's success and direction is unique to their lived histories and personal circumstances.

Appreciative advising is built on the premise that advisors will employ students to participate in the following six phases: disarm, discover, dream, design, deliver, and don't settle (He & Hutson, 2016; Hutson et al., 2014). Hutson and colleagues (2014) described the phases in more detail: the "disarm" stage intentionally creates an open and welcoming environment for students. Students may be apprehensive about attending an advising appointment, this stage is intended to ease any fears or anxieties students might have meeting with an academic advisor and confronting their academic standing. Throughout the "discover" phase, students are asked open-ended questions to facilitate dialogue and highlight students' strengths, assets, and skills. In the "dream" phase, students are asked about their greatest hopes and dreams for the future. Students and advisors then work together and co-construct a plan to make progress toward these goals during the "design" phase. Nearing the end of the appointment is the "deliver" phase where advisors encourage students to work toward their goals and reiterate confidence in their abilities. The "don't settle" phase is the foundation of appreciative advising and should motivate students and advisors to improve and always continue learning and growing (Hutson et al., 2014, p. 48). Similar to developmental advising, appreciative advising has been documented to increase academic success and retention rates for at-risk students (Kamphoff et al., 2007).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Academic advising is a relatively new functional area within higher education. New developments in advising approaches and techniques continue to unfold and stem in large part through the central organization of advising, NACADA. Higher education scholars have praised

the field of academic advising and the positive outcomes it has generated such as improving students' GPAs, increased retention and graduation rates and overall personal development and academic success (Egan, 2015; Kuhn, Gordon, & Webber, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975). Through these meetings with academic advisors, students have the opportunity to discuss their classes, talk about the challenges they are facing, plan their academic curriculum, and pose questions to a campus administrator. These meetings can be brief and last for 10 minutes, or they can be lengthy and take upwards of one hour depending on the conversation that transpires and the needs of the student. Serving as the person of authority, advisors set the tone and direction for the meeting with students. If a student leaves feeling as though the advisor paid attention to them, inquired about their activities outside of the classroom, one might conclude the student was important to the advisor, and the student felt as though they mattered to the advisor. On the other hand, if the student's questions go unanswered and they felt ignored or rushed out of the office, the student may feel insignificant, as if they do not matter to the advisor.

College is often espoused as being wonderful time for students. "It'll be the best four years of your life," is a frequent refrain that rings across college campuses. Students are developing socially and creating relationships, diversifying their experiences through new friendships, joining different clubs and organizations, and exploring and affirming their identities (Astin, 1984; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Academically, students are being challenged to think critically, be intentional and thoughtful consumers of information, and they are learning and growing into themselves as individuals (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Syed, 2010). These new undergraduate trials can also be accompanied by painful experiences, tribulations and often-untimely life events. What happens when students share a critical moment in their lives with a campus administrator? The ways in which students'

experiences unfold are crucial to their academic success, personal development, and persistence to graduation (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kuh et al., 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Students' sense of mattering affects their academic persistence and overall wellbeing (Schlossberg 1989; Strayhorn 2012). It is not enough for students to feel as though they matter to a faculty or staff member on campus; students actually need to believe they matter in order to generate feelings of belongingness (Strayhorn, 2012). These feelings of mattering and belongingness are important factors in facilitating students' self-esteem, competency, and confidence that is essential for students' to succeed socially and academically during their undergraduate tenure. Only once feelings of belongingness have been met, higher order process can begin (Strayhorn, 2012). Therefore, the interactions students have with academic advisors during these pivotal moments of mattering in their lives can determine their future trajectory, personal development, and academic success. With increased demands placed on academic advisors to work with larger student populations, are they able to effectively provide students with the appropriate support and resources they need to receive help?

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how students experience moments of personal mattering during their time with an academic advisor. Understanding students' mattering in academic advising settings will increase advisors' knowledge about how to approach working with students and facilitating their feelings of worth and significance. Findings will be shared with academic advising centers to provide advisors with information concerning how students experience feelings of mattering in their presence. The goal of this work is to inform academic advisors and the advising community of how students' experience

moments of personal mattering in advising settings. Academic advisors are the intended audience for this study.

### **Significance**

In a world where student populations are growing faster and greater than ever before, students can easily begin to feel lost. Students can begin to think of themselves as a number; one of 40,000 instead of an individual with personal concerns and needs. Under these conditions, it can be difficult to create environments that foster students' sense of mattering. Students who perceive high quality advising experiences can have positive effects on students beyond measures of retention, persistence, and graduation (Vianden & Barlow, 2015). As Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted,

Academic advising provides an avenue by which colleges and universities may improve student satisfaction and retention as well as assist students in selecting and committing to a major. It both directly influences students' persistence and affects students' grades, intentions, and satisfaction with their own role, factors that lead indirectly to student retention. (p. 26)

Academic advisors play a significant role in measured outcomes of student success such as retention. However, they may also be the pathways to improving student satisfaction as well. Academic advising structures and organizations may differ across institutions but the role of advising impact advisors can have in improving student satisfaction remains constant.

As a higher education functional area, academic advising differs between institution type and size based on the goals, mission, and curricula of every college or university (White, 2015). However, the CAS in higher education has crafted an overview of learning outcomes for advising that students should reach regardless of institution type. They include: (1) forming an educational plan, (2) using information from various sources to set goals, (3) taking responsibility for meeting academic requirements (4) communicating the purpose of higher

education, (5) garnering the necessary academic habits to become a lifelong learner, and (6) acting as culturally competent citizens of the world (Mitstifer, 2015). Academic advisors have the unique opportunity to talk with students about their academic and cocurricular experiences. In these conversations are many entry points for students' sense of mattering to emerge.

Going further, it is in these settings and more specifically, in these moments of mattering, that academic advisors hold a meaningful responsibility to students. Students report valuing academic advising and consider it to be of key importance to their education (Noel-Levitz, 2014; 2010). Advisors are responsible for acknowledging and supporting students in their entirety (Crookston, 1972; White, 2015). Students' lives cannot be compartmentalized into academic, cocurricular, and personal segments. Advisors should consider the notion that several higher education scholars put forward, which proclaim that students' experiences outside of the classroom greatly affect their performance and success inside the classroom (Astin, 1984; Kuh et al., 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schlossberg, 1989). Additionally, students are resilient and may still be able to thrive academically while enduring painful experiences (Morales, 2008; Runner & Marshall, 2003). However, it is crucial that academic advisors are engaged with their students and are aware of students' out of classroom experiences in order to best support student success and development.

As the literature discusses, academic advising can have a profound impact on students' experiences. This study is significant because for many students, academic advisors may be the only campus administrators they have contact with outside of the classroom. Therefore, it is vital to students' mattering to explore how students experience these critical moments. Students are not required to meet with student life staff members or career advisors, all of who would enrich their experience and provide opportunities for them. Students may be mandated to meet with

campus administrators if they become involved in academic or judicial misconduct; however, students should meet regularly with an academic advisor to discuss their goals, academic trajectory, and post-graduation plans (Alexitch, 2006; Flatley, Weber, Czerny, & Pham, 2013). Higher education scholars have found that students' experiences outside of the classroom environment have a significant impact on their performance in the classroom, which is the reasoning behind regular meetings with a campus administrator (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schlossberg, 1989). Through regular meetings with a campus official, students have an opportunity to receive help, guidance, and support.

College students endure a significant period of personal growth and development throughout their undergraduate years. At times, students may experience personal circumstances that lead to crises, which affect all areas of their lives. It is imperative to explore how students experience these critical moments and how academic advisors have supported students in navigating such tumultuous periods in their lives. New developments in academic advising and insight into students' experiences are garnered through this exploration.

### **Personal Mattering**

This work is profoundly meaningful to me personally and professionally as a practitioner scholar in the field of academic advising. Through my work with students in an academic advising setting I have been a witness to their trials and tribulations, significant moments in their lives, and I have watched as they have overcome personal and academic hurdles. Among these students were Aaron, Dominique, Davis, Samantha, and Matthew.

#### **Aaron**

Aaron was a first year student from Florida who I met when I was on-call. On-call is a common practice of advising offices where students can walk with without an appointment to

talk with an advisor about a question they have, resource they need, or to talk through something with an advisor. Advisors often help students on-call with non-academic related issues such as roommate conflicts, how to find a job, internships, study abroad, or sometimes students stop in just to say hello, have someone listen to them, and to decompress their thoughts and emotions. Aaron came into my office and told me that he was concerned that he had missed some classes because he had overslept and he was unsure how this was going to affect him. He presented as a nervous first-year student who was away from home for the first time and trying to figure out how to navigate the large university he was attending. After a lengthy and endearing conversation, he left with a plan and goals to meet for the following few weeks.

Two weeks after we first met, Aaron emailed me in crisis. It was a Saturday afternoon when he received a call that his mother was brutally murdered. Upon hearing this news about his mother, Aaron reached out to me with questions as he was unsure how to proceed through the tragedy he was facing. We emailed back and forth and set a plan to meet the following Monday. During that meeting we talked about withdrawing from the term and going home to be with his family and take care of himself. Aaron did go home but returned to campus after consulting with his father and was determined to finish the remainder of the semester. I met with Aaron through the rest of the semester to provide support and resources for him. Aaron is still enrolled and we continue to meet for advising appointments and any other time that he stops by to say hello or decompress.

### **Dominique**

Dominique was a junior who I had been seeing for advising appointments since her sophomore year. She came into on advising appointment and revealed her unplanned pregnancy to me. She told me she was scared and unsure how she was going to finish her classes and

complete her degree. Together, we created a plan that allowed her to take a semester off after having her baby. After a semester away from classes, she was ready to come back and finish her degree. We partnered with our online department and other campus resources to permit her to take online classes for the remainder of her degree. Dominique worked diligently to complete her degree and graduated in December 2017.

### **Davis**

A friend who was in a campus recovery program for drug and alcohol addiction referred Davis to me for an advising appointment. Davis was returning to school after two years away while he was in rehab for drug addiction. Looking at his transcript, he started his academic career with a high GPA. However, it was noticeable when he fell off track as his grades plummeted when he failed a multiple semesters in a row. There was an option for Davis to rehabilitate his GPA through academic bankruptcy. Academic bankruptcy would turn all of his grades of F to W meaning the failing grades would no longer be counted toward his GPA. However, the policy was written that students could only apply for academic bankruptcy after completing two semesters in a row of a 3.0 GPA or better.

We continued to work together and Davis would check in with me throughout his next two semesters to be held accountable and stay on track. We would talk about his interests, his goals, and what he wanted to pursue after graduation. After two semesters of earning a 4.0 GPA while taking calculus, statistics, and accounting, Davis applied for and received academic bankruptcy for one of his failed semesters. This helped improve his GPA enough for the requirement to declare his double major in finance and accounting. Soon after, Davis was taking upper division courses and on a path to graduation.

## **Samantha**

Samantha came in during my on-call day. She was a junior, who was struggling academically and financially. She was looking to transfer back to her home state where she could receive in-state tuition. Samantha disclosed that her parents would pay for her to go to school in her home state but because she chose to go to school out of state her parents were not supporting her financially. This left Samantha working two jobs to afford tuition, books, food, rent, utilities, and the cost of her sorority. Samantha came into the advising office to talk with someone about how she could finish her degree in the fastest amount of time possible. She was trying to figure out how much money it was going to cost her depending on the amount of time she had left to complete her requirements to graduate. We reviewed the information together and it was as she was walking out of the office that Samantha told me the true reason she was struggling personally and academically. As she was walking away Samantha said that she did not eat so she could afford to buy the clothes that would help her fit into her sorority. According to Samantha, this left her tired, hungry, and constantly craving the approval from her sorority sisters.

## **Matthew**

Matthew was a student leader on campus. He was Vice President of a large charitable student organization and a camp leader for a first-year orientation program. He was excited to be a member of his fraternity and was a very involved student having formed many relationships with staff members in student life. I had been seeing Matthew for advising appointments for over a year before he revealed that his goal for the semester was to come out to his mother and tell her he was gay. He was thrilled to be in a newfound relationship and told me that he was in love with his boyfriend. They had even discussed post-graduation plans and moving across the country together. Matthew stopped by a few weeks later to say hello and told me that he was facing some

challenges. His fraternity, which he was profoundly proud to be a member of originally, placed him on inactive member status because they found out he was dating a man. While this is not the first time Matthew said he had faced some sort of discrimination due to his sexual orientation, it was something that jolted him because his fraternity had felt like a family to him. Matthew told me he was disappointed and hurt by his inactive status and chose to report his fraternity to campus administrators.

### **William**

I met William during the fall of his first year during a first year seminar course that I taught. He was a first generation college student who completed his fall semester with a strong GPA. He was proud of himself, he told me, in one of our meetings together. William told me that not only was he the first in his family to go to college; he was the first person in his community to attend college. He said he felt a lot of pressure to do well and succeed. William said that all of his friends at home were felons and had been arrested. No one “got out” of the community he was raised in. William was taking difficult classes and helping out at home. He was responsible for picking up his younger brother from middle school every day, which meant he had to build his course schedule around his family obligations.

William did not do very well his second semester and began to question his ability. He was no longer sure if he was meant to be at college. This was the first of many times William cried in my office and disclosed his insecurities, anxieties, and questions he had about his life and where it was going. I heard from William over the summer regarding the classes he was taking at the local community college but did not hear from him again until the end of his sophomore year. He came into my office and shut the door. As soon as he sat down William immediately burst into tears and told me he was not going to pass some of his classes. He had

just taken his statistics final and said he did not know how to complete any of the problems.

William also divulged that he had not been sleeping or eating. He commented that he was too stressed to sleep and he could not afford to eat. While he was revealing these things William also told me that he was depressed. We discussed resources on campus that could assist William and provide support to him and his family. We also talked about returning to the community college he had attended and getting in touch with a counselor. Like many students, William's story is not over. He continues to battle anxiety, depression, financial stability, and food insecurity.

### **Summary**

The premise for detailing these students' stories is to shed light on the personal lives of students and the challenges they endure. The purpose of this study is important for me to illuminate the impact and meaning that spending time with an academic advisor can have for students. My intent in pursuing this work is to demonstrate to the academic advising community that we, as advisors, can offer meaningful experiences for students that will allow them to grow, be challenged, and motivated to achieve their goals. The students' narratives described above offer a brief snapshot into the lives of college students and the real life challenges and situations they are experiencing. There are countless students battling anxiety, depression, addiction, financial insecurity, food instability, and a myriad of difficult life circumstances who seek out academic advisors for help, resources, and a place to turn.

Depending on the institution, college students are not required to meet with a university administrator unless they are at risk academically (i.e., academic warning, probation, suspension) or have a judicial sanction (i.e., student conduct). However, institutions that impose mandatory advising can be assured that students will meet with a campus administrator at least once per

semester. This meeting is an opportunity for students to discuss academic and non-academic issues that affect their ability to be successful in college.

### **Overview of the Methodology**

This qualitative study was created using a phenomenological research design to understand students' experiences. Data were collected through individual interviews with students who experienced moments of mattering during their academic advising appointments. The interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. All interview data was coded into a priori themes for analysis. Reflective and reflexive memos, member checking, and transcription accuracy assisted in triangulating the data.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The organization of this dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter one provides an overview of academic advising and an introduction to students' mattering. It also states the purpose for the study and describes the significance of the study. Chapter two is an overview of the literature and demonstrates a noticeable gap in the research. The third chapter details the methodology and rationale for a phenomenological study. The results of the study are presented in chapter four and chapter five encompasses interpretations, considerations for future research, and my conclusion.

### **Glossary of Terms**

The terms in this section are related to my research and are used throughout this study.

**Academic Advising** A concept; the practice of meeting with students to create academic plans, discuss career interests, and address academic and personal concerns affecting academic success.

Academic Success      Students' academic achievements including their overall satisfaction, the acquisition of new skills and competencies, persistence through to graduation, attainment of learning outcomes, and students' career success post-graduation (York et al., 2015).

Mattering                "A motive; the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension" (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 165).

NACADA                 The Global Community for Academic Advising

AAA                        Academic Advising Association

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I discuss the current research surrounding academic advising to provide an overview of existing research and to indicate a clear gap in the research that has been conducted. The research is separated into four main categories: (1) student satisfaction with academic advising, (2) academic outcomes, (3) student development, and (4) high-impact practices. Within each section, there are subcategories related to the overarching research topic. Student transitions, expectations, and perceptions are the three subcategories under student satisfaction with academic advising. Retention, and GPA are the subcategories housed under academic outcomes. Student development encompasses psychosocial development, self-authorship, and self-efficacy. Finally, I conclude with an overview of my theoretical framework.

#### **Advising Satisfaction**

The first category of research situates students' satisfaction within academic advising. Students' satisfaction with the college experience is a key indicator of student persistence (Schreiner, 2009; Schreiner & Nelson, 2013). According to a Noel-Levitz report (2014) academic advising was a predictor of students' satisfaction with their college experience. Moreover, this 2014 report from Noel-Levitz stated that students considered academic advising to be of utmost importance to their education. Students who connected to academic advisors early on in their academic career at orientation stayed connected and formed meaningful relationships with their academic advisor through to graduation (Vianden & Barlow, 2015; Zhang, 2016a). However, there have been accounts of students who were dissatisfied with their

advising experiences as reported by Goomas (2012). In terms of overall student satisfaction with academic advising, Paul and Fitzpatrick (2015) noted that there was a positive link to student satisfaction and first-year to sophomore student retention as well as sophomore persistence to graduation. Additionally, researchers Milsom and Coughlin (2015) found that proactive academic advising in particular uncovered factors related students' satisfaction and dissatisfaction regarding their major choice. These results were based off of their work with 10 students in an intensive qualitative study using grounded theory techniques.

Research has demonstrated that students were consistently more satisfied with advisors who were perceived as open, caring, and knowledgeable (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2013; Donaldson, et al., 2016; NSSE, 2014; Noel-Levitz, 2014; Sutton & Sankar, 2011; Vianden, 2016). Negative experiences or student dissatisfaction with advising appointments discouraged students from attending future advising session (Vianden, 2016). Moreover, Vianden (2016) found that students described negative interactions as having induced feelings of doubt about their mattering to the institution and impaired their emotional wellbeing. Another study revealed findings that indicated academic advising satisfaction among both pre and post-transfer students was significantly lower than students' overall educational experience (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2014).

### **Student Transitions**

Prominent higher education scholar, Baxter-Magolda (2014) defined the college experience as a time of transition. These transitions can lead to students enduring difficult experiences. Students who transfer colleges and change environments have to adjust to new peer groups, new campus cultures, and different policies and procedures. The transitions into new spaces include new and different advising structures.

There are differences in the ways institutions organize academic advising structures. For example, a small liberal arts institution may have a decentralized model of advising while a large research institution may offer students a centralized advising structure. Centralized advising departments staffed with professional advisors offer students different experiences than decentralized advising units or departments that use faculty advisors. These approaches can provide students with different academic advising experiences, perceptions, and expectations. In fact, some advising approaches create structures for both faculty and staff advisors to work with undergraduate students (Montag, Campo, Weissman, Walmsley & Snell, 2012). Specific student populations, such as millennial students, benefit from these dual advising structures as demonstrated by Montag and partners (2012). Research examining student transitions uncovered that satisfaction varied among students who underwent multiple different advising experiences (Montag et al., 2012; Walmsley & Snell, 2012).

Transitioning to environments with different advising structures can be a challenging adjustment for students. Quality academic advising is a key component in students' learning and it facilitates a smooth transition in their adjustment to a new educational environment (Bai & Pan, 2009; Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Packard & Jeffers 2013; Zhang, 2016a). Student satisfaction has been documented at an array of institutional types and across advising structures (Allen, et al., 2013; 2014; Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014). Within departments, students may start in a centralized advising office and then transition to see a faculty advisor once their major has been declared (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014). Students at community colleges, who transfer to a four-year institution, undergo several transitions during the transfer process. One of the key transitions they endure is moving to a new or different advising structure (Allen et al., 2013).

Barker and Mamiseishvili (2014) examined students' transitions from a centralized advising space to a decentralized environment with faculty advisors through 17 qualitative interviews. They found that students' experiences were determined in large part by the advisor-related differences from before and after their transition to a new advisor (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014). A major concern students stated was their uneasiness with the unknown advisor before they transitioned to a faculty advisor. Findings indicated that the more students knew about the transition to a faculty advisor, the more comfortable they were with the process (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014).

