From Providing Access To Promoting Success: Transforming A Community College System’s Advising Services

Staci L. Grasky

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FROM PROVIDING ACCESS TO PROMOTING SUCCESS:
TRANSFORMING A COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM’S ADVISING SERVICES

By

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ABSTRACT

The economy of the early twenty-first century endured the Great Recession, demanded an increasingly skilled workforce, and saw technological advancements that enabled new levels of scrutiny and accountability. Within this environment, institutions of higher education felt the impacts of recession and recovery, changing workforce demands, and heightened scrutiny. For community colleges, student demographics shifted and challenges grew as they admitted high numbers of students who faced obstacles to attaining their academic goals, such as a lack of preparation for college level work, low socioeconomic status, unclear goals, and first-generation status. With little ability to control these factors and mounting pressure to ensure positive student outcomes, higher education administrators began to rely on advising to help shepherd students through unfamiliar academic territory and build students’ institutional integration. During that time, a system of community colleges in the northeastern U.S. sought to support at-risk students to academic success through a program of proactive advising delivered by professional advisors and peer mentors. This qualitative collective case study examined the experiences of peer mentors to discover how they perceived advising contributed to their socio-academic integration and led to their success as students. Through semi-structured interviews of peer mentors and advisors, the study found that these successful students were motivated by those close to them and by their emerging personal goals, sought help with practical enrollment matters and grew to accept help academically, felt comfortable at their institutions through initial familiarity and that comfort continually increased, and established self-confidence in their academic and personal
capabilities. Implications for advising practice include building advisor-student relationships as soon as possible, proactively and regularly communicating with students in a variety of ways, involving all campus constituencies in advising efforts, and celebrating and building on student success. The study provides recommendations for practitioners, including early and consistent communication, respect for individual needs and preferences while recognizing that all students have some level of need, and proactively building positive, not punitive, advisor-student relationships. Also included are suggestions for further research in the field of academic advising within and beyond the community college setting.

Keywords: advising, community college, peer mentor, low-income, underprepared, first-generation, socio-academic integration, proactive
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DEDICATION

To Vera, the person with whom I so wanted to clink glasses when this was finished.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges have historically served a diverse population of students, from those in dual enrollment programs, to those direct from high school, to a wide range of nontraditional students (Bryant, 2001). Since their inception and through the start of the twenty-first century, these colleges enrolled students including academically underprepared students, first-generation students (the first in their families to attend college), and prior college graduates seeking further specialized training (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Community college students came from all income levels and family situations (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The obstacles and uncertainty many community college students faced extended far beyond classroom and program concerns, and unfortunately, many of these students never reached their academic goals (Bailey, 2015; Coley, 2000; Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011). To address these concerns, many community colleges provided a growing array of advising services, hoping to improve student outcomes (Karp, 2013).

According to Crookston (1994), a great deal of early advising activity was strictly prescriptive, during which advisors told students which courses to take. The extremely high advisee caseloads at many two-year institutions were one cause of this narrow scope of advising (Education Advisory Board [EAB], 2014). The National Academic Advising Association’s (NACADA) 2011 National Survey of Academic Advising indicated that the median caseload at two-year colleges was 441 students. At many institutions, academic advising responsibility fell to faculty (Cook, 2009). Often advising was neither their area of expertise nor their priority (Kennemer & Hurt, 2013). Large caseloads, lack of expertise, and its status as a low priority task allowed advising to devolve into simply picking classes (O’Banion, 2012). Faced with an array
of academic and personal challenges and lacking a sufficient support system, it was no surprise that so many community college students failed to achieve academic success (NACADA, 2011; Williamson, Goosen, & Gonzales, 2014).

However, trends in advising services started to reach beyond course selection facilitated solely by faculty (Williamson et al., 2014). In the 1970s, advising best practice began to see a shift to developmental advising, forging relationships between advisor and advisee as they discussed student goals and needs and shared problem-solving and decision-making responsibilities (Crookston, 1994). As Grites (2013) described developmental advising:

The developmental academic advisor gathers information to recognize where the student stands along the educational, career, and personal dimension of her or his life, discusses where the student plans to be, and assists the student in getting to that point as readily as possible. (p. 13)

In the early 2000s, centralized advising centers staffed by professional advisors became more common (Steingass & Sykes, 2008), and in contemporary practice, proactive advising took hold, whereby advisors consistently monitored advisee progress and actively sought out those feared to be at risk academically (Deil-Amen, 2011; Karp, 2011). This proactive model of advising acknowledged the need to, at times, relay information prescriptively as well as develop student independence and decision-making abilities (White & Schulenberg, 2012). However, while proactive advising practice might be preferred, unrealistic advisor caseloads rendered these methods difficult to institutionalize (NACADA, 2011). Factors outside the institution also influenced the development of advising practice.
External Impacts on the Community College Environment

Economic, political, and demographic factors beyond the institutional environment impact postsecondary institutional operations and outcomes. These influences shape enrollment trends, competition, operational finances, and student profiles. The following were the unique experiences and reactions of community colleges to these external impacts at the time of this study.

Enrollment Trends

Barr & Turner (2013) noted that postsecondary enrollments increased exponentially in the early part of the twenty-first century, particularly at open-access institutions. The Great Recession of 2008 caused substantial increases in unemployment, sending displaced workers to postsecondary institutions for retraining, often paid for with federal dollars (Barr & Turner, 2013). Concurrently, the U.S. government expanded the availability of Pell grants and allowed more students with limited financial resources to pursue higher education (Barr & Turner, 2013).

After the recession, the United States renewed its focus on the educational requirements of the emerging workforce to meet the needs of the evolving economy (Coley, 2000). Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2013) estimated that 65% of all jobs in the year 2020 would require some level of postsecondary education, with 30% of all job openings requiring at least an associate degree. Based on projected workforce needs and a steady decline in the nation’s comparative college achievement, President Obama (2015) announced his belief that community college should be free to all Americans. The poor economy, increased financial support for educational pursuits, and heightening workforce requirements sent unprecedented numbers of students to community colleges.
As the economy rebounded from the recession, community college enrollments began to decline (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). The economic recovery lowered unemployment rates and diminished the availability of federal retraining subsidies (State Higher Education Executive Officers [SHEEO], 2016), while a Republican majority in the House of Representatives planned cuts to Pell grant funding, a major source of financial support for low-income students (Kogan & Shapiro, 2016). Additionally, in spite of an increased projected need for postsecondary education, the aggregate number of high school graduates declined during this period (NCES, 2014). An improving economy and shrinking pool of traditional students reversed the trend of record community college enrollments.

Heightened Scrutiny

The national academic attainment agenda that emerged during the Obama administration highlighted and perhaps exacerbated the fact that community colleges garnered substantial attention and scrutiny (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, & Hwang, 2016). Recently, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE, 2017a) unveiled a new version of its College Scorecard, which allowed consumers to compare postsecondary institutions side by side based on a variety of factors, such as cost, graduation rate, and expected post-graduation salary. Furthermore, the performance measures of additional local institutions appeared to students and parents completing the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) if cost or completion rates were more favorable than at their selected institutions.

Although costs were often markedly lower at community colleges as compared to four-year postsecondary institutions at this time, measures of success were also lower (Bailey, 2016) as was these institutions’ level of prestige (Chen, 2015; Coley, 2000; Córdova, 2006). Only four percent of community college students completed an associate degree in two years, compared to
the 19% of students who earned bachelor’s degrees on time (Complete College America, 2014). There was also a lingering stigma that two-year institutions are less prestigious, rigorous, and valuable (Chen, 2015; Coley, 2000; Córdova, 2006). VanNoy and Jacobs (2012) found that employers had negative perceptions of associate degree holders as compared to potential employees with four-year degrees. These economic factors, the proliferation of comparative education data, and perceptions of institutional rigor influenced students’ college choices.

**Institutional Financial Composition**

Although state funding for higher education slowly improved along with the economic recovery following the recession of 2008 (SHEEO, 2016), it was at a lower rate than necessary to cover the increasing costs of operation (Wexler, 2016). In 2013, states spent twenty-eight percent less per student at public institutions of higher education than at the onset of the recession in 2008 (Oliff, Palacios, Johnson, & Leachman, 2013), and many economic analysts doubted a rebound of state appropriations to pre-2008 levels (Barr & Turner, 2013). In fact, though later figures demonstrated improvement, state funding in 2015 remained fifteen percent lower than at its peak (SHEEO, 2016). Meanwhile, federal subsidies for education meant to bolster economic recovery ended (SHEEO, 2016), and discussion of Pell reduction ensued (Kogan & Shapiro, 2016), which caused the overall proportion of governmental funding for college operations to decline. In keeping with the mission of access, community colleges historically maintained substantially lower costs of attendance than other postsecondary institutions (Provasnik & Planyt, 2008), which resulted in fewer tuition dollars available for operations (Ma & Baum, 2016). However, due to decreases in other aspects of financial composition, tuition began to comprise a greater amount of community college budgets (Desrochers & Hurlburt, 2016).
Student Demographics

There are many reasons students chose to attend community colleges at the time of this study. Students wanting career-specific education and training enrolled to gain practical experience in their area of interest combined with core academic courses to advance their educations and become employable at a higher level (Bailey, 2016; Coley, 2000; Hirschy et al., 2011). Other students were seeking career exploration opportunities. These individuals might have intended to complete a four-year degree but were undecided about future career aspirations and found that community college was an affordable way to explore various careers or educational paths (Chen, 2015). Still other students were academically underprepared for college and required access to the remedial educational services available at community colleges (Bailey, 2015; Bynon, 2015; Coley, 2000).

Students with demographic barriers to pursuing full-time enrollment at four-year institutions often saw community colleges as an accessible alternative (Bailey, 2016). These students might be first-generation (Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003), English language learners (Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, & Suarez-Orozco, 2011), low income (Alon, 2009), or nontraditionally aged (Coley, 2000). For students possessing one or more of these characteristics, the community college environment was appropriate until personal or financial circumstances changed, comfort in the educational arena grew, or they achieved their educational goals and found suitable employment. As Bailey (2016) described them, community colleges were “open access, and flexible, convenient colleges in reasonable proximity to a large majority of the population, including especially groups traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education” (p. 12). The growing need for college-educated students to fill positions in emerging industries (Coley, 2000) translated into increased aspirations for students who might not have
considered college previously. However, community college students were often underprepared for college level work (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005; Bidwell, 2014).

**Implications**

Ruchi (2014) stated, “it is appreciably cheaper to maintain existing customers than to attain new ones” (p. 629). This tenet held true for postsecondary institutions and the retention of students (Tinto, 2006). The combination of increased scrutiny (White, 2015), higher expectations (Kot, 2014), and economic concerns (Drake, 2011) caused the priority for many public, two-year colleges to evolve (Bailey, 2016). As Strayhorn (2015) stated, “the new or renewed focus on college student success is justified” (p. 56). As such, community colleges shifted their attention away from simply providing educational access to students to retaining them and ultimately seeing those students through to completion (Bailey, 2016; Engle & Tinto, 2008). The site for this study represented one such example of this change in focus.

**Site Description**

The institutions at the center of this study comprised a state-wide system of community colleges in a northeastern state of the country, which for this study will be called the Northeast Community College Consortium (NCCC). The NCCC served more than 24,000 students each year through certificate and associate degree programs focused on a variety of trade and technical areas, as well as transferable liberal studies (NCES, 2017). The NCCC also served as a major economic engine for the state. In addition to its students filling openings for skilled workers in virtually every business and industrial sector, the NCCC itself employed hundreds of full- and part-time staff and faculty, which made it one of the state’s largest employers (CareerOneStop, 2017). These community colleges raised the aspirations of their citizens and provided them with the opportunity to reach their fullest potential, which helped them to
contribute as much as possible to their families, communities, and the state (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015).

The early part of the twenty-first century bore witness to several shifts in the NCCC philosophy and structure. The years following the NCCC’s change from technical to community colleges were strong growth years during which enrollments increased exponentially (NCES, 2015). However, since 2015, the combination of a recovering economy, increased competition, and a shrinking population with fewer high school graduates reversed this growth trend. Additionally, system-level leadership dramatically changed, with a new NCCC president, a restructured executive staff, and the presidents of three of the seven colleges with less than five years in their roles. Amid all of these changes, the opportunity existed to reflect, reevaluate, and refresh the NCCC’s institutional and operational values and goals to better align with its organizational environment. As a result, the NCCC fine-tuned its focus from simply providing educational access to the masses to retaining the students it welcomed and ensuring their success.

**Statement of the Problem**

The diversity of experience (Engle & Tinto, 2008), preparation (Community College Survey of Student Engagement [CCSSE], 2016), and circumstances of its students (Bailey, 2015), as well as increased attention on and availability of data regarding student outcomes (USDOE, 2017a), placed community colleges in a unique and challenging position (Bailey et al., 2005). Issues of classroom management and teaching effectiveness were commonly and consistently addressed and researched at all educational levels (Dibapile, 2012). However, the obstacles community college students faced extended beyond classroom and programmatic concerns (Karp & Bork, 2012) and often could not be solved using college support services (Bailey et al., 2005; Holzer & Baum, 2017).
The complexities of student populations and institutional financial limitations caused community college administrators to consider what actions they could take to improve student outcomes (Hunter & White, 2004; Tinto, 2006). Potential approaches included clearing students’ educational paths by helping them navigate college policy and procedure (Strayhorn, 2015), connecting them in meaningful ways to other students and the institution early and often (Deil-Amen, 2011), reaching out when students are in academic trouble (He & Hutson, 2016), and acting as a sounding board for all manner of student concerns (Hester, 2008; Karp, 2011). Research suggested that advisors could help accomplish these interventions, but without proper advising services in place, researchers and practitioners believed students’ failure to achieve academic success would continue (Lowenstein, 2015; Tinto, 2012a; White, 2015).

Evidence showed that community college students fared poorly in academic achievement. Data from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (2015) indicated that although approximately three-quarters of all first-time postsecondary students returned to their institutions for their second year, that number was closer to one-half at public, two-year institutions. Degree completion figures were even more alarming: although nearly sixty percent of students entering four-year institutions in 2008 earned a bachelor’s degree by 2014, just over thirty percent of students entering two-year colleges in 2011 completed an associate degree by 2014 (NCES, 2015). To improve these outcomes, institutional scholars and administrators came to believe that two-year colleges should refocus their attention, transforming their traditional visions of merely providing access into a new paradigm of access, support, and ultimately, success (Bailey, 2016; Holzer & Baum, 2017).

Given that advising was a common form of support, it was important for advising practitioners and academic administrators to understand its impacts on student success (Pietras,
Prior advising research often explored the perceived satisfaction of students with their advising experience, generally measuring perceptions using quantitative techniques and attempting to correlate these satisfaction levels to other objective outcomes, such as grade point average (GPA) and retention (Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Kot, 2014; Pietras, 2010). As advising practice continued to evolve, research into the more qualitative aspects of advising emerged to better explain the characteristics of quality advising (Deil-Amen, 2011). Some of these studies sought to establish the qualities and behaviors inherent in advisors (Mead, 2012), while others examined student characteristics and beliefs, which often pointed to the importance of advising (Nielsen, 2015; Parsons, 2012). There was perceived value in continued institutional investment in advising efforts (White, 2015). To assess advising’s worth, Pietras (2010) suggests:

If institutions plan to continue advising programs, they should seek to substantiate the effectiveness. That may lead to restructuring the provision of advising services in an effective and efficient means that meets the needs of both the college and the student.

(p. v)

Much of the early research into advising focused on four-year, residential colleges and universities, which explored student perceptions of traditional, prescriptive advising applications (Smith, 2007). Contemporary research in the field suggested further study into a variety of higher education settings that investigated outcomes beyond satisfaction (Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Smith, 2007; Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorne, 2013). There remained a great deal to learn about advising and its influences on student success at community colleges (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005).
Purpose of the Study

In keeping with its new student success agenda, the NCCC planned to identify their most at-risk student populations and provide a self-contained model of advising to a reasonable number of students at each of its colleges (Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2011). In the fall of 2016, each newly hired professional program advisor served as the primary advisor to 75 incoming, at-risk students. The program advisors provided both prescriptive and developmental advising to their advisees using a proactive approach aimed at increasing student success. Each college also identified comparison cohorts, who exhibited the same risk factors and had access to non-mandatory, traditional advising services, which minimally consisted of prescriptive advising delivered via faculty-assigned advisors or in drop-in, centralized advising offices. The NCCC tracked both groups of students to determine course success and satisfactory academic progress, as well as fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall retention. As the initiative continued, colleges identified additional advised and comparison cohorts, and program advisors received assistance from peer mentors selected from first- and second-year student success program (SSP) participants. The NCCC hoped to find that this initiative improved student outcomes and could serve as a model for future advising services.

The goals of the SSP were numerous. First and foremost, the program provided additional, intensive advising services to the NCCC’s most at-risk student populations. Measuring academic outcomes for the groups served alongside their comparison cohorts was intended to determine whether or not targeted, proactive advising, in and of itself, could positively affect student persistence and success. Each college defined the students at risk within their student populations. As such, outcomes for different types of risk factors were measured.
The researcher hoped to gain an understanding of the impacts of different advising activities on student success for at-risk populations to inform future resource allocation to advising endeavors across the NCCC. The SSP served as a unique, system-wide initiative intended to help set the direction the NCCC would take to assure student success, and as a secondary consequence, bring additional cohesion to a system whose colleges worked rather independently at the time. The research conducted for this dissertation also expanded on existing research into advising, potentially informing future best practice beyond the NCCC.

The purpose of this collective case study was to examine whether advising promoted the success of students possessing identified risk factors by asking successful students to describe how and why their advising experiences might have influenced their academic accomplishments. SSP participants selected by program advisors to act as peer mentors demonstrated the ability to overcome these risks by returning for their second academic year. As such, this population of students served as ideal cases to examine. The study’s aim was to determine which aspects of advising that the SSP’s peer mentors believed contributed to overcoming obstacles and persisting in their academic pursuits. The findings will help the NCCC staff identify the types of advising efforts to continue, expand, and conclude. The immediate impact of this study might be to assist in establishing the future direction of advising support at the NCCC. Similar student issues existed for most community colleges, and even some four-year institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The results of this study might also inform advising best practices across the postsecondary landscape and have the potential to act as a springboard for further, similar research extending to different student populations at other institutions and in various regions nationwide, especially for colleges implementing new advising programs.
**Research Questions**

The overarching questions this study sought to answer are:

- How do community college peer mentors describe and understand their experiences with advising?
- How do community college peer mentors perceive that the assistance provided by advisors helped them develop academic and social connections with their colleges?

**Conceptual Framework**

The development of this investigation grew from an examination of personal and institutional interest, as well as relevant literature in the field of advising practice (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The researcher’s involvement in gathering data to report on grant-funded, system-wide initiatives often resulted in curiosity as to whether the program achieved its desired effects. The NCCC’s desire to act efficiently and promote the success of their students brought increasing relevance to this type of inquiry for future NCCC planning and program development.

This study paid particular attention to the practice of advising as a method for improving student outcomes (Lowenstein, 2015; McClellan, 2011; Strayhorn, 2015; White, 2015). The literature was teeming with quantitative analyses of university students’ satisfaction with their advising experiences (Barbuto, Story, Fritz, & Schinstock, 2011; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). Some of these studies compared measures of satisfaction to objective measures of student performance (Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Kot, 2014; Ryan, 2013; Smith, 2007; Young-Jones et al., 2013). Qualitative analysis of advising was also gaining traction, with research that examined advisor experiences or the behaviors and attitudes of students from particular demographic categories (Mead, 2012; Nielsen, 2015; Parsons, 2012). Previous studies spoke to the need for
further exploration of how advising impacts student success for community college students (Bahr, 2008; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Mertes, 2015).

The application of theory as a lens through which to investigate advising in this context provided a unique perspective by which to frame this study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). In writing the grant proposal seeking to fund the SSP, the NCCC emphasized program advisors’ use of proactive advising techniques. Therefore, the use of Varney’s (2013) proactive advising theory comprised one element of the theoretical framework employed. Also, given the evidence in the literature surrounding student persistence as reflecting the level of integration into the college environment, as well as the influence advising might have on fostering that integration, social and academic integration theories were integral to the discussion (Tinto, 1975). Directly applicable to the community college student, Deil-Amen (2011) blended these concepts into socio-academic integration theory and lent another theoretical facet to this study’s framework. The combination of proactive advising theory and socio-academic integration theory informed data collection and analysis as the study progressed.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

Certain assumptions, biases, and circumstances inherently exist within any study, leading to inevitable limitations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). While the researcher’s position within the NCCC afforded her access to the program advisors, their students, and a wealth of institutional information, that proximity potentially promoted or hindered honest conversation and possibly inserted personal bias into discussions and data interpretation. In focusing only on peer mentors participating in the SSP, the study also accepted the biases of the program advisors who selected them and overlooked the majority of SSP participants, many of whom could have lent valuable insight into both the successes and shortcomings of this advising program.
The timeframe of the study in relation to the program’s implementation cycle presented additional limitations. Program advisors were hired at the start of year one (fall of 2016) at approximately the same time the students serving as peer mentors matriculated. As such, training in proactive advising techniques was just beginning and might not have produced the same effect on these students as it could on participants in later program years. Finally, it may have been difficult for peer mentors to differentiate how the advising activities of their program advisors influenced their academic and social integration from those activities initiated by other college staff and faculty or from the mentors’ own intrinsic motivation (Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004).

The researcher acknowledged these limitations and aimed to mitigate them by clearly identifying the specific scope and intent of data collection, as well as maintaining the objectivity of findings and conclusions. The optimal sample size for this collective case study was six to ten peer mentors participating in the interview process. According to Yin (2003), such a size allows for the adequate support of findings. Yin (2003) also pointed to the use of propositions, or theories to be tested, to reasonably narrow the focus of inquiry. The researcher employed theoretical propositions related to the benefits of socio-academic integration and proactive advising to help achieve that focus (Deil-Amen, 2011; Barbuto et al., 2011). The study deductively and inductively analyzed collected data to discern the key themes study participants perceived as important (Patton, 2002; Thomas, 2006). This thematic analysis informed the study’s discussion and conclusions (Yin, 2003).

**Significance**

With limited control over the myriad academic and nonacademic challenges faced by its students and an increased concern for their success, the NCCC implemented a proactive approach to advising the students it considers most at risk. The NCCC secured private funding to
hire both program advisors and peer mentors tasked with proactively engaging with students exhibiting each college’s most troubling risk factors, from a lack of adequate academic preparation to the incidence of first-generation students. As the NCCC found and committed resources to this endeavor, the system shifted its vision to focus on not only providing access but also promoting student success. This study explored how the NCCC’s recent proactive advising initiative influenced the socio-academic integration of at-risk students across its system of colleges.

If institutional leaders plan to continue advising programs, they should seek to substantiate the effectiveness. Doing so could lead to restructuring the provision of advising services in an effective and efficient means that meets the needs of both the college and the student. With increasingly limited resources, brought about by changes to state funding patterns (SHEEO, 2016), a commitment to holding tuition steady (Daggett, 2015), and increasing costs of operations (Oliff et al., 2013), it was important for institutional decision-makers to responsibly allocate available money to programs that supported the NCCC’s student success agenda and demonstrated positive results (EAB, 2014).

Beyond two-year public institutions, this study might be relevant to other postsecondary institutions initiating or assessing similar advising programs. By examining the advising experiences of students from multiple institutions, this study might contribute to the wealth of research into advising theory, and could inform future best practices. It might also serve as the impetus for further study of other risk factors, institutions, systems, and states.

**Definition of Terms**

At-risk student: A student who met the criteria to receive advising from a program advisor as set by the college of attendance, including students requiring remedial coursework, undecided
students, students accepted after May 1 of the enrollment year, veterans, students over the age of 25 at first enrollment, and fully online students (NCCC definition). The student may or may not receive targeted, proactive advising services.

*Comparison cohort:* The group of at-risk students selected for tracking who did not receive advising services provided by the Student Success Program.

*Developmental advising:* Creamer and Creamer (1994) explained developmental advising as follows:

> The use of interactive teaching, counseling, and administrative strategies to assist students to achieve specific learning, developmental, career, and life goals. These goals are set by students in partnership with advisors and are used to guide all interactions between advisor and student. (p. 19)

*English language learners:* An active learner of the English language who might benefit from various types of language support programs (National Council for Teachers of English, 2008).

*First-generation student:* “students whose parents may have some college, postsecondary certificates, or associate’s degrees, but not bachelor’s degrees” (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

*Nontraditionally aged student:* A student over the age of 24 at time of first enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993).

