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FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: MAKING SENSE OF ACADEMIC

ADVISING AND ADVISOR LEADERSHIP FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

By

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A DISSERTATION

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Andrew Martin Frazier
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Educational Leadership

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: MAKING SENSE OF ACADEMIC

ADVISING AND ADVISOR LEADERSHIP FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

ABSTRACT

Earning a college degree is one of the most socially and economically beneficial

accomplishments individuals can achieve in the United States. The benefits of a college degree

are evident, however not all students attain such credentials equitably. One student group that

graduates from college at disparate rates when compared to others is first-generation college

students (FGCS), or those who are the first in their family to earn a degree. FGCS are twice as

likely to leave college with no earned degree compared to students who have parents or

guardians with college degrees. Additionally, while significant research focuses on FGCS

support efforts, few studies capture the experiences of FGCS with academic advising and its

influence on persistence and student success.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how

FGCS at a small, private university in Tennessee perceive their lived experiences with academic

advising and advisor leadership, and whether such experiences influenced student success and

persistence to graduation. Two research questions directed this study: (1) How do FGCS at a

small, private university describe and understand their lived experiences with academic advising

and their advisor? (2) How do FGCS perceive and relate the role of academic advising and their

advisor in their success and persistence to graduation? Eight individuals participated in two rounds of semi-structured interviews.

Data analysis incorporated NVivo qualitative software and followed Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam model. The seven-step analysis process resulted in four primary themes: (1) expectations and understandings of advising, (2) influence of encouragement and support, (3) advisor availability and access, and (4) perceptions and development of autonomy. Analysis also resulted in rich individual textural-structural descriptions, which culminated in a composite textural-structural description that captured the essence of how participants made sense of advising experiences. Results revealed that advising did benefit participants and helped them in their persistence to graduation. Findings also uncovered areas where policymakers and advisors must consider ways to support FGCS success and persistence such as through developing advising orientations, professional development on relational aspects of advising, making adequate time for FGCS advisees, and advising to support autonomy.

Key Words: *First-Generation College Students, Academic Advising, Persistence, Sensemaking, Transcendental Phenomenology*.

University of New England

Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

This dissertation was presented
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It was presented on
February 22, 2021
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"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28, NRSV). Thanks be to God.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Earning a college degree is one of the most beneficial accomplishments for individuals to improve their quality of life, career earnings, and social mobility in the United States (Scheld, 2019). The average income for individuals with a bachelor's degree frequently exceeds and sometimes doubles the income of individuals with only a high school diploma (Abel & Deitz, 2019; Scheld, 2019). Completing a college degree can also influence employment opportunities by expanding a student's marketability in the workforce. During the second quarter of 2017, full-time employees with a high school diploma earned a median weekly income of $718 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). During the same period, full-time employees with a bachelor's degree earned a median weekly income of $1,189 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). The significance of this gap confirms the importance of a 4-year degree in improving an individual's potential lifetime earnings. Holding a college degree can also lessen an individual's chances of facing unemployment, providing a greater sense of security in the higher earning power a degree provides (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Thus, the economic advantages of obtaining a college degree are prudent for social mobility and pecuniary advancement.

Additionally, research throughout the twenty-first century contends that holding a college degree can improve an individual's satisfaction with their life circumstances. Bachelor degree holders are twice as likely to report happiness with their lives as those holding high school diplomas (PEW Research Center, 2016). These satisfaction measures further extend into aspects of social mobility, with individuals holding college degrees reporting greater satisfaction with their social circumstances, improved marriages and reduced divorce rates, better health, and less instances of depression (Aughinbaugh et al., 2013; Clark & Royer, 2013; Oswold & Wu, 2011;

Trostel, 2015). College degree attainment can improve an individual's acquisition of social capital, and, ultimately, have ripple effects of social and economic benefit for the rest of society as well (Busteed, 2019; Trostel, 2015). College may be expensive, but the inherent benefits of obtaining a degree appear to make the investment worthwhile.

Despite many inherent and apparent benefits of earning a college degree, not all individuals are able to access or obtain such credentials easily. Colleges and universities have a long, marred history wrought with instances of disparate and exclusionist admissions practices (Mintz, 2017). Access to a college education in the United States has expanded in recent decades, but issues persist related to gaps both in access and completion (Lawton, 2018; Mintz, 2017). Rising student debt can hinder the ability for some to even afford college (Busteed, 2019). Many institutions have rightly focused in recent years on improving access and allowing more individuals the chance to obtain a college education. Yet, there are still disparities for specific student populations regarding completion and success rates (Lawton, 2018). There exists a dearth of proportional efforts and funding allocated towards student support and completion initiatives for more under-prepared and under-represented student groups (Mintz, 2017).