According to Laanan (2001) transfer students' grades decreased and their satisfaction at their transfer institution declined during an experience called transfer shock. This may explain another study by researchers Allen and colleagues. (2014), which found that community college students were significantly more satisfied with their advising experiences prior to transferring. This mixed methods study conducted by Allen and colleagues (2014) examined pre and post-transfer students from community colleges. Quantitative and qualitative data from the study supported findings that pre-transfer students had a higher satisfaction with their advising experiences than post-transfer students. Upon transferring to four-year institutions, students were met with navigating larger systems and with fewer perceived avenues for support. Students at community colleges were well connected and developed relationships with advisors and support staff prior to transferring. After the transition to a new institution, students had to start over in unfamiliar environments and cultivate new relationships with advisors and support staff. These new advising relationships did not meet students' expectations of their prior advising experiences, leading them to feel dissatisfied (Allen et al., 2014).

Another study examined the types of advising that were important to community college students before and after they transferred from these two-year institutions (Allen et al., 2013). Using five domains and 12 functions of advising developed by Smith and Allen (2006), researchers surveyed students enrolled at two community colleges with the intent to transfer and students who had already transferred from community colleges. Results indicated that pre and post-transfer students rated each of Smith and Allen's (2006) five domains of advising as important. The results revealed that students wanted academic advisors to provide them with a comprehensive experience, be knowledgeable about transfer courses, provide them with individual attention, and assist them with their co-curriculum involvement (Allen et al., 2013).

This research demonstrated that pre and post-transfer students exhibited differing perspectives on advising satisfaction. Specifically, pre-transfer students rated shared responsibility as a more important function than post-transfer students. According to Smith and Allen (2006), shared responsibility prompted students to be accountable for their education by working with advisors for degree planning, and helping students with critical decision making and problem solving skills. Compared to pre-transfer students, post-transfer students rated referrals and knowing students as individuals as being more important to them (Allen et al., 2013).

Transferring to a new institution or changing advisors can be a difficult process. Students transitioning to new advisors in new spaces face challenges of the unknown. The research above indicated that students experience these types of transitions in their own ways and value aspects of advising differently.

## **Expectations**

Related to advising satisfaction is students' expectations of their advising experiences. Anderson et al. (2014) surveyed 115 undergraduate students regarding their expectations of advising. Students responded that they were more satisfied with academic advising if their expectations of the advising session aligned with the advisor's approach. Moreover, results demonstrated that it was more important for students' expectations of advising style be met rather than the specific academic advising approach itself. Also, in two separate qualitative case studies, Ellis (2014) and Arms, Cabrera, and Brower (2008) found that students' expectations of advising were largely based on their high school interactions with guidance counselors.

Undecided or exploratory students have many similar elements related to their major choice (Ellis, 2014). Yet these students also have unique histories that are specific to each individual. Ellis (2014) examined the advising experiences of 30 undecided students through qualitative interviews and found that they had distinct needs and expectations of their advising experiences. Findings also uncovered students' expectations of advising may change and become more specific as they work together and construct an academic plan (Ellis, 2014). Another study of exploratory first-year students found that students had specific expectations surrounding academic advising that comprised academic curriculum and course schedule as opposed to conversations about their transition to college and setting goals (Workman, 2015b). That qualitative study examined exploratory students who resided in a living learning community. Findings from the study completed by Allen et al., (2013) suggested that regardless of institution type, students believed that advising is important. Further, students expected their advisors to be knowledgeable about their academic requirements, refer them to resources, and provide them with individual attention (Allen et al., 2013). These expectations aligned with findings from

Vasher (2010), who stated that mutual trust and respect is generated between students and advisors when advisors were transparent about students' academic situations and knowledgeable about majors and careers. Scholars who researched the perceptions and attitudes of students toward intrusive advising found similar results from interviews with 12 students at a community college (Donaldson et al., 2016). Donaldson and partners (2016) discovered that students perceived better overall experiences when they were required to meet with an advisor, co-constructed an academic plan, and had individualized time and attention with an academic advisor.

### **Perceptions**

Overall, students perceive academic advising to be an important function of their collegiate experience (Hale et al., 2009). Anderson and partners (2014) reported academic advising as a primary indicator of students' academic success. Hale and colleagues (2009) found similar findings across a national survey of 225,000 undergraduate students over 425 colleges and universities. Their findings revealed that students perceived academic advising as the second most important factor related to their educational experience behind quality instruction (Hale et al., 2009). Interestingly, students reported higher levels of perceived support when meeting with advisors more frequently (Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon-Rayle, & Hawthorne, 2013).

Students identify effective advisors to have certain characteristics that contribute to these perceptions. Barnes, Williams, and Archer (2010) found that effective advisors were perceived to be accessible, helpful, social, and caring while less effective advisors were perceived as inaccessible, unhelpful, and impersonal. Furthermore, it was the relationship with a supportive advisor that students perceived to be important yet; few students reported a supportive relationship as examined by researchers (Orozco, Alvarez & Gutkin, 2010). In a related

quantitative survey of 428 undergraduate students, Paul and Fitzpatrick (2015) uncovered advisor characteristics were associated with positive student perceptions of advising. Students reported the best predictors of their satisfaction were the altruistic calling and wisdom that students perceived their advisors to demonstrate during the advising sessions. Specifically, the results indicated increased student satisfaction with advisors who demonstrate servant leadership traits through advising (Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015). Interestingly, researchers Arms and colleagues (2008) found that the location in which advising took place did not matter to fostering these positive and meaningful relationships. Whether advisors were located within students' residence halls for easy access or at a more centralized advising location, both offered students the opportunity to connect with advisors in meaningful ways (Arms et al., 2008).

Academic advisors assist students in multiple ways including referring students to campus resources, helping students choose a major, and creating an academic plan for students to follow. Degree planning is an essential part of students' advising experience and it involves mapping out students' academic curriculum required academic curriculum. Students reported perceiving increased satisfaction with advisors who focus on academic related issues such as course selection and degree planning (Sutton & Sankar, 2011). This mixed methods study found that students perceived dissatisfaction when talking with advisors about mentoring opportunities, internships and careers, and problems related to their faculty. A study by Richardson, Ruckert, and Marion (2015) echoed these results and found that veteran students had positive perceptions of advising when working with advisors who used degree-mapping technologies during advising appointments.

Positive perceptions of advising experiences can yield results beyond student satisfaction. Using a critical incident technique with 29 participants, Vianden (2016) found that students who

had positive perceptions of their academic advising developed a sense of pride in their institution and reported greater feelings of acceptance and mattering, and described an increased sense of belonging. Another study conducted by Vianden and Barlow (2015) surveyed 1,207 undergraduate students and examined their perceptions of academic advising. Findings revealed that students who perceive high quality of advising were more loyal to their institutions (Vianden & Barlow, 2015). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that cultivating a strong institutional connection with students increases their retention, persistence to graduation, and overall academic success (Williamson, Goosen, & Gonzalez, 2014).

While much of the research surrounding advising satisfaction focuses on students, Allen and Smith (2008) examined the importance, responsibility, and satisfaction of academic advising from a faculty perspective. They surveyed 171 instructional faculty members who also served as academic advisors. Results suggested that faculty believed advising was important to the undergraduate student experience. However, the responsibility these faculty advisors felt accountable for did not align with their perceptions of its importance (Allen & Smith, 2008). For example, in this quantitative study, faculty advisors reported the importance of assisting students to navigate institutional policies and procedures; however, they did not report feeling responsible for helping students through these processes. Likewise, faculty advisors in this study revealed they believed referring students for academic issues was more important than referring students for nonacademic challenges (Allen & Smith, 2008). Researchers Craft, Augustine-Shaw, Fairbanks, and Adams-Wright (2016) agreed and found that faculty instruction was underscored more than the interpersonal and non-academic issues related to advising. Nonetheless, they still rated student referrals as being important. Allen and Smith (2008) noted that faculty perceived academic advising to be an underrated function by senior administrators. The results of this

research conducted by Allen and Smith (2008) and Craft et al. (2016) demonstrated that faculty advisors deem academic advising to be an important function of higher education yet, they are hesitant to embrace students' non-academic related issues in an advising capacity.

In this section, I explored literature surrounding students' satisfaction with academic advising. Findings included the transitions from community colleges and the change in their academic advisors between institutions. I also looked at the expectations and perception students had in relation to their academic advising meetings. The studies described above indicate that students had a better educational experience if their advising session met their expectations and they perceive high quality advising experiences as a result.

### **Academic Outcomes**

Academic outcomes are related to how students perform academically and their persistence to graduation. As noted by Pascarella and Terenzini, "Research consistently indicates that academic advising can play a role in students' decisions to persist and in their changes of graduating," (2005, p. 404). A history of scholarship has made claims about the benefits of academic advising on students' academic outcomes (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In one of his landmark studies examining student attrition, Tinto (1975) stated that advising contributes to student persistence. Citing reasons such as increased accountability, the development of meaningful relationships, and effective degree planning, these scholars agree that advising leads to academic outcomes such as increased retention, GPA, and overall student engagement (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In a quantitative study of 2,745 first time freshmen, Kot (2014) evaluated the impact of centralized advising and students' academic performance. Students who were advised through centralized advising offices compared to students who did participate in advising, had

significantly higher GPAs. Findings also revealed, “centralized advising was the second most important predictor of first term GPA (after high school GPA)” (p. 553). This study demonstrated that centralized advising had a significant effect on students’ academic performance. Therefore, Kot’s (2014) quantitative study upholds support for these assertions.

In a pioneering study assessing the effect of academic advising on students’ chances of success, Bahr (2008) determined that under almost all circumstances accounted for, academic advising was deemed actively beneficial to students’ academic pursuits. All students who received academic advising and academic support services benefited from the additional support. However, it was students who were academically underprepared who benefited the most from these academic support services, namely in the form of advising, according to Bahr (2008). Outside circumstances aside, the more students are supported academically through advising, the better they should perform academically. Academic outcomes include students’ retention and GPAs as measures of success.

### **Retention**

Multiple studies have revealed that quality academic advising programs are pivotal to student retention and satisfaction (Drake, 2011; Hale et al., 2009; Mitstifer, 2015; Winston & Sandor, 2002). Additionally, comprehensive academic advising programs have also been called upon as an effective means to increase graduation rates (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005). In research by Paul and Fitzpatrick (2015), student retention increased when students are more satisfied with their advising and had a positive experience. Furthermore, Jain, Shanahan, and Roe (2009) discovered that in engineering programs poor academic advising was a key component of student attrition.

Due to the benefits academic advising can have on students and their undergraduate experiences, several scholars have proposed that academic advising as a functional area had the potential to positively effect retention, belongingness, and student satisfaction (Anderson et al., 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Styron, 2010; Sutton & Sankar, 2011; Teasley & Buchanan, 2013; Vianden & Barlow, 2015). For example, Gansemer-Topf and Schuh (2006) determined that academic support contributed significantly to constant improvements in retention and graduation rates. Advisors work to retain students and increase their persistence to graduate through various means, such as degree planning software, advising syllabi, and educational contracts. Quantitative evidence provided by Richardson et al. (2015) indicated that students were more likely to be retained and persist through coursework if they worked with advisors who utilize degree-mapping systems.

Students expect advisors to be knowledgeable about the academic curricula (Allen et al., 2013). However, a study presented by Fowler and Boylan (2010) showed that when students' nonacademic and personal considerations were attended to, their academic success might increase. Focusing on increasing developmental skills and abilities while limiting credit hours was shown to increase students' academic success and retention (Fowler & Boylan, 2010). Likewise, Hatch and Garcia (2017) studied persistence intentions of students in their first few weeks in college and found that it was academic and social support that advisors provided students, which lowered their odds of attrition (Hatch & Garcia, 2017). A study by Gravel (2012) examined student advisor interactions as factors in retention with undergraduate online degree seeking students. This mixed methods study revealed that timely and personalized communication was a vital element of these interactions and served as a significant contributing factor in students' retention.

Along with advisor knowledge, personality traits, and timely communication, advising structure is pertinent to students' retention and persistence as well. In a quantitative analysis of 2,745 first time freshmen, Kot (2014) found that students who utilized centralized academic advising, staffed with professional academic advisors, were more likely to return for their second year. Moreover, another quantitative study involving 437 students demonstrated that the number of advising appointments students attended was a significant predictor of student retention (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). In that study, researchers explored the relationship between first generation students and their academic advisors. Results indicated that for every advising appointment attended by students, the odds that student was retained increased by 13% (Swecker et al., 2013).

Scholars in academic advising have examined retention among specific student populations. Longwell-Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, and Serrata (2016) conducted three qualitative research studies examining first generation college students. Taken together, the three studies portrayed the challenges first generation college students can have navigating family relationships while enrolled in college. Longwell-Grice and partners (2016) determined that the relationship with an academic advisor was essential to the retention of first generation college students. Richardson et al.'s (2015) work specifically looked at veteran student's retention and persistence to graduation through degree-mapping software.

### **Grade Point Average**

Academic advising is an opportunity for students to meet with a university representative to discuss their academics, factors affecting their academic standing, and their GPA. Students must have a minimum GPA in order to graduate from a college or university, which is why meeting with an academic advisor to determine a student's GPA or discuss how to improve it is

beneficial. In a study related to retention, Kot's (2014) research on advising structure (2014) indicated that centralized advising was the "second most important predictor of first term GPA (after high school GPA)" (p. 553). A quantitative study involving 611 student participants was conducted to assess if academic advising did indeed impact student academic success (Young-Jones et al., 2013). Researchers found that academic advising in particular led to improved study skills, which increased students' academic performance.

Intensive learning skill courses include supplementary contributions to student success methods to help students overcome academic deficits. Learning skill courses were developed to help students improve time management and to learn new study skills and techniques to increase their GPA. Renzulli (2015) conducted a study using mixed methods research design, which found that students on academic probation could see an increase in GPA from their participation in a learning strategy skills course taken in person. Students' GPAs benefited when advisors serve as instructors for learning skill courses and other introductory courses (Ryan, 2013). Moreover, students were more likely to succeed academically and persist through their first year yielding higher GPAs when advisors taught introductory courses (Ryan, 2013).

Anecdotally and empirically, academic advisors surmise that the more students reach out for support and assistance, the more academic gains students will make (Swecker et al., 2013). Overarching evidence from a quantitative study, which examined 1,534 first year students' use of academic resources such as academic advising suggested links between higher academic resource usages among students with lower GPAs (Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Akamigbo, Saltonstall, Campbell, & Gore, 2009). This study determined that higher academic resource use greatly benefited high-risk students in terms of improvements in GPA (Robbins et al., 2009). Robbins and colleagues (2009) quantified students' risk by a single composite variable. They

measured student risk through regression models related to academic preparation in terms of students' ACT/SAT scores and high school GPA, as well as psychosocial factors, and social economic statuses related to first year college and GPA retention. While academic resource use and academic advising among students in this study benefited all students, it was connected to even greater and more significant benefits among students who were deemed high-risk students (Robbins et al., 2009). Bahr's (2008) study echoed this sentiment that while academic advising was beneficial to the academic success of all students, it was more beneficial to students who were academically underprepared.

In this section I reviewed research conducted on academic advising and students' academic outcomes. I examined literature surrounding retention and students' GPAs. From the overview of research in this section, scholars and higher education administrators can conclude that students benefit academically from academic advising. Academic advising increases student retention and benefits all students, especially academically at risk and underprepared students. Turning to the next section, I review literature surrounding academic advising and student development. Primarily, students' psychosocial development, self-authorship, and self-efficacy as it relates to academic advising.

### **Student Development**

There are several theories that attend to the development students undergo during their time as undergraduate students (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Gilligan, 1977; Josselson, 1987; Kohlberg, 1971; Schlossberg, 1989; Perry, 1970). Academic advising has the ability to significantly contribute to all facets of students' academic experience, including their development (Chan, 2016; Harrison, 2009; Young-Jones et al., 2013). Effective academic advising is considered to be a complex and active process that contributes to student

development (Harrison, 2009). Students develop interpersonally through the experiences, interactions, and identities they form during college (Syed, 2010). Advisors largely serve in supportive roles for students and work through challenges such as college adjustment, emotional development, and social support alongside them.

Students transitioning to college endure an array of complex feelings, thoughts, and anxieties as they enter into this unknown venture: college (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2004; Chickering, 1993; Goldrick-Rab, 2007; O'Banion, 2012; Schlossberg, 1989). Therefore, it is of no surprise that advising theories stem from student development theories and are modeled after psychosocial theorists Erikson and Levinson (Harrison, 2009). Advisors work with students to confront the challenges students face while helping them to develop into independent critical thinkers (Campbell & Nutt, 2008). In this section, I will explore research that examines academic advising and students' psychosocial development as well as students' self-authorship and self-efficacy.

### **Psychosocial Development**

Scholars have studied students' psychosocial development in college to determine how students gain social and personal skills to make decisions and become independent learners (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Burt, Young-Jones, Yadon, & Carr, 2013). Scholars have paid particular attention to students' psychosocial development based on their perceptions of and interactions with academic advisors and instructors (Burt et al., 2013; Chan, 2016; Harrison, 2009). A study examining students' perceptions of advisor and instructor support was linked to students' psychosocial development. Specifically, students' perceptions of support from academic advisors significantly predicted their need for autonomy (Burt et al., 2013). Taken together, these researchers demonstrated that advisor and instructor support projected students'

needs for relatedness. Autonomy and relatedness are components of students' psychosocial development (Burt et al., 2013).

Chan (2016) examined nursing majors' perspectives of their academic advisors and found that academic advisors contributed to students' personal growth and development. Academic advisors were perceived positively, and students felt encouraged by their advisors. In addition, the academic advisors in this study promoted physical, psychological, and personal health leading to the development of students' self-perceptions, skills, and strengths (Chan, 2016). Another study regarding student perceptions and psychosocial development indicated that students who expected more psychosocial support prior to entering into a peer advising program reported that they felt as though they received more psychosocial support as a result of participating in the program (Fullick, Smith-Jentsch, & Kendall, 2013). However, the advisors' behaviors, which conveyed psychosocial support, were controlled in this study. Therefore, students' psychosocial support on the part of academic advisors were related to students' expectations of the support they received (Fullick et al., 2013).

It is not often that residence life literature becomes entangled with academic advising. However, when residence life professionals worked to rehabilitate at-risk students' GPAs through a residential academic plan designed to enhance the psychosocial development and improve the academic skillsets of these students, the two disciplines merged (Johnson, Flynn, & Monroe, 2016). Residence life staff members employed an intensive academic plan for students on academic probation, which involved a proactive approach to improve students' academic standing. As a result of weekly meetings and mandatory study hall classes, students created meaningful friendships, improved their GPAs, and enhanced their psychosocial development to cope with many challenges facing them as college students (Johnson et al., 2016). This study

demonstrated the partnerships advisors could create with other functional areas on campus to assist furthering students' psychosocial development, increasing students' GPAs, and developing meaningful friendships.

### **Self-Authorship**

The foundation of academic advising rests on supportive and meaningful relationships between students and academic advisors. Baxter Magolda (2004) developed a learning partnership model, which expanded to facilitate students' psychosocial development through self-authorship by cultivating supportive and meaningful relationships. Studies using elements of the learning partnership model (2004) showed an association between students' academic motivation and retention due to the support they received through these partnerships and the psychosocial development that occurred as a result (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Demetriou, 2011). Harrison (2009) noted that effective academic advising was an integral part of students' development. Further, good advising was associated with academic success and may have contributed to positive perceptions about life long learning (Harrison, 2009).

Pizzolato and Ozaki (2007) added to the advising research aligned with Baxter Magolda's (2004) learning partnership model. They investigated how the model could fit within an academic advising retention program. As a result of participating in this study, students underwent transformations in their beliefs, cognitive ability, and emotional regulation, which are prerequisites to self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007). Through this program, students were able to begin to construct formal knowledge independently, which is part of the self-authorship process as dictated by Baxter Magolda (2001). As a result, these findings suggested that learning partnership models situated with academic advisors could promote student growth and development toward self-authorship (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007).