*Northeast Community College System (NCCC):* Pseudonym given to the seven two-year, public institutions of higher education, located in the Northeast region of the United States comprising the site for this study.

*Peer mentor:* At-risk student served by a program advisor in year one of the Student Success Program, who was selected by the program advisor to assist with program activities in year two.
Prescriptive advising: A relationship based on the authority of the advisor, to whom students come with problems and are prescribed solutions (Crookston, 1994).

Proactive advising: “Intentional contact with students with the goal of developing a caring and beneficial relationship that leads to increased academic motivation and persistence” (Varney, 2016, para. 3).

Program advisor: Professional academic advisor hired by the NCCC to provide proactive advising services to a particular cohort of at-risk students each year for the three years of the initiative.

Satisfactory academic progress: The requisite combination of grade point average and course completion rate to remain in good academic standing as defined by each college.

Self-contained advising: “Advising for all students from the point of enrollment to the point of departure is done by staff in a centralized unit” (Gordon et al., 2011, p. 8).

Split advising: “A specific group(s) of students . . . are advised in an advising office. All other students are assigned to academic units or faculty advisors” (Gordon et al., 2011, p.7).

Student Success Program (SSP): Privately funded initiative that placed professional advisors on each campus of the NCCC to provide proactive advising services to select cohorts of at-risk students each year for three years. The SSP incorporated the use of peer mentors (pulled from the ranks of year one participants) in year two to assist advisors with program activities.

Successful course completion: Earning full credit with a grade of C or better in a college level or remedial course (NCCC definition).

Total intake advising: Gordon et al. (2011) described this form of advising as follows:

Staff members of an administrative unit are responsible for advising all students for a specified period of time or until some specific requirements have been met. After meeting
these requirements, students are assigned to an academic subunit or member of the instructional faculty for advising. (p. 7)

**Conclusion**

The national conversation around community colleges early in the twenty-first century presented these institutions with both opportunities and challenges (Obama, 2015). The leadership of the NCCC acknowledged its integral role in meeting the state’s emerging workforce needs, and at the same time, understood what it could and could not control. Growing competition (Alon, 2009), increased scrutiny (Drake, 2011; Kot, 2014), underprepared students (Bailey et al., 2005; Hollis, 2009), inconsistent state support (SHEEO, 2016), and other factors threatened the NCCC’s stability. However, the opportunity existed to vastly improve student outcomes, from successful course completion to persistence, continuing through graduation. Community college students often led complicated lives (Cook, 2009), and institutions that succeeded in making the college experience as simple as possible helped provide students with safe learning environments in which to pursue their educational goals (Deil-Amen, 2011; Engstrom & Tinto, 2010; Hollis, 2009). The NCCC believed that program advisors could fill a need for more personalized, proactive advising services for students, leading to their success.

This study introduced several issues surrounding community college student success, discussing the need for, purpose, and significance of the study for the NCCC and beyond. Chapter one delineated the questions the study seeks to answer and provided definitions of terminology both commonly used in the field and specific to the study. Chapter two examines the existing literature on the topic of advising, particularly as it relates to student success. Chapter three outlines the methods proposed to gather and analyze the data used in the study’s examination of the SSP. Chapter four of the study describes the results of this analysis, and
chapter five summarizes the study’s findings and conclusions. A bibliography and appendices follow these conclusions.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

At the start of the twenty-first century, public institutions of higher education bore pressure from many forces: insufficient state support (State Higher Education Executive Officers [SHEEO], 2016), increased governmental and consumer scrutiny (Drake, 2011; Kot, 2014; Shapiro et al., 2016; United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2017a; White, 2015), and a wide gap between high school preparation and college readiness (Sparks & Malkus, 2013), to name a few. Community colleges in particular felt the burden as they admitted ever larger numbers of underprepared, over-obligated students (Coley, 2000; Karp, 2011) into classes taught primarily by adjunct faculty (Provasnik & Planty, 2008), and were held increasingly accountable for student success (Bailey et al., 2005; Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCSSE], 2016; Tinto, 2015). One of the few strategies these institutions had at their disposal to promote their students’ success was advising (White, 2015). In fact, O’Banion (2012) emphasized the critical nature of advising in the community college setting as follows: “Academic advising is the second-most important function in the community college. If it is not conducted with the utmost efficiency and effectiveness, the most important function— instruction—will fail to ensure that students navigate the curriculum to completion” (p. 43). The importance of delivering efficient and effective advising to affect student success provided impetus for the examination of advising in practice (Education Advisory Board [EAB], 2014; Pietras, 2010), from the implementation of advising programs through measuring student outcomes (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Barbuto et al., 2011).

This literature review provides an overview of several relevant books, articles, and studies on advising development and practice. First is a description of the review typology,
establishing the appropriate approach for this study and presenting the process of selection and rejection of resources. A discussion follows of the history of advising theory and the methodologies that were in use and evolving at the time of the study, describing the contemporary internal and external environmental factors that intensified the need for high-quality advising. The review continues with highlights of the research on common characteristics of community college students that make these students particularly vulnerable to academic jeopardy. Next are a review and analysis of the conclusions of advising research to date. Finally, the review describes the conceptual framework of the study as related to the literature and poses questions future research may answer to best guide institutions in their advising efforts moving forward.

**Review Typology**

The initial scan of the literature on advising for this review consisted of keyword and phrase searches within several online databases of scholarly materials, including EBSCOhost, ERIC, as well as in the Google Scholar search engine. Given that research questions required further development, these preliminary searches began with the broad topic of *advising* to uncover foundational materials helping to frame the subject and trace its history. Focusing at first on recent books provided relevant background information on the origins and development of advising over time and allowed the researcher to establish contemporary priorities within the field to fine-tune research questions and proceed with more narrowly defined search parameters.

This preliminary material made it clear that, due to resource constraints at community colleges, contemporary advising practice sought primarily to serve at-risk student populations. Therefore, the second pass at the literature involved searches around advising including the terms *at-risk, first-generation, and underprepared*. To further focus the review, additional searches
included the phrase *community college*. The researcher selected peer-reviewed studies from within the most recent decade based on relevance to the topic. To augment the review, an evaluation of the references cited commonly in the selected literature resulted in another set of studies and reports. These sources served to establish additional support for conclusions as well as baseline statistical data.

Petticrew’s (2001) description of systematic literature review indicated the requirement for a specific research question to help determine what literature to include or exclude. Based on this depiction, the review grew to meet this requirement as the literature helped the topic and its questions to emerge. Beyond the systematic typology necessary to do justice to this complex topic, this review synthesized the literature in an integrative manner to advance knowledge of the topic of advising at-risk students in community colleges (Torraco, 2005).

**Origins of Academic Advising**

For as long as institutions of higher education provided curricular choices, most students required academic advising (Cook, 2009; White, 2015). In its simplest form, academic advising entailed outlining what courses a student needed to take to continue to fulfill degree or certificate requirements from one academic term to the next until the student graduated (Lowenstein, 2005). Gordon et al. (2011) referred to this as prescriptive advising, whereby the advisor possessed the requisite information to impart to the advisee in a very unidirectional manner. In many instances, a full-time faculty member in the student’s discipline acted as the student’s advisor to facilitate this task, and faculty tended to engage with advisees upon student request, putting the burden on the student to seek help (Longwell-Grice, 2008; Lowenstein, 2005). Often, students saw little need to consult with an advisor, as they could determine which courses to take by consulting the institution’s catalog (Smith & Allen, 2014). Private four-year institutions often had narrow
programmatic options, sufficient time and room in the curriculum for exploration, and students from educationally savvy families (Cook, 2009). Cook (2009) asserted that for students attending these types of institutions, this model of advising worked quite well.

However, the practice of advising became more complicated when considering the circumstances faced by students at many two-year, public institutions of higher education (Bailey et al., 2005; Hirschy et al., 2011). As more options became available to students due to the addition of liberal arts and other transferable degrees to an already broad scope of technical programs, and a wider variety of students began to pursue higher education through community colleges, the more difficult navigating course selection became (Grites, 2013; White, 2015). Grites (2013) asserted that heightened aspirations led to an increase in first-generation and academically underprepared students attending college. Studies showed that students who were the first in their families to enroll in higher education lacked the underlying support provided by a parent who understood the systems and vocabulary of academia (Bailey, 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Bailey (2015) noted that students who entered college with academic deficiencies requiring that they complete remedial coursework before taking college-level courses presented another obstacle, as did lacking a clear sense of academic direction. Based on their role of providing widespread access to higher education, community colleges admitted disproportionately higher numbers of underprepared students than four-year institutions (Bailey, 2015; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010). Determining how to overcome these difficulties was often overwhelming for students, and the logical person to whom they turned was an advisor.

In the 1970s and 1980s, realizing that the prescriptive model of advising no longer sufficed for the growing number of postsecondary options and changing demographics of
college-going students, practitioners in the field of advising responded to become more learning centered (Grites, 2013; Reynolds, 2013). Not only did students need assistance picking classes but they also needed to understand institutional policy and language (Strayhorn, 2015). For these reasons, advising practice grew more developmental, using a shared approach to learning, much like a course in itself (White & Schulenburg, 2012). Crookston (1994) is often cited as the authority on developmental advising, based in part on a conference speech he delivered outlining the concept in 1970, in which he described advising as teaching. The notion of advising as an educational endeavor continued into recent times in the work of Lowenstein (2005), McClellan (2011), Smith and Allen (2014), and White and Schulenberg (2012). As such, it was logical that academic advising activities often fell into the responsibilities carried out by faculty (Habley, 1993). However, acknowledging the necessity of advising and growing evidence of its role in retaining students, advising became a more widely distributed endeavor, both in who performed advising activities and what those activities entailed (Williamson et al., 2014).

**External Environmental Factors Impacting Institutions of Higher Education**

The changing environment outside postsecondary institutions also contributed in part to the evolution of advising practice. Examining the effects of the contemporary external environment on both the institutions and students comprising the higher education sector demonstrated why advising emerged as a priority as well as the direction advising efforts followed (Steingass & Sykes, 2008). The volatile national economy, changing job market, increasing academic aspirations, growing insistence on accountability and transparency, diminished state support, and rising costs all affected institutional operations (Obama, 2009; SHEEO, 2016; White, 2015). Similarly, economic concerns, career prospects, academic preparation, and the availability of comparative higher education information for consumers led
students to make particular educational choices (Coley, 2000; Kuh, 2007). For many students, community colleges offered low-cost, accessible, career-specific educational opportunities (Hirschy et al., 2011; Pascarella et al., 2003). Not only was it important for these institutions to attract greater numbers of students, community colleges needed to provide sufficient supports to retain those students until they reached their educational goals (Bailey, 2016; Córdova, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ryan, 2013).

The contemporary economic environment demanded higher educational aspirations for individuals to remain employable (Coley, 2000; Kuh, 2007; Obama, 2009) as low-skill jobs that offered a living wage began to disappear (Schwartz, 2016). In their place were growing numbers of highly technical positions requiring some level of higher education, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Carnevale et al., 2013). Carnevale et al. (2013) estimated that 65% of all jobs in the year 2020 would require some level of postsecondary education, 30% of which needed at least an associate degree. The emerging economy mandated that more people than ever before pursued education and training beyond high school (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

The growing need for students to pursue a higher education introduced its own challenges (Coley, 2000). As more students pursued a college education, competition for admission heightened (Alon, 2009). Alon (2009) noted that this trend was particularly true for the most selective institutions, to which many students aspired and for which they prepared throughout high school. While by comparison, four-year postsecondary institutions held steady in enrollments, community colleges experienced a steady increase in student enrollment in the early 2000s, indicating an overall rise in academic aspirations with limited room in the traditional pathway (NCES, 2013). Alon (2014) claimed the class divide was increasingly evident in the
examination of exclusive colleges and universities, as these aspirations were encouraged later on and less often for first-generation and low-income students. Often, these students were on the other end of the achievement spectrum, lacking the systemic understanding, financial resources and academic preparation necessary to pursue top schools (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Due to these circumstances, more students turned toward open access, lower-cost public institutions (Capt, 2013). The influences of increasing enrollment (NCES, 2013), incoming students in high-risk demographic categories (Coley, 2000; Heisserer & Parette, 2002), more intense scrutiny on performance (Kot, 2014), and new financial realities (SHEEO, 2016) led many community colleges to turn their attention to promoting student success (Bailey, 2015; Holzer & Baum, 2017; Strayhorn, 2015).

With expectations increasing for students, so too did they increase for institutions (Hunter & White, 2004; Steingass & Sykes, 2008). Both the government and increasingly aware consumers held colleges and universities to rigorous standards of accountability and performance (Drake, 2011; Kot, 2014; White, 2015). Private rankings on numerous quality standards, from academic rigor to cafeteria food, proliferated in the media (Shapiro, 2016). To make measures more transparent, the White House established the College Scorecard (USDOE, 2017a), which compared factors such as cost, retention, and completion rates. No longer sufficient to simply admit students, the expectation was that institutions shepherd as many of their students as possible to a degree, or colleges and universities risked unfavorable ratings or bad publicity (Drake, 2011; Holzer & Baum, 2017).

Public perception of institutional reputation became increasingly important as the budgetary model for publicly-funded colleges and universities continued to shift away from a reliance on state appropriations to the ability to self-sustain (Daggett, 2015; Hollis, 2009; Hunter
According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2013), state support for public institutions of higher education dropped in the early part of the twenty-first century and again plummeted after the Great Recession of 2008. Although increases followed, the proportion of state funding as a percentage of institutional budgets was never fully restored. Many public colleges and universities subsisted primarily on the money they generated through tuition, grant-seeking, and fundraising (SHEEO, 2016). Exacerbated by these decreases in state funding, the cost of college continued to grow disproportionately (NCES, 2014a).

The State of Regional Community Colleges

The site at the heart of this dissertation experienced the effects of all of these external factors among its public, two-year institutions of higher education. Transitioning from technical institutions to community colleges provided NCCC’s students the opportunity to learn a trade as well as build a foundation for transfer to four-year institutions. This transformation also marked major milestones for the NCCC as it changed from a collection of vocational-technical institutes to technical colleges to community colleges. Though faculty who oversaw technical programs feared the extinction of career programming as a result of this metamorphosis, the NCCC as a whole expanded its offerings to a new sector of the market and yielded an unprecedented number of new students early in the twenty-first century in both its technical and liberal studies programs. However, this rapid influx of students introduced many new and unforeseen student characteristics requiring attention.

Common Characteristics of Community College Students

As previously mentioned, the increasing expectation that students achieve some level of post-high-school education caused a ripple effect throughout higher educational institutions as their administrations faced heightened scrutiny and pressure (Kot, 2014; White, 2015). As Drake
(2011) said, “we have long since left in the dust the notion that simply opening our doors to students is enough, that once here, they can negotiate their own way through our often byzantine, labyrinthine curriculum, processes, and hallowed halls” (p. 9). Community colleges found themselves in the unique position of providing access to many of the most challenging populations of students, due to their open access (Alon, 2009; Bailey, 2016), low cost (Alon, 2009; Capt, 2013), and convenience (Bailey, 2016). Some of these populations included students not adequately academically prepared for the rigor of college-level coursework (Hollis, 2009), unfamiliar with the policies and processes of the higher education environment (Pascarella et al., 2003), of a non-traditional age (Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012), low-income (Alon, 2009; Nielsen, 2015), or not certain about their educational goals (Steingass & Sykes, 2008). The following are some of the most prevalent issues exhibited by community college students today.

**Underprepared Students**

Adequate academic preparation of incoming college students is of great concern to postsecondary institutions, both about the abilities of students to perform college-level work and in the findings of studies related to students entering at an academic deficit (CCSSE, 2016; Hollis, 2009; Melzer & Grant, 2016). Many recent studies showed that students who begin their college experience requiring remediation never achieved their academic goals (Bailey, 2009; CCSSE, 2016; Engstrom & Tinto, 2010; Hollis, 2009; Melzer & Grant, 2016). Bailey (2009) stated that “students who enroll in remediation are less likely to complete degrees or transfer than non-development students” (p. 15). The need for remediation, or preliminary coursework required for entering college students before taking college level courses, is prevalent, especially at noncompetitive, two-year, public institutions (Bailey, 2009; Community College Research Center (CCRC), 2014; Sparks & Malkus, 2013). Sparks & Malkus (2013) asserted that the needs
of remedial students “can be addressed through administrative support for increased emphasis on career counseling and greater social and emotional supports through mentoring programs” (p. 102). Researchers also recommended ways to integrate remedial coursework into college level courses or create opportunities for students to catch up in summer courses before enrolling in their first fall semester (Hollis, 2009; Sparks & Malkus, 2013).

**Low-income Students**

The literature often mentioned a connection between students’ socioeconomic status and a lack of preparation for college-level work. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) noted that students from low-income families face several barriers to academic success, and perhaps the most influential of these was the likelihood of these students beginning their higher educational pursuits academically underprepared. While the national agenda promoting inclusiveness and access to higher educational opportunities for all who desired it grew (Ma & Baum, 2016; Obama, 2015), so did concerns about providing adequate supports to the influx of students (Bailey et al., 2005; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Holzer & Baum, 2017; Tinto, 2014). Alon’s (2009) quantitative analysis of enrollment trends noted the inverse relationship between institutional competition and the admission of low-income students, which drove many more of these students to open-access, low-cost community colleges. Greater numbers of underprepared, low-income students required academic and financial support. However, as Bailey (2016) astutely stated, “Despite the substantial needs of their student populations, community colleges are given comparatively fewer resources” (p. 13). Pressure to serve low-income students, with their many disadvantages, caused researchers to focus on this population.

Several quantitative studies exist that explored the impacts of low socioeconomic status on college students, as do a handful of qualitative inquiries. Hu (2010) examined the quantitative
survey data from 832 low-income, four-year college students participating in a scholarship program to determine their levels of social and academic engagement and the relationship between engagement and measures of student success. His research kept separate these two aspects of engagement, finding a positive relationship between social integration and persistence, but that unless high academic engagement accompanied high social integration, the intensity of academic engagement caused students to burn out. In another quantitative study, Evans, Kearney, Perry, and Sullivan (2017) examined the outcomes of 94 low-income students attending a community college in the Southern United States randomly selected to participate in a program in which they received intensive case management from trained social workers outside the institution to navigate both academic and non-academic obstacles. They compared several measures of success for this group as compared to a group receiving only financial assistance, as well as another group receiving standard advising through the college. Findings demonstrated significantly better persistence and completion rates for females receiving the external intervention. Evans et al. noted concerns about replicability. Qualitatively, studies on low-income postsecondary students often incorporated other risk factors. These include Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008), who explored the help-seeking tendencies of first-generation, working class, male students, and Nielsen (2015), who studied the educational aspirations of low-income, minority women.

First-generation Students

Upon entering their chosen postsecondary institution, the experience of the first-generation college student is akin to traveling to a new country with no GPS, knowing nothing of the country’s language and no one who lives there. Terms such as add/drop, withdrawal, FAFSA, book voucher, probation, and suspension are foreign concepts (Strayhorn, 2015). The increasing
number of first-generation students attending college makes this population of particular interest to many researchers, including the scholars that follow.

Quantitative studies exploring the advising of first-generation students include the analysis of advising frequency as compared to retention and the measurement of academic outcomes for first-generation versus non-first-generation students. Swecker, Fifolt, and Searby (2013) quantitatively assessed the relationship between the number of advising meetings and the retention of first-generation university students, recommending standards for the types and frequency of advising interventions. They asserted that “policymakers may also benefit from a qualitative analysis that provides explanatory data regarding retention of first-generation students” (p. 50). These researchers concluded that institutions might capitalize on efforts to retain students by connecting first-generation students with available and necessary resources aimed at helping them persist (Swecker et al., 2013). In their quantitative study measuring the academic outcomes of first-generation students as compared to others attending fifteen different four-year institutions, Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini (2004) noted that first-generation college students “may be less prepared . . . to make the kinds of informed choices about institutions and involvements during college that potentially maximize educational progress and benefits” (p. 277). They concluded that community colleges might provide an environment more responsive to the needs of first-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2003).

Qualitative studies of advising’s influences on first-generation students focus on both student and advisor perceptions. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) qualitatively examined the experiences of first-generation males entering college who expressed hesitation to approach faculty outside of their classrooms to ask general questions. Mead (2012) interviewed several advisors of first-generation students who themselves were first-generation students. The
advisors interviewed indicated the need for personalized advising for first-generation students, but acknowledged the enormity of resources this would require (Mead, 2012). As Mead concluded, “peer mentoring programs might be a viable alternative that would provide first-generation college students with ample support from their more experienced peers, while also allowing them advice and assistance from an academic advisor when necessary and appropriate” (p. 167). Findings in both of these qualitative studies focused on nonacademic issues and indicated the need for additional, nonacademic supports over assistance with course selection or standard advising offerings.

**Unique Student Characteristics**

Beyond academic preparation, socioeconomic status, and familial experience with higher education, many additional student factors often predict difficulty when it comes to postsecondary achievement. In one study, Nakajima, Dembo, and Mossler (2012) established that traditionally aged students, receipt of financial aid, attempting more credits, and earning a higher cumulative GPA all predicted greater academic success. The converse of these factors, in addition to off-campus work, continued to forecast academic trouble (Dickey, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nakajima et al., 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004). Though receipt of financial aid was a positive factor, academic jeopardy often resulted for students who were eligible but who did not pursue aid (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Nielsen, 2015). Hatch and Garcia (2017) found evidence that students with unclear academic goals upon entry into postsecondary education were similarly at risk. Though females surpassed males in postsecondary participation, their gender still places them at greater risk of academic difficulty (Nielsen, 2015; Parsons, 2012). Additionally, online students required special attention, particularly if facing any of the aforementioned characteristics placing them at risk (Nolan,
2013). The literature calls for further research to establish appropriate advising approaches for these special populations of students (Bahr, 2008; Hatch & Garcia, 2017). Consideration of the qualities possessed by every student is critical in the development of adequate advising practice.

**Contemporary Advising Theory and Practice**

Aside from the quality and scope of academic offerings, providing adequate support to students in the form of academic advising comprised one of the few services a college or university could impact directly (King, 1993; Lowenstein, 2015; White, 2015). Contemporary advising practitioners recognized that a one-size-fits-all approach did not meet the needs of today’s students, particularly the wide variety of students found at public institutions (Schreiner, 2013). Therefore, research examining emerging theory on what works in advising practice today was critical to postsecondary institutions (Burton, 2016).

In some cases, students successfully self-advised to completion (Smith & Allen, 2014). For them, the intrusion of mandatory orientations, advisor meetings, and course pre-approval were often unwelcome barriers (Alexitch, 2002). Other students required a wide array of advising approaches, from prescriptive course selection to developmental advising on academic policy and process (Cook, 2009). Often, students did not prioritize or seek advising, and as such, those who needed advice often dropped out (Alexitch, 2002). It was for these students that the concept of proactive or intrusive advising emerged (Glennen, 1976; Karp, 2011). Not only did this form of advising merge prescriptive and developmental advising, it actively identified and sought out at-risk students before academic issues, such as lack of attendance or poor class performance, became insurmountable (He & Hutson, 2016; Heisserer & Parette, 2002).

Contemporary advising practice also incorporated methods and theories from disciplines outside of education. Given the intensity of this form of advising, reliance on faculty advisors
was often insufficient and therefore led to the need for professional advising staff (King, 1993; Tinto, 2012b). Many advisors were trained as counselors to recognize nonacademic concerns and provide appropriate referrals (Cook, 2009; Glennen, 1976). Barbuto et al. (2011) applied theories of full-range leadership to advising efforts, finding that certain elements of both transactional (prescriptive) and transformational (developmental) behavior exhibited by advisors led to positive student perceptions. Studies by Deil-Amen (2016), Mead (2012), Mertes (2015), Nakajima et al. (2012), and Parsons (2012) also placed a great deal of emphasis on advising’s role in establishing student connections: relationships between faculty and student, or the social and/or academic integration of the student into the institution. Each of these theoretical frames provided a different lens through which to examine proactive advising’s influences.

While early advising endeavors relied on face-to-face meetings, technology introduced many other options for advisors to connect with their students, and for advisees to seek out assistance. For example, college websites provided substantial information to students, from course offerings and program requirements to resource referrals (Gaines, 2014; Nolan, 2013). Advisors could readily view student progress and e-mail or text advisees who appeared to be struggling (Waldner, McDaniel, & Widener, 2011). Online chat and tutoring services allowed students to receive assistance virtually, dramatically increasing accessibility (Britto & Rush, 2013). This new era of advising continued to develop, with best practices evolving and the extent of its effectiveness undetermined, indicating the need for additional inquiry.