One student group where this disparity is apparent is first-generation college students (FGCS), or individuals who are the first in their immediate family to earn a college degree (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). FGCS represent approximately one-third of college enrollment in the United States, however, these students graduate at half the rate of continuing generation peers, or those individuals who have immediate family members with college degrees (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Despite institutional and national efforts, this disparity persists, explicating the need for additional research into how institutions can better serve FGCS and help them succeed.

Outreach and service programs for students from disadvantaged backgrounds such as the Federal TRIO program and the Center for First-Generation Student Success (Quinn et al., 2019) seek to improve academic and social outcomes in higher education for FGCS and have made significant improvements for a multitude of FGCS. However, certain support avenues deserve greater inquiry to potentially further mitigate poor success rates. One such support effort that could prove critical is academic advising. Academic advising is a foundational support effort that institutions can provide for students in their educational journeys (Tinto, 2012). Advisors are strategic individuals who provide a critical connection between a student and an institution and have historically served as guides for class selection and degree progress tracking. However, the role of the advisor has increased in recent years to include instances of relational support, leadership, encouragement, teaching, and providing social capital (Joslin, 2018; Tinto, 2012). Advising can help improve FGCS retention rates (Swecker et al., 2013), but further research into the lived experiences of FGCS with academic advising could help improve advising programs and retention efforts (Glaessgen et al., 2018; Morgan, 2019; Peeters, 2018). Thus, this study explored lived experiences with academic advising from the perspective of FGCS and how they made sense of advising and advisor leadership.

Site Description

The research site for this study was a small, private university in the state of Tennessee, USA. The institution will be referred to by the pseudonym Smoky Mountain University (SMU). SMU serves more than 1000 students across various modalities and degree programs (TICUA, 2019). Further, SMU serves a FGCS population of approximately 22% of the undergraduate student body in the face-to-face modality (Provost, personal communication, May 4, 2020). This

institution is regionally accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award certificates, associates, bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees.

Additionally, SMU incorporates academic advisors as a prominent resource for all students during their enrollment. The Provost of SMU explains that the office of the registrar assigns an advisor(s) based on a student's declared major, and students must meet with their advisor(s) multiple times each academic year (Provost, personal communication, May 4, 2020). Advisors play a crucial role in helping students register for classes, track degree progress, and succeed both academically and socially. Advising at SMU is considered decentralized, which means that advising is not controlled or organized by a central advising unit but instead is done primarily by faculty members within certain majors and programs (Gordon et al., 2008). Decentralized advising can provide autonomy to faculty in how they deliver advising to students, but it can also result in disjointed or inequitable advising experiences depending on a student's program (Joslin, 2018). Advising is important at SMU, which made it an ideal site for understanding FGCS experiences with advising and advisor leadership.

FGCS at SMU experience challenges and barriers to success, as the literature indicates is common for FGCS (Cataldi et al., 2018; Gibbons et al., 2016; Provost, personal communication, May 4, 2020). While academic advising has always played a crucial role at this institution, continual improvement to the advising program and new measures of support for students are always important (Provost, personal communication, May 4, 2020). Especially challenging during the year 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic upended college education and pushed students at SMU into online and remote learning scenarios for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester (CDC, 2020). Advisors became even more critical for helping students during the challenges of the pandemic as advising experiences shifted from the normal delivery (Provost, personal

communication, May 4, 2020). The pandemic, resultant social distancing guidelines, and persistent unknowns prompt institutions such as SMU to consider the support measures in place to help students succeed, especially students with unique needs such as FGCS (CDC, 2020). Advisors at many small, private institutions, including SMU, serve on the frontline for helping FGCS navigate the regular challenges and barriers inherent in college, as well as the multitude of unforeseen issues that can arise during any academic year.

Statement of the Problem

FGCS graduate from college at disparate rates when compared with continuing-generation students (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). A great deal of research on FGCS has prompted a variety of support efforts and retention strategies to improve their college experiences and chances of success, including academic advising (Pratt et al., 2019; Peeters, 2018; Swecker et al., 2013). Despite the known value of academic advising for FGCS retention and success efforts (Carlson, 2020; Peeters, 2018; Swecker et al., 2013), poor graduation rates persist; there is a dearth of literature related to how FGCS make sense of academic advising and advisor leadership and whether such experiences influence student success and persistence to graduation. Morgan (2019) asserts that "qualitative studies should also be used to gather additional information about [first-generation] student retention and graduation trends relative to academic advising" (p. 61). Uncovering and documenting such information could bolster future FGCS support efforts.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) roughly 16 million total undergraduate students attended college in the Fall of 2018 (NCES.gov, 2018). Despite representing nearly one-third of the enrolled undergraduate student population (Cataldi et al., 2018), FGCS are about half as likely to earn a college degree compared to a student whose parents have earned a bachelor's degree (McCallan & Johnson, 2019). Further, they are less

likely than continuing generation students to persist through the first two years of college

enrollment (Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

Many institutions, alarmed by these statistics, have put more effort into improving

support services and college readiness programs, which can include meetings with academic

advisors (Tinto, 2012). Academic advising can improve FGCS first-year retention efforts