The tenants of self-authorship are interrelated and include trusting one's internal voice, constructing an internal foundation, and solidifying those internal commitments (Baxter Magolda, 2008). The foundation of self-authorship lay in the ability for individuals to construct authentic, meaningful relationships that are mutually beneficial. Additionally, self-authorship evolves through a person's lived experiences and is often developed after experiencing challenges accompanied by supportive structures to understand internal meaning making (Baxter Magolda 2001; 2008). Simmons (2008) found that academic advisors could help move students toward self-authorship when working with students who relied on parental advice when making decisions. Through the course of 17 semi-structured interviews, students described relying on their parents for information and advice more than any other resource including friends, academic administrators, and faculty members (Simmons, 2008). In an attempt to move students toward developing an internal foundation, Simmons (2008) suggested that advisors should not merely provide additional advice to students but to partner with them to advance their trust in their inner voice, and in turn, their self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

Trusting one's internal voice, constructing an internal foundation, and solidifying those internal commitments (Baxter Magolda, 2008) also contribute to students' identity formation. While there has been limited scholarship surrounding academic advising and identity development, it is a timely area of focus among traditional age college students who are formulating and affirming their respective identities. Student development encompasses all aspects of one's development among undergraduate students during their experiences. Interestingly, Museus and Ravello (2010) took an in-depth look at the characteristics of academic advising that contributed to students' racial and ethnic minority student success at predominantly white institutions (PWI). In their study, students articulated the importance of academic advisors

understanding the multifaceted issues relating to students' racial and ethnic identities and the supported they want as a result, regardless of the specific type of challenges students were facing. As indicated in the following research, students' identities contributed to their major choice. Syed's (2010) work examined students' ethnic identities among ethnically diverse college students and major choice. The study was conducted to understand whether students' major choice was related to their evolving ethnic identities (Syed, 2010). Findings discovered that students' identities were related to their major discipline and major decision-making. Additionally, Syed (2010) found that students' ethnicity was at the forefront of their identity development during their undergraduate tenure.

Decision making for undergraduate students stems from their personal development and ability to accurately assess their situation (Wheland, Butler, Qammar, Katz, & Harris, 2012; Workman, 2015a). Researchers Wheland and partners (2012) examined students' affective reasoning and attitudes surrounding course withdrawal. Using mixed-method techniques involving a 959 participant survey and 15 interviews, researchers discovered that students used affective reasoning most frequently when deciding whether to withdraw from a course. Advisors have the ability to address students' emotional reasoning during students' decision-making processes. In a study by Workman (2015a) posited that first year students' decisions were largely influenced by their motivations to make friends and create social networks. Therefore, Workman (2015a) determined that these students had not reached self-authorship as defined by Baxter Magolda's (2008) theory of student development.

### **Self-Efficacy**

Defined as students' ability to make decisions and complete tasks, there is a vast amount of scholarship conducted on students' self-efficacy (Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, & Schedin,

2014; Burt et al., 2013; Workman, 2015c; Young-Jones et al., 2013,). Self-efficacy can be understood within student development as students are growing and having increased ability to make critical decisions. At the same time, self-efficacy can also be understood as a student outcome or goal that students should reach as a result of their collegiate experience. In these studies, researchers discovered that academic advising impacted students' personal development, specifically, their self-efficacy (Burt et al., 2013; Young-Jones et al., 2013). Continued results of the study by Young-Jones and et al. (2013) revealed significant effects of academic advising on students' development and self-efficacy, which also affected their academic performance. Findings uncovered that students' study skills and self-efficacy were significant indicators of students' GPAs.

There has been a wealth of research exploring students' self-efficacy and their decision-making as it relates to choosing a college major. For example, research from a quantitative study found that undecided students had higher levels of negative career related thoughts, lower levels self-efficacy regarding career decisions, and they experienced more difficulties making decisions compared to their peers who had chosen a major (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2014). Taking a closer look at self-efficacy and major choice, Cunningham and Smothers (2014) studied the effect of a specific type of career assessment software on 73 students' self-efficacy when choosing a major prior to meeting with an academic advisor. Using quantitative analysis, they determined that students who did not use the career exploration software experienced greater levels of self-doubt compared to students who used the career assessment tool followed by meetings with an academic advisor (Cunningham & Smothers, 2014). Workman (2015c) also explored students' self-efficacy and major choice. Specifically, this qualitative phenomenological study examined parental involvement in students' decision-making. Using grounded theory techniques, findings

revealed that students' situations vary from individual to individual. Moreover, the influence parents have on their students' major choice was complex and might have contradictory effects on students' self-efficacy and decision-making abilities (Workman, 2015c).

In a similar vein of choosing a major, students' motivations to change majors were examined by Firmin and MacKillop (2008). In a qualitative study comprised of 20 students, researchers found that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations contributed to students' decisions to change their major (Firmin & MacKillop, 2008). Most often, students referenced lack of awareness regarding their own self-interests. Additionally, the students participating in this study were not overly self-aware individuals and did not understand the advice shared with them regarding the majors they were considering (Firmin & MacKillip, 2008). Additional research by Henning (2009) studied students' personal motivations to engage with academic advisors through a quantitative survey of 317 students. Results indicated that students who were matriculated in their primary area of study were more likely to engage with academic advisors as opposed to those who were forced into a major or undecided (Henning, 2009). It was apparent that students who had chosen their academic pathway were more motivated to meet with an advisor compared to those who were undecided or forced to decide on a major (Henning, 2009).

Advising as teaching is a common held belief by advisors that adopt a developmental advising approach (Crookston, 1972). This view of advising is practiced as a collaborative learning experience where students and advisors learn from each other as a result of the advising meeting. Erlich and Russ-Eft (2013) used social cognitive theory to assess students' learning in academic advising sessions. Specifically, they used a quantitative survey to measure students' self-efficacy and self-regulated learning behaviors pre and post academic advising sessions.

Results demonstrated that as students' self-efficacy rose, students' accomplishment levels did the same, according to their academic advisors (Erlich & Russ-Eft, 2013).

There has been research conducted on students who are undeclared, undecided, or exploratory, meaning they have not chosen a major. Workman (2015a) researched exploratory first year students' and their experiences as undecided students. Their experiences with academic advising were examined using Schlossberg's transition theory (1981). Grounded theory techniques and a qualitative research design found that overall students were generally comfortable with their exploratory or undecided status. Every participant in the study also used resources, such as meeting with an academic advisor, to assist them through decision-making processes regarding major choice (Workman, 2015a). This study demonstrated that academic advisors could offer undecided students academic support while they explore their major options and make decisions.

Leach and Patall (2016) did additional research on undecided students and examined need-supportive advising practices. Specifically, they looked at students' psychological need satisfaction and decision-making processes for 145 students in a longitudinal study. Their results indicated that students who were advised with need-supportive practices early on in the academic year had greater feelings of autonomy and understanding about their major choice toward the end of the year. Therefore, researchers Leach and Patall (2016) concluded that students who received need-supportive advising early in their undergraduate careers had greater competency regarding self-efficacy and decision making toward the end of the year.

The studies in this section show that academic advising provides space to enhance students' psychosocial development, self-authorship, and self-efficacy. Through meeting regularly with advisors students are provided an opportunity to make gains in their personal and

psychosocial development while creating learning partnerships with advisors and building confidence in themselves. There has been little research conducted on academic advising related to students' identity development. However, there is also a clear gap in students' experiences of mattering within these academic advising sessions.

### **High-Impact Practices**

Student engagement in higher education refers to the intentional time and effort students put forth into their experience outside of the classroom (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2009). The National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) assesses first year and senior students' involvement in six high-impact practices including (1) living-learning communities, (2) service-learning based courses, (3) work alongside a faculty member involving research, (4) internships and practical teaching and learning experiences, (5) study abroad experiences, and (6) a senior capstone course, thesis, or other culminating experience. Kuh (2008) placed a high value on high-impact practices on students' experiences, as they require a substantial amount of time dedicated to meaningful activities and interactions outside of the classroom. Students' involvements in the six high-impact practices are connected to increased student learning and retention (NSSE, 2007).

In their study of surveying 707 first year students, Arms et al., (2008) discovered that when academic advisors worked with students in living learning communities, the students were engaged in more enriching experiences. Arms and colleagues (2008) also found that students who were more engaged with their counselors in high school had increased chances of being engaged with their academic advisors in college. Related research from Workman's (2015b) qualitative study of exploratory student residing in a living learning community indicated that students received support from their academic advising experiences. The living learning

community furthered these supportive measures through social involvement in the residence hall (Workman, 2015b).

Kuh (2009) underscored the importance of frequent student-faculty interactions through his work with high-impact practices. Hawthorne and Young (2010) contributed to his work by providing evidence showing increased persistence among undergraduate students who were satisfied with faculty support through instruction and advising. Further work by Leach and Wang (2015) examined the motivation for engaging in out-of-class communication with faculty members serving as students' academic advisors. In their study of 21 students, these researchers discovered four motives related to communication including the desire to form relationships, functional motives, encouragement motives, and finally, a participatory motive, where students wanted to engage with their faculty in an attempt to demonstrate their interest in the material (Leach & Wang, 2015). Regardless of student motive, the interactions with faculty advisors engaged students in their learning, which enhances their overall experience (Kuh, 2009).

The sooner students are able to establish a meaningful relationship with an advisor, the more likely they are to become engaged in their collegiate experience and persist through their academic curriculum (Hatch & Garcia, 2017). However, students who work are less engaged in specific support services (Veres, 2015). Veres (2015) researched engagement with academic services related to tutoring and found that student personal counseling were significantly more restricted the as time students spend working increases (Veres, 2015). As a result, this quantitative analysis surmised that the usage of these services became more restricted and students were less engaged due to their involvements in other areas.

This area of research demonstrates that academic advising can be incorporated into high-impact practices in various ways to engage students in their academic support services and

cocurricular experiences. The scholarship in this section highlights student engagement and academic advising through communication methods, living learning communities, and student-faculty interactions. In line with high-impact practices, students who engaged with academic advisors were more likely to persist through their curriculum and be retained (Kuh, 2009; Leach & Wang, 2015; Veres, 2015).

### **Summary of the Literature Review**

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature surrounding academic advising in higher education to demonstrate a gap and provide understanding for the study. The literature reveals the vital role academic advising plays in students' academic success and persistence as well as their personal development during their undergraduate tenure. Additionally, in large part, students base their satisfaction with academic advising on their expectations and their experience with high school counselors. In many studies, researchers examined students' development through their growth in self-authorship and self-efficacy academic behaviors and major decision-making. Through these studies in particular, students' perceived mattering was not examined.

This chapter also surveyed scholarship on the ways students engaged with academic advising through high-impact practices. The final section demonstrates that advising through living learning communities increases engagement and student-faculty interactions continues to boost students' engagement leading to increased retention. Much of the research reviewed in this section focused on quantitative studies. While there were data relating to qualitative work, most of the research stemmed from quantitative data reported from student surveys. Furthermore, none of the mattering literature mentioned academic advising and none of the advising literature examined students' mattering. Therefore, it is apparent that a true gap in the literature exists to examine students' experiences and perceptions of mattering in academic advising settings.

## Theoretical Framework

Mattering has been studied in various yet limited ways. Most of the scholarship on mattering has explored mattering as a construct related to students' mental and physical health, students' perceived stress, and overall wellbeing. These studies derive from counseling, development, and psychology disciplines. Other studies conducted on students' mattering relate to specific populations. In what follows, I will review the literature regarding mattering in higher education.

Researchers have examined mattering in higher education through the lens of college students' mental health and stress. Dixon-Rayle and Kurpius (2008) investigated the relationship among stress, depression, self-esteem and mattering among college students. A sample of 455 students who were surveyed revealed gender differences in their perceptions of stress and level of depression. However, there were no significant differences between self-esteem. Self-esteem was positively related to students' mattering. Findings also purported that the more a student believed they matter, the less stress they report perceiving by events and circumstances. Interestingly, women in this study felt as though they mattered to others more than men in the study; however, they also reported higher levels of stress and depression (Dixon-Rayle & Kurpius, 2008). In line with themes from the previous study researchers Raque-Bogdan, Ericson, Jackson, Martin, and Bryan (2011), explored the relationships between attachment, self-compassion, mattering, mental health, and physical health among 208 college students. Students' mattering in this study was positively linked to their physical health. Results also demonstrated significant positive correlations between students' self-compassion, mattering, and mental health (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011).

Another study examined the perceived stress, wellness, and feelings of mattering between first year Citadel cadets. A total of 234 cadets took part in this study, which was conducted at The Citadel (Gibson & Myers, 2006). Data were used to compare to another group of cadets at West Point in a study conducted years prior (Myers & Bechtel, 2004). No differences were found between perceived stresses or mattering between the cadets in both studies. When considering gender, female cadets had significantly higher social self, friendship, and cultural identity scores, compared to male cadets.

Researchers France, Finney, and Swerdzewski (2010) conducted a construct validity study to assess university mattering among college students. Results from the study indicated that students' general mattering was separate from their mattering at university. This study also generated initial evidence for validity scores on the University Mattering Scale, which was created from modifying elements to become more relevant to college and university settings (France et al., 2010). Researchers Tovar, Simon, and Lee (2009) also embarked on studying the development and validation college students' mattering through the creation of the College Mattering Inventory. Through a diverse study of community college and university students, Tovar and partners (2009) sought to determine the construct validity of the College Mattering Inventory on diverse student populations. Two studies were conducted with the total number participants amounting to 3,139. The studies conducted by Tovar and colleagues (2009) generated a validated mattering instrument concerning students' mattering through quantitative assessment.

Students' familial and social support is an important part of their perceptions of mattering. Researchers conducted a longitudinal study to examine university students' perceived mattering to their parents (Marshall, Liu, Wu, Berzonsky, & Adams, 2010). This study was

conducted over a three-year period with 484 participants. Results of this three-year study suggested that students' mattering did not change for students over the course of the study. There were gender differences that appeared, which indicated that women perceived themselves as mattering more to their parents and friends than men. Students' living environments were also associated with their perceptions of mattering to their friend groups but they were not linked with perceptions of mattering to their parents (Marshall et al., 2010). Dixon-Rayle and Chung (2007) studied students' perceptions of mattering to college friends and the college environment across 533 first-year undergraduate students. Building off of Schlossberg's (1989) scholarship of students' mattering and marginality in transition, Dixon-Rayle and Chung (2007) revisited these concepts. Findings demonstrated increased levels of mattering to students' college if they had social support from family and friends. Data from this quantitative study revealed that students experienced less academic stress if they felt supported by family and college friends, and if they felt like they mattered to their college. Similar to other studies (e.g. Dixon-Rayle & Kurpius, 2008; Gibson & Myers, 2006; Marshall et al., 2010) women reported greater levels of perceived social support from family and friends and mattering to family and friends, and marginally greater mattering to their college (Dixon-Rayle and Chung, 2007). These studies indicated that mattering continues to matter to college students, and "may actually aid them in their transition to the college environment and their academic success" (Dixon-Rayle & Chung, 2007, p. 31).

The research related to mattering that lies outside of higher education is largely housed within secondary education and teaching. For example, an Australian study looked at the relationships between student teachers and their lecturers, which found that those relationships "always" matter (Giles, 2011, p. 89). Curry and Bickmore (2012) studied school counselor's personal and professional needs as well as the ways in which the counselors felt they mattered.

Findings uncovered that their personal and professional needs as well as their feelings that they mattered were satisfied by recognition by others within the school setting, and through collaboration with students and colleagues (Curry & Bickmore, 2012).

Further research collected outside of higher education focuses on high school students in education. Researchers Lemon and Watson (2011) studied psychosocial variables of wellness, perceived stress, mattering, and at risk status for students who were considered at-risk of dropping out of high school. Findings from a 175-student survey indicated that at-risk students developed a personal value system that included high school completion and they connected meaning making processes with high school graduation (Lemmon & Watson, 2011).

A qualitative study examined the experiences of African American males' mattering to others at their urban high school (Tucker, Dixon-Rayle, & Griddine, 2010). Transcendental phenomenology was used during individual interviews with nine African American male students. Results suggested that the students placed significant value on mattering to others including their friends and the school counselor. Moreover, the social relationships and support students developed at school helped them traverse circumstances where they felt unsupported by family (Tucker et al., 2010).

The research here describes recent studies conducted on mattering. Studies pertaining to higher education exposed gender differences in students' perceptions of mattering. The higher education research surrounding mattering also addressed students' mental and physical health and wellbeing, as well as the college environment. There has not been research investigating students' mattering in the academic advising setting that has been conducted. Scholarship outside of higher education remains focused in areas of teaching and education. Scholarship surrounding students' mattering and perceptions of mattering revealed gender differences students who

perceived they mattered more to their families. Additional research on students' mattering unveiled its connection to the college environment and students' social support.

Sociologists Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) introduced the concept of mattering in the early 1980s through four large-scale surveys conducted in different sections of the country in the 1960s. The surveys assessed the degree to which adolescent students, in different grade levels, mattered to their parents. The results of the data revealed that parental mattering was connected to self-esteem, and further, these relationships were not related to the child's beliefs that their parents have positive or negative feelings about them. Additionally, these feelings that one matters is related to multiple dimensions of a child's mental health. Last, adolescents who were considered juvenile delinquents did not feel as though they mattered to their parents. Through this study, Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) generated four constructs associated with mattering, which will serve as the framework of this study.

The concept of mattering derived by research conducted by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) will guide this study. Defined as, "a motive; the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension exercises a powerful influence on our actions," Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) research developed four constructs associated with the concept of mattering: (1) attention, (2) importance, (3) dependence, and (4) ego-extension. Moreover, Rosenberg and McCullough claimed it is the perceptions of mattering that were of utmost importance. These four constructs will help guide this study to examine students' experiences of mattering in academic advising settings.

By breaking these constructs down further, Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) provided an understanding of the components associated with the concept of mattering. According to Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) attention is the construct that is the primary form of

matter; it is the feeling that a person is significant by grasping the interest or notice of another individual. Importance is a feeling in which mattering is more strongly expressed among people. Importance implies feelings that an individual is of value to another person who demonstrates care and concern. Ego-extension asserts that a person is a reflection of another. For example, the adolescents in the study original study conducted by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) would understand ego-extension to be the pride his parents demonstrated toward his accomplishments and the disappointment they revealed at his failures. The adolescents understood their parents' feelings as an extension of their own, when they felt as though they mattered. Dependence claims that behavior is influenced by one's dependence on other individuals and is easily understood as other individuals satisfy most of our needs.

The concept of mattering is primarily studied in disciplines such as education, sociology, and psychology; however, there has been limited research on mattering conducted in recent years. Schlossberg conducted groundbreaking work in 1989 on the concepts of students' mattering and marginality within higher education. Dixon-Rayle and Chung (2007) furthered the work of Schlossberg (1989) to incorporate more modern meanings of students' mattering and the obstacles that students face in higher education. There have been small-scaled studies conducted on students' mattering in higher education outside of the scholarship from Schlossberg (1989) and Dixon-Rayle and Chung (2007) (e.g. Gibson & Meyers, 2006; Marshall et al., 2010; Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011). However, these studies primarily focused on students' mental health and wellbeing. They did not address students' experiences, perceptions, and feelings of mattering on campus or in a specific setting such as academic advising.

Researchers claim the benefits of academic advising to assist in improving students' academic success and increasing retention, and persistence to graduation (Astin, 1993; Kuh,

2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The framework proposed by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) can be applied to students in academic advising to determine how they experience interacting with academic advisors. The constructs that contribute to mattering are focused in areas that academic advisors can develop as part of their advising approach with students. However, there are limitations of the concept of mattering framework. It was developed over thirty years ago and was originally constructed and applied to adolescents' feelings and perceptions of mattering to their parents. More recent scholarship such as Dixon-Rayle and Chung's (2007) work that incorporated the concept of mattering using Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) as a foundation demonstrates the relevance of mattering in higher education.

The concept of mattering is appropriate for this study in higher education to gain an understanding of students' experiences and significant moments where they felt as though they mattered in an academic advising setting. Previous studies lend insight into the importance of students' mattering in higher education (e.g. Dixon-Rayle & Chung, 2007; Schlossberg, 1989). The concept of mattering developed by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) provided a foundation to this study and the components of attention, importance, ego-extension, and dependence that feed into one's feelings of mattering. I will use this framework to guide the study. I will use the four constructs of mattering to develop my interview questions and guide my interpretation and analysis of the data. Working with these constructs provides a direction for the creation of the study and will carry through to the discussion and implications for academic advisors.