Progression of Advising Research

Academic advising research followed a progression much like that experienced by advising itself. In its earliest application, when advising was predominantly prescriptive and faculty directed, studies on the subject revolved around quantitative inquiry of student
satisfaction through the use of surveys, similar to those used to evaluate faculty performance in the classroom (Hester, 2008; Kim & Feldman, 2011; Pietras, 2010). As advising started to incorporate developmental approaches, research began to marry the subjective notion of satisfaction with objective measures, such as GPA, course success, retention, and degree completion, seeking relationships between student perceptions of advising and student performance (Young-Jones et al., 2013).

When advising evolved from mostly faculty-led approaches to include professional advising, research turned to new forms of inquiry, comparing the results of faculty to professional advising and assessing the operations of professional advising offices (Powers, Carlstrom, & Hughey, 2014; Williamson et al., 2014). As proactive advising practices emerged, studies began to consider whether more advising meetings begat improved student outcomes (Hester, 2008; Swecker et al., 2013). Early on in advising’s evolution, a heavily quantitative focus on four-year institutions was predominant (Hester, 2008). More recently, however, a limited number of qualitative and mixed methods studies appeared in the literature, along with studies particular to the community college setting, demonstrating relatively new angles on research, potentially leading to a richer understanding of advising practice within public, two-year institutions (Deil-Amen, 2011).

**Analyses of Student Satisfaction**

Mirroring the simple origins of advising practice, advising research began primarily with basic surveys of student satisfaction with their advising experiences (Hester, 2008; Pietras, 2010). Similar to student course evaluations, most surveys measured subjective perceptions with Likert scales, culminating in quantitative reports without generalizable conclusions (Kim & Feldman, 2011; McFarlane, 2013). Infusing advising practice with the tenets of transformative
leadership theory, Barbuto et al. (2011) focused their attention on faculty training. However, their research did not evaluate outcomes of advising interventions beyond student perceptions, leaving room for additional study.

In their 2006 study, Reason et al. analyzed the results of nearly 6,700 first-year students and more than 5,000 full-time faculty feedback on the National Survey of Student Engagement from among 30 four-year colleges and universities to establish what factors contributed positively to perceptions of the college experience and increases in “academic competence,” an important ingredient in student persistence (p. 166). Their findings indicated a clear relationship between perceptions of institutional support and variety of engagement activities and experiences, particularly in a student’s first year of college. The study also demonstrated the complexity of the organizational dynamics and the need for institutions to consider the interrelation of multiple conditions affecting their environments that contribute to student perceptions (Reason et al., 2006).

Correlation to Student Success. Many quantitative studies moved beyond subjective measures and attempted to correlate advising interventions or satisfaction to truly objective factors, such as course completion, GPA, and persistence (Pietras, 2010). Analyzing the first-year GPA and second-year retention of first-time, full-time freshmen at a large, public research institution, Kot (2014) compared the GPAs of students who did and did not participate in centralized advising services to discover that students who received advising earned significantly higher GPAs. Fowler and Boylan (2010) compared course success and GPAs for underprepared students who either received structured advising or not at a public, two-year institution in the southern United States. Their findings supported the benefits of mandatory orientations, first-year experience courses, limited course loads, and blended advising models. The authors
suggested conducting additional research at other two-year institutions, on larger, random samples of students, to establish more clearly which aspects of advising contribute directly to improved success.

Ryan (2013) sought to establish that proactive faculty advising produces improvements in GPA and retention within a community college environment, again tracking objective measures for proactively advised students. However, Ryan’s analysis of student satisfaction did not include collection or analysis of data regarding the students not advised in this manner. Ryan’s study added to the research of Smith (2007), who earlier conducted a similar study at a two-year private college. The findings of both studies showed that students who experienced intrusive advising achieved higher GPAs and persisted at a higher rate than their peers who did not receive proactive advising. Smith (2007) noted that the prevalent literature focused on four-year residential institutions, indicating a need for research on advising at nontraditional, two-year institutions. He proposed the idea of quasi-experimental research comparing students served by proactive interventions versus control groups receiving traditional advising.

Young-Jones et al. (2013) attempted to correlate certain aspects of university advising to the factors’ influence on GPA. Their study compared student surveys regarding impressions of several expected advising outcomes to GPA. The researchers uncovered a correlation between high self-perceptions of student study skills and self-efficacy and increases in GPA. The authors recommended an assessment of advising methods beyond student satisfaction, calling for deeper, longitudinal studies of advising expectations and impacts.

Contrary to the conclusions of many other advising studies, Pietras’ (2010) research into perceived student satisfaction with advising claimed that increases in satisfaction scores bore no relationship to improvements in GPA or student retention. With research completed at different
locations across the country (and with different demographics), the study’s findings led Pietras to question whether institution type, size, geography, or other factors impact the success or failure of advising initiatives, potentially necessitating further research addressing these considerations. Doing so could result in establishing generalizable conclusions around advising in different settings and for different populations of students.

Many studies of advising effectiveness focused on characteristics that researchers claimed placed particular students at a disadvantage. Students often categorized as at risk include first-generation students and those underprepared for college-level academic work. With limited budgets, many postsecondary institutions target these populations for additional support, believing it will provide help where most needed (He & Hutson, 2016; Heisserer & Parette, 2002). In their analysis of National Center for Education Statistics data, Engle and Tinto (2008) attempted to explain why low-income, first-generation, and minority students access higher education and persist at lower levels than students without these traits. Similarly, the CCSSE (2016) asserted that readiness for college was a major contributor to successful college completion, and promoted advising as a mechanism to steer underprepared students around the barriers they face. In their longitudinal study of remedial course-taking patterns, Sparks and Malkus (2013) found that the need for remediation was far more prevalent in two-year, public institutions than any other segment of higher education. While measures of remedial course-taking underestimate this need, approximately sixty-eight percent of community college students require remediation as compared to forty percent at public four-year institutions (CCRC, 2014). Hollis (2009) recognized that advisors are best positioned to assist these developmentally underprepared students.
Alternative Assessments

The advent of professional advising offices triggered new types of research. Ryan (2013) and Smith (2007) studied institutions that trained faculty in intrusive advising methods. However, for many institutions, proactive advising practice required more attention than traditional faculty advisors could provide (Smith, 2007). As such, Kot (2014), Fowler and Boylan (2010), Karp (2011), and Steingass and Sykes (2008) promoted the concept of centralized, professional advising. To end the debate over faculty versus centralized advising, Williamson et al. (2011) claimed advising to be everyone’s concern.

Recent studies also included counts of advising meetings to identify the optimal number. Smith and Allen (2014) examined outcomes for 22,000 students across nine institutions and found three meetings per year were the most effective. Swecker et al. (2013) tracked the number of face-to-face meetings of first-generation students to compare to persistence data, finding that numbers of in-person meetings per year had positive impacts that increased with frequency to a maximum of seven. Combining the subjective with the objective, Hester (2008) found that a greater number of advising meetings correlated to higher satisfaction, but not conclusively to higher GPA. It is unclear from these studies whether a mandated number of meetings or simple availability of advising created beneficial effects, suggesting that more research on the influence of this factor is necessary.

Several research studies examined advising through unique theoretical lenses. In their 2014 survey, Powers et al. inquired whether advisors developed student learning outcomes (SLO) for advising. Other studies exploring advising SLO included McClellan (2011), Smith and Allen (2014), and White and Schulenberg (2012), who encouraged the development and use of SLO and related learning theories in advising practice. These scholars also promoted additional
empirical research to assess not only student satisfaction but the effectiveness of advising as learning (McClellan, 2011). Utilizing Bean and Metzner’s (1985) theory of nontraditional student attrition, Dickey (2014) sought to establish whether proactive advising influenced the retention of probationary students. In their 2011 study, Erlich & Russ-Eft applied social cognitive theory to determine quantitatively whether academic advising increased student self-efficacy. These studies demonstrate the variety of ways to explore advising and the multitude of advising approaches that exist.

**Limited Qualitative and Mixed Methods Analyses**

Compared to the wealth of quantitative studies related to advising practice, there is a noticeable lack of research focused on the qualitative analysis of the subject (Mertes, 2015). One potential explanation is the desire to quantify satisfaction and success, either to justify the expense of professional advisors or to emphasize how important the activity is to faculty advisors (Pietras, 2010). However, researchers and practitioners cannot identify the qualities inherent in effective advising without examining the attitudes and behaviors of those engaged in the advising process, both advisors and students (Pascarella, 2006). As such, additional qualitative research may serve to further this understanding (Hunter & White, 2004).

In one qualitative study, Mead (2012) interviewed ten professional advisors (who were first-generation college students themselves), to uncover the promising practices they employed with first-generation students. Two of the major themes that emerged from Mead’s research were the primary characteristics of first-generation students, and the role advising played for these students. Mead concluded that first-generation college students needed early and regular advising interventions, suggesting that special attention is paid to this population by researchers, institutional administrators, and advisors. Additional recommendations for further research
included the qualitative inquiry of non-first-generation advisors in determining if their perspectives differ (Mead, 2012).

Focusing on student characteristics, Nielsen (2015) interviewed 23 low-income, minority, female students from three California community colleges with persistent aspirations to achieve their degrees. Nielsen concluded that with this particular group of subjects, the women ascribed primarily to one or both of two mindsets: “pragmatic job-seeking” and “moral self-improvement” (p. 276). In the first, the subjects’ motivating factor was the belief that it is necessary to have a degree to land a fulfilling and lucrative job. The subjects’ second mindset was that achieving a degree was considered a high moral pursuit, and doing so led to the betterment of the individual (Nielsen, 2015). Knowledge and understanding of these motivators might inform advising practice to include the deliberate discussion of aspirations and motivation with advisees. Further research could also establish other motivating factors.

Similarly, Parsons (2012) studied the attitudes and behaviors of first-generation, female participants in the federal TRiO program at a community college in Maine to establish the behaviors and attitudes they demonstrated that caused them to achieve at a higher level than their peers. Both Nielsen (2015) and Parsons identified advising as a significant factor keeping students on track. These qualitative studies left substantial room for additional, in-depth case studies of particular populations of at-risk students and their advisors.

Studies employing mixed methods research were quite rare, though Pascarella (2006) noted their importance in determining why certain interventions had an impact on students. He suggested that future research, “would benefit substantially from mixed-methods studies in which quantitative and qualitative approaches are purposefully employed in coordinated and
mutually informing ways” (p. 516). This recommendation underscored a need for methodological diversity in advising research.

In one mixed-methods study, Kim and Feldman (2011) examined the advising preferences of students at a university in the Midwest. They initially conducted qualitative interviews with 22 business students to establish what advising approaches led to satisfaction and which did not. They used these findings to generate a quantitative satisfaction survey administered to nearly 500 students. Kim and Feldman analyzed the survey results to identify the attributes of students that resulted in positive responses and determined that advising was of great importance to first-generation students.

Existing research into the effects of proactive advising practices left room for multi-institutional, qualitative inquiry into how academic advisors influenced the socio-academic integration of community college students who possessed certain risk factors (Deil-Amen, 2011). This dissertation attempted to help fill that gap by inquiring directly with NCCC students who fit identified risk profiles but persisted against the odds. In examining this population, the study intended to gain insight into the advising characteristics and actions that best stimulated the persistence of at-risk NCCC students.

**Conceptual Framework**

The development of a conceptual framework is an iterative process involving reflection on one’s own interests and professional position, as well as exploration of the relevant literature around those interests to determine a topic in need of further examination and existing or emerging theories through which that examination might best occur (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017; Weaver-Hightower, 2014). The result is a synthesis of these elements to form an argument for the study grounded in personal curiosity, supported by and expanding on prior research (Ravitch
& Riggan, 2017). The evolution of the following framework served to guide this study of centralized, proactive advising for at-risk students attending the state’s community colleges.

There were many reasons for examining methods for improving community college student success that represented a greater national perspective, the statewide view, an organizational outlook, and even the researcher’s personal agenda. At the time of the study, there were economic implications as questions related to reputation and prestige placing pressure on the field of postsecondary education to achieve increasingly positive results (Coley, 2000; Córdova, 2006). A national academic attainment agenda and higher-level workforce skill requirements were pushing students to pursue higher education (Bessen, 2014; Carnevale et al., 2013; Coley, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2017a). Many students, particularly those entering community colleges, faced challenges and barriers to success, from inadequate academic preparation to financial and family concerns (Bailey, 2015; Bailey et al., 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hirschy et al., 2011; Tinto, 2014). Finally, anecdotal observations at both the college and system level exposed a trend of quickly implementing and ending student success initiatives without fully planning for or evaluating their impacts. This researcher’s unique placement within the NCCC as an internal, yet partially detached, observer provided access to and a vested interest in NCCC advising initiatives.

Though there were many studies of academic advising in higher education, most examined faculty advising within four-year institutions (Pietras, 2010). Much of the research on advising quantitatively measured student perceptions of the advising they received via student satisfaction surveys (Barbuto et al., 2011; Reason et al., 2006). Some studies explored student perceptions and satisfaction as they compared to course completion, GPA, or persistence (Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Kot, 2014; Ryan, 2013; Smith, 2007; Young-Jones et al., 2013).
Qualitative research on the topic of advising was less prevalent but equally supportive of advising as a promising practice. Mead (2012) interviewed several professional advisors, themselves first-generation college students, and found that such students need early and regular advising. Other researchers studied unique populations of at-risk female students who, against the odds, persisted in their educational attainment, to identify particular behaviors and attitudes (Nielsen, 2015; Parsons, 2012). Both Nielsen and Parsons concluded that advising was essential to student success. A common thread throughout these studies was their focus on particular student demographic characteristics, such as first-generation, low-income, or underprepared students. The body of research on the subject noted that advising served a valuable purpose for a wide variety of students, and further research might help determine the best practices in advising approach and implementation for specific student groups (Burton, 2016; Mead, 2012; Steingass & Sykes, 2008; Williamson et al., 2014).

**Proactive Advising Theory**

In exploring the literature on the history of advising, multiple theories emerged in the research. In a 1970 conference presentation, Crookston (1970/1994) compared what many consider a traditional model of prescriptive advising, where the advisor told advisees what to do, with his theory of developmental advising, wherein the advisor/advisee relationship required more shared responsibility and ultimately resulted in the advisee’s growth. Proactive advising borrowed elements from both prescriptive and developmental advising theory. Varney (2013) summarized this form of advising to include the following:
Table 1.

*Summary of Proactive Advising: Critical Points, Reasons, and Tactics*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Critical Point</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Tactic</th>
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<td>Start early.</td>
<td>Start students on a strong path.</td>
<td>Bring in preadmissions, start of term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop relationships with students; think in terms of a counseling relationship.</td>
<td>Academics are not the only reason that students are unsuccessful in school.</td>
<td>Reach out, contact, and connect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the relationship to help students get past obstacles and setbacks.</td>
<td>Students need a caring connection at the school, someone to help them identify challenges and advocate for themselves.</td>
<td>Get to know students. Help them see aspects of themselves that they may not currently appreciate. Capitalize on student strengths.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be the student connection to the institution.</td>
<td>Students need a strong point of connection, someone who cares.</td>
<td>Be that person.</td>
</tr>
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Varney (2013) also noted the need for proactive advisors to recognize warning signs before they became real concerns, and suggested that advisors intervene to prevent academic catastrophe at the first hint of trouble. This form of advising emphasized the personal connection over the professional responsibility and strove to develop self-efficacy so that the student ultimately became his or her own proactive advocate (Varney, 2013).
Socio-academic Integration Theory

Perhaps the most celebrated and cited researcher on the subject of advising is Tinto (1975), who established the importance of the social and academic integration of students within their institutions (sometimes referred to as engagement) on persistence intentions. Tinto (2012b) critically explored this important topic, and countless studies using his theories on advising exist. Recognizing that his and others’ study of student engagement spans several decades, yet issues with student outcomes persist, Tinto (2006) noted the need for continued research on engagement and its effective application in practice.

While the wealth of information gleaned from the study of social and academic integration is undeniable, historically this research focused on residential, four-year institutions, rather than two-year, commuter institutions (Mertes, 2015). Contemporary studies of social and academic integration among community college students concluded that these two forms of engagement were not necessarily separate (Deil-Amen, 2011). Within a two-year college setting social interactions were often limited to academic pursuits, and as such merited alternative consideration (Davidson & Wilson, 2013). Karp, Hughes, and O’Gara (2008) claimed that “studies of integration in the community college should not ignore social integration, but should examine how social integration is encouraged by academic activities” (p. 18). In a study of community college students, Mertes asserted that social integration is important, but that where it occurs is less relevant. Deil-Amen suggested renaming the phenomenon socio-academic integration within the community college setting, as often these students are looking for “opportunities for specific instances of interaction in which components of social and academic integration are simultaneously combined” (p. 72). She recommended proactive interventions to
foster student engagement as well as qualitative inquiry to determine how two-year students
develop a sense of belonging at their institutions (Deil-Amen, 2011).

Conclusion

Increased recognition of risk factors preventing college students from success (Engle &
Tinto, 2008), a growing number of students presenting with these risks (Heisserer & Parette,
2002), and an economic need for institutions of higher education to wisely and responsibly
allocate funds (Zhang, Gossett, Simpson, & Davis, 2017) warranted additional research into best
educational practices that lead to student success. Many student problems existed outside the
classroom (Evans et al, 2017). Therefore, nonacademic interventions were often the key to
overcoming those issues (Karp, 2011; Karp & Bork, 2012). One of the most often used
approaches was advising (McFarlane, 2013). In the early 2000s, the state of advising theory,
practice, and research demonstrated the new complexities academic advisors faced in their field,
including student risks and preferences, advising scope and delivery method, and institutional
organization and resources (Smith & Allen, 2014).

Improving outcomes for students as they aspired to reach their potential and contribute to
the state’s economy was of great personal interest. This researcher’s position among the state’s
community colleges and their investment in proactive advising to help foster positive outcomes
for the most vulnerable of their students converged serendipitously and provided the opportunity
for evaluation of these efforts to inform future plans. Historical advising research favored the
quantitative examination of student satisfaction but could benefit from further qualitative
discussion (Pietras, 2010). Theories surrounding proactive advising were developing, meriting
assessment (Burton, 2016). Proactive advising practice’s similarities to full-range leadership
theory and relationship to student engagement theory provided a potential blended theoretical
lens through which to view this study and helped to direct the study’s focus, questions, data collection, and analysis (Fowler, 2015).

This study focused on a state-wide initiative aimed at proactively advising students within the NCCC identified as possessing specific risk factors believed to hinder academic achievement, to improve student outcomes. Commonly noted risk factors included first-generation status, lack of academic preparation, online course-taking, attending only part-time, and being of nontraditional age. This study used the proactive advising theory of Varney (2013), along with Deil-Amen’s (2011) socio-academic integration theory, as lenses through which to examine the academic success of community college peer mentors. Determining whether targeted advising programs had a positive impact on student success might help inform and guide the NCCC in developing future advising programming and could potentially serve as a model for other postsecondary institutions and systems with similar student populations.

This chapter provided an examination of the relevant literature in the field of academic advising, highlighting the gaps that exist and how this study intends to address those gaps based on the conceptual and theoretical frameworks described. Chapter three will explicate the methodological direction the study will take. Chapters four and five will present the study’s findings, discuss their implications, and make recommendations for future research related to this topic.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

At the start of the twenty-first century, institutions of higher education needed to act as efficiently and effectively as possible to deliver positive student outcomes (EAB, 2014). Increased national attention and competition, along with rising student aspirations and expectations, required postsecondary institutions to use a diminishing pool of resources as carefully as possible (SHEEO, 2015; USDOE, 2017b). Given their open access and low cost, community colleges, in particular, faced the challenge of enrolling higher proportions of at-risk students (Bailey, 2015). First-generation, underprepared, nontraditional, and low-income students performed measurably more poorly than their peers, often failing to persist in the achievement of their academic goals (Coley, 2000). Collectively, this group of students was known as at-risk (CCSSE, 2016; Sparks & Malkus, 2013). College faculty and administration could not control the common risks associated with student departure; however, these institutional actors could shepherd students through unfamiliar academic territory and direct them to the internal and external supports available (King, 1993; Lowenstein, 2015; White, 2015). Most commonly, postsecondary institutions relied on advising to provide this navigational assistance to students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

To understand how advising interventions influenced student success, asking the students themselves presented a direct and suitable approach. Speaking with students who demonstrated academic success despite exhibiting risk factors, the researcher hoped to illuminate promising advising practices. By focusing on at-risk students who persisted to enroll in their second year at their community colleges and were selected to assist other students as peer mentors, this collective case study sought to answer the following questions:
• How do community college peer mentors describe and understand their experiences with advising?
• How do community college peer mentors perceive that the assistance provided by advisors helped them develop academic and social connections with their colleges?

Research Design

Research was conducted using a collective case study approach. Yin (2003) asserted that case studies are advantageous when “a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control” (p. 9). Given the unique characteristics of each peer mentor, program advisor, and the colleges they serve, a collective case study allowed for in-depth examination of each case, with the opportunity to identify commonalities across cases. The collective case study evaluated a student success program (SSP) that provided proactive advising to at-risk students by examining student experiences. The researcher anticipated that the data collected and analyzed would result in findings useful for promoting the continuous improvement of advising services system-wide.

There were several advantages inherent in the design of this study. Collective case study research allowed for wide and varied data collection, which was necessary to sufficiently capture information from multiple sites and constituencies (Yin, 2003). Additionally, both Creswell (2007) and Stake (2003) spoke to the importance of a case study’s boundaries. In the study conducted, geography (the state), institutional type (two-year public institutions), student demographics (identified risk factors), and SSP participation bound the population. Adding to these boundaries by narrowing participation to program advisors and their peer mentors attempted to shed a positive light on at-risk student success and program contributions. For these
reasons, this design provided both the latitude and structure a study of this scope required (Creswell, 2007).

Yin (2003) asserted that high-quality case study research and design required the careful consideration of several elements. In addition to crafting meaningful research questions that asked how or why, they should also serve to link the data collected to theoretical propositions (Yin, 2003). This qualitative case study assessed the proposition that proactive advising interventions influence students’ socio-academic integration and that these concepts, in combination, assisted in mitigating common risk factors and fostering student success. Yin also indicated the importance of establishing appropriate units and forms of analysis. For this collective case study, the units of analysis were individuals from the site who likely best illustrated the answers to the research questions posed, and the analysis aimed to elicit themes both deductively and inductively (Thomas, 2006). Additional details about the study’s setting, participants, data collection, and analysis follow.

Setting

This collective case study was conducted at several campus locations within a statewide, public system of community colleges in the northeastern United States, referred to in this study as Northeast Community College Consortium (NCCC). The NCCC’s foundation secured funding to install program advisors on each campus to provide proactive advising to select groups of at-risk students over a three-year period. To determine what aspects of this type of program merit institutionalizing, system-level exploration ensued as the project unfolded to identify strengths and opportunities. The researcher had access to and was responsible for conducting internal NCCC’s inquiry, which helped inform this study, and which in turn contributed to system-wide program assessment.
The investigator’s role as institutional researcher for the central program of study presented both advantages and potential liabilities. The investigator’s level of access to quantitative data related to the SSP and its participants was unrestricted, requiring that she took great care to use the data ethically and to protect the anonymity of participants (Creswell, 2007). However, the availability of such a depth and breadth of data allowed for close examination of the many facets of each case. Simultaneously, the researcher’s position within the NCCC may have introduced some concern on the part of students, program advisors, and college administrators as to what information they felt comfortable sharing. The investigator navigated relationships and ethical boundaries carefully to garner the trust necessary for honest feedback to this inquiry (Coughlan & Brannick, 2014).

Few qualitative case studies on advising existed that explore a statewide system of community colleges (Deil-Amen, 2011). Parsons (2012) asserted that “missing from the available literature are the stories of those students who succeed in college against the odds” (p.113). This study provided insight into the experiences of several at-risk students who overcame their obstacles to succeed academically and sought to illustrate how the NCCC’s proactive advising approach may have contributed to that success.

**Program Description**

In the fall of 2016 (SSP year one), each college within NCCC selected groups of students possessing particular risk factors. These groups comprised cohorts served by program advisors, along with similarly at-risk students for comparison cohorts. Risks included one or more of the following student characteristics: first-generation, female, low-income, online, part-time, and undecided majors. Target program advisor caseloads for year one were 75 students, with approximately 40 students per comparison cohort. In fall 2017, new cohorts of served and
comparison students were identified from the incoming population of students, representing many of the same risk factors. For some colleges, however, low admissions prevented selection based upon risks other than students enrolling for the first time.