(Swecker et al., 2013). Tinto (2012) notes that regular advising meetings are positively linked to

student retention. However, while advising can be beneficial for retaining students, and

increasing the amount of advising meetings can positively influence FGCS retention, little

research exists that examines how FGCS perceive advising and whether it helped them succeed

in college (Glaessgen et al., 2018; Morgan, 2019; Peeters, 2018; Swecker et al., 2013).

FGCS experience barriers to success that all college students face but have the added

burden of managing challenges related to being the first member of their family to earn a college

degree (Gibbons et al., 2016). FGCS often lack social capital, which refers to "networks of

relationships" with knowledge of the college experience that help students navigate higher

education and understand educational jargon (Schwartz et al. 2018, p. 167). Without a network

of social capital, some of these students enroll in college lacking key understandings of how to

succeed or seek informed help (Lozano-Partida, 2018). FGCS frequently arrive to college not

only underprepared academically, but also uninformed as to how to locate and utilize support

services aimed at academic success (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Helping FGCS succeed is not

only beneficial for institutional retention, but more importantly it can greatly benefit these

students in a variety of economic and social ways to earn a college degree (McCallen & Johnson,

2019).

Some institutions have specific programs or groups designed to help FGCS, but small college campuses may not have the resources or personnel for entire departments (Falcon, 2015). Academic advising can offer students a form of social capital once they arrive on campus as a key individual that students can refer to when confused (Carlson, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2018). McCallen and Johnson (2019) identify faculty and advisors as key individuals in providing support for student success. Similarly, when faculty serve as advisors, they can become advocates, liaisons, and models of ethical behavior for their advisees (Horowitz, 2017). Troxel (2018) asserts that "academic advisors interact with students, by design, while they are still enrolled at the institution. Therefore, they have influence on the academic journey of students, including their decisions and situations related to remaining enrolled or not" (p. 23). Regardless of institutional size or resources, advisors can serve as helpful advocates and liaisons for the college experiences when the process is executed well but can result in severe student dissatisfaction when executed poorly (Joslin, 2018).

An advisor's leadership within the advisor-advisee relationship may be particularly influential for student success and persistence. Grasky (2018) describes the experiences of peer mentors with advising, including how academic advising influenced student success. The researcher uncovered positive connections within advisor-advisee relationships related to social and academic matters yet called for additional research on the benefit of advising for certain student groups such as FGCS (Grasky, 2018). Troxel (2018) explains the links between academic relationships, such as advising, and student success, which contributes to persistence. Barbuto et al. (2011) calls for additional studies into the "relationships between advisor behaviors and student outcomes" (p. 656). Additional qualitative studies on FGCS experiences in college and higher education are necessary to continually improve support initiatives and

retention efforts (Havlik et al., 2020). Demetriou et al. (2017) assert that studies on successful FGCS are useful and can help policymakers and administrators improve support efforts, including academic advising by identifying the aspects of experience that resulted in success. Morgan (2019) appeals for further qualitative studies on FGCS success in relation to academic advising. The value of advising is apparent. However, additional research into FGCS lived experiences, the benefits of academic advising, and FGCS support efforts can help initiate meaningful change to advising programs for the benefit of students.

Subpar persistence and completion rates for FGCS continue to be a concern due to unique challenges and barriers they face (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). In addition to contrasting graduation rates, there exists a gap in the literature pertaining to how FGCS perceive academic advising and advisor leadership, and whether such experiences influence student success and persistence to graduation (Cataldi et al., 2018; Glaessgen et al., 2018; Morgan, 2019; Swecker et al., 2013). Uncovering such information could help improve FGCS graduation rates, advising strategies, and provide a platform for further scholar-practitioner research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how FGCS at a small, private university in Tennessee perceive their lived experiences with academic advising and advisor leadership, and whether such experiences influenced student success and persistence to graduation. Academic advising represents an institutional relationship that can influence success and persistence (Tinto, 2012; Troxel, 2018). Tinto's (2012) work on institutional strategies for improving student retention, *Completing College,* describes advising as a critical resource for helping students navigate higher education and achieve their goals. Advising has clear value for students, but its influence varies based on the quality of its delivery

(Joslin, 2018). The value of advising is clear, but there is need for additional research to fill the gap in the literature regarding the interplay of FGCS experiences with advising and student success (Barbuto et al., 2011; Glaessgen et al., 2018; Morgan, 2019; Swecker et al., 2013). Thus, this study aimed to document the lived experiences of FGCS with advising, which provides information to inform best practices in academic advising and strategies for FGCS success.