In summary, this chapter presented the major areas of literature as they related to academic advising in higher education and the concept of mattering. The literature review underscores the gap in which students' experiences of mattering in higher education are missing.

Research associated with students' satisfaction with their academic advising experience including their expectations and perceptions is abundant. Academic advising as it relates to students' academic outcomes has also been explored at length. Students utilizing academic advising as a means to engage in their experience was also investigated. The ways academic advising can foster students' personal growth and development was examined through the research. Finally, the concept of mattering was reviewed through literature within higher education and outside of the field as well.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines my research approach and design, as well as the data collection and analysis methods I employed in this study. I provide an overview of my research paradigm, methodology, research purpose and goals, research questions, site selection, participant selection criteria, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and quality assurance for my research approach. The chapter concludes with my positionality statement as a qualitative researcher.

#### **Design and Research Approach**

In this study, I employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research allows participants to share narrative descriptions and insights surrounding their thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, and understandings (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative researchers engage with data and generate meaning from the processes and participants, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument for data generation and analysis. This research is interpretive and multiple views may surface based on the data presented and represented through participants' experiences and perceptions. Additionally, qualitative research requires flexibility on the part of the researcher as the construction of meaning making through data collection and analysis may shift, change, and transform through the entirety of the research process (Creswell, 2007).

As a researcher, I believe that all individuals construct their own knowledge and meanings of truth and reality. Therefore, my qualitative work is conducted through the

constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm drives all aspects of the research approach in this study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this perspective, individuals generate knowledge and truth for themselves based on their personal experiences (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). As a constructivist researcher, I operate with the understanding that individuals generate knowledge and make meaning of their lives based on their past experiences and lived histories. From this perspective, I believe that individuals' experiences affect the ways in which they move through the world around them. One's personal experiences contribute to their knowledge, skillset, and their behaviors as individuals. Through my understanding of constructivism, knowledge and meaning making are created based on the experiences a person endures. This contributes to my relationships with participants and the understanding that our experiences are unique, and have shaped the individual ways in which mattering is significant in our lives. Therefore, each participant may understand mattering differently. My relationship with participants is a collaborative process. We work together to gather information and construct meaning. The participants' perspectives inform my analysis, which is based on the mutual construction of knowledge that we generate together.

Phenomenology is a methodological approach to qualitative research that aligns with constructivism as it seeks to examine a certain phenomenon. Moreover, phenomenology is an interpretive approach, which is often used to explain individuals' experiences. Because people experience situations in different ways, one must be mindful of the context in which they occur. Citing Savin-Baden and Major (2013), "Phenomenology is concerned with developing objective processes to interpret those things typically considered subjective" (p. 61). Therefore, phenomenology assists in understanding an experience related to a phenomenon while recognizing the context and social reality of the individuals being studied.

## **Methodology**

Phenomenology is a qualitative methodology that interprets the essence of an experience or phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). Derived from the work of German philosophers Husserl and Heidegger, phenomenology examines individuals' experiences. More specifically, according to Savin-Baden and Major (2013) phenomenology is a research approach designed to understand the experiences of a phenomenon. The goal of a phenomenological research approach is to understand the very essence of a phenomenon experienced by multiple participants. The purpose of this study is to examine the phenomenon of students' experiences in moments of mattering. Phenomenological semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2014) will be used to gain insight into students' experiences with academic advising, critical moments of mattering, and how academic advising assisted them during those critical moments. Related, researchers should seek to understand what participants' experiences are and how they experience the selected phenomenon of the study being conducted (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Even as this study uses phenomenology as the methodology, it began as a philosophy. Husserl and Heidegger surmised that reality was constructed from phenomena, as they were perceived in the human consciousness (van Manen, 1990). Creswell (2007) underscores that the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology rely on the following principles: (1) the examination of the lived experiences of individuals, (2) the understanding that these experiences are conscious (Van Manen, 1990), and (3) the descriptions of these experiences, termed essences. There are several approaches to phenomenological research that have garnered the interest of researchers. In this study, I am choosing to approach phenomenology from a hermeneutical lens, where the research is derived from participants' lived experiences and the interpretations of these experiences (van Manen, 1990). In addition to this hermeneutical

phenomenology, post-intentional phenomenology (Vagle, 2016) will be used to guide aspects of the methodology.

Post-intentional phenomenology endeavors to slow down, open up, and uncover the experiences people have with their surroundings. In this study, I explore and uncover the experiences students have within academic advising settings on a college campus. The meanings and relations students have to their being on campus, as students in academic advising settings are examined. The essence of students' mattering was generated through semi-structured phenomenological interviews (Brinkmann, 2014; Roulston, 2010) to understand students' individual experiences and perceptions of significant mattering (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2014) provide a basic guide for researchers to follow; yet they also allow room for deviation from a prescribed protocol. Phenomenological interviews explore participants' experiences in detail to garner rich descriptions of the particular phenomenon or event (Roulston, 2010). This permits researchers to follow up and interrogate certain experiences, notions, and thoughts that a participant communicates during an interview.

According to Jackson and Mazzei (2012), the concept of the entangled state of agencies, which Barad (2007) purports, is based on shifting relationships. It is the continual shifting of these relationships that fold onto each other, which creates the conditions for these spaces and events. Considering the organization of higher education, these relationships between students and advisors take different forms. Advisors have the ability to serve many different roles in students' lives such as mentor, teacher, friend, confidant, and advocate, when working with students in academic advising settings. Based on these varied roles advisors can take on in students' lives, how do they distinguish what makes these spaces and these roles possible? It is the continual shifting of relations between students and advisors and the flow of these relations

back and forth that fold onto each other, which again, creates the conditions for these roles and relationships to transpire. Examining students' experiences of mattering in advising settings requires the examination of their relationships to other things (i.e., relationships with advisors, friends, mentors, parents, relationships they have with spaces).

### **Research Purpose/Goals**

The purpose of this research study is to understand and explore students' experiences and feelings of significance and worth in academic advising settings. This research contributes to advising literature on students' perceptions, expectations, and satisfaction with academic advising. Moreover, the goal of this phenomenological study is to provide insight into students' experiences for academic advisors. The academic advising community has not had the opportunity to understand how students experience moments of mattering in the space of an advising appointment prior to this study being conducted. This goal of this research is to provide academic advisors with insight into how students experience feelings of worth and significance when meeting with an academic advisor.

Through this study, I hope the investment of our students is propelled forward by the ways in which they experience moments of mattering in academic advising settings. I am interested in disrupting the normative and traditional ways of advising practices to create new possibilities in how we, as academic advisors, engage in this work. These possibilities are available when students' experiences in these settings are opened up and interrogated. The possibilities, which result from the interrogation of students' experiences, should be harnessed to create new productive processes for students to engage in academic advising. This could lead to new forms of relations, mechanisms, and types of advising practices. It is my goal to disrupt

these “old” ways of advising and knowing and to open new possibilities for the future to the benefit of the students with whom we work.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research questions posed for this study asks:

- How do undergraduate students in a public university in the southeastern United States define feelings of mattering?
- How do undergraduate students experience moments of mattering in academic advising settings?
- Why is students’ mattering important in academic advising settings?

### **Site Selection and Rationale**

The University of Higher Learning is the site selected for conducting this research study. The University of Higher Learning has a Carnegie classification of doctoral university according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The university boasts over 37,000 students and is the public flagship university of the state. The undergraduate student population is the overwhelming majority at nearly 32,000 students. Of these 32,000 students, 55% of them are from out-of-state and only 2% are international students. A majority of 56% of female students comprises the study body and this university is considered a Predominantly White Institution with only 14% students of color identified. Students at the university are retained from the first to second year at a rate of 86%.

The rationale behind this selection is linked to the background information of this study. This institution has a unique recruiting system where university admissions recruiters reside in nearly every state across the country and recruit the students in their regions. Undergraduate students have been heavily sought after and aggressively recruited in the past, leading to a

swelling undergraduate population and a minimal graduate student population at 8.1% of the total student body based on fall 2016 enrollment numbers. Therefore, undergraduate students at this large public research university comprise the vast majority of the student body. As this institution grapples with the ways to accommodate a disproportionately large undergraduate student population, it was suited to investigate students' experiences of mattering as undergraduate students on a densely populated and growing campus.

Academic advising is decentralized throughout The University of Higher Learning. As a result, students are advised in different capacities, and some are not advised at all depending on their major and home College. Colleges that do not require advising have faculty and professional advisors working in tandem with students in an advising capacity. There are Colleges where advising is mandatory for all undergraduate students. In these Colleges, students are required to meet with a professional academic advisor every semester before they are able to register for classes. There is currently a movement to make academic advising a more centralized process on campus. Additionally, there is an active debate on campus about whether to mandate advising for all undergraduate students prior to registration or to allow students to register for courses without meeting with an academic advisor.

### **Selection Criteria, Rationale, and Recruitment**

Undergraduate students at The University of Higher Learning were recruited to participate in this study. Undergraduate students are the primary focus of the study question. They also make up the overwhelming majority of the overall student population at the university. The rationale behind this selection of participants includes information related to the site selection. As The University of Higher Learning boasts 37,000 and growing students, exploring how students are experiencing their interactions with campus administrators, primarily academic

advisors, will assist in understanding students' feelings and perceptions of their experiences. Gaining this understanding will assist academic advisors to cultivate an environment, which will lend the greatest support for students' success. Academic advising is central to students' academic progress. Therefore, obtaining in-depth insight of students' experiences in these venues will lead to greater understanding into the lives of students and the crises they endure.

To be eligible to participate in this study, participants needed to be full-time undergraduate students who had experience in an academic advising setting. There was not a standard or requirement that students needed to meet in order to feel as though they experienced a moment of mattering. As each student's moment of mattering was unique, I asked students to explain their experiences and articulate why these moments were significant to them. Through the participant's responses, I gained an understanding of the significance and meaning of their experiences in an academic advising setting. I interviewed a total of 15 students, three times each to gain an understanding of their perceptions and feelings of mattering. Students' critical or significant moments differed between students but they were personally significant to the individual in this study. The rationale to study undergraduate students' significant moments of mattering is to contribute to the scholarship and field of academic advising in an effort to better understand the student experience in academic advising settings.

Students from all majors and Colleges across campus were considered to participate in this study. A rich and diverse participant pool was desired in terms of students' fields of study, gender, race, and college classification. I selected students who responded as willing to participate in the study with a goal of having a diverse group of student participants through variation sampling until I reached a total of 15. Once I confirmed three interviews with all 15 participants, I reached saturation and declined additional participants.

Professional advisors at The University of Higher Learning were sent an email with information regarding the study through the university's Academic Advising Association (AAA), which comprises all academic advisors on campus including professional and faculty advisors. The AAA is housed under the Office of Academic Affairs and promotes quality academic advising at the university. AAA was created to support the growth and development of academic advising and advisors at the University of Higher Learning. As an association, it serves faculty and professional advisors as well as graduate students and others in academic and student affairs that are concerned with the personal and academic needs of students. The AAA is also an allied member of NACADA and routinely supports the goals and programs of the national organization.

The individuals contacted through AAA were asked to identify potential participants who they believe have had critical moments of mattering during their advising appointments. Upon receipt of student names from academic advisors, a recruitment email was sent to students requesting their participation in three interviews to discuss significant moments in their academic advising experience. Recruitment emails were also sent to college Registrars and Directors of college advising centers on campus with the request to disseminate the recruitment email to their respective student listservs. Student participants engaged in three 45-60 minute recorded individual phenomenological interviews. The first interview consisted solely of students' academic advising experiences. The second interview focused on a critical moment where participants felt as though they mattered as students on campus. The third interview explored the phenomenon of students' personal and significant moments of mattering within the academic advising setting.

Table 1.1

*Participant List*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Classification by Credit Hour</b>	<b>Gender<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Advisor Type (Faculty or Professional)</b>
Michael	Junior	Male	White	Engineering	Professional
Kate	Junior	Female	White	Communication	Professional
Gabrielle	Sophomore	Female	White	Communication	Both
Raven	Junior	Female	African American	Communication	Professional
Susie	Freshman	Female	White	Communication	Professional
Regina	Sophomore	Female	White	Communication	Professional
Smith	Sophomore	Male	African American	Communication	Professional
Kim	Senior	Female	African American	Engineering	Professional
Molly	Senior	Female	White	Arts & Sciences	Faculty
Sam	Senior	Female	White	Arts & Sciences	Faculty
Goldie	Senior	Female	White	Arts & Sciences	Faculty
Titus	Sophomore	Male	African American	Arts & Sciences	Faculty
John	Freshman	Male	White	Arts & Sciences	Professional
Christina	Sophomore	Female	African American	Business	Professional
Lena	Junior	Female	White	Interdisciplinary	Faculty

**Data Collection**

Data collection included three semi-structure interviews with the participants. Each of these interviews used a conversational approach to the interviews (Roulston, 2010). Fifteen participants were interviewed three times each using the protocols in Appendix A, B, and C.

Semi-structured interviews incorporate a guide that outlines the interview protocol yet they are

<sup>1</sup> I understand sex and gender to be two separate and unique constructs. When asked to fill out a demographic survey at the end of our final interview together, students self-reported their gender as male or female.

flexible and allow space for the participant's to provide details and rich narratives (Brinkmann, 2014; Roulston, 2010). The purpose of this interview structure was to obtain a context for the final interview, as I was interested in understanding students' experiences in academic advising settings and their experiences of mattering separately before merging them together. Due to the complexity of students' mattering and the bountiful experiences students bring with them through their relations with people and spaces they interact with, I wanted to interview each participant three times.

My theoretical framework informed each interview and had questions related to the components of mattering: attention, importance, dependence, and ego-extension. The phenomenon under investigation was to be clearly understood to drive each segment of the research. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews covered the varied forms of mattering in students' experiences. Through the work of examining students' experiences of mattering in academic advising settings, it was crucial to resist the temptation to understand students' experiences in the space of academic advising alone. It would be detrimental to the examination of students' experiences to interpret them in isolation. Instead, I committed myself to remaining open to the lines of flight and explosions of new creations that gave rise to different, complex, and meaningful possibilities (Vagle, 2016). This meant inquiring about other meaningful events in their lives as students. Digging in and asking about how these students defined what it means to matter, what it felt like to matter in advising spaces, and other social spaces could generate new understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, taking care and consideration into the personal stories and lived histories of the students' brought forth alternative discoveries regarding their feelings of worth and significance in academic advising settings.

First, I listened to participants' experiences in academic advising settings and, in as much detail as possible, I asked students to tell me about themselves and their advising experience. I inquired about their motives to see an academic advisor and I asked students to walk me through each step of that process and describe what it was like in their experience. During the second interview, I asked students to tell me about a time when they felt as though they mattered as a student on campus. Looking into these moments for identifying information that signal meaning and significance helped me understand the third interview. In the third and final interview with participants, I asked them to describe a time when they felt as though they mattered in an academic advising setting. Obtaining as much detail as possible from participants merged these concepts together and moved toward a discursive lens of the students' experiences. During each interview, I took detailed notes that I revisited afterward. I wrote questions that I wanted to ask participants in our future interviews together. Following up on these questions gave way toward a more detailed conversation and helped me fill in any gaps of misinterpretation or misunderstanding.

When conducting phenomenological research surrounding students' experiences of mattering in academic advising settings, the intentionality and web of relations between students and their surroundings was complex and multilayered (Vagle, 2016). Spatial relations were not bound in the students' intent or their mattering. Instead, intentional relations, following Husserl (1970), accounts for students' physical and relational connections with their advising experience and with their campus space. This extends to their academic spaces and into their social spaces such as their living environment, where they eat, and where they spend time outside of academics. Additionally, students' intentionality extends beyond the physical spaces they navigate. It lives in the interactions and passing transitory relations students develop, while they

negotiate their college experience. These physical and social relations are not considered in isolation from each other. They cross boundaries and merge together in meaningful and complicated ways, contributing to students' lived experiences.

In line with post-structural guidelines from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), my work began in the middle. Meaning, there was no beginning and no end, this post-intentional phenomenological work should not be conducted in a linear fashion because individuals do not experience or relate in linear ways. It can be argued that there is no beginning and end in advising, either. Students do not stop becoming before they start college and they continue to transform and grow upon graduation. The development of a student is not linear nor are the experiences, relations, and interactions they pursue. Instead these relations, experiences, and conditions are entangled and compromise the entire becoming of a person. Therefore, the methods and research components during the investigative process were revisited often to ensure an open and shifting process that was accessible to reach the fullest understanding of the phenomenon. It could not be reached in isolation. It needed to be examined and sought after in multiple steps and phases of a phenomenological study, which was my premise for interviewing participants three times each.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data I transcribed each interview and followed aspects of Creswell's (2007), Van Manen (1990), and Vagle's (2016) approaches when analyzing phenomenological data. I transcribed all 45 interviews. This was an important step as it allowed me to re-listen to my conversations with participants and re-familiarized myself with their narratives and the content of the data. After the transcription process was complete, I engaged in member checking by emailing the completed transcripts to the participants so they could verify for accuracy of the

content and meaning making. One of the participants requested that we meet again to follow up and ensure I understood what they were trying to convey during their interview.

Once all of the interview data had been gathered, transcribed, and reviewed by the participants, I turned to data analysis. To begin, I read through the entire transcript of each individual interview. Next, I went line by line through each transcript and wrote questions, considerations, and thoughts in the margins. I identified quotes, words, lines, or concepts that stand out to me or formed questions. I re-read through each transcript line by line again to review the illuminating themes, quotes, and concepts that emerged (Vagle, 2016). Through this process, I took notes of the excerpts that stood out and wrote descriptions and interpretations of the participant's responses.

After I made these notations, I added descriptions to my notes and articulated my thoughts, which opened the data to new meanings and interpretations. To do this I engaged with Dahlberg's (2006) bridling technique, which is intending to be reflexive and allows the researcher space to be open to contemplate new possibilities. Further, Vagle, Hughes, and Durbin (2009) described bridling as "an active project in which one continually tends to the understanding of the phenomenon as a whole throughout the study" (p. 350). Finally, after adding descriptions to my notes from the transcripts, I read across all of the transcripts once more and honed in on patterns of meaning (Dahlberg & Drew, 1997), which are essentially themes that manifested within the data. My goal with this analysis was to engage with the data meaningfully by asking follow up questions to participants and to probe deeply. I wanted to pull apart and revisit each line of the data to establish the patterns of meaning (Dahlberg & Drew, 1997) to use as a disruption to the practices of academic advising.

Phenomenological data analysis has been approached through various techniques in recent research in higher education. Zhang (2016a) used a phenomenological approach when considering international students' experiences with academic advising as they sought to uncover the essence of the complexity of students' academic advising experiences. Initial open coding was used to develop themes for data analyses. In another study by Zhang (2016b), transcripts were coded to identify significant subjects when examining the experiences of international doctoral students. Next, themes were generated after further inductive analyses of categories and coded data. Su and Harrison (2016) employed member-checking techniques when they conducted a phenomenological study to examine the study abroad experiences of Chinese college students in English-speaking programs. Alfattal (2016) used thematic coding and Moustakas' (1994) six-step procedure analysis when analyzing data from a phenomenological study to understand international students' college needs. Bellefeuille and McGrath (2013) analyzed data through van Manen's (1990) method of hermeneutical analysis. The data was triangulated through multiple data sources such as researchers and reviewers. Bellefeuille and McGrath (2013) conducted thematic analysis and reflection of the triangulated data in their phenomenological study, which examined the lived experiences of child and youth care/social care students and faculty. In a phenomenological study that looked at the experiences of bullying in adult women educators in higher education researchers Sedivy-Benton, Strohschen, Cavazos, and Boden-McGill (2015) looked for patterns of concerns in the interview transcripts across participants. Using iterative transcript reading to develop a "deep understanding of the phenomenon" researchers Sedivy-Benton and partners (2015) used a four-stage analysis process to examine and identify concepts, establish themes, code data, and generate theory (p. 37). Throughout these phenomenological studies in higher education, member checking remained

consistent. The use of initial coding to generate themes from which to analyze the data were also employed throughout the respective studies however, the approach to theme development varied slightly.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To ensure I adhered to ethical research guidelines I gained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before I began to recruit participants for this study. Prior to the start of the interviews, I asked the participants for their verbal and written consent to interview and have the interview recorded. Participants were informed that the audio recordings, transcripts, and identifying information would be kept anonymous. As such, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves. Furthermore, they were told that they could stop the interview at any time without consequence. The participants also received information pertaining to the study at hand and an overview of the procedures. Finally, given my position as an academic advisor, I refrained from interviewing any students I had previously worked with in an advising capacity.