The NCCC collected empirical data annually on course success, persistence, GPA, and completion for SSP students, comparison cohorts, and all students entering college in each SSP year. Students who returned for their second year of college achieved what many at-risk students could not—persistence (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). To leverage this success, in the fall of 2017 (SSP year two), program advisors selected peer mentors from their returning, year one cohorts to assist with SSP activities. Students selected by the program advisors to act as peer mentors exhibited qualities of success program advisors believed beneficial to share with new students. It was from this population of program advisors and peer mentors that the study’s participants were selected.

**Participants/Sample**

Merriam (2014) stated that “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). As such, the study focused on SSP students who demonstrated success and the program advisors with whom these students worked. Program advisors hired peer mentors to perform tasks with varied responsibilities depending on local SSP and program advisor wants and needs, as well as the skills and abilities of the individual mentor. Assigned tasks ranged from setting up social media accounts to foster program participant communications to organizing SSP events. This study intended to explore the peer mentors’ experiences to learn why they persisted and whether their success might have been attributable to
the proactive advising they received from their program advisors as they began their postsecondary educational endeavors.

Peer mentors were accessible to the researcher in a variety of ways. All had institutional email, which is the most common mode of communication with students system-wide. Each of the mentors also worked directly with their college’s program advisor on SSP activities, and therefore, the researcher could contact mentors through the advisor as needed. As program advisors hired as many or as few peer mentors as they believed their local SSP required, work hours varied to accommodate student schedules and remain within budget. Inquiry into these schedules allowed for additional opportunities to connect. This study reached out to all peer mentors to encourage involvement, with the understanding that some would choose not to participate. Yin (2003) indicated that “the analytic benefits from having two (or more) cases may be substantial,” asserting that a sample size in the range of six to ten could provide persuasive evidence of the propositions put forth” (p. 53). As a result, the researcher considered the collection of data from at least one peer mentor per college, or seven cases, optimal but optimistic. Ultimately, six peer mentors from four colleges chose to participate, and three program advisors provided follow up interviews for clarification, comprising the sample for the study.

Data Collection

A collective case study methodology allowed for the collection and use of diverse data sources (Yin, 2003). To gather the knowledge necessary to answer the research questions, the researcher collected assorted data in various ways. The investigator’s use of the NCCC’s student information system (SIS) provided programmatic data on participant demographics, contact information, and academic outcomes to assist in identifying and reaching out to potential
participants. The SIS also contained records of program advisor interventions, including calls, meetings, training, and other SSP-sponsored events. These data served as background information that helped the researcher to contextualize and compare cases. The researcher obtained permission to access personally identifiable educational data from the NCCC, in compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The investigator sent e-mail invitations to program advisors and peer mentors soliciting participation (see appendices A and B). Participants provided written consent to use both interview and aggregated FERPA-protected educational data for this study.

To appropriately construct and validate interview questions, the researcher requested that a college administrator familiar with the initiative assess whether the initially drafted interview protocols for both peer mentors and program advisors contained any leading questions, were missing any important questions, or the administrator had suggestions to improve questions. Open-ended interview questions leveraged the study’s theoretical framework to elicit responses regarding the students’ perceptions of their socio-academic integration and whether proactive advising interventions influenced integration. More targeted probing questions were designed to gather sufficiently illustrative data. Once the administrator and investigator preliminarily assessed interview protocols to establish whether they adequately addressed the research questions, the investigator modified the protocols as necessary throughout the data collection process. Answers to these questions served as the primary source of data for the study’s analysis, along with clarifying and supporting data from follow-up inquiry.

One substantial modification to the interview questions occurred early in the study’s data collection phase. CCSSE (2018) published qualitative research based on responses to a survey administered to 130,000 community college students from across the U.S. in which they asked
questions regarding student perceptions of advising. From this research, CCSSE developed several focus group discussion protocols suggested for use by community college administrators to inquire with groups of students and advisors. These protocols became a resource for revising and augmenting original interview questions and strengthened the researcher’s investigation.

Semi-structured interviews with participants, conducted by the researcher, provided qualitative data for analysis. Meetings took place either in person on campus in a private meeting space or via an online video conferencing platform, called Zoom, from the location of their choice. Initial interviews with peer mentors lasted 25 to 55 minutes. Questions ranged from college aspirations and expectations to perceptions of available support to personal experiences as mentors (see Appendix C for the peer mentor interview protocol). Inquiries with program advisors lasted 38 to 70 minutes. In addition to questions about advising practices in general, the researcher asked program advisors to provide descriptions of the advising interventions mentioned by peer mentors to capture details regarding their form and intent, as well as their impressions of efficacy (see Appendix D for the program advisor interview protocol).

The researcher recorded all interviews electronically using the video conferencing application and took handwritten notes. The researcher sent recordings for transcription to Rev.com, and she reviewed and corrected resulting transcripts before she sent copies via email to participants for member checking. One program advisor returned her transcript with minor edits, which the investigator made. The other program advisors and one peer mentor replied that their transcripts were acceptable as transcribed. The remaining peer mentors did not respond to the initial request for member checking. The researcher sent additional emails to these five mentors and their advisors and received confirmation of one more mentor’s transcript. The researcher used the data collected from the four remaining peer mentors as transcribed.
Analysis

This study employed a thematic analysis of the data to assess evidence of socio-academic integration and proactive advising theory as related to student success, which still allowed for the discovery of patterns and relationships that indicated alternative explanations (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010; Yin, 2003). The researcher limited data analysis to the qualitative aspects of each case and used demographic and background information only for comparison. Patton (2002) stated that “the case study approach to qualitative analysis constitutes a specific way of collecting, organizing, and analyzing data” (p. 447). Transcription occurred using the transcription service Rev.com, with the researcher providing minor corrections. The investigator asked participants to participate in the member checking process to ensure validity and allow for additional insight, information, and clarification with limited success. The researcher hand-coded the resulting interview transcripts to attain the deepest level of familiarity with and understanding of the data possible.

The study employed both deductive and inductive analysis to gain a deep understanding of the data collected. Deductive analysis determined whether the aspects of proactive advising theory influenced socio-academic integration as described by peer mentors and if those factors were highly prevalent. The investigator initiated deductive techniques by searching for a priori codes related to proactive advising and socio-academic integration within the data (Mills et al., 2010). These codes included terms pointing to integration, such as involvement, engagement, and participation, as well as those indicative of proactive advising interventions, including communication, caring, and connection. However, inductive analysis allowed for the emergence of other influencing factors (Patton, 2002). Thomas (2006) noted that inductive analysis was appropriate for distilling qualitative data down to its most relevant themes.
Analysis followed a modified version of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis process. Braun and Clarke outlined this process in six phases: “familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report” (p. 87). The researcher became familiar with the data through both transcription correction and closely reading collected interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The text was categorized into preexisting and emergent codes using several passes (Kohlbacher, 2006), to identify three to eight primary themes (Thomas, 2006). The investigator reviewed and refined themes, resulting in a final set of well-defined, named themes for discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000), “A theme is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole” (p. 362). In keeping with the evaluative propositions of this case study (Yin, 2003), the themes selected primarily related to how peer mentors perceived their success as attributable to the advising support provided by the NCCC, to inform advising best practice and areas for potential improvement.

Descriptive data served as background information, providing a context and comparison of peer mentors to the larger populations of SSP, college, and system. To maintain FERPA compliance, the researcher made anonymous all data regarding student demographics, GPA, course success, and remediation, with data reported only in the aggregate or in comparative narrative terms. Protection of individually identifiable academic records was of the utmost importance. Both site permission and participant consent forms addressed the particulars of the types of data the system’s colleges and participants allowed for disclosure within this dissertation (see Appendices E through G for the site permission letter and consent forms).
Participants’ Rights

Protecting the rights of study participants was a priority (Creswell, 2012). As grant-funded employees of the NCCC, program advisors were subject to inquiry into their activities by the funder to ensure the appropriate stewardship of the award. The collection of information for these purposes occurred via the system’s foundation, and the investigator was responsible for gathering and reporting this data. Regardless of this access, the researcher sought permission to use data for this study from all parties involved. The NCCC provided written consent to access the site and student information systems for the collection of necessary data to maintain FERPA compliance. The investigator asked program advisors and peer mentors to read and sign informed consent paperwork outlining the scope and purpose of the investigation and that they were able to opt out of the study at any time. This consent included the particular details of the student’s FERPA-protected educational record the study referenced. The interview protocol included instructions at the outset indicating that participants could choose not to answer any questions with which they were uncomfortable. The researcher offered interview data to interviewees for member-checking following transcription, providing ample opportunity for correction.

The investigator treated collected data with the utmost care. Interview recordings, notes, and other artifacts were stored electronically on password-protected devices and secured in locked storage when not in use. After transcription and providing ample time and opportunity for member checking, the researcher destroyed recorded interview data. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to individuals and campuses in all written materials to preserve anonymity.
Potential Limitations

Inherent in any study design are latent limitations that are important to address to establish the study’s scope and intent. In this particular case study, due to the researcher’s access, the potential amount of data available was virtually limitless, and although case study allows for great breadth and depth, finding a manageable scope of work was challenging (Creswell, 2007). However, as Yin (2003) suggested, the use of propositions helped to define constraints within which to contain inquiry. Therefore, the proposition that proactive advising positively supported socio-academic integration, which in turn led to improvements in students’ success, provided boundaries within which to contain the study’s inquiry. Also, research that focused only on successful students within the served cohort limited the potential of identifying SSP shortcomings. This affirmative stance was intentional, as the study’s purpose was to determine what the NCCC could and should do, as opposed to identifying what it should not. The researcher aimed to mitigate these possible limitations by maintaining a consistent focus and acknowledging the study’s purpose of finding and capitalizing on strengths.

Reliance on interview data as the study’s primary source of information presented other potential concerns. With the typical complexity of community college students’ lives (Cook, 2009), soliciting student participation proved difficult. The researcher narrowed the potential participant pool to SSP peer mentors to leverage those students’ commitment to institutional cooperation. However, these students’ work as peer mentors added to their obligations, and they may have perceived requests for interviews and subsequent member-checking excessive. It is also possible that participants may have had difficulty recognizing and articulating their perceptions and beliefs (Creswell, 2012). Given the researcher’s position with the NCCC, both peer mentors and program advisors may have hesitated to respond to interview questions with
complete honesty for fear that their comments might reflect negatively on themselves, the program, or the institution (Creswell, 2012). The researcher crafted careful questions and a rapport-building interview protocol to help address this possibility.

**Conclusion**

Hatch and Garcia (2017) stated that “it is imperative to further unpack the nature of advising activities and their relationship to persistence decisions” (p. 357). The NCCC agreed, making a concerted effort to support advising initiatives and examine their impacts. This chapter discussed how the researcher employed a collective case study methodology to identify the boundaries of setting and participants and gather data to evaluate the SSP using thematic analysis. Chapters four and five will outline the study’s findings and discuss its contribution to understanding the advising/persistence relationship, to inform the direction of advising practice among the state’s community colleges into the future, as well as to generate ideas for further exploration.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Institutions of higher education faced many challenges in the years following the Great Recession of 2008. Community colleges, in particular, confronted issues arising from the composition of their student populations (Alon, 2009), financial concerns (State Higher Education Executive Officers [SHEEO], 2016), and external environmental factors. Many students entering community colleges lacked familiarity with the college setting (Mead, 2012), required additional academic preparation for college-level work (Bailey et al., 2005; Coley, 2000), and led complicated lives (Tinto, 2014). State funding for college operations decreased across the country, stretching the already tight resources of community colleges even further (SHEEO, 2015). Meanwhile, increased availability of student outcome data (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a), historically poor for community colleges, led to heightened scrutiny and competition among institutions of higher education (Drake, 2011; White, 2015). As the evolving workforce required more skilled employees (Carnevale et al., 2013), larger numbers of disadvantaged students started to enter community colleges (Alon, 2009; Bailey, 2015; Ma & Baum, 2016).

The seven colleges comprising the Northeast Community College Consortium (NCCC) encountered the shrinking resources, external scrutiny, and an increasingly complex student population of this time. The NCCC recognized the importance of holistically supporting students from pre-enrollment through the attainment of academic goals. The system’s foundation secured funding to establish a student success program (SSP) aimed at providing advising support to the students most at risk of failing to reach their academic goals. Early in the 2016–2017 academic year, each of the NCCC’s seven colleges hired program advisors charged with proactively
shepherding program participants through the many academic and nonacademic obstacles they encountered. In each of three program years, these advisors each served 75 at-risk students. In year two of the program, program advisors selected peer mentors from the initial cohort to assist in these efforts. Peer mentors persisted in their academic enrollment and possessed qualities that advisors believed offered benefits to newer students in the program.

Peer mentors possessed one or more risk factors believed to contribute to academic failure, including low socioeconomic status, lack of adequate preparation for postsecondary academic work, first-generation status, and unclear academic or career goals. Despite these challenges, these students persisted into their second year of college. This case study examined peer mentor experiences to assess what aspects of the SSP and other institutional interventions made a positive impact. The SSP encouraged the use of proactive advising theory (Varney, 2013), considered best practice in advising at the time (Donaldson et al., 2016; Swecker et al., 2013), to advance the social and academic integration of students served by the program.

Through the lenses of proactive advising (Varney, 2013) and socio-academic integration theory (Deil-Amen, 2011), this collective case study asked the following research questions:

- How do community college peer mentors describe and understand their experiences with advising?
- How do community college peer mentors perceive that the assistance provided by advisors helped them develop academic and social connections with their colleges?

This chapter outlines the methods used to analyze collected data, presents demographic participant data to provide context, and identifies four primary themes resulting from data analysis. These themes include:
• Motivating Factors Driving Effort
• Attitudes About and Availability of Support
• Finding and Fostering Feelings of Comfort
• Advancing Burgeoning Confidence

Analysis Methods

Case study design permits the inclusion of multiple types of data (Yin, 2003). The institutional review board application, site permission letter, and participant consent forms allowed for the collection and use of information related to the demographic characteristics and academic performance of participating peer mentors. The NCCC also granted permission to collect comparative performance data from its student information system for students served by the SSP, the program’s comparison cohorts, and the colleges’ entering Fall 2016 cohort. The researcher collected the primary data used to answer the research questions from participant interviews. A discussion of the analysis of each of these types of data follows.

Demographic and Academic Data

Upon receipt of signed consent forms granting permission to use peer mentor educational and demographic data, the researcher performed queries within the NCCC’s student information system to collect data on several characteristics. These included peer mentors’ ages, genders, grade point averages, and enrollment intensities (credits attempted each semester). The investigator also gathered evidence related to academic risk factors, including remedial course-taking, parental college-going to determine first-generation status, Pell grant eligibility to establish socioeconomic status, and declaration(s) of major to determine the clarity of academic goals. Saldana (2009) called the standardized tracking of this type of data “attribute coding,” and further asserted that “attribute coding is good qualitative data management and provides essential
participant information and contexts for analysis and interpretation” (p. 56). He claimed the
necessity of this type of coding for most qualitative studies, especially those including multiple
participants, sites, and data collection formats. The researcher also collected aggregate data on
the academic performance of the advising program’s participants, comparison cohort, and
entering class of students for descriptive comparison purposes.

**Interview Data**

Three in-person interviews and six online interviews took place, the latter using Zoom
video conferencing software. In each instance, the researcher recorded the proceedings and sent
the resulting .mp4 files to Rev.com for transcription. The investigator reviewed the transcripts,
made any necessary corrections, and delivered copies to the subjects of each interview for
member checking. In cases where participants requested changes or noted errors, the researcher
made appropriate alterations to the transcripts and converted the text into simple matrices in
Microsoft Word to allow for clear and organized coding.

The coding process evaluated interview data using both deductive and inductive thematic
analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) aimed to address the study’s research questions. The
investigator performed an initial open coding pass on each transcript, noting virtually every
potential code. During this coding cycle, the researcher bore in mind a priori (or predetermined)
codes related to proactive advising and socio-academic integration to address deductive
concerns. This process aligned with Saldaña’s (2009) recommendation that “a provisional list of
codes should be determined beforehand to harmonize with your study’s conceptual framework or
paradigm and to enable an analysis that directly answers your research questions and goals”
(p. 49). The researcher developed several codes in advance by noting the behaviors and attitudes
indicative of proactive advising (Varney, 2013) and socio-academic integration (Deil-Amen,
Examples of the study’s a priori codes included advisor contact, frequency and modes of communication, feeling cared for, making connections, facing challenges, sense of belonging, and building relationships. Leaving the initial coding cycle open to codes not predetermined allowed for the emergence of unexpected inductive codes as well. Second pass coding followed a structural approach, which Saldaña recommended for studies involving multiple participants that employed “semi-structured data-gathering protocols” such as those used for the study’s participant interviews (p. 67). Saldaña’s prescribed use of structural coding also emphasized coding related to research questions. This coding pass helped narrow codes to those relevant to the research questions.

**Investigator Memos**

As prescribed by Creswell (2012), an important part of the analytic process revolved around the researcher’s consideration of the data. During each interview, the investigator took handwritten notes regarding items of interest. Following the interviews, she made field notes to capture her impressions of the interview subject and discussion. After coding passes, the researcher wrote analytic memos to reflect upon and synthesize the ideas coding provoked, adding to these memos as new thoughts arose (Creswell, 2012). Creswell also recommended writing disproving memos to ensure an appropriately critical perspective. The investigator crafted memos identifying discrepancies and biases to address this recommendation.

**Development of Themes**

The researcher undertook thematic analysis to find patterns from among the codes and memos (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Similar to Saldaña’s (2009) structural coding method, Braun and Clarke noted that “the purpose of [thematic] analysis is to identify those [patterns] relevant to answering a particular research question” (p. 57). As themes began to emerge through
analysis, Saldaña’s axial coding process aided in grouping codes into thematic categories.

Coding, memo writing, and analysis resulted in nine initial thematic categories:

- Help
- Relationships
- Internal and External Motivation
- Engagement
- Stretching Boundaries
- Career Aptitudes and Work Ethic
- The Advisor as Touchstone
- Ability to Face and Overcome Fears
- Unavoidable Interaction

Based on Braun and Clarke’s (2012) next phases of thematic analysis, review of these themes and their underlying data narrowed and defined themes. Thomas (2006) described three to eight themes as optimal in qualitative analysis. Analysis of codes within initial categories bore opportunities to combine related themes, expanding their descriptions and identifying subthemes, until four primary themes remained:

- Motivating Factors Driving Effort
- Attitudes About and Availability of Support
- Finding Feelings of Comfort
- Advancing Burgeoning Confidence.

The four themes derived from data and analysis served to best answer the research questions and carried the support of data collected from multiple participants.
Presentation of Demographic and Academic Results

Chapter four presents results in two parts. The first section describes the sample population, outlines demographic characteristics, and provides comparisons between participants’ and peer groups’ aggregated academic performance measures. A thematic presentation of the interview data follows, illustrating the themes and subthemes that emerged to answer the research questions.

Participants

SSP peer mentors and program advisors served as the participants for this study. Since the inception of the student success program (SSP) in the fall of 2016, only five of the NCCC’s seven colleges retained their original program advising staff and hired peer mentors. NCCC program advisors identified ten students who served in a peer mentor capacity. On one campus, the peer mentor began in the role less than two weeks before the commencement of this study and was not invited to participate. One or two peer mentors from each of the remaining four colleges chose to participate in the study, with three program advisors interviewed to explain further aspects of the advising experience noted by mentors as influential. Peer mentor and program advisor interviews comprised the bulk of the data collected and analyzed for this study.

Demographic Characteristics. Given their limited resources, the NCCC aimed to focus the efforts of their program advisors on students with barriers to academic success. The colleges identified different obstacles; however, many students, including the study’s participants, demonstrated a variety of issues, whether those issues were their college’s focus or not. These barriers included low socioeconomic status, first-generation status, unclear academic goals, and inadequate preparation for college level work. The following table summarizes the academic obstacles faced by the participants of the study:
Table 2

Risk Factors of the Study’s Participating Peer Mentors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factor</th>
<th>Peer Mentor Count</th>
<th>Peer Mentor Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low socioeconomic status</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-generation status</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academically underprepared</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear academic goals</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Study participants each possessed one to three of these risk factors. Also, colleges identified several other factors also believed to negatively affect student academic performance, including gender, age, ethnicity, and academic intensity. However, these factors did not apply widely to students, either across the system or among the study’s participating peer mentors. Therefore, the researcher refrained from reporting on these characteristics, as they could potentially identify individual institutions or participants.

**Comparative Academic Success.** Multiple measures existed to assess the academic success of individuals and institutions alike. Course success, course completion rate, grade point average, and persistence are typical gauges of success for the NCCC. The following aggregated data compares the academic performance of study participants to several peer groups:
Table 3

**Academic Performance Comparison**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Peer Mentors Interviewed</th>
<th>All SSP Participants</th>
<th>SSP Comparison Cohort</th>
<th>New NCCC Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course success</td>
<td>86.0%</td>
<td>70.7%</td>
<td>68.1%</td>
<td>72.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course completion</td>
<td>91.9%</td>
<td>79.3%</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
<td>79.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade point average (0.0 to 4.0 scale)</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence fall 2016 to spring 2017</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence fall 2016 to fall 2017</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence fall 2016 to spring 2017</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
<td>59.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NCCC definitions of these measures are as follows:

- **Course Success**: Completion of a course attempted with a grade of C or better
- **Course Completion Rate**: Number of credit hours earned, regardless of grade, to the number of credit hours attempted
- **Grade Point Average**: Credits attempted multiplied by quality points (weighted by grades earned) divided by total number of credits
- **Persistence**: Enrollment in a term after the first term of enrollment

As seen from these data, overall SSP participant performance in courses was consistent with peers. In contrast, participating peer mentors outperformed fellow SSP participants, comparison cohort students, and the entering Fall 2016 NCCC class. Persistence data illustrate the issues most populations of NCCC students experienced in maintaining enrollment through completion.
of their academic goals. However, continued enrollment was a condition of employment as a peer mentor, explaining the high figures for peer mentor interviewees.

**Presentation of Thematic Findings**

Though the participants’ stories varied, each interview contained evidence of four primary themes. Peer mentors spoke of the external influences and personal goals motivating their efforts, their attitudes about and the availability of support received and given, the sense of familiarity and comfort they found within their institutional environments, and the increasing confidence they felt both academically and personally. Program advisors elaborated on their experiences with the SSP, its students, and their peer mentors, describing advising approaches, interventions, and outcomes. Table 3 outlines the themes and subthemes resulting from the analysis of peer mentor and program advisor interview data. Descriptions of each theme follow, supported by the data and linked, where applicable, to the study’s theoretical framework, which sought evidence of proactive advising and socio-academic integration.
Table 4

Relevant Themes and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Motivating Factors Driving Effort</td>
<td>• External influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Personal goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 Attitudes About and Availability of Support</td>
<td>• Help-seeking tendencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Availability of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Providing an appropriate level of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The desire to help others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 Finding and Fostering Feelings of Comfort</td>
<td>• Initial familiarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• An environment of care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sense of family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 Advancing Burgeoning Confidence</td>
<td>• Academic attainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Personal growth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme #1: Motivating Factors Driving Effort**

The interviews of peer mentors and program advisors unveiled several factors driving peer mentor motivation. Many of these factors related to relationships peer mentors valued and personal preferences. As the first in their families to attend college, some peer mentors relied on the experience of people outside their families for assistance navigating college enrollment; however, in most cases parents, grandparents, and siblings encouraged peer mentors’ college aspirations. Prior experiences cultivated some peer mentors’ desired paths. Peer Mentor A took a course in high school that sparked her interest in the medical field, so she began exploring her college’s different health program options. Peer Mentor C described working with farm equipment and automobiles in his youth and realized his preference for working with his hands.
His college offered hands-on learning from the first semester, engaging him in learning at the outset. Encouragement and engagement fostered peer mentor efforts.

Future career opportunities also served as a major motivator for peer mentors. Several peer mentors expressed a desire to pursue programs of study that led to desired and profitable careers. For some of them, that meant working to escape low socioeconomic status. Peer Mentor B stated, “I always wanted something where there was a potential to move up and possibly get promoted and make a decent living.” As Peer Mentor E stated, “There weren’t any careers that I could have gotten through my high school vocational program or something that didn’t require further education that I was interested in.” About her future career in psychology, Peer Mentor D acknowledged, “The harder I work, the sooner I’m going to be where I want to be where I can help people and work with them and be working in my passionate field.” Dreams and future goals also inspired Peer Mentor F, who said he’s “so tired . . . but I get up out of bed every morning, and I still do what I have to do.” These forms of motivation comprised the subthemes External Influences and Personal Goals discussed below.

**External Influences.** One of the primary risk factors colleges identified as contributing negatively to academic success was low socioeconomic status. While only half of the study’s participating peer mentors fell into this category as commonly defined, 83% mentioned the benefits of loans and scholarships, both related to the SSP and otherwise. Peer Mentor A first learned of the SSP through its promotion of a scholarship, and said, “that you could get a . . . scholarship if you maintain a certain GPA.” She “figured that it was a good opportunity to get some scholarship money . . . ever since then, I’m in this office all the time.” In this case, the motivation to earn a scholarship led to participation in the SSP, leading to increased socio-academic integration.
First-generation status was another common obstacle faced by the peer mentors interviewed. Four of the six peer mentors were among the first in their families to attend college. Regardless, family members encouraged these peer mentors’ enrollment in college, and other people in their lives helped them navigate the college experience. For some, that assistance occurred while students were still in high school. Peer Mentor B received guidance from his local career center after a layoff. The parents of Peer Mentor F’s girlfriend helped him apply to college. In many cases, participants noted the college staff’s willingness to assist. As Peer Mentor B stated, “it seems like there’s someone here to help you for any issue that you might have.” All of the peer mentors interviewed also specifically discussed how helpful and encouraging their program advisor was. As Peer Mentor F stated about his program advisor, “I don’t think I would have made it, honestly. [Program Advisor 3] showed me some sort of direction when I didn’t have any.” Although these students lacked the benefit of family experience with the college environment, others were available to guide them.

Expectations and encouragement from family members also existed for the two peer mentors who were not first-generation college students. Peer Mentor E claimed to have been “ambushed” by her mother into taking a tour of the college. As she described it, college was an expectation growing up, and her mother employed proactive methods to set that expectation. She explained, “I remember my mom lying to me and telling me we’re going to the mall. Instead, she brought me here for a tour, and I was not happy about it,” recounting the way she likely scared the tour guide with her poor attitude. She recognized the irony of the fact that she now leads tours herself. Peer Mentor C described his mother as a nontraditional college student, who commuted, noting the difference in her college experience from his own. He also recalled a
conversation with his grandmother, who emphasized the need for higher education in the emerging workforce.

Additionally, some peer mentors identified the motivating characteristics of their program advisors. As Peer Mentor C stated, “she cracks the whip on me, which is good,” noting a level of proactive advising. Peer Mentor E noted that her program advisor has “shown me that even my small successes are actually really big.” These examples demonstrated different styles of motivation, but the techniques used worked for the individual students in their circumstances at the time.

From the peer mentor perspective, external motivation was often the result of proactive intervention on the part of people they trust. The program advisors described how the SSP promoted socio-academic integration and contributed to the continued motivation of these students. As part of Program Advisor 1’s SSP, advisees attended the freshman seminar courses she taught. In these first semester courses, students got to know one another and their program advisor, often building strong social bonds. Program Advisor 1 noted that several of her advisees scheduled meetings with her in pairs, believing that they “make each other accountable.” Connections built through freshman seminar courses created motivating socio-academic relationships between students.

Status arose as another motivator from the perspectives of peer mentors and program advisors. As Peer Mentor D recounted the conversation leading to her employment as a peer mentor, her program advisor told her “we want students that other students can look up to.” She also noted, “I’m getting a bit of an image; people know who I am now.” When extended the chance to speak at the system-wide Student Success Forum in the fall, Peer Mentor F expressed great excitement at the prospect of sharing his experiences in front of a statewide audience of
professional advisors. Regarding the peer mentor role and its enhancement of socio-academic integration, Program Advisor 3 stated, “They have this connection. They’re seen as a responsible person here. They’re somebody who works here.” Peer mentors appreciated the request to serve in this capacity, and their roles motivated them to set good examples for other students.

**Personal goals.** Participant motivation also stemmed from a combination of internal factors, such as personal interests, circumstances, and future aspirations. All of the participating peer mentors acknowledged a need for higher education to achieve their goals, even though for some, those goals continued to evolve. Peer Mentor A knew she wanted to pursue a career in the medical field but did not have a specific occupation in mind. Enrollment at the community college allowed her to explore different options, and she learned she would need education beyond the associate degree level for employment in a medical career of interest, sparking heightened aspirations to continue her education.

Based on experience working with machinery on his grandfather’s farm, Peer Mentor C preferred the notion of hands-on learning and knew that he wanted to learn about heavy equipment. In speaking about his reasons for attending college, he stated, “I figured if I wanted to know how to fix it, I needed to know how it worked.” On his college of choice, he said, “They actually allow you to run the equipment for your first semester, which is cool.” Though he was less enthusiastic about his academic coursework, the chance to learn in the field motivated him to persevere and exert extra effort in his academic studies. He also expanded his goals to include earning an associate degree as opposed to the one-year certificate he originally planned to obtain.

Goal-setting was a priority for program advisors as they worked with advisees. Program Advisor 2 not only inquired about student goals but found herself “trying to work with them to articulate how they can meet those goals. What is it that they need to do in order not only to set
them but to meet them?” Program Advisor 1 encouraged students to consider what courses they enjoyed to start contemplating potential career paths. When discussing methods for determining an advisee’s goals, Program Advisor 3 indicated, “I’m pretty blunt. I just ask.” This direct, proactive approach was effective with Peer Mentor F, who declared, “[Program Advisor 3] is constantly on me and reminding me that I’m trying to go somewhere.” Program advisors helped students set their sights toward the future and discussed how to achieve both short- and long-term goals.

In answering a question about what helped him overcome obstacles, Peer Mentor F summed up the motivating power of goals:

As long as I am keeping in touch with what I want out of life and reminding myself exactly where I want to go, I think that gets me through anything, really. And it’s important to know that, and it’s hard for a lot of students to have that, because my generation specifically, a lot of them don’t know what they want to do at all.

Peer Mentor F’s goal-orientation led to achievement, regardless of the challenges he faced.

Peer mentors reached beyond their perceived capacities, persevered through multiple challenges, and succeeded academically by establishing and continuing to set greater goals. Program advisors proactively inquired with their advisees about goal-setting. Those goals served as a touchstone in motivating peer mentors to increase their efforts.

Theme #2: Attitudes About and Availability of Support

A common thread of discussion throughout the data involved participants’ attitudes about asking for and providing assistance and whether support was readily available. Most peer mentors expressed comfort asking questions regarding processes with which they had no prior experience. The local career center helped Peer Mentor B enroll in college. He stated, “They got
me all ready and signed up.” Similarly, Peer Mentor A received assistance applying to college and for financial aid from high school staff, and once she met her program advisor, considered her to be “my go-to for everything.” Others recalled seeking assistance with financial aid, course selection, and other tasks of enrollment.

Nuances emerged in the data as peer mentors and program advisors described their attitudes about appropriate levels of support. Some peer mentors felt strongly about their self-sufficiency and initially ignored or rebuffed general offers of assistance. Peer Mentor C admitted to overlooking multiple attempts on the part of his program advisor to connect with him at the start of his college career, until as he said, “I recognized that, hey, this is really helpful.” If not for a requirement to meet with his program advisor after he experienced academic difficulty, Peer Mentor F stated, “I probably would have tried to handle it myself.” Meanwhile, Program Advisor 1 lamented students seeking help, asking, “Why didn’t they ask us for help? Why didn’t they come in sooner? We’re so available, and there’s so many resources.” Nonetheless, program advisors set boundaries beyond which they felt it inappropriate to cross. Program Advisor 1 explained her limits as “offering to help and go along with them and do it with them, but I’m not going to do it for them.” Program Advisor 2 described a similar approach, explaining, “It’s that whole scaffolding . . . you walk him up, you show him [resources], you give them a soft handoff. You then ask and check and see if they’re attending, and if they’re not, you can’t drag them there.” Ultimately, peer mentors expressed their appreciation for the wealth of resources available and their comfort grew in accessing those resources, and program advisors recognized the need to offer assistance to the extent practicable but not foster overt dependence.

Peer mentors and program advisors alike demonstrated the desire to be of use to others. Program Advisor 1 described herself as “passionate” about helping others. In some cases,
participants were frustrated by students’ refusal to accept help, even as they acknowledged their tendency to do the same. When asked what the greatest drawback is to peer mentorship, Peer Mentor C said, “Sometimes a drawback is students doing what I did and just completely not looking at anything or ignoring everything. I help set up study groups, and nobody shows up. It bothers me because I went and I set it up.” On using her own experiences to help others, Peer Mentor E stated, “Mistakes can be valuable, but if I can prevent somebody from making ‘Uh oh’ that I did, then that’s a good thing.” Peer mentors sought to provide similar assistance to others as they came to understand the benefits of receiving help.

Four subthemes emerged from the overarching theme of support. They include Help-seeking Tendencies, Availability of Support, Providing the Appropriate Level of Support, and the Desire to Help Others. The following section addresses each subtheme in greater detail.

**Help-seeking tendencies.** Participant responses varied regarding their willingness to seek help. Most participants had no issues asking questions about administrative tasks, such as completing enrollment or financial aid applications. Some hesitated to seek assistance for academic or personal issues, while others felt more comfortable doing so. Participant F articulated his preferences around outside support and the way his program advisor handled them:

> I enjoy figuring things out on my own, and he knows that, and I’m not afraid to ask questions, but I’m very self-sufficient. So, he mainly just, he would show me where I need to go and give me all the information I needed to start, and then he left it up to me, which is I think very important. That’s what I needed. He also, if he absolutely knew that I needed to contact someone specific, he would get me there, and sometimes he wouldn’t give me a choice, which I’m thankful for.
He recognized that at times he resisted asking for help, but still needed it, and appreciated that his program advisor insisted upon offering resources in a proactive manner, which promoted a more beneficial relationship.

In describing her experiences with orientation, Peer Mentor D claimed to have “done a lot of research beforehand . . . I know what I’m doing.” However, she still found it helpful to learn the locations of administrative offices and did not hesitate to ask financial aid questions or confer with advisors regarding scheduling considerations. When having difficulties in classes, she emailed instructors to “try to make sure that I get that one-on-one with them.” For her, asking for help when she needed it was natural.

In some instances, peer mentors acknowledged that although support was there, they failed to use it. Peer Mentor E stated, “there are a ton of services that I haven’t taken advantage of yet.” As he reflected on his tendencies, Peer Mentor F said of tutoring:

Like I said, I try to be self-sufficient, so I kind of have stayed away from it, but that’s not for any particular bad reason, I just I try to do it on my own by myself first, and then see what I can do after that.

Peer Mentor F realized that seeking a tutor for a class in which he was struggling was appropriate, which further expanded his comfort asking for assistance.

Peer Mentor C admitted that although he was not shy about asking prescriptive questions about the enrollment process, he paid little attention to his program advisor’s offers of more general advising assistance at first, indicating, “I got a card in the mail. I actually didn’t even look at it. And she emailed me. I don’t use email very well either.” It was not until she tracked him down in person that he said, “I recognized that, hey, this is really helpful. I was like, ‘Oh, this is great. I probably should’ve paid attention to the postcard and the email she sent me.’” He
further explained his newfound belief in the benefits of help-seeking to a friend contemplating enrollment, telling him, “Hey, if you fail out up here it’s because you did something really wrong. You didn’t open up and ask somebody for help, or you are really good at avoiding [Program Advisor 2].” The benefits of his relationship with his program advisor opened Peer Mentor C up to receiving help and promoting help-seeking behaviors in other students.

In addition to program advisors physically tracking advisees down, other efforts existed to preclude students’ need to ask for help. Peer Mentor E mentioned a requirement in her English class to access the writing lab on campus. A positive experience led her to continue using the writing lab for other classes, creating engagement. In other cases, participants in the SSP were required to enroll in freshman seminar with their program advisor, leading to regular interactions with their program advisor, as well as receipt of the support inherent in the content of the course. The course also represented an opportunity to cultivate socio-academic integration, in that it provided information beneficial to students’ academic futures while building peer-to-peer and student-to-institution relationships.

As with these inescapable activities, proactive advising theory promoted creating unavoidable opportunities for students to obtain assistance. Program Advisor 3 spoke of finding ways to “engineer” informal interactions with students. Using proactive tactics, Peer Mentor F worked to generate SSP participant engagement and stated:

I try to almost make them feel obligated to meet with me just initially, you know, because you have to. Because like I said, a lot of kids don’t like to use e-mail, so whenever they see that, if they view it as something they have to do initially, then they'll be more open, then do it later, just because they need the extra push.
This peer mentor recognized students’ tendencies to avoid or ignore offers of assistance and realized the power of making interventions appear mandatory. The proactive approach garnered continued contacts, which provided program advisors and peer mentors the chance to offer their assistance whether the student sought it or not.

**Availability of support.** Overall, participating peer mentors believed assistance was available to address various needs. Areas in which study participants expressed a need for help included pre-enrollment activities, course selection, academic assistance, and simply having someone with whom to talk out issues. Many of those needs emerged before meeting their program advisors and extended beyond SSP interventions, connections to support, and institutional boundaries.

For Peer Mentor A, support for college-going activities began in her high school, where staff provided services to smooth her path to college. Peer Mentor B received assistance from his local career center following a layoff. Peer Mentor C found the initial enrollment process easy, primarily due to the ready availability of answers and noted:

I had a lot of questions, obviously, being my first time going into this kind of an opportunity or experience. I just would call the office. They have a number on top of all the paperwork. I just called them and was like, “Yeah, I’m not sure what’s going on.”

They’re like, “Oh, okay. Just do this.”

Similarly, as Peer Mentor D found financial aid issues the most confusing, she asked many questions of the financial aid office on campus, and found them to be “super friendly.” She also noted that “there’s always a resource” for any issue she encountered.

Several peer mentors also spoke of the availability and importance of resources to help with academic issues. Peer Mentor E considered herself a “mediocre student,” who expected to
earn grades of C at best. However, she found herself more suited to college-level study and found several unexpected resources on campus.” Peer Mentor F planned to use tutoring for one of his courses along with another SSP student. Most of the peer mentors interviewed also mentioned the assistance provided by their instructors, which is characteristic of socio-academic integration. As Peer Mentor B noted, “Everyone, all the teachers and all the people that work here at the school have been really helpful whenever you need it. Usually, it seems like they go out of their way to help.” Peer Mentor E admitted to returning to a prior teacher for help in her current, higher-level math course, and stated, “I know what time his classes are, so I’m able to sneak in and be like, ‘Hey, how do I do this?’” Her comfort with his style of teaching worked better for her comprehension, and he was willing to talk her through the content.

Concerning the support provided by the SSP, and its advisors specifically, Peer Mentor D stated, “As a technically first-generation college student, I had no one who could help me. Absolutely. My mom would be like, ‘I've got no clue.’ So, having that extra resource is super beneficial.” Peer Mentor B said of his program advisor:

She’s always been really helpful with anything really that you need with school. If you didn’t know where you needed to go to ask a question, if she didn’t know the answer, she’d always send you to the right person.

In general, participants agreed on the availability of assistance for a variety of needs and that there were multiple avenues by which to find help. Their positive experiences seeking resources led to the creation of solid networks of campus support.

**Providing an appropriate level of support.** Participating program advisors expressed opinions about the appropriate level of support provided. It became clear that these professionals went to great lengths to help SSP students to succeed. However, even
considering the program’s emphasis on proactive advising, boundaries existed as to how far program advisors went to assist students.

The advisors who participated in the study exhibited proactivity in contacting and following up with advisees. Contact with students happened in myriad ways, from postcards and letters to electronic means, such as emails and texts, to seeking out students in person. Program advisors emphasized the use of email with their advisees, indicating the proliferation of this form of communication in the workplace. Program Advisor 1 explained how she implores her students “to be checking their emails, too. That is huge. Please check your email.” Program Advisor 3 placed email in the following context:

They have to use it. It’s a professional expectation. You and I, when we email, I don’t think we usually have more than an hour go by before one of us is back to the other. That’s just normal interaction on email among professionals.

However, when emails went unanswered, or students missed classes or meetings, program advisors took their approaches a step further. As Program Advisor 3 stated, “I sent a hard copy letter, followed up with phone calls, sent emails. If I don’t get a response, I go find them.” When teaching freshman seminar courses, Program Advisor 1 tells her students, “If you’re not [in class], when I get home, I’m going to call you,” because I teach at night. And a student has said, ‘Yeah, [Program Advisor 1] will call you.’” Program Advisor 2 resorted to tracking down students as well. She stated, “I will go out and seek out people that I feel like I need to do that with.” However, she maintained boundaries by saying, “I haven’t ever gone and gotten anybody out of bed. Yet.” All of the program advisors interviewed demonstrated a willingness to attempt proactively to reach their students multiple times and in multiple ways.
At the same time, program advisors recognized, and in some cases expressed disappointment, that making contact did not always guarantee student action, nor were they willing to do a student’s work for him or her. Program Advisor 2 noted:

I feel guilty that I have people on my caseload that I just cannot get to walk through my door. I can’t do it. You know, I can lay in wait for them, but it’s not a meaningful conversation. . . . You pretty much can’t do anything if they’re not willing to step up to the plate and take responsibility for their own actions and do the work. . . . All I can do is advise and suggest and encourage. So students either take advantage of it, or they don’t . . . at some point if I’m working harder than they are, what good am I doing them when they leave here?”

Regarding the SSP, Program Advisor 2 realized that:

It’s not going to make a difference for everybody, because you cannot do the work for them. You can force them to be in a situation where they are doing some work. Whether they get the rest of it done is another story.

Program Advisor 2 went out of her way to offer students resources but found that some students simply never responded, and to go any further did them a disservice.

Similarly, Program Advisor 1 supported students proactively, but only to a point. She went directly to instructors about student issues only when necessary, preferring instead to coach students to engage appropriately with faculty. If a student presented a conflict with a teacher, she advised him or her to approach it as if it were a work situation, saying, “Okay, so if this was a supervisor, how would you have that conversation with a supervisor?” Or if the student needed to initiate a conversation with an instructor, she offered to “read one of your emails. I will read a draft and give you
some feedback, but I’m not doing it for you.” In essence, Program Advisor 1 believed in teaching students to advocate for, and ultimately do for, themselves.

Program Advisor 3 echoed the idea of providing the right level of support until the student can act independently, and said, “My door is open,” but “when they don’t need that professional support any longer, they move on, and I just don’t hear from them anymore. . . . They need help getting here, staying here, and leaving when they decide to leave.” Program Advisor 3 felt that relationships with students ran a natural course to their conclusion.

Interview data revealed an understanding that program advisors and peer mentors were unable to solve all student issues themselves. They expressed the importance of knowing when the situation required connections to other resources. Program Advisor 1 noted that with more “sensitive issues,” she brought in her supervisor or staff from other offices to assist. Peer Mentor F acknowledged that one of his gravest concerns about his role as a peer mentor involved finding a student in a truly terrible situation. He said, “It can get a little touchy if a situation with a student is way worse than we thought, and that’s whenever we have to really make some big judgment calls.” Program Advisor 3 said of the spectrum of issues facing students, “Every time I think I’ve heard all the things they had to tell me, something new comes up.” However, experience helped with the recognition that “A lot of times, a roadblock can be dissolved with a phone call or an email to a particular individual. I can help students with that.” Program Advisor 2 agreed that students in her region faced “overwhelming issues” and that staff at her college were “amazing as far as cobb[ling] together resources to be able to help students that want to
help themselves.” Participants saw the need to assess each situation individually and respond appropriately and with sensitivity.

**The desire to help others.** Participant interviews consistently revealed a strong desire to help others, both on the part of peer mentors and their program advisors. In the case of Peer Mentor A, a tradition of helping others emerged in the conversation. When describing the program advisors offer to serve as a peer mentor, she recounted:

> I said that I would be more than interested in it, because all throughout school, I’ve always helped my friends and my peers to help them with like math and stuff like that. Things that I was good at that they couldn't understand.

Similarly, Peer Mentor D expressed a desire to help her friends:

> When your friends come to you for help, and they’re like ‘I just really need some help, and I don’t want to go into the office. I don’t want to talk to these people I don’t know.’

> I’m like ‘Well, come right over. I’ll help you right out.’

To summarize her feelings about providing help to others, she continued, “Being able to be that helping hand when people are in a really bad place, they don’t feel good, they’re really confused or scared is really great.” In these students’ cases, helping others provided a sense of personal accomplishment.

Although it took Peer Mentor C time to realize the benefits of his program advisor’s help, he expressed frustration around “students doing what I did and just completely not looking at anything or ignoring everything.” However, he noted his success in coordinating a study group for one of the more difficult courses in his program, as he stated, “I pretty much got the whole class to come and study throughout the semester and for the final exam, which worked out very well.” In this case, the peer mentor was able to bring the dynamics of help-seeking and helping
others together. Similarly, Peer Mentor B found himself both giving and receiving help in informal study groups as he said:

There’s quite a few of us from my class that we’ll get together and work on homework together and to study and get ready for whatever kind of exams and things that we have. And then in the shop and stuff when we’re all working, everybody seems to be really ready to help each other if we need it. So it’s pretty good. It’s like a team almost.

Peer Mentor B believed that learning to work in a team would benefit him in his future career as well. Also sharing the desire to extend the cycle of support beyond the college environment, Peer Mentor E stated, “I feel . . . not only like a better student, but I feel like I’m developing as a more helpful person.” The opportunity to serve as a peer mentor gave these students a sense of achievement beyond academic success, and their desire to help others took hold.

**Theme #3: Finding and Fostering Feelings of Comfort**

Peer mentors’ sense of comfort with their colleges grew over time. Interviews revealed that development of students’ comfort often began before enrollment as they established familiarity with the campus and associated individuals. Peer Mentor C toured his campus, several hours from his home, four times before beginning classes there, whereas Peer Mentor E found more comfort close to home, when he noted, “I am kind of a homebody, so going far is not appealing to me at all. I like the idea of a small campus. I like the feel of it.” Several students mentioned the benefits of attending accepted student days and orientations for finding offices and classrooms and making friends. Some students expressed that their feelings of comfort overtook initial feelings of trepidation and fear about attending college. For Peer Mentor D, initial expectations about fitting in differed from reality, and she noted:
I was really shocked because I took that time off I was like man, I’m not going to get along with anyone. And then I get 18-year-olds who had way more maturity than I did. And then you get 50-year-olds taking classes with my class, and it was like oh, okay, so we’re all on the same level here.

Peer Mentor D found commonalities between herself and other students, which alleviated her fears and elevated her sense of belonging. Peer mentors gained comfort through on-campus experiences before and as classes began and became familiar with the campus environment, staff, and other students early on.

In many cases, feelings of comfort grew beyond familiarity to the belief that someone on campus truly cared about their well-being and success. In speaking about classes, Peer Mentor B said of his classmates, “everybody seems to be really ready to help each other if we need it. It’s like a team almost,” and that his instructors are “available for any questions that we might have.” Regarding his advisor, he stated, “She’s always been really helpful with anything really that you need with school.” Peer Mentor D recalled one advisor’s willingness to listen, and said, “She’s actually one of the first people I went to when there was family stuff going on. I was like, ‘I really just need somebody to talk to. Can I vent to you for a minute?’” Program Advisor 1 noted her desire to build an environment of care for her students, as she attempted to reach out regularly to ask about her advisees and encouraged them to participate socially, make friends, and integrate further with the college. Peer mentors believed that other students, faculty, and advisors truly cared about their academic and personal well-being.

In a few cases, participants described feelings beyond familiarity and comfort. After she established herself in several on-campus job opportunities and spent significant time on campus outside of classes, Peer Mentor A exclaimed, “I love it here.” Peer Mentor D felt the same of her
campus, as she said, “It’s definitely a home feeling.” These mentors also invoked the word *family* when talking about their college experiences.

Although not all peer mentors likened their feelings about the college setting to those of home and family, each described a level of comfort that grew over time. Peer mentors described early experiences that built familiarity and ongoing interactions that fostered growing comfort. The subthemes stemming from the theme of Finding and Fostering Feelings of Comfort included Initial Familiarity, an Environment of Care, and Sense of Family, all described below.