My investment in this work stems from my professional role as an academic advisor. Thinking through the many varied ways in which students and advisors interact, I believe that it is important to students' success and overall wellbeing to know that they matter and are significant members of our campus community. These relations students have with campus administrators, the spaces they interact with, and the relations they hold with each other matter to the particular ways in which they engage with campus, their academics, and their personal wellbeing.

I am also aware that this belief could become problematic through my research. Therefore, I tried to be acutely aware of my personally held beliefs and continuously worked on being open to new possibilities through reflexive practices such as bridling (Dahlberg, 2006). For

example, I needed to be mindful and open to the possibilities that existed where students did not feel as though it is important for them to experience moments of mattering in academic advising settings. It was important for me to practice reflexive journaling and being open to new discoveries through the duration of this project.

### **Quality Assurance**

I engaged in multiple measures for quality assurance purposes. I accounted for researcher bias through continual reflective and reflexive journaling and memo writing, and I did member checking with participants (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988). Qualitative research involves thorough self-reflection to continually assess the researcher's positionality and biases throughout the entirety of a research process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1988). To be transparent and hold myself accountable through this process, I wrote reflexive memos after meeting with participants, kept detailed notes of the entirety of the research study, and continued reflecting on the study by engaging in bridling, described in detail below. In an attempt to verify the accuracy of the transcripts for content and meaning, I engaged in member checking with participants by sending them copies of the interview transcripts for them to provide feedback on and review.

Phenomenology asks that researchers bracket out their experience to set aside their inherent biases and assumptions. This stems from the reflexive practice of qualitative researchers. Dahlberg (2006) developed another notion of bracketing, which she termed bridling, referring to her lived experience working with horses. Bridling allows a phenomenological researcher the freedom to be open to new possibilities and understandings while being reflective in the process. Understanding on the part of the phenomenological researcher allows room for

pause and consideration of the phenomena. In this way, the researcher is given room so interpretation is not made preemptively without time for adequate reflection.

Throughout the interview process I participated in reflexive journaling to bridle my thoughts and experiences. This exercise allowed me to slow down and inspect each phase of the research and interview process. Bridling and opening up moves away from the formerly known phenomenological notion of bracketing, which was used as a means toward the concept of phenomenological reduction according to Husserl (1970). Bridling requires the researcher to remain open and unguarded to new possibilities (Dahlberg, 2006). Being open in this way allows for theories to be interrogated, questioned, and pulled apart. The methodological quandaries that result from this reflexive engagement with the data and research are not a means to an end. Instead new questions are brought forth for examination. This is a continual process through which the researcher folds onto themselves and the data, revealing new relations and forming different possibilities. Meaning, researchers make connections of how the dialog and relations unfolded and are able to connect new relations and new discoveries to the study through examining themselves with the participants and the data they engage with through their work. It positions researchers to look inward and invest in assessing their biases, experiences, and beliefs to assess the ways in which they examine and open up new possibilities. As a qualitative researcher using a phenomenological approach to this study, I needed to assess my personal experiences and understandings related to mattering while conducting this study. Phenomenological qualitative research involves the intricacies of human bias, which are not limited to participant biases, but include those of the researcher as well (Creswell, 2007; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

## **Positionality Statement**

I became interested in this work through my professional experience as an academic advisor. As an academic advisor, I worked together with students creating meaningful relationships and furthering their personal development, personal goals, and academic success. In my experience, students routinely seek the assistance of academic advisors for non-academic related challenges they are facing. Hearing their stories fraught with triumph and tragedy culminating in the challenges that students confront while trying to succeed academically has led me to study students' mattering.

My work in advising is co-constructed through the partnership and rapport I build on a continual basis with students. I view my approach to advising and research similarly, as a mutual construction of knowledge between advisor/student and researcher/participant. It is difficult to ascribe to one advising framework as every student brings unique needs and challenges with them when they enter my office. However, in large part I find myself ascribing to the appreciative advising framework. I inherently work to see students' strengths and work in partnership with them to achieve their academic and personal goals. I believe that students' college experience is a time of self-discovery. As a result, there should be mistakes that are made along the way through this process. I am invested in working with students through these mistakes and challenges so they can pursue their dreams and not settle on what they have been told they deserve.

As a result of this co-construction of knowledge and meaning making, I have been challenged to learn, grow, and become flexible in my approach of advising students. A phenomenological qualitative research approach lends well to my work as an academic advisor where I attempt to understand students' experiences to help them complete their academic

curriculum. I view myself as a practitioner scholar and as a person who is immersed in the scholarship of academic advising professionally and academically in this study. My work as a practitioner scholar in academic advising informs every aspect of this study. Working as a professional academic advisor I have insider knowledge regarding the practices and approaches of co-constructing knowledge and building rapport with students. I understand my relationship to this research as influential in understanding and analyzing the methods employed and reflective journals of the advisors in this study. My insider knowledge and experience will also influence the construction and analysis of the interviews with students in this research project.

In relation to the research context of this study, my positionality and experience as a professional advisor and practitioner scholar, has shaped the formation of the study. While my positionality as a professional advisor is subjective and based on my personal experiences and interactions with the students with whom I have personally worked with, it has carried through to the understanding and interpretations I have generated in this piece. To address my bias and positionality within this research study (Merriam, 1988), I will use reflective journaling and reflexive memos through the entirety of the study to confront these challenges and assumptions I bring with me to the research. Through the use of reflective and reflexive journaling I hope to acknowledge my practitioner and researcher biases to analyze the data and interpret the findings generated in this work (Finlay, 2012).

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings from the research I conducted regarding students' experiences of mattering in academic advising settings. This study was framed through Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) concept of mattering, which I used to develop interview questions and, in turn, guided my analysis. I used a priori coding to guide the development of the themes discussed below. Following the data analysis, I will respond to the research questions that directed this study.

Before delving into my findings, I sought out a piece of work, which used phenomenological analysis and an a priori approach to ground these outcomes. Crum and Franklin (2002) conducted a phenomenological study, which explored mentoring female graduate students. To analyze the data, researchers Crum and Franklin (2002) generated preset or a priori codes they uncovered through the literature. These predetermined codes evolved into themes, which had common "attitude threads" and patterns, which represented theoretical constructs of their work (p. 3). Crum and Franklin's (2002) resulting analysis was based off of the preset codes, which the researchers developed through the literature and represented as theoretical constructs. I used their study as an exemplar of conducting phenomenological research using an a priori approach to my findings.

## **Summary of Methods**

This phenomenological study began at the end of January 2018 at the University of Higher Learning in River Town. I conducted three semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 15 participants for a total of 45 interviews. I took detailed notes of our conversations during each interview to refer back to in future interviews, I generated reflective memos after each interview, and practiced bridling (Dahlberg, 2006) to explore new possibilities and uncover new and unfolding aspects of the phenomenon, mattering. I re-listened to each interview as I transcribed them. I read through each transcript multiple times to take notes, ask questions, and to identify quotes, words, and concepts that stood out to me. This allowed the sub-themes, which were manifested in the data, to emerge under each a priori code. It should be noted that these participants came from five different colleges at the University of Higher Learning and had a combined total of 20 unique majors. They either had a professional advisor, faculty advisor, and some participants had both a professional and faculty advisor. This study and the findings that follow are about how this group of undergraduate students experience moments of mattering in academic advising settings.

## **Constructs of Mattering**

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) identified four constructs associated with the feeling of mattering. These constructs (i.e., attention, importance, ego-extension, and dependence) appeared in different ways throughout the data. The complexity of students' experiences of mattering according to these constructs is explored below.

### **Attention**

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) identified attention as the construct most critical to a person's mattering. Attention is the feeling that a person is significant or meaningful. When

asked about how their advisor pays attention to them students purported a myriad number of ways in which their advisors paid attention to them. Additionally, students described the unique moments and details of how an advisor's attention was meaningful to them.

**Students value advisors' attention.** Through their interviews, students remarked that they appreciated their advisors paying attention to them. The form of attention that was cited most often was advisor recognition especially outside of academic advising spaces. Students indicated feeling noticed by their advisor and how that recognition and acknowledgement made them feel as though they mattered through meaningful interactions outside of their advising experience. Apart from recognition, students valued their advisor taking time to inquire about their personal lives and check in on how they were doing. Christina, a Management major mentioned that when she saw her advisor outside of class or in the hallway, she would come up to Christina, asking about her life and checked in on how she is doing. Going even further, Christina said that her advisor even emailed her over the summer to see how everything was going. Christina explained that she replied to the email and asked how her advisor was doing as well.

Not every participant had such in-depth conversations through their advising experiences. Students reported that when their advisor recognized them in a hallway as an example of a significant moment of mattering. This became even more meaningful when an advisor addressed the participants by their names. Advisors who were attentive and knew the students around them well enough to say hello generated an influential moment for the participants. Kate, a Public Relations major said it was a brief moment where her advisor recognized her passing by in a crosswalk on campus that was the most powerful for her. When recalling this meaningful moment she described it as "pivotal." Kate spoke about this moment, of passing her advisor in

the crosswalk, and how it was meaningful and significant to her experience. She had met with her advisor only a few times prior to seeing her in the crosswalk. Given the large number of students her advisor sees, Kate thought it was meaningful that her advisor not only recognized her in this moment but also acknowledged her presence by saying, “Hey Kate, what’s up?” It generated greater feelings of significance for Kate because none of her previous advisors remembered Kate’s name, which set the expectation that her newest advisor would follow suit.

Participants often commented on the how they viewed advisors knowing and remembering students’ names as a form of attention. This signaled to the participants that they were important and had been given personalized attention from their advisor. For example, Goldie said, “They actually know who I am. It’s really comforting but really weird to me cause I thought since we’re such a big school but they actually know how I am.” However, it was not only the fact they their advisors knew my participant’s names. Many students were impressed and noticed when their advisors knew the names of other students as well. This indicated to the participants that their advisor was someone who cared about their students and was invested in them. Advisors demonstrated this investment by learning multiple students’ names. Regina articulated this concept when she said,

I definitely just love to watch her know so many students’ names and I think that truly is such a cool thing for an advisor to be like this CWID [campus wide identification] number, you’re Regina, you like really love your major and you wanna do great things and let me help you with that.”

When Regina talked about her advisor knowing her name and other students’ names it was a signal to her that her advisor was paying attention. Regina also alluded to her advisor paying attention to all of her students, not just Regina, which proved meaningful to how she perceived her advisor. Students placed a high value on advisors knowing their names and treating students as individuals beyond campus wide identification numbers.

Michael and Raven described more nuanced, advising related interactions when describing the ways in which their advisors paid attention to them. Michael described the effort his advisor took to pay attention to him and how the courses he was facing in the future made him feel like she cared about him as a student and what he wanted to pursue. In his words, Michael said, “And the fact that she went through all that effort to go and plug in each course and to see what I needed on top of what I already had was like, oh she actually cares, she things that my viewpoint should be respected in that should at least be considered a possibility.” Raven was more meticulous in her description of the ways in which her advisor paid attention to her. Raven referred to the personal interactions with her advisor including the body language of her advisor. Additionally, she described how her advisor paused, which demonstrated she was listening to Raven during advising sessions:

...So she cleared her schedule. And I just sat there and talked. She paid all her attention to me it was all eye contact, body positioning was facing me, um and leaning forward, so she was not only like listening to me she was understanding me. Um, and then she would pause so any question or anything she wants to say, like I said before, she would pause and think about how she went about it or how she knows how I would go about it and then give me her answer, which I loved that. And that was really the first, the first meeting and when we left and it was time for me to go she gave me a hug and then I left out the door.

The attention from her advisor that Raven experienced extended beyond body language. Raven described how she felt like her advisor understood her. She talked about how her advisor listened to her and thoughtfully responded to Raven’s questions based on what she knew about Raven at the time. She described the attention from her advisor in this first meeting they had together in great detail, which is how she experienced it in that first meeting and left such a long-lasting impression on Raven.

**Advisor recollection demonstrates attention.** It was clear, based on the participants’ responses, they valued the attention and recognition paid to them by their advisors. While their

recognition lends to feelings of significance, the experiences students had where their advisors recalled meaningful information from previous interactions also generated feelings of mattering. This recollection of advisors recalling details of past meetings with students demonstrated that they were listening, paying attention, and valuing the time spent with students. Kim, a Mechanical Engineering student said that her advisor always referred back to the time they first met during orientation on campus and the shorts that Kim was wearing that day. This recollection demonstrated that Kim was not just another student but a person who her advisor took the time to know and remember.

Participants were also attuned to the fact that their advisors were recalling personal information they discussed with their advisors previously. This could have been information about their family, friends, or their involvement outside of class. For example, Susie said, “Um, yeah, so she always like knows about like my personal life too. Like my family and all that.” The personal details advisors were able to recall about students’ lives and experiences aided students during their academic advising meetings. Gabrielle shared in detail how both her faculty and professional advisors recalled past conversations in academic advising meetings.

Definitely both of my advisors, Dance and Public Relations remember things that I’ve said from past times whether that’s about classes and which ones I wanna take or about um like opportunities that are happening or she will ask about “When’s your next show? What pieces are you in? Oh whatever happened to that dance thing you were telling me about last time?” And I think that’s a really cool trait of the advisors if they remember what their students are interested in and doing and involved in. Last time we talked about students being involved. I think it’s cool when advisors can like relate back to those and check up on students and how they’re doing.

Students understand that advisors are paying attention and recalling past information when they refer to prior conversations. They especially enjoy when advisors check in how students are doing as Gabrielle described in the quote above. The discourse surrounding advisor recollection

reflects students' awareness of their advisors' attention, active listening, and consideration of thoughtful details as described by Gabrielle.

In addition, students described the care and concern that advisors demonstrated through recalling prior interactions. This gave students an entry point to disclose personal information, challenges they were facing, and it reaffirmed that their advisor was a person they could return to and rely on for support. Regina had a similar experience to Gabrielle and also described the sincerity of her advisor through the course of their interactions together. Regina's advisor demonstrated this sincerity through her advising experience and beyond. When asked if Regina felt like she mattered to her advisor during her academic advising experience, she responded,

I think she is not one to listen to you, talk to you, care about you just in the moment when the door's closed and then once you leave, it doesn't change. She's someone who remembers things about my life. She is someone who if she sees me in the hall is going to genuinely say like, "Hey! Come in, I miss you, how have you been?" And care about my answers and actually want me to come in and not just say it to say it and I think it's very genuine in the way she like looks at me and asks me the right questions about things she remembered from our last conversation.

In the response above Regina spoke about the genuine interest, care, and concern her advisor put forth. Her advisor did not passively acknowledge Regina in the hallway without genuine intent to follow up with her in an advising meeting. Regina perceived her advisor to care about her within the confines of advising appointments and in external spaces as well. The sincerity displayed by Regina's advisor was enacted through all of their interactions together, both in and outside of advising spaces.

It was experience like the one described above, Regina reported, that lead her to feel "at home" in her college and situated within her newfound major after she changed her major for the first time. Regina went on to describe feelings of comfort, belonging, and that she knew she had found the right major for herself because she felt as though she mattered to her advisor and her

college. Through the course of our conversation Regina added that these interactions had also led her to become more involved in her college through different programs and organizations as well. As such, Regina said she felt connected and secure in her decision to change her major.

Students were also cognizant of the experiences and moments where they felt advisors were not paying attention to them through their lack of recollection and the way they were treated during advising meetings. The lack of familiarity and recall led students to have negative feelings toward those advisors and their advising practices. Students reported wanting to experience feelings of familiarity and friendliness during their interactions with an academic advisor. Perhaps Kate summed it up best when describing a repeated interaction with a previous advisor who had not demonstrated any recollection or recognition during their multiple meetings together.

Yeah like she was – I just never got, not that I need warm and fuzzy, but like at this point like we've met at least six times. Over the course of two years like six times. So like, at least pretend that you remember who I am. Or like, I don't need the warm and fuzzy. But at least like show that you've met me before. There's people you meet for the first time and they act one way and when you've met them again they're a little more like friendlier cause like they know you and then you know, it continues on. And it was just like the same reaction from her every time.

Kate was able to draw from an advising experience where she did not feel as though she mattered to describe her awareness of attention, recognition, and recall in advisors' behaviors. Through her experiences of being unrecognized and having an advisor unable to recall details of their past meetings, Kate was able to verbalize how meaningful it was to her when she did experience these meaningful interactions with an advisor. Kate was not alone; other participants were able to connect concepts of mattering to experiences where they felt ignored and unimportant, as I will talk about further in the next section.

## **Importance**

Feelings of importance rely on how advisors express care and concern for their students. Students identified specific actions, conversations, and non-verbal cues that signified their importance and their perceived non-importance to their advisor. For example Sam, a student in College of Arts and Sciences, described the same feelings of importance and non-important across all forms of communication (e.g. face-to-face and email) with her advisor and other faculty mentors in her life. Additionally, students reported feelings of confidence when they believed they were important to their advisor and mattered to their institution. Students noticed when their advisors cared about their lives outside of academics and articulated their appreciation for the personalization of their advising experience. Taken together, these themes underscored the value of academic advising in a students' collegiate experience.

**Students' mattering is critical to their self-esteem.** Participants in this study were clear in recounting how their feelings and experiences of mattering and non-mattering were critical to their self-esteem. Students cited feeling confident, motivated, driven, comforted, and secure when experiencing feelings of mattering in academic advising settings. Alternatively, one participant, Sam, displayed her vulnerability when reporting how she felt unimportant and as though she did not matter after meeting with her advisor. Sam's advising experience was one of the unique exceptions to the other participants in this study. Her experiences demonstrate how and why students' moments of mattering in academic advising settings are meaningful and important to students' experiences.

I don't know if I said this in the last one, but whenever I come out from meetings with him I feel so like, small. Like, I just because it really does, it feels like to him I'm just like another CWID that he has to go approve and he does not care about any of my extenuating circumstances or any of the things that I want to do and like, so he doesn't empower me at all so that makes me feel really like I don't matter.

Through Sam's interactions with her advisor she experienced feelings of not mattering and she talked about how she felt as a result of those advising meetings. More specifically, Sam talked about feeling like just another number to her advisor, which made her feel small. Although Sam's self-esteem was not reliant on interaction with her advisor, those interactions generated feelings regarding her worth as a student.

Other participants had vastly different experiences, where they claimed improved self-esteem, motivation, and drive when they felt like they mattered in advising appointments and as a student on campus. Lena said, "I think you need to feel like you matter to keep you going. It's motivating and it keeps you um, like determined." John also spoke about his morale as he talked about why mattering is important to him. He expanded on this concept and said, "So like, in terms of mattering I guess it's just to keep your own personal moral up and that affects your friends and in my case everyone else in the program [ROTC], my classes, and if that answers the question." Goldie supported these statements of motivation, moral, and determination when she described how she felt when she mattered as a student on campus.

Um, I gotta say like probably one thing that happened like, when I matter, it actually improves my self-esteem and makes me work even harder to achieve my ultimate goal. Um, when there's doubt in like me as a student, I can say it personally makes it a little harder.

Goldie said it "makes it a little harder" for her to be successful as a student when she has feelings of self-doubt. However, these feelings were mediated through Goldie's interactions with her academic advisor, who helped facilitate her feelings of worth and significance. In turn, her self-esteem improved, and she was able to work harder to achieve her ultimate goal, graduation.

I was interested in the emotions advisors were portraying during their interactions with students, which led me to inquire about them. I asked students what types of emotions their advisor displayed and how they displayed them in an academic advising setting. Interestingly, as

she talked about the emotions her advisor displayed during the course of her advising meetings, Raven related them to how they made her feel more courageous and increased her confidence.