**Initial familiarity.** Four of the six participating peer mentors described prior experience with their college or visits to campus before attendance, in some cases, meeting staff and students with whom they continued relationships once enrolled. Peer Mentor B discussed his college’s accepted students’ day, which he described as follows: “They have an event where all the new students get to meet each other. They had activities.” He recalled making a cardboard boat as well as some new friends. Peer Mentor C decided not to attend a similar event; however, he had been to visit his college multiple times before committing to attend. Peer Mentor E came with other accepted students from her high school to her college’s orientation. She said, “They sent a whole busload of students, and I was allowed to go. So not only was it kind of easier because I knew people who were with me, I was a little bit more comfortable.” She also mentioned meeting many of the staff with whom she worked, “So all of these people I met, I’m still working with, I still know them. They’re still available to me.” Peer Mentor D expressed feeling overly comfortable with her local college, as she attended events there frequently growing up, and chose instead to attend a college farther away. However, she “had visited [her college of choice] a couple of times in high school.” These preliminary activities and experiences
offered these students a sense of belonging in their new surroundings and paved the way for institutional integration.

Some participants mentioned similarities between their colleges and high schools, either in size or curriculum. Peer Mentor C explained:

When the rep came from [the college], he was describing the school, and he was like it’s really small, which is cool, and it’s in a small town. The area is like there’s not a lot of people because I didn’t feel like a big school was the place for me. . . . When I was researching schools and stuff I wanted it to be like my high school. If I was going to go to college, I wanted to be as close to that as I could. . . . Class sizes are small, which is good. I like it because I was in high school classes with classes of 10, 12 kids. I didn’t want to come to college and be in a class of 40 and be like, ‘Whoa, there’s kids everywhere.’ I feel like it’s kind of like the same connection I had with my high school.

Peer Mentor C built a vision of a safe and comfortable environment for learning based on prior experience and his desire to maintain some sense of the familiar. He found that familiarity contributed to his feelings of connection to the institution. While size was a factor for Peer Mentor C, others felt connected due to experience in their chosen programs of study. Peer Mentor A took a course related to her current college major through her high school, and Peer Mentor C completed a vocational program during high school that fed into his current college curriculum. For these students, finding programs that continued their education in an area of interest lent some level of familiarity at the outset of their college careers and enhanced feelings of academic integration.

Two peer mentors interviewed mentioned that interacting with and getting to know nice people on campus and gaining a sense of community overtook their initial feelings of fear about
the college experience. In describing his feelings toward entering college and what transpired, Peer Mentor B stated:

Well, it was kind of a scary thought, because it’s been so many years since I’ve been in school. It’s been almost 10 years since I was in school. I wasn’t really sure how it would be and with the big age gap between me and most of the other students. But everything’s gone pretty well. I’ve made a lot of good friends up here, and everything’s gone great. Everybody’s been real nice.

For Peer Mentor D, feeling prepared did not quell her fears, but her program advisor helped, and though she considered her college large, it did not feel that way once she began to gain comfort. She recalled:

College is just such a scary experience even if you think you’re ready for it. And [my program advisor] just came out in a really comforting, like let me take you under my wing, type of way. . . . Even though we’re still a big school, everyone still knows each other; it’s still a small community.

The trepidation these students felt entering the college environment faded as they made friends, identified welcoming resources, and began to grow socially and academically comfortable.

Program advisors and peer mentors alike worked to enhance feelings of familiarity with students. Program Advisor 2 appreciated early contact, because as she stated, “at least they knew my name, and at the admitted student days, I’m not only introducing myself to students, I’m introducing myself to parents.” For Peer Mentor F, the college and surrounding community were small enough that “everyone pretty much knows everyone in the area. . . . I know a lot of individuals in the school, which I’m also very thankful for, since I can interact with them well.” Similarly, Peer Mentor A stated, “The people that I tutor and help as a peer mentor, they all feel
comfortable to come to me when they have a problem.” The comfort and familiarity felt and fostered by these peer mentors enabled them to perform well in their mentoring roles. Program Advisor 3 saw the SSP’s proactive relationship-building increase over time with the help of peer mentors. This college traditionally implemented advising interventions to address issues only once they became real problems. As Program Advisor 3 stated:

I’m trying to move the formal meetings from a “you're in trouble,” or “going to be on academic probation,” or “there’s some things we need to do” to more positive weekly, hopefully, probably less than that, bi-weekly, maybe, check-ins so that we have a good solid working relationship before difficulty comes up. . . . We’re going to work really hard on onboarding with the third cohort, and increase both the number of meetings, contacts, and just activities with [SSP] students, and try to build relationships that way.

For this advisor, peer mentors, and college, proactivity represented a shift from reacting to difficulties, effectively rendering program advisor interactions negative or punitive, to focusing on establishing positive, supportive relationships. Rather than mandating advising meetings only for students in academic jeopardy, the addition of peer mentors allowed for more proactive attention.

**An environment of care.** Feelings of comfort deepened as participants recognized their college environments as sincerely caring places, where people celebrated success and listened to concerns. As Peer Mentor B noted:

I’ve been real successful, and it seems like whenever you do, there are people that will tell you that, “Hey, good job and keep up the good work.” It seems like everyone . . . it’s a lot more personal than what a lot of schools probably are.

Peer Mentor E added:
and [college administrators] don’t do it because to look good or anything like that; I’ve never felt more genuinely cared about than I do here. People notice if I’m having trouble with an assignment, or if I’m having trouble with a teacher. People notice that. And they want to know how to help you.

About her program advisor, this student proclaimed, “She’s a resource for everything. And she’s just somebody that I love to go see.” About the SSP and his program advisor, Peer Mentor F stated, “I think it’s the personal relationship that’s important, because a lot of kids don’t have that . . . it’s just the fact that there’s someone paying attention.” His program advisor concurred, and said, “I think the most beneficial aspects for students is students know they have someone who will listen to them.” Likewise, Peer Mentor C asserted, “I get a lot of people that come to me and just need somebody to talk to because they’re pulling their hair out and want a listening ear.” In general, these students expressed a notion that they felt valued, and those feelings led to stronger socio-academic integration.

In addition to listening ears, some participants discussed the proactive interventions that enhanced feelings of care. On the freshman seminar course, Peer Mentor D said:

It definitely helped me feel rooted. It was a really small class, and we had great people in there. We had [Program Advisor 1] and [another advisor], and they just made this great atmosphere where everyone was just instantly welcome, instantly happy. Everything could melt away . . . all your worries.

Similarly, regarding the freshman seminar course taught by her program advisor and another teacher, Peer Mentor E said, “They just welcomed us all in . . . made a good sense of community and I felt comfortable with them within the first week.” From the advisor perspective, Program Advisor 1 commented on her persistence around students paying attention to self-care, and
stated, “I’m always asking, ‘What are you doing to take care of yourself?’ . . . I think it just sets a stronger foundation for success, for caring for the students. . . . I will be there for them.”

Students’ sense of comfort grew through program advisors proactively inquiring about and attending to students’ need to feel welcomed, to belong, and to know that someone caring existed to listen to and help them work through their concerns.

**Sense of family.** Some participants likened their college experiences and the relationships made to that of the family dynamic, which pushed levels of familiarity even beyond genuine caring. From the program advisor perspective, parental tendencies sometimes emerged. As Program Advisor 3 stated, “Coddling is one of my least favorite words. I’m accused of that. I’m accused of being a rescuer.” However, this advisor explained, “My approach to that is that if I don’t take that tack, they won’t be successful, and they’ll be gone.” Program Advisor 1 introduced advisees to her family through the pictures in her office and emphasized her role as a mother. As she asserted, “it’s really that relationship base and getting to know who they are so that they’re comfortable. This is just the Mom coming out.” The program advisors developed strong relationships with their students that some compared to family dynamics and which led to institutional integration.

Peer mentors sensed this parental approach. Peer Mentor D claimed that one advisor “calls me her daughter sometimes.” In speaking about her program advisor, she stated:

The way I introduce [Program Advisor 1] is she’s very motherly. . . . Some kids really do want that motherly connection; they’ll stop by and see her every day. Or they’ll come and see her once a month. And she’s completely fine with that. She’s not going to be overbearing about it. She’ll just send out a trouble call to you. She calls on the phone, so you can actually hear her voice, and it’s actually pretty great.
Peer Mentor A described her college experience, “Everyone is nice to everyone, you can talk to anyone. It’s kind of like a family environment. You accept everyone.” Peer Mentor E stated, “this is the first place that had felt like home to me since I moved out of my parent’s place.” And when asked to finish the sentence, “Advising at this college is like . . .” Peer Mentor E said “family.” While professionalism and boundaries were declared important, so too were feelings of comfort, brought about through general familiarity with their surroundings, the belief that those around them cared about their well-being, and even a sense of home and family.

Theme #4: Advancing Burgeoning Confidence

Throughout the interview data, participants described the increasing self-confidence gained by peer mentors. Much of this confidence resulted from their success as students. Many of the peer mentors interviewed revealed academic insecurities they successfully overcame during their time in the SSP. Peer Mentor D expressed concerns related to his high school experience, and said, “I’m not going to remember a single thing that I learned in high school.” However, she found that her instructors brought her and her classmates up to speed as necessary. She stated, “They made sure everyone was together on what we were learning.” Peer Mentor E recounted a similar experience. As she remembered it:

. . . as a senior I didn’t even want to apply to colleges . . . because I didn’t do the best in high school. But when I got here, college work is not only a lot better for me, but I was also given a lot of resources here that I didn’t think I had.

Peer Mentor C and others peer mentors mentioned their preference for college over high school courses, primarily due to a focus on topics of interest. Peer Mentor C simply said, “I never thought I’d go to college. . . . I never thought college was for me,” and although he admitted, “I still struggle with the math and the English,” he did very well in hands-on, career-related
courses. All three of these peer mentors not only persisted in their pursuit of education, but they also excelled, each earning places on the Dean’s List.

In several cases, peer mentors’ academic success and growing confidence led to increasing academic aspirations. Peer Mentors B and C both originally intended to complete one-year certificate programs; however, both decided to pursue two-year associate degrees. As Peer Mentor B stated:

when I started, I kind of looked at like it was only a year so it couldn’t be too bad. Then when I got here and I started, I realized that I could be really good at it, and it does work out good. So I figured I should take a second year and continue to pursue an education. I enjoy it.

Several other peer mentors mentioned their desire to continue their educations to earn four-year degrees, and Peer Mentor D stated, “I plan on going to school for a very long time,” indicating her aspirations to earn a Master’s degree, if not a doctorate, in psychology. Many of the peer mentors enjoyed college, worked hard, performed well, and wanted to continue their education.

Peer mentor confidence also grew via their mentoring roles. As Peer Mentor B noted, “Just understanding everything going on around me made it easier to feel confident . . . to reach out to other students.” Peer Mentor B expressed initial concerns over mentoring other students, but acknowledged, “I definitely feel a lot more comfortable now than I did before. It’s probably one of my favorite jobs I’ve ever had.” The program advisors also recognized the growth of these students from when they first entered the program through their time as peer mentors, often due to the opportunities advisors provided. Program Advisor 2 stated, “I do think it’s been a great learning experience for them.” Participating advisors agreed that peer mentors not only
learned the content of their jobs but accountability and professionalism from their positions as peer mentors.

Peer mentors began their college careers with rather low expectations of their academic abilities based on prior experience. They found increased engagement in college courses of personal interest, performed beyond initial expectations, and grew in confidence. Their roles as peer mentors and opportunities provided by program advisors also led to increased self-confidence, manifesting in the confidence building of students they served but tempered by what peer mentors still needed to learn. The notion of burgeoning confidence begat the subthemes of Academic Attainment and Personal Growth, explored in detail below.

**Academic attainment.** As mentioned previously, half of the peer mentors who participated in the study tested into developmental courses, which indicated a lack of adequate college preparation before attendance. While some participants admitted to difficulties with certain subjects, they recognized the need to put in sufficient effort to succeed. As Peer Mentor F realized when he struggled with a particular course:

I got in contact with a teacher, and instead of just communicating through e-mail I set up a time to see her face to face so I could actually explain the circumstances, so she can get on a personal level as well. She helped me through that. I mean, she didn’t spoon feed me, per se. She told me exactly what I needed to do and that there was still hope, instead of me just sitting back and wondering and then just writing it off and thinking that there’s no chance. She made me understand; there’s always something you can do as long as you put in the effort.

Program Advisor 3 supported this approach and stated that in his experience, incoming students are:
used to being able to keep low profiles, stay under the radar, and move forward through high school. That strategy has worked well for them. It’s hard to convince them that that is not going to work well in college. Whether it’s this college or any other, they need to be proactive about getting their work done, establishing communication with instructors. In modeling this type of proactive behavior, Program Advisor 3 succeeded in convincing Peer Mentor F to initiate communications with his instructor and understood that the bulk of the responsibility fell on the student. The positive outcome from this experience instilled additional confidence in the student to continue accepting that responsibility.

Peer Mentor B was initially unsure of his ability to handle the academic rigors of college but was pleased to discover his capacity for learning, as he said:

The biggest concern I had, because it’s been a long time since I did any school work, and I wasn't sure how it would work out. But right from the start, I just kind of worked really hard and I’ve been maintaining really good grades. . . . I never really realized just how good I could be with academics.

Peer Mentor B noted his difficulties in high school but recognized his growth, and his success led him to believe in his abilities. He no longer felt concerned about the work and declared himself a “natural at picking up on new things.” His hard work also earned him a spot on the Dean’s list twice by the time of the interview. Participants D and E made the Dean’s List twice as well, even though Peer Mentor E considered herself a “mediocre student” whose “expectation for myself was kind of low.” However, she later described herself as “a smarter student” who “feels a lot more in control of my education.” As Peer Mentor D explained, “I definitely just started doing well in my classes, and it made me feel really confident. I was like okay, I do know
this stuff. I’m good at what I’m doing.” In each of these cases, students experienced success, which bred newfound confidence in their academic abilities.

Sometimes, participants acknowledged better academic performance in classes they enjoyed. As Peer Mentor C stated, “All of my trade-related classes here I score very well in. I think it’s mostly because I’m into it, interested in what’s going on.” Not only did he form a study group for one of his classes as part of his peer mentoring responsibilities, but he also helped the students a year behind him with course content. In another case, although she did not claim to enjoy math, Peer Mentor A tutored students in the troublesome subject, suggesting some affinity for the topic. The recognition that liking a course leads to improvements in academic performance, led Peer Mentor D to encourage the students she mentored to:

make sure every semester you have at least one class that you’re really interested in. . . .

Because no matter what, even if everything else is just piling up on top of you, you get to look forward to that one class where it’s just like oh my gosh, I love learning this stuff.

In this example, the student translated her own experience into sound advice. As peer mentors found areas of personal interest, they began to excel academically. This understanding led peer mentors to gravitate toward the courses more interesting to them and encourage the students they mentored to do the same. The ability to explore and find one’s passions in the college environment enabled peer mentors to perform to the best of their abilities and led them to promote this behavior in others.

Growth in his academic confidence inspired another peer mentor to instill it in others. Peer Mentor F stated, “Now that I’m involved in the program, I work with more individuals who are struggling than individuals who are succeeding. And most of that is, you know, they’re definitely smart. They are definitely capable. They’re all capable.” For him, belief in his abilities
allowed the recognition of ability in other students. Personal confidence spurred peer mentors to advance confidence in others.

**Personal growth.** In addition to academic achievements, peer mentors expressed indications of personal growth and gave credit to their program advisors and their roles as mentors for their increased confidence. As Peer Mentor B said about peer mentoring, “It’s been a real interesting experience, because I’ve never really done a whole lot of interaction with people for a job. It’s been really good for that. It’s helped open me up a little bit I guess.” Similarly, Peer Mentor E said of her program advisor, “she's opened my eyes to a lot of different things, and I’m not afraid to try anything.” Peer Mentor D described her initial hesitation around speaking to other students, and said, “it was definitely more difficult in the beginning. I didn’t like talking to the students one-on-one. I could talk to them over the phone fine; a little bit easier that way.” However, she then claimed, “Since college, I felt like I’ve just become more who I am.” These glimpses of personal development highlighted peer mentors’ growth in confidence as individuals.

The program advisors created opportunities for their advisees and peer mentors to challenge themselves and reflect on their growth. Program Advisor 2 said the freshman seminar course “is all of those things that everybody needs to be successful in school and successful in life.” With her freshman seminar students and SSP advisees, Program Advisor 1 encouraged personal journaling to take stock of highs and lows, to celebrate the good and assess how they worked through the bad. She said:

so when they come back, and I say, “So what do you have to celebrate?” or “Have you had any struggles?” And looking back and saying, “Oh yeah. You know what? Three
weeks ago, I had a hard time in math.” “Okay, so what did you do? You didn’t call me, but what did you do so that now you’re feeling better?”

Her tactic provided the chance to track and review experiences and reactions and discuss potential self-improvement. Program Advisor 1 also pushed her peer mentors out of their comfort zones to encourage growth. As Peer Mentor E stated:

I’ve had to do orientations, and she’s given me the opportunity to do that. And it was kind of nerve-wracking at first, because orientations. . . . A lot of the kids in there are really nervous, don’t know what they’re doing, their mom and dad might not be with them. They could be dragging their feet about college. But for her to feel confident enough for me to help those kids, that made me feel really good. . . . So she’s always giving me not only confidence but tools for success.

Program Advisor 2 maintained a focus on the individual student, saying of her approach, “It’s very student-centered, very holistic. I’m here to help them be their best selves.” Speaking specifically about his peer mentors, Program Advisor 3 summed it up as follows:

I think recognizing that they’re capable, providing support and supervision, and letting them know that it's okay to fail. . . . I think for both of them, this is the first time that they’ve ever had a position of responsibility where I say to them, “I trust you.”

Participating program advisors provided peer mentors with tools for success, opportunities to share expertise, chances to push themselves, and the room to make mistakes from which they learned. As peer mentors, these students had the opportunity to try new things, failed or succeeded, and learned about themselves from their experiences, growing in confidence along the way.
Several of the participants acknowledged how their roles as peer mentors straddled two worlds, as they were both students and employees. Simply put, Peer Mentor E said, “I work here too, so I’m not only a student, but I work here.” Peer Mentor C stated:

I kind of feel like I’m a stepping stone or a bridge between the two. . . . I’m in between, so I’m not talking to somebody else that’s in the same boat as them, but I’m not a boss like somebody down here in the office or a dean or what have you. Somebody in between.

Program Advisor 3 believed the SSP and the role of peer mentor prevented his students from dropping out of college, saying, “I think they might be gone. . . . I think it’s that strong. They have this connection. They’re seen as a responsible person here. They’re somebody who works here.” The peer mentor role appeared to build confidence through students’ perceptions of elevated status.

Though confidence grew, the students interviewed understood that in their roles as peer mentors they did not have all the answers. Peer Mentor A acknowledged the need to inquire with her program advisor when students had questions she could not answer. As she said, “Anything about the school, if I don’t know I just come [to my program advisor]. She directs me to the person I should be talking to.” As Peer Mentor C humorously stated, “I’m not going say I have my ducks in a row, because they’re not even in the same pond.” Peer mentors recognized that the need for continued growth, learning, and support marked a level of maturity, and to admit inexperience required personal confidence.

**Summary**

Community colleges enroll unusually high numbers of students with academic challenges and receive proportionately lower funding than other public institutions while charging less
(Bailey, 2015; State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2015). As a result of these and other factors, substantially more students at community colleges fail to reach their academic goals (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2016; Sparks & Malkus, 2013). It is in students’, institutions’, and society’s best interests to change this paradigm.

In 2016, to improve student outcomes, the Northeast Community College Consortium (NCCC) implemented a student success program (SSP) aimed at providing proactive advising services to academically vulnerable students. They hired several program advisors to engage in this work, and enlisted peer mentors from within the program to assist in subsequent program years. To serve as peer mentors required that students succeeded in overcoming challenges traditionally linked to academic trouble, persisted in their academic endeavors, and demonstrated characteristics their program advisors believed useful to fellow students. This collective case study sought to establish what kinds of institutional interventions contributed to peer mentor success.

Demographic and interview data contributed to the study’s results. The participating students exhibited one or more the following risks to academic achievement: low socioeconomic status, first-generation college-going, lack of adequate academic preparation, and unclear academic or career goals. Interview data revealed positive peer mentor reactions to interventions that served to motivate student effort, provided support that appropriately met student needs and preferences, fostered students’ feelings of comfort, and advanced student confidence.

Chapter one introduced the study’s problem of practice, purpose, and research questions. Chapter two outlined the process of reviewing the literature for relevant content and direction. Chapter three defined the study’s design and approach. Chapter five answers the study’s research
questions, discusses its implications, provides recommendations for its application in practice and potential future research, and draws conclusions about the study’s significance.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

It is in the best interest of institutions of higher education to seek continuous improvements in student outcomes (Kim & Feldman, 2011; Kot, 2014). Researchers argue that student success is a fundamental goal of colleges and universities (Dougherty et al., 2016).

Without question, it is a significant contributor to long-term institutional viability (Zhang et al., 2017). Early in the twenty-first century, governmental and public scrutiny demanded accountability, and the emerging economy required increasing educational aspirations (Carnevale et al., 2013; Drake, 2011; Kot, 2014; White, 2015). For community colleges, these factors created greater concerns. These institutions’ low academic and financial barriers to enrollment often attracted students with obstacles preventing their success (Bailey, 2015; Coley, 2000; Nakajima et al., 2012), including poor academic preparation (Bailey, 2009; Hollis, 2009), unclear academic and career goals (Hatch & Garcia, 2017), distracting extracurricular obligations (Karp & Bork, 2012), and a lack of understanding of the academic environment (Pascarella et al., 2003; Strayhorn, 2015). These difficulties wreaked havoc on resulting student outcomes.

To combat these problems, the Northeast Community College Consortium (NCCC) sought to provide additional support to its most vulnerable student populations through a targeted student success program (SSP). NCCC colleges hired eight professional advisors in the fall of 2016, each of whom served 75 at-risk students per year for three academic years. To assist with annually increasing caseloads, the program advisors selected students from the first year’s cohort to act as peer mentors to incoming program participants. Each college also identified comparison cohorts with similar risk factors to determine quantitative program benefits.
The NCCC conducted quantitative analysis on several measures of student success, including course completion, grade point average, and persistence of SSP participants for internal purposes and for reporting to the program’s funders. In this analysis, no consistent patterns or substantial differences in student outcomes emerged for SSP served or comparison groups in year one of the program. However, all peer mentors persisted into the spring of 2018, compared to only 55.2% of total students served in the first year of the SSP and 54.8% of the 2016 SSP comparison cohort. In the aggregate, peer mentors who participated in this study also performed increasingly well in their coursework, as their combined grade point average increased by .52 from Fall 2016 to Spring 2017 and rose another .07 in Fall 2017. Quantitative measures of program participant, comparison cohort, and entering student population success comprised the majority of system- and funder-related program exploration and provided the data that contributed to this study’s descriptive comparison.

This qualitative, collective case study diverged from internal NCCC quantitative inquiry. Through semi-structured interviews, the study sought to determine what aspects of the advising experience peer mentors believed to be beneficial to their academic success. Primary data collection consisted of six peer mentor and three program advisor interviews which posed various questions related to the understanding of advising, the interventions they received and delivered, and how advising contributed to their social and academic integration in the college setting. The researcher used Rev.com transcription, performed manual corrections, sent resulting transcripts to participants for member checking, and wrote field notes and analytic memos to capture impressions. The researcher conducted deductive and inductive thematic analysis on collected data to establish dozens of codes, multiple categories, and ultimately several themes.

Interview data revealed four primary themes:
Motivating Factors Driving Effort
Attitudes About and Availability of Support
Finding and Fostering Feelings of Comfort
Advancing Burgeoning Confidence.

Addressing these themes through proactive advising interventions appeared to enhance peer mentors’ socio-academic connections to their institutions, which in turn appeared to contribute to their academic persistence. This chapter delineates how the data and their underlying themes answered the study’s overarching research questions, addresses the study’s implications for advising practice, and presents recommendations for institutional action and additional research into this topic.

**Interpretation of Findings**

The study sought to examine how students with challenges identified as common barriers to academic success overcame those challenges to persist in the academic setting and whether they attributed their success to the advising they received or their connection to the institution. Data collection focused on interviews with SSP peer mentors possessing common risks to academic success, who nevertheless persisted in their studies. Supporting and clarifying information on SSP advising interventions came from interviews with SSP advisors, who oversaw SSP students’ academic progress and held the responsibility of selecting SSP peer mentors. Data analysis aimed to answer the two primary research questions discussed below.

**RQ1: How do community college peer mentors describe and understand their experiences with advising?**

Peer mentors discussed several aspects of their college experience that alluded to the receipt of advising, but not always from formal advisors. Preliminary conversations about
college aspirations and career goals took place with family members including parents, grandparents, and siblings, guidance and other high school personnel, as well as college staff from admissions departments and other offices. Once on campus, peer mentors received guidance from various combinations of financial aid personnel, full- and part-time faculty, and professional advisors, many not directly assigned to the student. These informal advising interactions supported the assertions of Williamson et al. (2014), who claimed that advising was a concern of all institutional actors.

Not only did a variety of individuals deliver advising services, but these activities also manifested in various forms. Participants noted different mechanisms used by advisors to disseminate information, including mail, email, phone call, text, college websites, and in person. Some peer mentors said that they paid little attention to college communications initially; however, once they were in a position where they needed to reach students, they expressed frustration with other students who ignored interventions. Similar student behaviors were encountered by Bean and Eaton (2002), who said that “for students who are avoidant, mentoring may be the best method of intrusion,” thereby supporting the use of proactive advising via mentors is a promising method for overcoming student resistance (p. 84). Program advisors emphasized the critical nature of reading emails with their students, as it was the predominant form of communication used in work settings. Gaines’ (2014) research supported a pro-email stance, as she found that students preferred email to other electronic forms of communication, because they wished to maintain separation between academic and personal virtual identities. However, program advisors noted the proliferation of countless institutional emails and sought to limit their use when possible. None of the program advisors felt above tracking down unresponsive students as the need arose, and peer mentors agreed that in some cases, an advisor
seeking them out in person made them take action. In some cases, program advisors enlisted peer mentors to assist in the search for elusive students. These types of proactive tactics ascribed to Karp’s (2011) belief in creating unavoidably intrusive supports for students.

Peer mentors also described certain campus activities as integral to their advising experiences and they, themselves, became essential actors in these events as peer mentors. As Kuh (2007) encouraged, “Teach first-year students as early as possible how to use college resources effectively” (p. 2). Pre-enrollment events, such as orientations and admitted student days, allowed students to meet each other and campus staff, as well as familiarize themselves with the college environment. Freshman seminar courses provided further opportunities to engage with students, faculty, and advisors, creating social networks. Karp et al. (2008) claimed that these networks evolved primarily in the classroom for community college students. Peer mentors became facilitators in orientations, provided academic assistance as tutors, and held events of their own to help students navigate their college experiences.

Although peer mentors described a broad spectrum of advising supports, in many cases they failed to associate certain activities with advising. Peer mentors did not necessarily recognize conversations around academic and career goals as advising; however, several researchers identified goal-setting as integral to the advising process (Hatch and Garcia, 2017; Hirschy et al., 2011; O’Banion, 2012; Steingass & Sykes, 2008). Similarly, peer mentors who claimed to know how to navigate college independently often described their ease in asking process-oriented questions, unaware that such inquiry and response represented a form of advising. Though the contemporary advising role encompassed far more than course selection (Crookston, 1994; Williamson, 2014), the peer mentors who participated in this study did not
acknowledge advising’s broadening scope, even as they received and delivered these broader advising services.

Both peer mentors and program advisors expressed their beliefs that resources existed to help students succeed. While many felt comfortable accessing those resources right away, for others, it took more time and often required substantial proactivity on the part of others. Some program advisors mandated regular in-person meetings. Freshman seminar courses provided the opportunity to embed advising and other resources into a required class. In one case, a faculty member required students in her class to visit the writing lab to learn about the services offered. This requisite encounter served to make the peer mentor in this class comfortable returning to this resource for assistance in future courses. Peer mentor discussions of these interventions acknowledged that it was worth seeking and accepting the help available to them when needed.

RQ2: How do community college peer mentors perceive that the assistance provided by advisors helped them develop academic and social connections with their colleges?

Though the study focused on a particular student success program (SSP) and its advisors and peer mentors, the first research question exposed a larger context for advising. Broader advising contexts included the constituencies who delivered advising and the scope of services they provided. It was necessary to acknowledge the roles of all institutional actors who advised peer mentors to answer the second research question. This broader definition of advisor recognizes that advising did not occur only within the formal advisor-advisee relationship for these students (Davidson & Wilson, 2013).

Data analysis revealed the growing comfort achieved by peer mentors over time, starting with an initial familiarity with the college environment and in many cases developing into something akin to a family dynamic. Personal experiences on campus and with institutional
actors influenced the level of comfort achieved. On student institutional engagement, Young-Jones et al. (2013) said, “student involvement with academic programs and professionals can still either facilitate the journey toward a degree or lead to disappointment and failure” (p. 7).

Figure 1 depicts the continuum of comfort described by peer mentors:

Figure 1. Continuum of comfort as described by peer mentors.

Positive encounters along this continuum moved peer mentors further toward peak socio-academic integration. Before enrollment, peer mentors’ knowledge of a nearby campus led to initial awareness. Campus tours established familiarity for many peer mentors, who met future classmates and college staff. Orientations and admitted student days created additional personal connections. Through regular contact, familiarity advanced peer mentor comfort. Program advisors who required mandatory check-ins built relationships with students. Peer mentors who attended classes regularly grew to know classmates and faculty better, making friends and finding instructors with whom they connected. Freshman seminar classes brought advising into the classroom for peer mentors, as course content focused on their academic and personal journeys with substantial support. For some peer mentors, this course built friendships and trusting relationships with college staff. Prior research supported orientations, freshman seminar courses, and mandatory advising (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Smith & Allen, 2014). These types of activities led students to realize that others on campus cared about their
success, which led to increased integration and success (Drake, 2011; Karp et al., 2008; Nakajima et al., 2016). Beyond feelings of care, some peer mentors and advisors began relating to their campus environments and the faculty, staff, and students around them as home and family, signifying a sense of institutional attachment (Karp et al., 2008). Many peer mentors described their advisors as parental figures, some directly, and others in their depictions of how the advisor treated them. As comfort deepened with each peer mentor, integration also increased.

Academic and personal confidence emerged alongside the growing comfort peer mentors described. Many of the peer mentors expressed a lack of academic self-confidence as they entered college, which Tinto (2015) believed to cause persistence issues. High school experiences and time away from school comprised the common explanations for peer mentor insecurities. However, for some of these students, the ability to study topics of interest and work in more hands-on environments led to their success in classes. Peer mentors acknowledged that academic achievement still required hard work; however, earning good grades and making the Dean’s List motivated them to continue working diligently. Several peer mentors gained the comfort necessary to seek help from faculty, tutors, and others when they struggled academically. Many peer mentors created study groups and served as tutors themselves.

The responsibility of peer mentoring helped to bolster students’ personal growth and confidence, as well. Program advisors provided peer mentors with opportunities to try new things, trusting these students’ abilities. As Young-Jones et al. (2013) discovered, “advisor empowerment also contributed to student responsibility, student study skills, and perceived support,” all of which increased student self-efficacy and contributed to academic success (p. 15). Some peer mentors initially expressed trepidation about guiding other students but came to understand their capabilities and appreciate the push outside their comfort zones. Several peer
mentors and program advisors noted how the role further integrated these students into the fabric of their colleges and elevated their institutional status (Kuh, 2007).

**Discrepancies**

Different impressions and interpretations emerged from among the compilation of participant interview data. For the peer mentors participating in this study, the largest discrepancies involved initial engagement. While some peer mentors gravitated toward their advisors with little effort, other relationships required continued effort on the part of program advisors. Early relationship-building occurred for peer mentors who attended freshman seminar courses with their program advisors, whereas other peer mentors lacked this opportunity. The distinction lay with optional versus mandated college policy and practice. Program advisors noted other practical differences. At one institution, only students in academic jeopardy were required to meet with advisors, which provided the advisor little leverage to initiate positive relationship-building activities. Other institutions required students to participate in orientations, advising sessions, and freshman seminar, which promoted opportunities to establish familiarity between advisors and students.

Peer mentor risk factors and their influence on peer mentors comprised another set of discrepancies. Though many peer mentors were first-generation students, family members provided encouragement and support for their college aspirations. Peer mentors from families not considered low-income still expressed the need to work and appreciation for scholarship money. Some peer mentors who did not require remedial courses expressed academic insecurities. These seemingly contrary portrayals exposed the fact that student beliefs and experiences did not necessarily follow measurable demographic characteristics.
The data revealed other kinds of discrepancies as well, primarily along the continuum of change experienced by peer mentors. As entering students, some peer mentors expressed a desire to remain completely self-sufficient; yet for some, this did not apply to asking prescriptive questions. Once they became peer mentors, these students often recognized the benefits of seeking help and wondered why other students shied away from available resources. Concerning peer mentor comfort in the college setting, several participants described relationships often associated with family; however, one program advisor described clear boundaries, and another insisted that the relationship remain professional. Also, while the confidence peer mentors gained through their roles helped establish a deeper connection to the institution, the self-efficacy gained in this role should enable these students to develop the independence to pursue new opportunities beyond the college (White & Schulenberg, 2012).

Limitations and Delimitations

Choices the researcher made regarding design and scope served as delimiters to the study. Internal NCCC institutional inquiry focused on quantitative analysis of SSP outcomes, and this study provided the opportunity to expand research in a qualitative direction. Rather than incorporating quantitative measures beyond aggregate descriptors to employ a mixed methods approach, the decision to rely primarily on qualitative interview data lent focus to the research and maintained the anonymity of participants. The study’s sample size of six peer mentors and three program advisors was robust considering the existence of only ten peer mentors and six program advisors across the NCCC at the time of the study. However, the populations of SSP participants (n = 591 in Fall 2016), comparison groups (n = 328 in Fall 2016), and dozens of professional advising staff were substantially larger, as were the thousands of at-risk students and hundreds of informal advisors in the NCCC at the time of the study. This scope was appropriate
for the qualitative methodology and provided the necessary boundaries for a case study (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2003).

The study’s research design and participant selection also led to several limitations. The researcher’s reliance on interview data presented limits related to the ability of participants to articulate their points of view (Creswell, 2012). By interviewing only peer mentors, whose roles required continued enrollment, the study’s point of view focused on students who persisted and achieved more academically than their peers. Such students perhaps possessed greater intrinsic motivation than that of their peers (Reeve et al., 2004), which could account for their educational perseverance, regardless of the advising interventions received. Peer mentors who accepted their roles may have indicated the like-mindedness of peer mentors and program advisors and colored their opinions of advisors and their actions (Alexitch, 2002). Finally, the combinations and intensity of risk factors varied from one peer mentor to the next, which limited the ability to generalize findings (Coley, 2000).

**Implications**

The NCCC’s commitment to student success led to the implementation of a targeted advising program aimed at serving its institution’s most vulnerable student populations. The NCCC’s colleges employed advisors on each campus to deliver proactive advising services. This approach followed the contemporary best practices advanced in the literature. Scholars such as Ryan (2013) and Smith (2007) found that proactive advising resulted in higher grade point averages and student persistence. Given the NCCC’s desire to institutionalize promising advising practices efficiently and effectively, leaders there sought to assess the program’s impacts both quantitatively and qualitatively. The NCCC’s internal quantitative inquiry found little difference between the academic performance of SSP served and comparison cohorts in the first year of the
program. However, peer mentors demonstrated higher academic persistence and success than their peers.

Institutions of higher education focused substantial resources on student support services as they sought to improve student outcomes. Hirschy et al. (2011) stated that “educational leaders invested in student success should direct their efforts toward those programs and policies that have the best chance of making a difference for students” (p. 313). Similarly, researchers such as Fowler and Boylan (2010) encouraged researching what aspects of advising contributed to student success. This study addressed these recommendations as it examined the experiences of some of the program’s most successful students to uncover the advising activities those students believed influential to their accomplishments. The NCCC, other similar institutions, and individuals engaged in guiding students into and through higher education should consider the following implications regarding the state-of-the-art in advising to help inform future advising theory and practice and continued research in the field.

**Implication #1: It’s Never Too Soon to Advise**

Based on the stories told by peer mentors regarding their pursuit of education, advising began well before enrollment and involved conversations with family members, high school staff, and others. Peer mentors noted their appreciation of assistance with admissions and financial aid applications, as well as taking tours and participating in accepted student days and orientations. Early discussions of personal and occupational goals helped peer mentors choose not only their colleges but their courses of study. Hatch and Garcia (2017) asserted that goal identification early in community college student enrollment improved persistence, and several other studies noted the need for early and consistent support interventions (Kuh, 2007; Mead, 2012; Tinto, 2012b). The sooner goal-setting and other advising interactions occurred, the more
quickly peer mentors became familiar with their campuses, acquainted themselves with college offices and resources, made friends, and began to feel the comfort and connection said to promote academic success (Hollis, 2009). Freshman seminar classes served as opportunities to cultivate deeper institutional integration (Fowler & Boylan, 2010), and the encouragement from this and other courses to engage with tutors, writing and research assistance, and other services laid a foundation of support that students could access throughout their college careers (Deil-Amen, 2011; Young-Jones et al., 2013).

Implication #2: Enough Advising Isn’t Necessarily Enough

As important as it was to establish contact and build relationships with students early in their college experiences, program advisors and peer mentors acknowledged the tendency of students to miss, ignore, or purposefully avoid institutional outreach and offers of support. Karp & Bork (2012) described the help-seeking tendencies of community college students as “a process where students first must recognize that they need help, they must understand the possible places to get help from, and finally follow through on asking for help” (p. 31). Mead (2012) found that first-generation students needed early and consistent advising. This study included examples of both first-generation and non-first-generation peer mentors who required a similar level of support. With the abundance of information that came at students as they tried to navigate new and often unfamiliar territory, multiple modes of communication and attempts to connect proved critical to successfully reaching students (Gaines, 2014).

In several cases, institutional policy and staff made contact mandatory. For instance, policies at some NCCC colleges required new students to attend orientation or take a freshman seminar course. To build early connections and establish strong advisor-student relationships, two program advisors who participated in this study taught or cotaught freshman seminar
courses, which created unavoidable interactions. Some program advisors also mandated regular meetings or check-ins as a condition of SSP participation. Though more difficult to enforce, program advisors also stressed the necessity of reading email communications. In many cases, program advisors and peer mentors spoke of tracking students down physically, as waiting for students to come to them proved ineffective. Peer mentors expressed pride in their self-sufficiency, lacked initial awareness of supports, and noted time constraints as preventing them from seeking help. Therefore, advisors and mentors alike proactively met students where they were (Holzer & Baum, 2017), repeatedly offering information and assistance until barriers broke down. It is important to remember, however, that sometimes these efforts, no matter how heroic, never took hold.

**Implication #3: It Takes a Village**

From early discussions of goals, aspirations, and expectations to the interventions of faculty, professional advisors, and other college staff, this study revealed peer mentors experienced advising constantly. Virtually any faculty, staff, student, friend, or family member who encountered these students served as a potential advisor, and nearly every interaction, whether recognized as such or not, directed them and affected their institutional integration. In her 2011 study, Deil-Amen discovered that students believed integration and feelings of comfort stemmed from interactions with institutional actors. At one time or another, each peer mentor needed some level of guidance, and when that need arose, they sought answers. Some answers came from college websites, others from professional advisors, some from full- or part-time instructors, others from classmates or family members, and some from various college staff. Peer mentors and program advisors commented that help existed on campus, and if an advisor did not have an answer, they typically knew who to ask. Over time, the relationships established
between peer mentors and program advisors led these students to recognize their advisors as solid sources of support and direction, in some cases, likened them to family.

**Implication #4: Success Begets Success**

Each of the peer mentors involved in this study faced challenges identified as barriers to academic success, yet each persisted and performed increasingly well over time. Many peer mentors lacked academic confidence as they began their college pursuits, often due to past academic performance, but they found that hard work garnered positive results. Descriptions of these peer mentors’ behaviors affirmed Karp and Bork’s (2012) assertion that community college student success relied on engaging in new academic habits. Some peer mentors formed study groups to help themselves and other students. Program advisors spoke of ways in which they provided students encouragement, helped them access academic resources, and celebrated accomplishments. Several peer mentors mentioned earning Dean’s List honors and their desire to perform as well in subsequent semesters. In courses where peer mentors excelled, they became tutors, using their academic strengths to help other students.

In addition to academic success, peer mentors experienced personal achievements as well. Peer mentorship established these students as role models and trusted employees. For many of the peer mentors, the role also deepened their desire to help others beyond the academic setting and contribute to their communities in general. As Bean and Eaton (2002) asserted:

> When individuals believe they are competent, they gain in self-confidence and develop higher levels of persistence at and achievement of the task and develop higher goals for task achievement. We believe that as academic and social self-efficacy increase, academic and social integration also increase. (p. 77)
The responsibilities given to peer mentors provided opportunities to share their talents, learn new skills, and broaden their aspirations. The trust of their program advisors and the success they achieved built upon itself to foster greater self-confidence and loftier goals.

**Recommendations for Action**

According to contemporary researchers, institutions of higher education, particularly community colleges, must find ways to improve student outcomes to remain economically viable, achieve their missions, satisfy external scrutiny, fulfill the needs of the emerging workforce, and more (Drake, 2011; Kot, 2014; Kuh, 2007). Advising is one of the tools institutions can employ to foster student success (White, 2015). As it strives to ensure the success of its students, the NCCC should consider the following recommendations as they relate to the themes and best practices uncovered in this study. These recommendations may also inform advising practice at other, similar community college systems, as well as other colleges and universities. Returning to the themes of this study, advising interactions should motivate and support students, make them comfortable in the educational environment, and bolster their confidence.

**Recommendation #1: Communicate Early and Often**

Countless sources of information and influence bombard college students before they set foot in their first class. Institutions must ensure students receive accurate, consistent, and pertinent information to make informed, appropriate decisions. Early interactions form student impressions that can either build a foundation of trust and comfort or undermine student integration (Deil-Amen, 2011). Institutional contact must be regular enough to capture students’ attention and in the case of advising, sufficient to establish strong student-advisor relationships.
Rather than relying on guesswork or believe misinformation from unreliable sources, students should seek help from knowledgeable institutional players. Contemporary advances in technology allow institutions to consider many potential modes of communication. Students often gather initial information on college websites, so institutions should strive for ease of navigation and clarity of content. The proliferation of email often dilutes its efficacy (Gaines, 2014) while other electronic modes of contact continue to emerge. Colleges must weigh the benefits of using such methods against their cost, utility, privacy considerations, and perceived professionalism (Gaines, 2014). Mailed materials carry substantial costs (Dykema, Stevenson, Klein, Kim, & Day, 2012); however, students may take notice if used sparingly. Personal phone calls can feel special in their individuality, even if advisors do not reach the student, but leave a message. In-person interactions provide the best opportunities to disseminate information and develop student-advisor bonds (Gaines, 2014); however, advisors must not limit these contacts to scheduled face-to-face meetings in an advising office. They can range from informal chats in the hall to connecting at various campus events.

**Recommendation #2: Respect Individuality and Be Inclusive**

The experiences of every student are unique (Zhang et al., 2017). Although advisors may know of certain aspects or qualities a student possesses that could help or hinder their academic progress, no one can predict how a student will react to these and other influences encountered throughout his or her college career (Karp, 2011). Just as advising professionals must seek multiple ways of communicating with students to determine what works (Gordon et al., 2011), advisors must use various approaches when interacting with students (Fowler & Boylan, 2010) to make the personal connections that lead to gaining student trust and sense of belonging (Deil-Amen, 2011).
Institutions should also recognize that advising extends beyond professional advisors and assigned faculty to include everyone in the organization. Anyone who makes contact with students shapes their impressions of the institution, contributing either positively or negatively to their college experience (Williamson et al., 2014). Therefore, institutions must communicate a clear vision for student advising to all faculty and staff, sharing best practices and encouraging a culture of care.

The notion of inclusion must also extend to students. Limited resources often restricted an institution’s ability to provide the level of advising adequate to help every student reach his or her educational goals (Mead, 2012; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). As a result, colleges and universities often focus efforts on the students with noted, quantifiable challenges, including lack of academic preparation, low socioeconomic status, unclear goals, and first-generation status (Bailey et al., 2005; Maxwell & Person, 2017). However, it is neither practical nor possible to quantify each student’s story and predict a likely academic outcome. Therefore, institutions should look for ways to serve everyone. As Kuh (2007) stated, “If a program or practice works, make it widely available” (p. 3). Advisors must also realize that some student challenges require assistance beyond their expertise, and sometimes that of the institution (Smith, 2007). In such cases, colleges should seek to develop a robust network of advising professionals and associated support services to handle more critical/non-academic concerns.

In addition to acknowledging and readying faculty and staff to advise properly, the use of peers as mentors proved not only practical, for the peer mentors who participated in this study it produced increased student aspiration, integration, and success. Mead (2012) concluded that peer mentoring provides the opportunity to ramp up resources to deliver more individualized attention. While turnover issues certainly exist, particularly at associate-degree granting
institutions, the benefits of using peers in support roles could outweigh such concerns. The success of such efforts relies on early recruitment, sufficient training, and appropriate oversight.

**Recommendation #3: Act Positively and Proactively**

Proactive advising in its best form begins before even a hint of trouble exists (Karp, 2011). This form of advising serves to establish solid advisor-student relationships that help inform students at the outset of their college experiences and grow into caring, trusting relationships as time goes on (Varney, 2013). Building a strong foundation before issues arise helps students feel comfortable seeking their advisors help when they need it. Drake et al. (2013) recommended early interventions, developing relationships, leveraging those relationships to help students address setbacks, and serve as students’ connection to the institution. When an advisor without the benefit of such a relationship must approach a student about an issue, the student may consider the interaction punitive or negative, damaging the opportunity to build advisor-student trust, as well as the associated feelings of integration (Karp & Bork, 2012). Therefore, advisors should not wait to connect, support, encourage, and show care for students, establishing a positive relationship that will weather any issues that arise during the academic journey (Crookston, 1994; Drake, 2011). Colleges can facilitate these relationships through mandatory activities linking advisors and students, such as orientation and freshman seminar courses (Fowler & Boylan, 2010). Institutions must also make available and accessible information regarding student progress, alerting advisors to potential academic troubles and taking action to address them before they become crises (Drake et al., 2013; Waldner, McDaniel, & Widener, 2011). Even with limited resources, institutions must prioritize the establishment of positive advisor-student relationships as soon as possible for all students.
This study recommends that the NCCC and other similar institutions work to improve advisor-student communications, tailor advising to the individual, expand advising services to all students, and employ proactive advising techniques to develop positive advisor-student relationships. The recommendations suggested in this study represent the researcher’s interpretations of interview findings. Additional research into this program, other advising efforts within the NCCC, and the topic of postsecondary advising, in general, may proffer other recommendations. Suggestions for such research follow.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

This qualitative study provided an in-depth investigation of the experiences of several peer mentors and their advisors participating in a targeted advising program for at-risk students within a community college system in the northeastern United States. While results support the findings of several contemporary studies on advising and may inform future advising practice, much more research remains necessary. Potential future research includes changes to study design, setting, scope, and participants, each of which could provide further insights and alleviate this study’s limitations.

**Research Design**

It is worthwhile to conduct research using various methods and designs (Creswell, 2012). Creswell noted that qualitative research might answer different questions than quantitative and mixed methods research. Green, Green, Camilli, Elmore, and Elmore (2006) asserted that “it is virtually impossible for any one approach to be used to address the complex issues being explored through research in education” (p. xvi). Research into advising practice could benefit from continued investigation that uses various designs. This qualitative study’s design created certain limitations, including sample size, participant characteristics, and reliance on interview
data that another qualitative study could address with focus groups, surveys, or field observations (CCSSE, 2018; Flick, 2008). Further quantitative research could overcome this study’s inability to include disaggregated student outcomes. Researchers might develop quantitative methods by which to test for advising proactivity (EAB, 2014) or uncover incidences of other advising practices. Countless opportunities also exist to employ mixed methods in conducting advising research.

**Setting, Scope, and Participants**

Though this study used interview data from students attending multiple community colleges within a single state system, other possibilities for research exist both within and outside that system and state. Participating peer mentors represented just four of the NCCC’s seven colleges, and only three program advisors participated from among these same institutions. While this represented a substantial number of peer mentors and half of the advisors employed by the specific SSP at the time of the study, future examination could aim to include more recent cohorts and additional peer mentors and advisors to span the entire life cycle of the SSP. Further in-depth inquiry into the program advisors’ experiences may also shed light on program strengths and areas needing improvement. Exploration could also expand beyond these particular roles. Potential participants might include students from the SSP’s participant or comparison groups, whether they were successful or not, to investigate not only possible explanations of positive outcomes but to determine the reasons for academic failure and college departure.