Um so that's some things that she's done and they just gave me a lot more courage but she came down to my level. Um, which was helpful, which brought me back up to her level, that confidence. The same confidence she had in me, I needed in myself. I needed her for that time cause I don't think anyone else could provide that attention and confidence I needed in myself during last year, probably sophomore year too.

Raven was clear in her response that her advisor portrayed confidence in Raven as a student, which generated greater feelings of confidence in herself, which she did not have at the time. This perception of Raven's advisor giving her confidence was so important to Raven's self-esteem that she reported needing it. Moreover, Raven said that no one else other than her academic advisor could have provided her with that attention and confidence at the time. This statement indicates how important Raven's advisor was to herself, her confidence, and her self-esteem.

The increased confidence that Raven's advisor inspired in her was during a particularly difficult time during her sophomore year. Raven was not alone when discussing her experience of mattering that occurred during a challenging time in her life. Students' also voiced that their experiences of mattering helped them talk to advisors and other campus administrators about troubling situations in their lives. Feeling comfortable enough to share these challenges with advisors allowed students to feel supported and overall better as they worked through their difficult situations. For example, Kim recalled talking with her advisor about an academic crisis she was enduring and how it made her feel. In the quote below, Kim referred to feeling comfortable enough to share a difficult academic experience she was going through with her advisor. This experience was so significant to Kim, that she termed it an "academic crisis."

Um, I guess it's just it makes me feel like, um, I matter more. I don't know. It makes me feel like um, not necessarily like more important but that um that it's – I don't know, it's easier to talk to someone about not just your academic situations cause I did have an academic crisis like my very first semester on campus. And I didn't have to like, it wasn't necessary to share the full details with [my advisor] but I felt like I could cause I felt like it would make me feel better just to talk with her about it.

The example above was significant and meaningful because Kim said she did not have to talk about this situation with her academic advisor but she chose to because it would make her feel better to talk about it. Moreover, Kim noted that it would make her feel better to talk to her advisor about the “academic crisis” she experienced. Kim was not reaching out for just anyone to talk this through with; she knew specifically that she wanted to talk with her academic advisor about this situation because it would make her feel better.

Christina also spoke about the self-doubt she experienced while she was in the business school and how meeting with an advisor helped her work through those feelings. Christina's experience lends to the different ways confidence and self-esteem can manifest by talking with an academic advisor and uncovering new avenues of support and resources. She stated,

These academic advising experiences have been able to make not just me but the people that I know that had been to academic advising more confident in themselves and more confident in their abilities and what they can do and what they can achieve in the business school and not just to schedule you're the rest of your academic career but even if you needed to just go talk to someone about a different class or some big way to get tutoring or help or anything.

Christina's response above lends insight into students' increased confidence after meeting with an academic advisor. She referred to academic advisors as being people who students could go in and talk to about avenues for support. Christina also referenced academic advising as being more than course scheduling. It is this understanding that advisors work with students beyond course scheduling to build students' confidence, support them, and refer them to resources.

Students endure a great deal of personal growth and development during their time as an

undergraduate student (e.g. Chickering, Perry, Phinney). They must confront the social and developmental complexities of navigating newfound relationships and peer groups while striving to comprehend academic material on a deeper, more profound level. Challenges that accompany the social and academic demands placed on students can be mediated by academic advisors who have the ability to provide a comfortable environment where students feel as though they matter and are encouraged to share developments in their lives that have an effect on their academic performance and overall self-esteem.

**Advisors' care and concern is a holistic endeavor.** Participants reported feeling that their advisor cared for them and were concerned about them as well as their academic success and personal achievements. Students revealed that advisor care is not purely isolated to students' experiences in academic advising settings. Students experienced their advisors' care and concern as a holistic endeavor, necessary to impart feelings of mattering. Like Sam, Molly also had a unique advising experience where she did not feel connected to or seemed to experience significant moments of mattering with her academic advisor. As part of their majors, both Molly and Sam are housed within a separate larger academic department related to their academic discipline. Molly proclaimed that she did "self-advising" and only saw an advisor to sign off on her registration sheet. She described in detail below the tension and complexity of why she did not see faculty as academic advisors even though her assigned academic advisor was a faculty member.

Because they're not. So I think faculty as advisors, I think that the problem is that they want me that when they call for advising, right before you make your spring schedule, it's like a 15 minute appointment usually with a person that I've never like met except for that I know that they're in Political Science or I know they're in International Relations and in my head like if you're going to advise me, if you're actually going to tell me what courses you think I should take, then like we need repertoire, we need like to have something, you need to care about who like you need to care about my place in your program. And like what I'm doing afterwards. But we've never talked before, we have 15

minutes and I hate your classes. So, like, I can advise myself better than that... And so I want an advisor that is interested in that as well and that will help me cultivate like a well-rounded college education and someone that I connected with. Someone that I like trust I think is the big thing. Just someone that I started building a relationship with before I sought their advice. And that could be personal but I need to seek someone's advice. I don't want someone to like, advise me.

Molly was hesitant to think of her assigned faculty advisor as an advisor at all. Instead, Molly claimed that she advised herself. In order for her assigned faculty advisor to help her with academic advising, she wanted a rapport with them. Molly described in detail how familiarity and a connection were required to engage in academic advising. She leaned into the notion of trust and because she had taken courses with her assigned faculty advisor and had negative perceptions of them, she was not going to trust them enough to seek their advice during academic advising meetings. Instead, Molly wrote off advising meetings and chose to forge her own academic path.

While Lena, who was also advised by faculty advisors, had a vastly different experience, she echoed Molly's sentiments regarding the desire for a holistic advising experience that goes beyond course scheduling.

But it can be hard to like, find someone who really wants to like talk to you about your life and what you want, and your career and cause really I think that's what you're talking about or at least that's what I'm talking about like when I go to advising. I want to sit and talk about my life and what I wanna do with it basically. I'm just in an advising session where it's only about like, like next semester's courses like it's not - that's not cutting it for me, I guess.

Lena echoed Molly's desire for a holistic academic advising experience. She expressed wanting more than course scheduling information from an academic advisor. Lena talked about how she also wanted a connection with an academic advisor, someone who could talk with her about her interests, career goals, and give her advice and information as she moves forward in her

academic curriculum. These students were clear in knowing what they wanted and needed from academic advisors based on their diverse experiences in academic advising settings.

Students reported valuing when their advisors understood what it was like to be an undergraduate student. For example, Regina said, “She understands how students work and she understands that like life is not easy and schedules get messy.” Smith agreed and stated that, “Yeah, so she definitely shows her ways in acknowledgement and reaching out and just being genuinely concerned about my well-being. Being invested in students’ holistic wellbeing goes beyond surface questions and course planning. Students were attuned to their interactions with academic advisors and knew when they are devoted to providing students with a well-rounded advising experience. Raven took the notion of holistic advising even further when she was asked what she saw the role of academic advisors was, and she replied,

I think they should be holistic. I think they should be a life, a life coach someway. I just think in the interview process you might want to find someone who can do it all. That might save grades honestly, and probably lives. Cause college students think it’s the end of the world and most of them will not but some of them unfortunately will feel like they don’t matter or not valued and in themselves so if they have someone to talk to not about academics or not just about academics, that’s for the free. That’s for the free.

Raven viewed holistic advisors as being so important to students’ success that they might help save students’ grades and even save students’ lives. She digressed and talked about how college students endured events they perceived as being large significant and potentially life ending. Raven advocated for academic advisors to work with students in a holistic manner so they are able to talk with students about these serious life events as well as academics and course schedules.

Students’ desires for a holistic advising experience can place a heavy burden on academic advisors. However, the holistic approach to advising demonstrates that students are more than what they present in front of an advisor. Meaning, they have entire lives, commitments, work,

and social connections, frustrations, and immense challenges they are confronting, which students bring with them through every meeting and experience they have with an academic advisor. Gabrielle summarized this notion of the holistic care and concern of an academic advisor when she declared, “I know that she cares for me by how she looks at me as a whole person and thinks about what is going to benefit me best.” Students articulated the desire for advisors to create an environment for students to feel comfortable discussing their personal situations and further, taking their circumstances into account during an advising meeting to best meet a student’s individual needs.

**Personalize students’ advising experiences.** Students placed a special emphasis on the importance of personalized advising experiences and how much they valued these intricate details advisors strived to know and learn. Students’ perceived personalization went beyond being able to recall past details about students’ lives. The participants took this concept of personalized advising experiences further and described how advisors who had tailored conversations with students made an impact on their experience. Students purported that their feelings of mattering were informed by the personalization of their advising experience. This meant that their advisors took time to establish rapport with them, got to know who they were as individual students, how they learned best, and what they were interested in academically and vocationally. Goldie expanded on her personalized advising experience and talked about how her advisor asked her, “How do you learn? Like what teachers do you learn better with?” Goldie was so struck by this question and explained that she felt as though she was her advisor’s number one priority. She said that he cared about her as a person, cared about her progress, and doing well in school. It was such a meaningful and significant moment for Goldie that she recalled telling her parents about this interaction with her academic advisor.

In this example, Goldie's faculty advisor also asked her how she learned best and used her response, as a catalyst to offer suggestions for professors whose teaching styles would best suit Goldie. Her faculty advisor used intentional steps when inquiring about how Goldie learned. It was important for him to know the teaching styles and pedagogies of each faculty member in the department so he could ascertain who would be the best fit for Goldie to be most successful. The advisor's pointed questions about how Goldie learned best demonstrated his care and concern for her academic success as a student. This question led Goldie to feel like he was invested in her learning style and she was his only priority.

Beyond learning styles, students reported feelings of mattering when receiving personalized attention from their advisors. Whether advisors emailed students about prospective opportunities (i.e., internships, scholarships) or checked in with them over the summer months while school was out, students appreciated the personalized attention their advisors gave to them. Students reported that even in moments where advisors met them for the first time and encouraged students to follow their own path was personalized and significant. Molly talked about the most valuable and personalized meeting that she had with an advisor was the first time she met with him at orientation before the start of her first year. It was this interaction that inspired her to follow her interest and passion instead of what she thought was a prescribed path forward. Molly described feeling heard for the first time through this meeting an academic advisor at orientation. He took time to hear about what Molly wanted to do with her life and encouraged her to pursue it instead of following everything she had known before. This was a meaningful interaction for Molly and one she remembers very clearly to this day as it forged a new path forward for her.

Molly described the critical moment above as significant because for the first time meeting with an advisor she was encouraged to pursue her interests and lean into her curiosity. Molly described her advisor at orientation as taking the time to listen to her and hear about her interests. Advisors who practiced active listening and asked questions of their students to understand them and gain additional information and insight into who they were was perceived by these participants as showing interest and personalizing their advising experience. When talking about her research faculty mentor, Sam underscored this point, “I think the biggest thing for me is asking questions like that. ‘Cause that signals it’s when they ask me questions it seems like they are more interested and I’m not just spewing information at them.”

A particular concept students verbalized when talking about the personalization of their advising experiences was that they did not believe their advisor was limited in only giving them personalized attention. Students commented about how their advisor provided specialized attention to all of their students. Delivering specific and detailed information to students according to their circumstances and interests was part of the personalization students referred to in their advising experiences. Students took this notion further and described these specific interactions as meaningful and indicative of the caring nature of their advisors. Susie described how her advisor provided her with personalized attention and how that made her feel cared for in this advising setting. “...I feel like she doesn’t just say responses that she could say to anyone, they’re like very tailored to everybody and I feel like they’re not like just generic answers so I feel like because of that she like cares more about me as a person.”

Participants also spoke to the impersonal nature of advising experiences they endured and how those experiences contributed to feeling unimportant as a student. In particular, students described feeling like another number to their advisor or “just another student” as one participant

described especially at the large university where this study took place. When students look to advisors for help answering questions, they expected their advisor to have an answer. For example, students claimed to have asked their advisors questions but felt as though they had been brushed off or that their advisor did not know answers and did not seek out information to find an answer. Students understood this to mean their advisors were not willing or able to help them find out information pertaining to their unique circumstances during an advising meeting. Failure to help students answer questions puts the burden of work back onto the student to search for answers. For example, Sam said, “And so just with him, I don’t feel like I’ve got a lot of personal attention, you know? He’s just like, ‘You should already know all of the answers to all of your questions because the information is online.’” Moreover, when asked how advising appointments made her feel Sam responded, “I mean, it’s really kind of hurtful. Like whenever I get emails from him, I remember like last semester like, having to ask him a question, I was like dreading it.” Molly also talked about the time she asked her advisor a question during an advising appointment. When she her advisor told her they were unable to help Molly with her question, she responded “...And so then I was like, yeah, okay well I’ll help myself.” This was the beginning of Molly engaging in self-proclaimed self-advising. She felt unable to rely on an advisor to answer her questions or direct her to courses. Therefore, Molly reported only using her advisors to remove her advising hold and would advise herself on the courses she should take toward her degree completion.

Students experienced personalized advising meetings and interactions in different ways. For some students, it was significant to them when their advisor emailed them and reached out to check in on how they were doing when classes were not in session. Most students reported the intentional individualized advising experience that was produced when their advisor listened to

what they had to say and inquired about their academic goals and personal life. When students in this study did not receive personalized attention during their academic advising experience they purported feeling as though they had to take it upon themselves to acquire the specific and pertinent information they needed. Although Sam did not have a personalized advising experience with her assigned faculty advisor, she recognized how it is critical to students' overall experience,

Oh and another thing is I like, with this being such a big school and there are like paths that you have to follow and stuff like that, I think that the advisors should be the one who helps personally tailor like, what you're doing. And so like, you can make a cookie cutter degreeworks all you want but like the advisors like the person, like the personal touch is what can make it more effective like for the students.

While Sam did not experience personalized advising, she understood the significance of such an experience. She asserted that advisors should be the personnel to tailor specific and unique experiences to students during advising meetings. According to Sam, the personalization of these advising meetings is the factor that can make them more effective student experiences.

### **Ego-extension**

The concept of mattering (1981) construct, ego-extension, asserts that a person is a reflection of another. While students in this study reported valuing an advisor's opinion and wanting their support, they did not report many instances of an advisor celebrating their successes or sharing in their disappointments. Instead, students reported that if they mattered to themselves, they would in turn, matter to others.

**Advisor support is significant.** An academic advisor's support of a student is significant and meaningful to students' academic and personal experiences. The narratives students shared revealed that they understood college to be a time of self-exploration, life preparation, and personal development. Participants in this study shared how substantial their advisors' support

was to them and they talked through experiences where their advisor did not support them and how this lack of support made them feel as a result. Advisor support was manifested in different ways. For example, Kate described that when her advisor responded quickly to her emails, it demonstrated that she was a priority to her advisor. Gabrielle spoke about her advisors supporting her more broadly through her holistic college experience at a large research university and how it was setting her up to be successful post-graduation. Gabrielle perceived her advisor's support as being significant and important. Specifically, she talked about viewing her advisor as the person who is going to help her gain entry into professional, academic, and social worlds. She placed the importance of her advisors on her informing her of opportunities as a current student that would help her transition to post-graduation success.

According to these students, advisor support went beyond academic success and achievement. Participants in this study described advisor support throughout their personal lives too. Students spoke about how advisors shared in their frustrations such as being in a difficult place financially and how their advisors understood their lives and circumstances as college students. This understanding was portrayed by advisors as compassion and empathy when students shared the multiple roles and responsibilities they had as undergraduate students with their academic advisors. Students relied on their advisors for support in all facets of their life. Regina talked about how her advisor supported her during times where she experienced financial difficulties while Raven described her unofficial advising appointments, where she talked about her life outside of academics including her hopes, dreams, and fears she had for the future. Raven called these unofficial advising appointments because these were random times where she stopped into see her advisor without a prescheduled appointment.

...Then we talk about career-wise um internships um, what else do we talk about? This is really just like girl talk to me, with her. It's literally if I feel overwhelmed or I need some

guidance or just someone to talk to that's not in my friend group that's been there and done it, I come to her. Um, we talk about relationships, um fear of graduating, what to do afterwards and just checking in grade-wise. Um, so yeah that's unofficial. That's really when I have time and I just come over and see her.

These unofficial advising appointments Raven described helped her advisor build rapport with Raven and helped Raven to instill trust in her advisor to support her during these tumultuous undergraduate experiences.

Students reported that their advisors respected their decisions and gave them the confidence to pursue their dreams. The advisor support students experienced laid the foundation for them to disclose personal information that challenged their academic success. Kim, who experienced a self-described academic crisis said, "Um, but she's been like very supportive in a lot of things. Like I said, mainly academic but some personal things as well. So it was really nice to have her. She is really cool." While students did not speak of their advisor as being a reflection of themselves, they relied on their advisor as their go to person, who would lift them up in moments of strife. Through our conversation, Titus shared that he was not an individual to seek help from others often yet when talking about how he felt supported by his advisor he said, "I think he's there for me like, if I ever need someone to talk to I'm pretty sure I could reach out and talk to him." The importance of advisor support was not lost on students in this study. They may have experienced advisor support in different ways but students came to understand the significance of having a supportive advisor. Gabrielle shared why she felt it was important to feel supported and significant to her advisors.

Well, I think it's important for any student here to feel significant because when you feel like you're supported by people it's easier to go. It gives you more drive and ambition to do what you're here to finish. And so if I came to school and I had all of these dreams that I wanted to get done but no one supported me in them or no one helped to feel like I mattered um, I wouldn't have the drive to do them, I think.

According to Gabrielle, advisor support is significant because it makes it easier for students to stay enrolled and progress through the curriculum if they feel supported by an advisor. She spoke about the motivation and drive she felt as a result of her faculty and staff advisors' support.

Again, not all students provided the same narrative of needing, wanting, or feeling supported by their advisor. The variations among students' desires demonstrated the complexity of the student advising experience and points to contradictions in students' desires for academic support and their perceptions of advising. This contradiction was unveiled when students like Sam and Molly, who had uninformative and unsupportive advising experiences, were left to find information and academic and personal support through other staff and faculty on campus. Their dissatisfaction with their academic advisors encouraged both students to reach out and develop meaningful and supportive relationships with other faculty on campus.

Students who had experienced positive and supportive academic advising meetings felt validated and important through their interactions with their advisor. Conversely, students who did not have such ideal advising experiences had conflicting feelings regarding academic advising. Sam identified the desire for a supportive advisor who would advocate on her behalf. Molly on the other hand had the desire for an effective and supportive advisor but based on her experience, she had not found advising useful or helpful. Molly asserted, "I don't want an advisor in general. And it's not that I don't want an advisor. No, it is, it is. I don't want an advisor. I've never yeah, I've just never seen them as useful in helping me." Without having supportive advising experiences, Sam and Molly took it upon themselves to find other forms of faculty and graduate student support and mentorship to shepherd them throughout their undergraduate experience. Advisor support is significant because it can provide students with academic and personal guidance. Additionally, advisor support can provide an immediate

relationship connecting students to staff and faculty members who can encourage and mentor students throughout their undergraduate career. Smith used the following metaphor regarding his perception of advisor support, he said, “I think they [advisors] should, should be the streetlights for the students on the path to greatness.”

**Mattering is a complex and unique self-driven initiative.** Students in this study conveyed that mattering is not a uniform concept. They defined what mattering means to them individually, which carried an overarching premise of having a positive impact on others within one’s community. However, when I asked participants if there was anything else I should know about their experience, they often responded with statements that alluded to their mattering being a self-driven initiative. Students claimed that they could not matter to anyone else if they did not first matter to themselves. When asked who made her feel like she mattered, Goldie responded, “I can’t put a who because honestly, I feel like it’s myself that makes me matter.” Smith agreed and said, “I would say number one, myself because if you don’t matter to yourself then I feel you won’t matter as much to anyone else. So I feel like the first person you have to start with is yourself.” Christina explained the notion of mattering to the self further, and said that ultimately, “...I still am myself and I still matter to myself, and I still am worthy of doing of achieving what I already have achieved and that’s what matters at the end of the day.” For Christina, the confidence she gained from mattering stemmed from within. While she felt as though she mattered to her advisor, this concept of mattering started internally. Mattering for many of these students was a self-driven and self-initiated concept.

Additionally, students’ mattering was complex and messy and it carried different feelings associated with the concept. For example, students spoke to the isolation and feelings of community they experienced when they felt as though they mattered as a student on campus.