Additional studies beyond the SSP could include other individuals, institutions, and areas. This study could be replicated to investigate other NCCC advising programs and participants. Similar research could extend to all professional advisors, students, or faculty advisors at NCCC colleges. Finding ways to focus inquiry on students with particular risk factors presents another
possible avenue for future research. Bahr (2008) called for researchers “to begin the daunting process of disentangling the unique effects of the various features of advising for particular groups of students under the varying circumstances and contexts in which advising occurs” (p. 727). Expanding research in these directions could help overcome limitations resulting from including only students who persisted but faced inconsistent types of challenges. Opportunities also exist to explore similar populations in other states, within other community college systems or expand into the four-year institutional domain. Research beyond this study’s institutions, educational sector, and geographic area conducted by other researchers may ameliorate any institutional or regional idiosyncrasies and researcher bias.

**Conclusion**

This qualitative, collective case study explored the experiences of peer mentors and advisors who worked for a student success program within a community college system in the northeastern United States. The program aimed to deliver proactive advising to students possessing a variety of risk factors, such as low socioeconomic status, lack of preparation for college level work, first-generation status, and unclear academic and career goals. These represent issues commonly associated with community college students’ failure to reach academic goals. The study focused on students who persisted in their academic pursuits regardless of these risk factors to determine how they overcame obstacles and whether advising proved helpful. The study’s theoretical framework paid attention to advising activities considered *proactive* based on Varney’s (2012) theories of proactive advising practice, as well as evidence of socio-academic integration (Deil-Amen, 2011). Research questions inquired about the advising initiatives peer mentors experienced and whether these students believed advising helped them integrate socially and academically with their institutions. The study expanded on
contemporary advising research with its design, setting, and unique conceptual framework. The qualitative case study’s focus on successful students and effective advising practice addressed a gap in the literature for stories of those students who succeed in college against the odds” (Parsons, 2012, p. 113) and “what works” in contemporary advising (Tinto, 2006, p. 5).

Thematic analysis of the data gathered from in-depth interviews with peer mentors and program advisors uncovered important aspects of the student experience that led to success. The study presented recommendations for action on the part of the community college system studied and for advancing the state-of-the-art in advising practice, including improving communication methods, broadening advising’s scope for inclusiveness, and advancing meaningful proactivity. The study also provided ideas for future advising research to incorporate various methodologies and broaden the scope of inquiry to contribute to advances in the field.
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APPENDIX A

EMAIL TO PROSPECTIVE PEER MENTOR PARTICIPANTS

Subject: Requesting Your Participation

Dear Peer Mentor,

I am the NCCC’s institutional researcher for the Student Success Program for which you serve as a peer mentor. I am also a doctoral student at the University of New England, working on my dissertation: “From Providing Access to Promoting Success: Transforming a Community College System’s Advising Services.” For this study, I am hoping to interview peer mentors to learn directly from successful students about their experiences with the program. Participation is voluntary, and to be eligible, you must be:

- A currently enrolled student at one of the NCCC’s community colleges
- A peer mentor in the Student Success Program
- Eighteen years of age or older

I plan to conduct interviews via teleconferencing software at your convenience. Volunteers will be asked to sign a consent form in advance, which explains the interview process as well as your rights and responsibilities. Interviews are expected to last between 45 and 60 minutes and will be recorded to ensure accuracy. Participants will be provided with transcripts of their own interview for verification purposes, and the identity and privacy of all participants will be protected.

Please consider volunteering to provide the NCCC with valuable insights into our advising practices that will help shape services for current and future students. If you have any questions about this request or to schedule an interview, simply reply to this email.

Thank you for your consideration,

Staci Grasky
APPENDIX B

EMAIL TO PROSPECTIVE PROGRAM ADVISOR PARTICIPANTS

Subject: Research Study Participation Request

Dear Program Advisor,

As you know, I am responsible for institutional research for the Student Success program in which you serve(d) as an advisor, and I am researching aspects of the program for my doctoral dissertation: “From Providing Access to Promoting Success: Transforming a Community College’s Advising Services.” I have reached out to the program’s peer mentors for volunteers to be interviewed about their experiences. I would also like to solicit your cooperation in answering any questions that may arise from those interviews about the advising activities you conducted as part of the program. Please know that your participation as it relates to my dissertation research is voluntary.

I plan to conduct Program Advisor inquiries either in-person on campus or via teleconferencing software at your convenience. Volunteers will be asked to sign a consent form in advance, which explains the process as well as your rights and responsibilities. Inquiries are expected to last between 15 and 45 minutes and will be recorded for accuracy. Participants will be provided with transcripts of discussions for verification purposes, and the identity and privacy of all participants will be protected.

Please consider volunteering to provide the community college system with valuable insights into our advising practices that will help shape services for current and future students. If you have any questions about this request, please reply to this email.

Thank you,

Staci Grasky
APPENDIX C

PEER MENTOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The questions below follow introductions and discussion of consent

To begin, I just want to ask some general questions about you.

1. Why did you choose to attend college?
   a. What are your short-term goals?
   b. What do you hope to do in the future?

2. Was college an expectation for you growing up?
   a. Did your parents go? Siblings?
   b. Were you a good high school student? Did you enjoy it?

3. Before you came to college, what did you expect college to be like?

4. Did anyone tell you what college was like or what you should expect?
   a. If so, who was it? Family members? Friends? Teachers or others at your high school? People at work? Anyone who worked at the college?

5. Please share why you decided to attend NAME OF COLLEGE.
   a. Did you know what you wanted to come to college for? A degree? A job or career? Something else? (Note: let students name these areas and use their words in subsequent questions.)

OK. So now I want to explore your experiences as you began the process of enrolling at NAME OF COLLEGE, perhaps before you ever met with NAME OF NAVIGATOR.

6. How would you summarize what the process of getting started at this college was like for you? Think about the experiences you had up to the first time you actually went to a class. (Rate it on a scale in which 1 is really easy and 5 is really difficult.)
   a. Explain your answer.
   b. What made it easy? What made it difficult?
   c. Describe your best experience as you went through the steps needed to start college.
   d. Describe your worst experience.
7. Prior to registering for classes, did you talk with anyone at this college about the process of getting started here? More than one person? If so, did you know what the individuals’ jobs were at the college?
   a. Describe the conversations you had with that person(s), the questions the person(s) asked you, the questions you asked the person(s).
   b. Is there anything you wish they had told you that they didn’t?

8. How did you find the application process to be?
   i. What things were simple and what was more challenging?

9. When you first started at the college, did someone ask you about your academic goals—such as what you wanted to go to college for?
   a. Did anyone talk with you about the benefit of having a goal or earning a certificate or degree?

10. Did someone at the college discuss with you about how long it will take for you to reach your goals?
    i. Is this about the amount of time you were thinking it would take to reach your goals, or did you think it might take a shorter or longer amount of time?

11. Did you attend orientation?
    i. Was it required?
    ii. What were your impressions of that event?

12. Before you signed up for classes at this college, did anyone talk to you about your commitments life outside of school (work, children, etc.)?
    a. If so, did that conversation involve planning how you would balance those commitments with your college work?
    b. Did it affect your thinking about how many classes you would take?
    c. Did anyone ever recommend that you take more or fewer courses than you originally planned to take? (suss out part-time versus full time)

13. Can you describe your typical week—both at school and away from school?
    a. Inquire, if necessary, about work, homework, free time

14. Have you accessed any support services related to concerns outside of classes, for instance transportation or childcare?
a. If yes, then what and with whom?

b. How did you hear about these services?

15. How did you learn about the steps you needed to go through to sign up for classes?

a. Did someone talk with you about the process for registering?

b. Did someone talk with you about how to pick classes?

c. Were there any classes you were told you needed to take?

i. Who told you about these things?

d. What was the setting for this experience? In a group? Individual meeting? Online? If in a group—what kind of group—can you explain?

e. Were you required to meet with this individual or attend this session? Or, was it suggested that you do this? If so, who or what suggested that you do this?

f. If you did meet with someone, did this person use any technology, like a website or computer software, to assist you? Tell us about it.

g. Did you have to do anything prior to selecting classes (placement tests, interview, meeting with an advisor, etc.)?

16. Prior to and during the process of registering for classes, did you ever consider walking out the door and not attending NAME OF COLLEGE?

a. If so, why?

b. What made you stay?

17. Is there anything you wish you had known before you came to campus to get admitted and register?


So now let’s move into a discussion of what your experience was as classes started for you.

19. When classes began, what were your biggest concerns?

a. Probe if necessary to flesh out answers with regard to both academic and nonacademic concerns, i.e. confidence in abilities, competing priorities, etc.

20. Have you accessed any support services related to your classes, such as tutoring, writing assistance, help with research?
21. Have you ever hit a snag in any of your courses—fallen behind in your classwork, not done well on assignments or tests, etc.?
   a. When you’ve hit a snag in your classes, have you talked to a staff member at this college about it? If so, whom did you talk to?
      i. Was the person your instructor or someone else who was part of one of your classes?
   b. Did you go to the person or did the person contact you?
   c. If the person contacted you, in what way(s)? Phone? Email? Facebook? Other?
   d. How early in the term did the contact occur?
   e. What happened after you talked with that person?
   f. Did the person suggest anything you could do? If so, what were the suggestions? Did you follow up on those suggestions? If yes, was it helpful? Why or why not?
   g. Have you ever gone to anyone or any place on campus for additional help with your classwork?
      i. If so, what led to your going for extra help?
   h. Has anyone at this college ever provided you with information about academic support services, like tutoring, writing services, or math labs? If so, who? What did this person say?

22. In general, thinking about your experiences in your courses, who other than you is aware of your progress toward your overall academic goal?
   a. Does anyone stay in touch with you about your progress?
   c. Helpful or not helpful? Why or why not?

23. Have you ever had an issue come up in your life outside of college that made it difficult for you to stay on track toward your academic goal?
   a. If so, did you talk to someone about it? Was it someone who worked at the college? What was that person’s role at the college? Why did you decide to go to that person? What did you discuss? What happened after you met with that person?
24. Since starting classes, have you ever considered dropping out of college?
   a. If so, did you talk to a staff member at the college?
      i. If so, what was the person’s role at the college?
      ii. What happened then?
      iii. Was the conversation helpful? Not helpful? Why or why not?

So moving on to some questions about the Navigating Success program itself…

25. How did you learn about your Navigator, NAVIGATOR NAME, in the first place?

26. In what ways has NAVIGATOR NAME helped you?

27. How regularly would you say you heard from NAVIGATOR NAME in your first year at NAME OF COLLEGE?
   a. In what ways (such as emails, calls, in person)
   b. For what reasons?
   c. Do you feel like this was an appropriate amount of communication?
      i. If no, then what would your preference be?
      ii. If yes, why?

28. How connected do you feel to NAME OF COLLEGE?
   a. In what ways?

29. How would you say these connections are supported by or due to the actions of your Navigator, NAVIGATOR NAME?
   a. How so?

30. If you didn’t have NAVIGATOR NAME as your advisor, do you believe you would feel as connected?

31. Do you believe that NAVIGATOR NAME has contributed to your academic success?
   a. How so?

32. What do you feel have been the most positive aspects of the Navigating Success program?

33. Are there any things about Navigating Success that if you were in charge, you would change?
Okay, I’d like to move on to some questions about your role as a peer mentor.

34. How did you come to be a peer mentor?

35. What types of responsibilities do you have in that role?

36. How comfortable are you with those responsibilities?

37. How much support do you feel you receive as a peer mentor in performing your work?

38. What benefits do you feel you gain as a peer mentor?

39. Are there any concerns or drawbacks to the role?

To wrap up, I just have a few more questions.

40. Complete this sentence: “Advising at this college is like…”

41. Think about the one experience you’ve had at this college that you would say was most helpful in your efforts to be a successful student. What was that experience? Who was involved, and what did that person or people do?

42. If you could give the leaders at this college advice about the one or two most important changes the college could make to improve students’ experience, what changes would you recommend? Why do you believe those are the most important changes?

43. If you designed advising at this college, what would it look like?

44. Right now, what is the single most important factor that is keeping you moving toward success at this college?

45. How confident are you that you will stay and complete your academic goals? 1 being not very, 5 being extremely confident. Explain your answer.

46. If you were giving advice to a friend who was planning to attend this college about how to be successful at this college, what advice would you give?

47. Is there anything you would like to add that we haven’t covered?
APPENDIX D

PROGRAM ADVISOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The questions below follow discussion of consent.

To begin I just have a few questions about your experience in advising.

1. How did you come to be a postsecondary advisor originally, either at NAME OF COLLEGE or elsewhere?
   a. What is your educational background?
   b. How long have you been advising?

2. What do you feel are the general responsibilities of an advisor?
   a. Does this include financial advising? If yes, explain.
   b. Does this include career counseling? If yes, explain.

3. How has your job changed since you started advising students?
   a. Is/was Navigating Success substantially different from other advising experiences?

4. How have you been trained to meet current advising challenges/address current best practices in advising?
   a. Is there anything you do on your own to keep up to date?

5. What resources or training do you think could make you even more successful in your role as an advisor?

Moving on to some questions related to how you personally conduct advising and what the college’s advising approach is:

6. What is the nature of the first conversation you have with a student as their advisor?
   a. How much time do you generally allocate for an initial advising session? How much time is allocated for subsequent meetings?
   b. What is the expected outcome from your first advising session?
   c. What, if anything, is the “product” of the visit? A course schedule? Goal-setting? A written plan?
      i. What might be included in such a plan?
      ii. How is it developed? Prescriptively? Primarily by the student? Collaboratively?
iii. How do students know during which term they need to take each course?

iv. Do you address alternatives like other campuses/satellites, online courses, consortia with other schools?

d. Is the next advising visit scheduled during this first appointment?

e. Is this conversation different for full-time and part-time students? If so, how?

f. In general, do you learn much about your students’ lives outside of school (work, children, other family responsibilities, extracurricular activities, etc.)?

   i. If yes, how do you become aware of it?

   ii. If yes, does having this information about students’ lives outside of school impact how you advise them?

7. Describe the advising process for students during their college careers.

   a. What are the college’s, program’s, or your expectations for advising visits during a student’s first term?

   b. What are the expectations for advising visits during a student’s first year?

   c. What are the expectations for advising visits beyond the first year?

   d. What are the expectations for each visit?

   e. Are there any expectations for students between visits with an advisor?

   f. If students do not immediately develop an academic plan, when does that generally happen?

8. Discuss how students’ academic goals are incorporated into their advising sessions.

   a. Do advisors discuss the benefit of having a goal of earning a certificate or degree with students?

   b. How do students know which classes they would need to take in order to reach their goals?

      i. How do students know if a prerequisite is required?

   c. How do students know how long it will take for them to reach their goals?

   d. How do students find out about job or career opportunities based on their career interests?

   e. How do students find out about available career services?
9. If you need to talk with a student about enrolling in developmental education courses, what do you say?

10. Consider the different support services students have the opportunity to interact with both before they begin classes and while they are attending the college. Are any of these services integrated into the advising process you are describing or do students access those services independently, if desired?
   a. Do you regularly send students to these services based on your interactions with them?

11. Walk me through the advising process from the advisor perspective:
   a. How do advisors know when a student has been assigned to him/her?
   b. How many students do advisors typically see in a day?
      i. How does this differ by the time of year?
   c. How often is an advisor expected to communicate with a student before the student registers for classes? Each term?
   d. Is there an expectation about when an advisor contacts a student (e.g., if they are struggling in class)?
   e. Are there expectations for how often an advisor calls a student?
   f. How many emails per term are typically sent by an advisor to a student?
   g. What student data do you review on a daily, weekly, term basis?
   h. Is this the same for all students? FT/PT?
      i. What kinds of data does a supervisor use to evaluate your performance?

12. During the beginning of the academic term, does the advisor visit classrooms to inform students about the availability of advising?
   a. If so, in which classes do these visits occur?
   b. What information is shared with the students?

13. During the academic term, does the advisor have a specific role related to students’ progress in their classes?
   a. Is there a mechanism in place for keeping the advisor apprised of student progress? An early alert system? Other?
      i. Describe the process and your role in the process.
14. What, if anything, is your role in intervening with/providing additional support to students who are having difficulties in their classes?
   a. Do advisors at this college monitor or reach out to students about their progress in courses? In what way(s) do advisors contact students (e.g., in person, phone/text, e-mail, Facebook, or other ways)?
      i. What role do advisors play in connecting students to available support services, such as supplemental instruction, study groups, tutoring, writing or math labs, and other services?

15. How do faculty and advisors communicate with one another and/or collaborate on issues related to students’ progress?
   a. What role do classroom (face-to-face and online) faculty play in connecting students to available support services, such as supplemental instruction, study groups, tutoring, writing or math labs, other?

16. From your perspective, what are the most common challenges students face when they begin college?
   a. In your view, does the advising process currently in place at this college help students address those challenges? If so, in what ways?
   b. If not, are there steps you believe would be important for advisors to take to help students overcome those challenges, and if so, what are they?

17. When you think about the advising role with students, what aspects of the process would you say are most beneficial to students? Explain why you believe these aspects are helpful to students.
   a. Are there aspects of your process that you would say are not particularly helpful to students? If yes, what are they? Why would you say they are not helpful?

18. When you think about students’ experiences before they start college, are there any additional steps you believe the college could take to help students transition successfully into the college? Would you see any of those steps falling within the advising function?

19. When you think about students’ experiences during their first term, first year, and beyond, are there any additional steps you believe the college could take to help more students be successful and do any of these steps fall into the advising domain?

20. When you think about the components of the advising process in place at the college, what, if any, are the most important steps you believe the college could take to strengthen advising for entering students?
   a. For students during their first year?
b. For students who have been here longer than one year?

Moving on to your role with peer mentors,

21. How did you select and recruit your peer mentors?

22. In what capacities are they working?
   a. Potential probe: How do they interact with other students in the program, both within their cohort year and with subsequent cohort students?

23. How do you feel you have contributed to the success of your peer mentors?

24. How do you believe that students are impacted by becoming and serving as peer mentors?
   a. Potential probe: How do you feel it has impacted peer mentors’ connection with the college?

25. Your peer mentor mentioned the NAME OF INTERVENTION activity as something s/he appreciated/enjoyed. Can you please describe that for me?

26. Your peer mentor mentioned the NAME OF ISSUE to me as a concern. What are your thoughts on this?

27. Is there anything else you wish to add about your peer mentor(s)?

28. Is there anything I didn’t ask about that you would like to add?
December 18, 2017

RE: Permission to conduct research

Staci L. Grasky
46 Idlewood Drive
Cumberland, ME 04021

Dear Staci,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the collective case study entitled “From Access to Success: Transforming a Community College System’s Advising Services” at the Maine Community College System.

I understand that this research will involve recruiting and interviewing advisors and students from each of our colleges over the next several months, and protocols are in place to ensure confidentiality and privacy for participants and the system. Access to student-level data for comparison purposes is acceptable, provided information about non-participant groups remains in the aggregate, and you receive consent from participants to utilize their individually-identifiable education records for descriptive statistics to be used in the study. Information about your study will be shared with the community, staff, and administration as appropriate, and I look forward to learning about your findings.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Janet M. Sortor
Chief Academic Officer
APPENDIX F

PEER MENTOR CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title: From Providing Access to Promoting Success: Transforming a Community College’s Advising Services

Principal Investigator(s): Staci L. Grasky, UNE graduate student, sgrasky@une.edu; Dr. Brianna Parsons, UNE Research Coordinator, bparsons4@une.edu

Introduction:

• Please read this form, you may also request that the form be read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision.

• You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?
The purpose of this study is to inquire with community college peer mentors engaged in a proactive advising program about their experiences with advising and how they believe advising has supported their academic success.

Who will be in this study?
Optimal participation will be four to seven students. Participants must meet the following criteria:

• Current enrollment in a Maine community college
• Serving as a peer mentor in the proactive advising program
• Eighteen years of age or older

What will I be asked to do?

• Read and complete this consent form, with the original witnessed and maintained by the principal investigator.
• Participate in a 45–90 minute interview, either in-person or online.
• Review a transcript of the interview for accuracy (estimated 15–45 minutes).

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?

• There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.
• Participants may decline to answer any questions or opt out of the study at any time.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

• There are no substantive benefits to you for participating in this study aside from the opportunity to voice your opinion about a program in which you take part.
• It is expected that your input will help inform the community college system about advising practice and assist in shaping its advising efforts for the benefit of current and future students.

What will it cost me?
• There is no cost to participate. In fact, participants will receive a $25 gift card as a token of appreciation. Interviews will be held at a location convenient to the participant, online or on the phone.

How will my privacy be protected and data kept confidential?
• All participants, colleges, and the system will be assigned pseudonyms.
• Electronic files will be password-protected.
• Physical materials and media will be stored in a locked cabinet by the principal investigator.
• Interview recordings and transcriptions will be deleted at the conclusion of the study.
• Demographic and academic data will be used solely for background and comparative purposes and will be reported descriptively.
• A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only members of the research team will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.
• Research findings will be made available to participants.

What are my rights as a research participant?
• Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations/standing with your community college or the University of New England.
• You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
• If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

Whom may I contact with questions?
• The researchers conducting this study are Staci L. Grasky, graduate student, and Dr. Brianna Parsons, faculty advisor. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact Mrs. Grasky at sgrasky@une.edu or 207-807-1984.
• If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Dr. Brianna Parsons at bparsons4@une.edu or 207-221-4860
• If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

Will I receive a copy of this consent form?
• You will be given a copy of this consent form.
**Participant’s Statement**

I acknowledge that FERPA-protected information, including data such as GPA, individual course grades, and advising notes will be accessed and used in this research with my permission:

☐ Yes, I agree  ☐ No, I do not agree to my data being accessed for this research

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

_______________________________________________________
Participant’s signature or Legally authorized representative  Date

Printed name

**Researcher’s Statement**

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

_______________________________________________________
Researcher’s signature  Date

Printed name
APPENDIX G

PROGRAM ADVISOR CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title: From Providing Access to Promoting Success: Transforming a Community College’s Advising Services

Principal Investigator(s): Staci L. Grasky, UNE graduate student, sgrasky@une.edu; Dr. Brianna Parsons, UNE Research Coordinator, bparsons4@une.edu

Introduction:
- Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?
The purpose of this study is to inquire with community college peer mentors engaged in a proactive advising program about their experiences with advising and how they believe advising has supported their academic success.

Who will be in this study?
It is expected that three or four advisors will participate in this study. Participants must meet the following criteria:
- Current or prior employment as an advisor in the proactive advising program
- Eighteen years of age or older

What will I be asked to do?
- Read and complete this consent form, with the original witnessed and maintained by the principal investigator.
- Participate in a 15–45 minute interview, either in-person or online.
- Review a transcript of the interview for accuracy (estimated 15–45 minutes).

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?
- There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.
- Participants may decline to answer any questions or opt out of the study at any time.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?
- There are no substantive benefits to you for participating in this study, aside from the opportunity to voice your opinion about a program to which you contributed.
• It is expected that your input will help inform the community college system about advising practice and assist in shaping its advising efforts for the benefit of current and future students.

What will it cost me?
• There is no cost to participate. Interviews will be held at a location convenient to the participant, online or on the phone.

How will my privacy be protected and data kept confidential?
• All participants, colleges, and the system will be assigned pseudonyms.
• Electronic files will be password-protected.
• Physical materials and media will be stored in a locked cabinet by the principal investigator.
• Interview recordings and transcriptions will be deleted at the conclusion of the study.
• Demographic and academic data will be used solely for background and comparative purposes and will be reported descriptively.
• A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only members of the research team will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.
• Research findings will be made available to participants.

What are my rights as a research participant?
• Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations/standing with your community college or the University of New England.
• You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
• If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

Whom may I contact with questions?
• The researchers conducting this study are Staci L. Grasky, graduate student, and Dr. Brianna Parsons, faculty advisor. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact Mrs. Grasky at sgrasky@une.edu or 207-807-1984.
• If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Dr. Brianna Parsons at bparsons4@une.edu or 207-221-4860
• If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

Will I receive a copy of this consent form?
• You will be given a copy of this consent form.
Participant’s Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

Participant’s signature or Legally authorized representative          Date

Printed name

Researcher’s Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Researcher’s signature          Date

Printed name