Mattering is not a binary where students feel as though they do or do not matter in all capacities. Students' mattering permeates all areas of their lives. John explained, "'Cause like it affects I mean it affects you academically and socially. If you don't really feel like you matter that could isolate you like socially, which affects your academics if that makes sense.'" Lena explained the developmental, self-driven nature that mattering has taken on in relation to her experience as a student.

I think it just like keeps you going and, and it gives you motivation also when you have others, like other positive um roles if your life or other positive people in your life. It's not like just your family that you matter to it's like you have to kind of like that is always there in the background but you need to find it for yourself and in a new location. And it makes you stand on your own two feet and really develop who you are.

Lena recognized the profound growth and development she experienced as an undergraduate student. She understood her mattering and significance to be a motivating factor through these new developments and stages of growth.

College is a time of growth and understanding for undergraduate students. They are constantly learning more about who they are and developing greater critical thinking and life skills. Mattering is also carried out through the academic and social experiences associated with how students felt as though they mattered. Here, students spoke about making the large campus where the study took place smaller. Creating smaller communities within the broader university setting gave students a larger presence in their feelings and experiences of mattering. John explained the benefits of finding a smaller community within the greater campus at large while he simultaneously enjoyed the anonymity that a large university campus provided.

So unless you're like in a small program, in the ROTC program, I feel like I'm more important than just in like the sense of the whole campus so it's like a nice balance of both small, and you know, big but coming here with you know, no one really really knows you it's kinda like you're kind of free from the pressures of being stuck with like the same people.

John found his smaller community within the ROTC program on campus. It was in this program that he found more personal meaning and significance within his student experience. John used this more intimate community to mediate the anonymous feelings that were produced from the campus at large.

When students did not find validation in smaller social groups or through their advising experiences, they sought out other avenues to generate such feelings. Students in this study believed it was important enough for them to feel important, significant, and like they mattered that they sought it out on their own accord. This reiterates that students' mattering is complex, nuanced, and self-initiated. Participants pursued people, moments, and experiences that would fulfill the desire for these students to yield feeling important and significant. Sam was one of the participants who took it upon herself to find people on campus that would help generate such feelings. In the quote below, she described the self-motivation she had in seeking out a mentor outside of her academic advisor. Moreover, Sam emphasized the importance of students' mattering to their academic advisor to their holistic undergraduate experience.

Yeah, I think, I don't know if we're talking about students in general, like I said with the people who are not as proactive, I feel like that can make a huge difference on what you do in the future and what opportunities you're able to take advantage of because like, and um I'm pretty resilient. I had other people to help me but for students who can't find another advisor like that or like someone else to support them, um, I just think feeling like you matter in an academic setting. They [academic advisors] should be the portal for you being able to take advantage of other opportunities and like make the most of your academic experience and if you don't feel like you matter at all and you just go to your advisor to check off your like your classes that you're not gonna feel like you're eligible for those other opportunities or like, I think like cause I don't know for a lot of people that advisor can be like the only contact they have with any kind of mentor. Um, so yeah like I said, I think feeling like you matter to your advisor converses into a lot of different things and ways for you to change your academic experience and take advantage of things.

Mattering to an academic advisor can provide students with a well-rounded experience with information to campus wide resources and opportunities extending beyond the scope of their academic experience. When students have advisors who do not offer a supportive and holistic advising experience, the responsibility rested on students to find information, support, and resources on their own.

Mattering is complicated and students experienced this feeling in varied ways. Students voiced the importance of feeling like they mattered to themselves first, before they could matter to other people or through additional experiences. Furthermore, students reported creating smaller social circles to experience increased feelings of importance on a large university campus comprised of more than 40,000 students. Finally, students discussed searching for mentorship among faculty and staff members if their academic advisors did not contribute to these feelings for them. Smith had a poignant way of summarizing the complexity of students' mattering that is shared below.

Um, to matter is an ongoing thing. You know, you're not always going to matter to the same person um, you're not always going to matter to the same people or to the same organization or um you're not gonna always have, you're not always gonna matter as much as you did. Um, and that goes to show you that as a person we grow and your sense of mattering should grow and your sense of mattering should always start with yourself. And you know, as long as you make sure that you're making yourself proud, then you know that you have the ability to make everyone else in your life proud. So to matter is definitely multifaceted but it's important.

Mattering is multifaceted, complex, and messy. It is a concept that is going to differ and vary among and between students and their experiences. However, amidst the complexities of students' mattering, students in this study were able to identify the key aspects that lend to their feelings of mattering, namely a personalized, informative, and supportive interaction with academic advisors.

## Dependence

The dependence construct asserts that an individual's behavior is influenced by one's dependence on another person or persons. By in large, students in this study refuted that claim when asked if they felt dependent on their advisor in their role as students. However, they spoke to their feelings of dependency for advisor's reassurance and affirmation.

**Students depend on advisors for reassurance.** Most participants were resistant to the notion of being dependent on their advisor. Although students did not claim to feel entirely dependent on their advisors for their progression through college or success in their role as a student, they described the primary dependency they had on advisors for the reassurance advisors provided. This encompassed everything from checking in with students to consider decisions related to their career trajectory, ensuring class schedules were accurate, and providing emotional and personal reassurance for students. Above all, students depended on their advisor's opinion regarding the decisions related to their career, course schedule, and the circumstances that effected students' academic and personal endeavors. When describing her advisor Susie said, "She's kind of like my go to adult in Alabama." Susie went on to talk about the amount of dependency she had on her advisor when deciding whether to participate in a summer internship program, "I mean honestly, if she would've told me like she didn't think it'd be a good idea, I would've had to consider, I would've had an internal conflict I feel like." Susie was so dependent on her advisor's opinion of her internship that she would have reconsidered participating in it all together had her advisor not been supportive. This example demonstrates how valuable an advisor's opinion was to this participant.

Students voiced their dependence on their advisors for answering questions and being knowledgeable while also providing greater insight into their personal experiences. When asked

in what ways he felt dependent on his advisor, Titus said, “I used to like reach out to him and like ask him different questions about just like, what I wanna do, and just like give me some insight.” Michael provided an interesting example of what he felt students should be dependent on their advisors for within academic advising settings. Related to mental health, Michael described checking in with an academic advisor as akin to seeing a doctor and evaluating one’s emotional and psychological health. He said,

I do think everyone needs one like I do think that we should get like psychological and emotional check-ins with professionals as often as you’re supposed to go to the doctor. Like, it’s important. And I think it’d be important in the academic context too at the university. Just, do that mindset but I also understand why it doesn’t happen because there’s a lot of students that don’t need it or you know, can just kind of bypass the process. They know what they’re doing I mean, like people who are like basically going into their senior year, I don’t think they necessarily need a super in-depth advising appointment but a little check-in to see how they’re doing and how their classes are going would probably be appreciated.

These emotional and psychological “check-ins” assist in providing students academic and personal reassurance. Students at all academic levels from first semester freshman to graduating seniors depend on advisors for such reassurance. While they are not certified therapists, academic advisors can provide students with social support and resources for emotional, personal, and relational situations that are beyond the scope of their abilities.

While the majority of students did not express feeling dependent on their advisor, three students did assert feelings of dependency. These students spoke about their advisors being dependable in different capacities yet they all shared in the dialogic nature in which they felt dependent. Kim, Regina, and Lena described being dependent on their advisor for course scheduling and moreover, discussing topics outside of academics. When describing how she was dependent on her advisor Kim said, “so, I’m very dependent on her. Pretty much anything that has to do with scheduling or taking a class, or if I can take it um online or in the classroom.” Kim

elaborated on a personal level and said, “she’s [her advisor] also like, good to talk to, just in general.” Students in this study discussed depending on advisors to talk about general topics, situations, and challenges that arose in their lives.

Regina went to her advisor when she was facing a difficult time financially. She talked about depending on her advisor for support, to answer questions, and to point her in the right directions while she was under duress. Academic advising involves more than course scheduling. Students bring with them their past experiences and current challenges they are facing when they enter into academic advising spaces. The term “academic” advising is sometimes misleading as this situation points to an example of a time where Regina was depend on her advisor for assistance with an issue outside of course scheduling and registration. Regina expanded on how she was dependent on her advisor during this difficult time in her life. She was going through a financially difficult situation and depended on her advisor for support, resources, and information, which her advisor was able to provide to Regina at that time.

Through our conversation together, Lena described the desire for her advising experiences to be more than class scheduling as well. She not only had a longing for advising that stretched beyond surface requirements but she articulated her dependence on her advisor for insight and advice that expanded deeper into personal and career related aspects of her life. While Lena said she was dependent on her advisor for a variety of things related to her role as a student, she also said that many of her fellow classmates felt similarly.

I definitely yes to the, I feel dependent on him for academic, career, school, classes, everything. I would feel comfortable doing this if I needed to, is if I was having like issues with another professor whether in that department or in another department if I was like whether I didn’t feel like given a fair grade or I might ask him to offer insight on why this professor gave me this grade or this bad feedback and then ask him like what he thinks or from like if, if I felt like sexually harassed by another professor I definitely feel like I would be able to just because I feel like again he cares about his students’ well being and how they’re doing in their lives. I think I could depend on him for that and

based on just his general personality and openness I think allows, I think there's like a lot of students that feel like that about him. That he is like, not like a safe person, but like dependable, open, like nice person.

Citing her advisor as a dependable, open, and nice person, Lena felt comfortable going to him regarding things unrelated to specific advising questions. In fact, Lena described wanting more than course scheduling from an academic advisor. She wanted a person to rely on in times of need or to talk about her future career. Lena stated that many of her fellow classmates felt the same way about this advisor. He was known as a dependable, open, and nice person that students could rely on for their academic and non-academic needs.

Students defined their dependence on academic advisors differently. Many placed a high value on reassurance and validation of their choices that advisors provided for them as well as the decisions they made in their role as an undergraduate student. There were also students like Molly and Sam who only depended on their advisor to remove their advising hold so they could register for classes. Students valued advisors' opinions of them and wanted their approval of the next steps students took during their undergraduate careers. Depending on the situation and circumstances of each student, they depended on their advisors as a person to go to in times of need. These times of need looked different for each student. It may have been to share in a frustration, celebrate an achievement, inquire about next steps, or simply checking in with an advisor on their academic progress. Advisor dependence took different shapes, forms, and meaning for each student, yet was consistently desired and deemed as important.

**Advisor affirmation.** Students in this study found advisors' affirmation to be a significant factor in their feelings of mattering. They asserted feeling dependent on advisor affirmation. Advisor affirmation for these students included words of praise and approval that students were correct and on the right track. According to participant responses, their

dependency lied in the details and personalization that an advisor provided for students. Beyond confirming if a student is on the right track academically, students wanted to know if a course was going to help them in the future, if their advisor was going to advocate for credit to count on their behalf, and they wanted to know the best combination of courses to take together for them to be successful. In the quote below, Kate revealed the extra steps her advisor took to help her navigate her academic journey. Specifically, she focused on how her advisor assured her she that she was taking the correct course and alerted her to avoid a certain combination of classes to take simultaneously. Taken together this affirmative information imparted features of mattering to Kate.

Um, just like assuring me that I'm doing the right track, like saying, "Oh that's great" like I don't I mean, everyone likes being complimented; I don't live for being complimented but it is nice just to, cause it is nice just to, no one really knows like, they can only tell you so much at orientation. I was thinking about this yesterday, they can only tell you so much at orientation until your parents drop you off and leave you here. Like, essentially, like you can only be so prepared. So I think maybe just like, having people tell you, "Oh yeah this is good" or just like, little things like that. Because no one really knows how to navigate. I mean, like now I do a little but like, it's still you know your parents left like – my parents just left me here and so I think yeah, like making sure well, mattering and yeah. Like, little things, I don't need like a big pat on the back like "This is great!" Like, but just like the little things like, "Oh look this is great" or honestly sometimes even like, there's been a couple times where I've met with Mia and I've had class list and she's like, oh these are two W's, you don't wanna take that. Like, she didn't, I mean, like it's her job but she didn't have to tell me that I would be miserable in two writing classes so you know I think maybe that's was kind of like a point of mattering too because she was like oh, not that she wants people to struggle but like she made sure to point out to me that I would probably not like that. And I think that like, it was kind of, it's kind of like a connection in a way because she could've just let me do those two W classes and I would've been struggling but she didn't and I feel like that like is mattering, you know. Cause like she thought about that you know, oh, these two writing classes, I mean stuff like that I guess.

Kate described how when she arrived on campus she felt lost. Students can only know so much and be so prepared before experiencing college on their own as Kate described. Her advisor was able to provide her with the detailed information that Kate herself would be unable to know, as

she had not experienced it before attending the University of Higher Learning. As a result, Kate was dependent on her academic advisor for this detailed information, which helped her academically.

Interestingly, Molly and Sam were able to articulate the concepts of advisor affirmation and advocacy through advising experiences where they were missing these important aspects of dependency. Molly had been searching for the affirmation of an academic advisor, as it is something she has not experienced, even as she was in her senior year and about to graduate. Molly said,

Yeah, a thousand times. That's what I've looked for, I think. But I don't know that I – I think that I would love – no, I don't think, I know. I would love for an advisor to be like, "Hey, like, this looks great, you've taken great courses, good job. Like, oh my god."

Molly had been searching for an advisor to be dependent on for affirmation pertinent to her degree. She described wanting an advisor to affirm her and tell her that she had been doing a good job and had taken great courses. Because Molly was unable to find affirmation in the form of an academic advisor, she advised herself and searched elsewhere to find feelings of affirmation from other faculty members.

Sam on the other hand described her dependency on her advisor solely as a means to register for classes. Based on her past experiences with her advisor she knew that she was unable to depend on him to affirm her decisions or advocate on her behalf. Those interactions and the disregard Sam perceived from her advisor for the lack of details and information he refused to provide led her to feel frustrated, and in her words, "small." Sam went into her advising meetings prepared with specific questions to ask because unlike Kate's advisor, Sam's was not going to impart information about specific courses or requirements, based on her experience. When she spoke about the dependency she had on her advisor, Sam said,

Um, I mean, I'm dependent on him to clear my pin every semester and like I said, I, I would like to be able to depend on him to like stick up for me and let me like kind of work out all the things that I wanna do by like possibly waving one of those requirements or something like that but I can't cause I know he won't but, but like those are the things.

Sam was dependent on her advisor for an administrative obstacle of an advising pin that she could only have removed by her academic advisor. Personally, Sam was unable to depend on her advisor for advocacy or information related to her curriculum, which left her feeling as though she did not matter.

Students also voiced their appreciation and acknowledgement regarding the role of academic advisors to provide affirmation and guidance for them. Although they expressed independence in their decisions, they depended on the support and verification of advisors that they were indeed making sound decisions and pursuing the correct academic trajectory for their personal career path. Smith articulated this best when he discussed his dependency on his advisor for approval yet indicated that he knows what he wants to accomplish; Smith used his advisor for assistance getting there and accomplishing his goals. Smith spoke to the tension of students' desire for advisor affirmation and the independence of choice students want to make. He said, "so I'm dependent on her as far as approval goes. [...] I know where I want to go. I just need her for directions on how to get there." He wanted his advisor to approve of his choices but Smith wanted the independence of making personal and academic decisions for himself.

Advisor affirmation transpired in many similar practices and students described coveting advisor affirmation in similar ways. Students reported wanting their advisor to verify and approve of their class schedules, affirm that they were making the correct career-based decisions, and students wanted to hear from advisors that they were doing well as they navigated through their collegiate experience. Students depended on their advisors for this affirmation to build their confidence and respond to students' questions so they could continue on their educational

journey. Students recognized that their educational journey did not solely comprise their course schedule as they talked about wanting advisor affirmation for their life decisions in their responses as well. In the quote below, Gabrielle talked about how advisors can provide students with affirmation along the scope of students' educational journey.

You know, college really isn't school, it's life preparation and so I think that advisors have a really cool opportunity to be a steward of you know kids going through education and so for advisors to be a friend and kind of like a safe space for kids to go and get help and get affirmation is really valuable. And I'm glad I've gotten to experience that.

Ultimately, the students in this study understood college to be a time of growth and personal development. Students who had meaningful and significant interactions with their academic advisors talked about how their advisors helped them through their personal and academic triumphs and tribulations. While students who reported feelings of not mattering after meeting with an academic advisor described a lack of support, meaning, and significance in their experiences.

### **Summary of Results**

Many of the participants in this study provided rich and compelling narratives surrounding their experiences of mattering in academic advising settings. However, there were other participants who did not provide as rich or expressive narratives when compared to other participants in this study. I want to acknowledge that Titus and John, two first year students did not have the breadth of advising experience as other participants in this study. They had one advising appointment in the fall semester and at the time of our interview they had not participated in a second advising meeting. Given their limited experience with advising, their responses were not as developed as other participants in this study and therefore, were not highlighted in as much detail compared to the other participants.

Additionally, it is interesting to point to the participants whose narratives were richer and more developed when talking through the complexities of their experiences of mattering within academic advising settings. The majority of these students namely, Kate, Regina, Raven, Susie, and Smith all shared at least one advisor in common. Likewise, participants Molly and Sam also shared in the same discipline and while they each had different experiences, they ultimately lacked the experiencing moments of mattering within academic advising settings. None of the participants reported knowing one another and each participant was interviewed three separate times individually. I also note that the participants who had more occurrences with academic advising, due to their class standing, had more experiences in advising to generate greater and more in-depth responses.

In summary, in this chapter I presented the results of this study. The themes were coded into four a priori assignments based on Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) concept of mattering including, (1) attention, (2) importance, (3) ego-extension, and (4) dependence. In the next chapter I present my interpretation of the results, answer my research questions, and provide my recommendations for how this study can inform advising practices and future research.

## CHAPTER 5

### INTERPRETATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, I examine how my findings from my data analysis answer the research questions. Finally, I review implications this study has for academic advisors and offer recommendations for future practices and research and end with my researcher reflections and methodological practices.

#### **Research Question 1: How do undergraduate students in a public university in the southeastern United States define feelings of mattering?**

Undergraduate students in this study used terms such as feeling valued, acknowledged, affirmed, important, making an impact, and feeling significant to describe feelings of mattering they had experienced. However, when students were asked to define what mattering is, they spoke about making a contribution or having a positive impact on an individual or making a difference within their community. Students recognized these contributions to individuals and their communities had far reaching effects in terms of being recruited, retained, and having pride in one's own community. Students verbalized the need to feel valued and significant in order for them to matter.

A significant factor defined by students in this study that contributed to feelings of mattering was the attention, acknowledgement, and support students received. Students found that advisors who paid attention to them took time to listen and learn about their lives as students. Meaning, advisors could identify them outside of traditional advising spaces because

they knew students' names and could recall intricate details of past conversations they had with these students. Students also recognized and valued their advisors' ability to learn students' names and provide them with a personalized advising experience. These attributes contributed to a positive perception of academic advising by the students in this study.

Alternatively, there were some participants who expressed frustration when having to re-explain their circumstances or re-introduce themselves to advisors who they had met with on more than one occasion in the past. This fed into students' self-reported feelings of insignificance and not mattering. In these instances, students reported feeling negative toward their advising experience. More specifically, students did not feel as though their questions could be answered or that they could be provided with enough guidance from their academic advisor alone to have a successful and fulfilling undergraduate experience.

When asked to provide an example of a time a student felt as though they mattered, some students were better able to talk through an experience where they felt as though they did not matter. These feelings were significant to their experiences as students and included issues related to students' racial and gender identities. Two women of color participants described separate and specific examples of experiences they endured related to their race and gender, which added to their feelings of not mattering. Neither of these experiences took place within an academic advising setting however, both were related to their future endeavors.

Raven described her identity as a double minority being that she is African American and a woman. She had walked into a space of white majority students feeling ignored and that her presence was unwanted. These feelings were fueled by the disregard of her presence and lack of acknowledgement by the fellow students in the same physical space. Raven recalled feeling outcasted and not included in the group projects taking place. Raven talked about the majority white

students in the room neglecting her as she walked in and said hello yet they waved and welcomed other majority white students who entered the room. It was the specific interactions, and moreover the lack of interactions that took place between the majority students and Raven that added to her feelings of not mattering. This recent experience was enlightening for Raven as she reported it to be the first time she did not feel valued, welcomed or like she mattered as a student on campus.

Christina's experience of not mattering is different than Raven's as she was applying for a summer internship program out of state. It was not an experience she had on campus but in her role as a student when attempting to get a summer internship. She had made it through multiple rounds of the interview process and had multiple forms of communication (e.g. phone interviews and emails) with her potential supervisor. Nearing the end of the interview process, Christina had been given every signal to indicate that she was the top candidate for the internship position. Start dates, compensation, living arrangements, duties, expectations, and responsibilities had all been discussed and agreed upon by both Christina and the supervisor in charge. In one last attempt to finalize her position with the firm, Christina emailed a copy of her portfolio of work, which demonstrated her talents and abilities were well suited for the position. Included in that portfolio was a photo of Christina. According to Christina, within a matter of minutes from when she emailed her portfolio, she received an abrupt curt email telling her that the firm had chosen to go in a different direction with their summer intern. The immediate rejection signaled to Christina that upon view of her identity as a woman of color she was not valued and did not matter to the firm.

To summarize, undergraduate students define mattering as having a positive impact on individuals around them. They described feeling motivated, secure, significant, valued, and

acknowledged when discussing feelings of mattering. Students were able to articulate how their feelings of mattering fed into larger campus contexts in their role as a student. Additionally, some students were able to verbalize their experiences of not mattering. These students described in detail experiences that generated feelings of not mattering that were revealed through their marginalized racial and gender identities.

**Research Question 2: How do undergraduate students experience moments of mattering in academic advising settings?**

Students in this study experienced moments of mattering in different ways. Some students found it meaningful to have an advisor recognize them and refer to them by name outside of advising spaces. Other students experienced moments of mattering in academic advising when their advisor asked them questions and inquired about their interests, dreams, and goals they had for the future. Students especially discussed their appreciation for advisors when they were able to recall past information or sent them internship and job opportunities via email. This indicated to students that their advisor cared for them and was thinking about them. Above all, students underscored the importance for the personalization of their advising experience as an indicator of mattering.

The personalization that students valued most occurred when their academic advisors took time to get to know them. Getting to know students involves asking questions and listening intently to their responses. Students who spoke about their greatest moments of mattering had advisors on who asked intentional and meaningful questions. On the other hand advisors who garnered the greatest amount of dissatisfaction from students were perceived to treat them as one among many and did not offer them a personalized advising experience. The lack of advisor

support during these meetings left students needing to find supportive faculty or staff members elsewhere.

Prior to conducting this study I incorrectly assumed that I would find students experiencing significant moments or crises with their academic advisor. While this may be true for some students, none of the participants in this study alluded to disclosing any significant or life altering moments that facilitated their feelings of mattering in an academic advising setting. Instead, students shared small meaningful moments that generated feelings of mattering within these advising spaces. In these spaces students can talk with an academic advisor, as a person who is impartial yet supports students' goals and aspirations. Christina described why she thought having a supportive advisor was important to her experience in the quote below.

I just think being able to have someone to talk to besides my friend or my family. Like I feel like it's really important to be able to have not just a family member but a teacher or an academic advisor in the actual business school that can relate to you and can talk to you about things that are happening in the school that you're with.

Having campus support systems, like academic advisors, in place for students to rely on in times of need is critical to students' self-esteem and their mattering. Students reported feeling confident and secure when they had a campus administrator who supported their endeavors. When faced with questions of whether or not to pursue certain opportunities students talked about relying on their advisors for their encouragement and support. For example, one participant mentioned that if her advisor had not supported her choice to pursue a certain program, she would have felt conflicted and would have reconsidered her decision.

Students did not divulge large, pivotal moments of significant mattering that occurred during their advising sessions. However, I have come to understand that these small moments that might go unnoticed by individuals on the periphery and even advisors themselves carry a significant weight with students. These seemingly small moments of acknowledgement,

attention, and significance are important because they create the foundation for students to share those life-altering moments with an academic advisor. Without these surface moments of mattering grounding students' relationships with academic advisors, students would not turn to them in times of need. There were few students in this study who conveyed feelings of depending on their advisor for the sole purpose of removing their advising hold, which would allow students to register for classes. Yet there were more students who provided detailed examples of the interactions and moments of mattering students experienced that led to feelings of comfort and safety. These students indicated that they could trust their advisor and go to them should they ever have a greater need.

**Research Question 3: Why is students' mattering important in academic advising settings?**

This study leaned into the question, "Why is students' mattering important in academic advising settings?" Although they experienced mattering in varied ways, every participant in this study shared stories and experiences of mattering and not mattering that transpired within academic advising spaces. When students' experienced moments of mattering within these settings they reported feelings of support, significance, and importance. According to higher education scholars (e.g. Schlossberg 1989; Tinto 1975; 1993) feelings of mattering and significance are important factors in students feeling connected to a community and finding support within a college setting. Through this study, students' described mattering as being important in academic advising settings because it is critical to their self-esteem, holistic development, and academic achievement.

Students' whose narratives did not reflect feelings of mattering in this study were found to be invaluable in contributing to this research question. Students like Molly and Sam in particular, described how their experiences regarding mattering made them feel apprehensive and

unappreciative of academic advisors. These participants were also reluctant to seek the assistance of an academic advisor, which led them to find sources of support elsewhere. Molly and Sam were both proactive and found other measures of support in the form of non-advising faculty members and a graduate teaching assistant. However, not all students may be as resilient and take it upon themselves to seek additional avenues of support. The benefit of students being able to experience moments of mattering with academic advisors is that they are a campus official who students can be required to meet with prior to registering for their following semester. The advisor-advisee relationship is unique in that colleges and universities can preemptively establish it at orientation for students and requires them to meet with an advisor every semester.

When students feel like they matter in academic advising settings it became easier for them to return and talk to an advisor during a time of crisis. Participants in this study explained this concept. Even though most of the students in this study did not express an experience or time of crisis, many suggested that they would feel comfortable going to their advisor in a time of need. Kim and Regina were two students who experienced frustrations that they shared with their advisors. Kim talked to her advisor about her self-described academic crisis and said that doing so made her feel better. Regina shared the financial difficulties she was facing with her advisor and relied on her advisor for support and guidance during that time. Titus and Lena believed that they could rely on their advisors for support and assistance should they ever need to seek their advice. Again, these small situated moments of mattering lay the foundation for students to seek reliable support in the future.

Students' mattering is meaningful in relation to the size of this campus and to their academic success and retention. The feeling of mattering in academic advising contributes to creating smaller communities within a larger campus setting for students. Students in this study

spoke to this notion frequently during their interviews. They discussed the community oriented environment and hominess they felt when describing experiences of mattering in advising, classroom, and housing spaces. For example, students reported feelings of connectedness and familiarity when advisors recognized them outside of traditional advising spaces. Furthermore, these feelings of mattering connect students back to the larger university campus, where they can sometimes feel anonymous in their role as a student. Michael related students' experiences of mattering to feeling connected on campus. He said,

And so when you have experiences of mattering on this campus, to matter as a student, to matter as a member of the community as a whole, it, it kind of ties you back to certain things. It helps you from becoming detached and commuting in and then taking care of things as you need to. Um, I mean without that experience of mattering I mean, a lot of people would not be proud alums. A lot of people would just and move on, you know? So that, I think that's definitely, that's very important.

In summary, students' mattering in academic advising settings is crucial to their holistic wellbeing and academic success. Students who experienced feelings of mattering in these spaces felt supported and significant as a student. Students depended on their advisors to provide them with accurate information and to affirm their choices and decisions. In times of crisis, students reported that they could rely on advisors with whom they had established a good, positive rapport. Students who did not experience moments of mattering in academic advising settings were left to discover other forms of support independently, if at all.

### **Researcher Reflections and Methodological Considerations**

As the primary investigator, I made deliberate and intentional decisions throughout this study. Being a phenomenological study, I felt it was appropriate to interview the participants multiple times regarding their experiences surrounding academic advising and their feelings of mattering. Interviewing students multiple times allowed me to isolate their experiences in separate settings before bringing them together in the final interview. More importantly, I chose

to interview participants three times in an attempt to build rapport with them. At the beginning of each interview together, we engaged in small talk and I was intentional in inquiring about how they had been since the last time we met. Not only was this an attempt to build rapport with participants so they would feel comfortable disclosing personal moments of mattering, it was also my way as a practitioner and researcher of modeling to the participants that they mattered to me.

When analyzing the data, I chose to personally transcribe the interviews. This allowed me to re-listen to the interviews, map, and draw connections between students' feelings and experiences of mattering and not mattering. Then, because my interview questions were developed using my theoretical framework, I found that it made sense for me and was a natural fit to use the constructs of my theoretical framework as guidelines for a priori coding while generating my themes. As a result, the sub-themes emerged within the data and aligned within each construct, which I used to guide my data analysis.

Finally, it was also important for me to interview a broad and diverse range of students in terms of their classification, majors, gender, and race. I was keen on interviewing students who had faculty advisors and professional advisors to draw from a large pool of participants and to understand a spectrum of perspectives and experiences. I was cautious to refrain from interviewing any students who I had advised personally or had any contact with in my role as an academic advisor.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study provides new perspective of students' mattering in academic advising settings, which assists the advising community better understand students' experiences. Research surrounding students and academic advising examines their perceptions and satisfaction of

advising practices. This study, however, took a more intentional approach to understand how students experienced moments of mattering within academic advising settings. Knowing that students experienced feelings of mattering according to constructs developed by Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) concept of mattering, advisors can strive to aim their practice and interactions with students to align with these concepts. More specifically, the academic advising community can enact more intentional advising practices such as acknowledging their advisees outside of traditional advising spaces, bringing up prior conversations and recalling past information that students shared with them, as well as creating an open, dependable environment where students could feel comfortable returning in times of strife or need. As a result of this study, academic advisors can glean insight into how their advising practices can facilitate students' mattering.

Specific suggestions emerged for the global academic advising community through this study. Students in this study expressed their appreciation of advisors who asked them questions, acknowledged them outside of traditional advising spaces, and who recalled past conversations and information. While taking detailed notes and engaging in active listening are vital skills for all advisors to practice, our field and our advisors need to move beyond these reflexive behaviors. Instead, academic advisors (both faculty and staff advisors) need to invest themselves in their students to help them generate feelings of mattering. By investing in students, we can provide a nonjudgmental, supportive, and open space for students to feel like they matter. Asking intimate questions and getting to know students and their life circumstances allows space for students to disclose information pertinent to their advising sessions. The advising community understands that students' decisions, behaviors, and circumstances that occur outside of classroom spaces have a significant effect on their performance in the classroom. Therefore, we

as advisors, need to allow students the opportunity to share their lives and experiences beyond the classroom in order to best advise, acknowledge, and affirm our students.

Through this study, students' understood mattering to be a self-driven and self-initiated process, critical to their self-esteem. Given that understanding, student affairs and academic affairs should collaborate to foster constructs of mattering on an individual level with students. Students' mattering, like student success, is a campus wide initiative. The responsibilities to facilitate these feelings, which are critical to students' self-esteem, rest on all members of a campus community. While academic advisors have a unique opportunity to meet with all students, they should partner with student affairs professionals on a routine basis to create initiatives on how to facilitate students' mattering, which have been reported to be self-initiated through this study. An ongoing partnership between academic advisors and student affairs professionals creates the space for a broad dialogue on how to provide students with the most opportunities to generate feelings of mattering in multiple spaces on a college campus.

Students in this study enjoyed advisors who personalized their experience. They also expressed great dislike for advising that was impersonal or unfamiliar. Students talked about their appreciation for academic advisors who knew their name, knew their story, and took time to talk with them about what would best suit their academic schedule, personal life, and overall career trajectory. Students voiced the desire for advisors to be invested in their lives, which requires more than class scheduling for future semesters. In this way, advisors should adapt their practices to incorporate the personalization of advising into their work.

With advising numbers that continue to grow at many institutions, academic advisors have had to modify their practices to suit their advising caseload needs. This includes unique abbreviated advising sessions such as express advising or group advising. However, based on the

results of this study, these shortened advising sessions are not conducive to students' experiences of mattering or in advising. Taken together this calls for greater changes from administrators in the structure and demands placed on academic advisors. To eliminate these unique practices required to better serve students' needs, campus administrators should provide financial support for the hiring and training of additional advisors. This may not work at institutions of all sizes; however, at large universities such as the one where this study took place, the increase in advisors would lower advising numbers and allow for more time and personalized attention of each student. Increasing the number of both faculty and professional advisors increases allotment of time they would be able to spend with each student. However, it does not mean an increase in overall quality of advising. This is something advisors would require all advisors be trained on the importance of academic advising and in particular the importance on facilitating students' feelings of mattering through these advising meetings.

### **Future Research**

This phenomenological study uncovered many new facets of students' experiences in academic advising settings. However, it also shed light on research that should be explored regarding students' mattering and academic advising practices. First, there needs to be more research conducted to understand the self-initiated concept of mattering that students spoke about more fully. This was a unique finding that emerged through the course of my interviews and data analysis. Students claimed that their feelings of mattering started with themselves and were self-initiated. Meaning, mattering was up to the individual student. If students wanted to matter to others, they must first find it within themselves to matter. This self-driven concept of mattering should be explored in more detail so higher education practitioners who work directly with students can gain a deeper understanding and insight into students' mattering. Understanding the

self-initiated concept mattering will help higher education practitioners and scholars develop efforts that would promote and encourage students' mattering in a university setting.

A second area of future research to expand on is the way that students view their mattering in relation to the size of college campuses. This study took place at a large research university comprised of more than 40,000 students. Size was a reoccurring factor in how students talked about their feelings of mattering on their campus. The notion of institution size should be explored in more detail through further research. Participants in this study described finding smaller peer groups and social circles they developed to combat the large student population at the University of Higher Learning. However, there was an inherent tension in the way students described enjoying the anonymity a large campus provided while simultaneously valuing personalized attention and forming small peer groups to find community within this wider university setting. Therefore, students' experiences of mattering at campuses of different sizes should be studied to explore the dimensions of this tension between the anonymity a large campus can provide and the feelings of community smaller colleges can offer to students' experiences.

Students' mattering is critical to their self-esteem. This finding in particular should be explored further as students' self-esteem has far reaching effects on their overall health (mental and physical), personal development, social connections and academic success. Future research should investigate more intentionally and more fully how higher education faculty and administrators can explore opportunities to generate feelings of mattering among its students. In doing so, we may find new or alternative practices, programs, and ways to foster students' sense of mattering on our campuses. Students' self-esteem is connected to students' self-efficacy and the stress they endure as undergraduates (Flynn & Chow, 2017). If higher education scholars can

uncover new ways to generate students' mattering in multiple facets of campus, students' self-esteem, their health, personal development, social connections, and academic success could benefit as a result.

This study focused on students' experience of mattering in academic advising settings. Specifically, the research was centered on how students' experienced mattering to their academic advisors. Future research should investigate how academic advisors matter to students. Fruitful academic advising depends on a two way partnership and a rapport between advisees (students) and advisors. The dynamic of this relationship should be explored in more depth and detail to not only understand students' experiences of mattering but to also understand how advisors matter to their advisees. The global community for academic advising could benefit from understanding how and in what ways academic advisors matter to their students. Understanding how advisors matter to students would help academic advisors understand how to build rapport with students in more meaningful and nuanced ways.

Another feature of this study that could be expanded on is the differences between students' experiences of mattering between faculty and professional advisors. Participants in this study spoke about the varied advantages and disadvantages of each type of advisor and because of these many differences, this particular aspect of advising should be investigated. Faculty advisors are often tasked with advising students within their major discipline as a service component of their position. Students voiced how they valued the advice and information offered to them by their faculty advisors regarding career planning and long term goals. However, there were also students in this study who did not feel valued or significant to their faculty advisor, or simply disregarded their opinion because they did not enjoy a class taught by that faculty member. Professional advisors work to advise students as the foundation of their position. They

are trained on the curriculum and are accustomed to attending to students' needs on an ongoing basis. While professional advisors may be well versed in the academic catalog and working interpersonally with students, they may lack the in-depth knowledge of a students' major or discipline that a faculty member can provide.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, students' experiences of mattering need to be studied in relation to their racial and gender identities. Based on the experiences of participants in this study, the saliency of their race and gender were primary factors in their feelings and experiences of not mattering. This should be examined to further understand the experiences and hear the narratives of students from marginalized identities. As all students can be required to meet with academic advisors, who have the privilege of working with students along their academic journey, it is imperative that students who endure experiences of not mattering be critically examined, heard, and understood.

### **Conclusion**

Through conducting this study I sought to understand the phenomenon of undergraduate students' mattering in academic advising settings. The findings suggest that students value their advisors' attention, mattering is critical to students' self-esteem, academic advisors' support is significant to students' experiences, and students are dependent on their advisors for support, reassurance, and affirmation. Additionally academic advisors' care and concern is a holistic endeavor, not limited to course scheduling. Moreover, students' mattering is a complex and unique self-driven imitative that students engage in.

Understanding how students experienced moments of mattering in academic advising settings could influence how academic advisors implement advising practices in their work to foster meaningful interactions with students. These practices could also transform the ways that

advising currently takes place across institutions. Furthermore, as academic advisors understand the notion of students' mattering being critical to their self-esteem, they can work to provide more personalized and holistic advising experiences for students.

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APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW 1  
ACADEMIC ADVISING

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself
  - a. Where are you from
  - b. What are you majoring in
  - c. Where do you live (on or off campus)?
  - d. How would you describe your college experience up to this point?
2. In as much detail as possible, please tell me about your academic advising experience
3. Why did you make an advising appointment?
4. Walk me through your typical academic advising appointment.

*Attention*

5. In what ways does your advisor pay attention to you?
  - a. How do you feel significant to your advisor?
  - b. In what ways do you feel that your advisor is interested in you?

*Importance*

6. In what ways do you feel like you are important to your advisor?
  - a. How does your advisor demonstrate they care about you?

*Dependence*

7. In what ways do you feel dependent on your advisor?
  - a. Do you feel dependent on your advisor when you make decisions related to your major? If so, please explain.

*Ego-extension*

8. Tell me about an experience you have had where your advisor has celebrated an achievement with you or shared in your disappointment?

*Other*

9. Is there anything else you think I should know about your academic advising appointment?

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW 2

#### CRITICAL MOMENT(S) OF MATTERING

1. In as much detail as possible, please tell me about an experience where you felt like you mattered as a student on campus.
  - a. What happened that elicited these feelings of mattering?
  - b. What makes you feel like you matter?
  - c. Who makes you feel like you matter?
2. How do you define this feeling of mattering?
3. *Attention:* Why is it important for you to feel significant?
4. *Importance:* In what ways is it important for you to feel like you matter?
5. *Dependence:* When have others depended on you? When have you felt dependent on others?
6. *Ego-extension:* Who shares in your achievements or your moments of mattering? Who shared in your moments of frustration?
7. *Other:* Is there anything else you think I should know about your significant moment of mattering?

## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW 3

#### MOMENTS OF MATTERING IN ACADEMIC ADVISING SETTINGS

It should be noted that the interview questions below were adapted based on participants' experiences and the conversation between investigator and participant to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

1. In as much detail as possible, please describe a critical moment or experience where you felt like you mattered in an academic advising setting.
2. Walk me through this time. Paint a picture for me. (e.g. what was happening, who did you meet with, what did you discuss, how long did you meet, etc.)
3. Do you feel like you matter to your academic advisor? What has informed these thoughts?
4. *Attention*: What made you feel like your advisor was paying attention to you?
5. *Importance*: Did you feel important during this time?
  - a. What made you feel important?
  - b. How did your advisor demonstrate they cared about you during this experience?
6. *Dependence*: Did you feel dependent on your advisor during this significant moment or experience in your life?
7. *Ego-Extension*: Thinking back to that time, how did your advisor share in this experience with you? What emotions did they display?
8. How did you perceive your advisor during this experience? (e.g. caring, supportive, prideful, etc.)
9. *Other*: Is there anything else you think I should know about this experience?

APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD CERTIFICATION

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA® | Office of the Vice President for Research & Economic Development  
Office for Research Compliance

October 30, 2017

Keely Latopolski  
CCBA  
Box 870225

Re: IRB#: 17-OR-360 "Students' Experiences of Mattering in Academic Advising Settings"

Dear Keely Latopolski:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on October 26, 2018. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to provide to your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_  


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