The study involved FGCS who were current seniors and recent graduates, as these students have successfully persisted in many ways. Demetriou et al. (2017) calls for additional studies on successful FGCS as a way of uncovering helpful support strategies. The process of documenting the lived experiences of FGCS through their perceptions of advising connects to a part of the theoretical framework of this study, namely sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Understanding how FGCS made sense of advising helped illuminate both the experience of advising and the actions of an advisor, including how these facets influenced subsequent actions, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions related to student success (Marion & Gonzales, 2014).

FGCS are only half as likely to earn a four-year college degree compared to continuing generation peers (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). More than just lacking four-year degrees, FGCS are more likely to leave higher education without *any* degree or credential than continuing-generation peers (Cataldi et al., 2018). Educational leaders can benefit from exploring the nature of FGCS experiences, including with advising, to discern how to best serve them. FGCS who have overcome barriers and persisted towards graduation can be examples for administrators to look to, as their experiences are valuable, and their voices can help initiate meaningful change.

Advising is a crucial support for college students yet advising programs can be disjointed or underutilized (Joslin, 2018). Both Joslin (2018) and Tinto (2012) warn that poor advising experiences can affect a student's satisfaction with an institution. Greater inquiry into

interactions between advisors and FGCS could be a facet of mitigating poor advising by uncovering tools and approaches that were successful in meeting individualized needs, a strategy that could improve the disjointed nature of advising mentioned above. Advisors can be champions of equity on college campuses, which can include providing unique and individualized support to underprepared groups like FGCS (Lawton, 2018). Thus, the purpose of the study was born from the problems explicated above, as well as the identified gap in the literature (Morgan, 2019).

The purpose of this study operates from a twofold platform for how this research may be beneficial for policymakers and educational leaders. First, the findings of this study contributed to filling the gap in the literature on FGCS perceptions of academic advising and advisor leadership. Second, and perhaps most importantly, the findings can help improve FGCS completion rates as well as academic advising programs at institutions of higher education.

Research Questions

Frequent advising can improve FGCS retention rates (Swecker et al., 2013). Additionally, advisors can serve as key leaders within the college experience of students by helping with a variety of college readiness topics (Barbuto et al., 2011; DeLaRosby, 2017; Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015). However, continued disparate graduation rates and the lack of research documenting the ways FGCS make sense of advising, and whether such experiences influence success, prompted this qualitative study (Morgan, 2019; Peeters, 2018). Through the dual lens of sensemaking and the behavioral approach to leadership, explicated in the next section, this study sought to uncover how FGCS seniors and recent graduates perceive advising and advisors as resources within their educational journeys. To better understand the central phenomenon regarding FGCS lived experiences with academic advising, document individual perceptions, and to uncover

information to fill the gap in the literature, this study was guided by two central research questions:

1) How do FGCS at a small, private university describe and understand their lived experiences with academic advising and their advisor?

2) How do FGCS perceive and relate the role of academic advising and their advisor in their success and persistence to graduation?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study incorporates a tripartite structure including personal interest, topical research, and a theoretical framework. Both personal interest and topical research focus on the nature and benefit of advising while acknowledging the challenges that contribute to inequitable FGCS success. The subpar success rates are troubling, as many FGCS do not persist to graduation due to the inherent barriers in the college experience for students who enter unprepared academically and socially (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Therefore, the current study acknowledges that FGCS encounter unique barriers, which is a necessary first step in understanding FGCS academic advising experiences.

Lawton (2018) aptly notes that institutions should consider how to close the opportunity gap for FGCS through equitable and systematic reform approaches. Academic advising has the capacity to champion equity on campuses, but more research is needed into how FGCS perceive their advising experiences to understand advising's role in these efforts. Such information could help educational leaders grasp how to potentially improve retention programs. Further, as a university registrar, this researcher oversees an academic advising program. Academic advising programs can often be disjointed or imbalanced due to a lack of understanding student needs or urgency on behalf of advisors (Joslin, 2018). While many advisors strive to provide equitable

service to all students, without institutional support and systematic change, the overarching

advising experience can be found lacking by students with individualized or unique needs.

University registrars and other advising administrators can champion and incorporate

values of equity and individualized service into the advising programs at their respective

institutions (Lawton, 2018). These values could alter institutional culture, feelings of belonging,

and student success, each of which can be issues of concern for students struggling with

transition and persistence (Lawton, 2018; Tinto, 2012). Such efforts could also encourage

advisors to think pedagogically about advising, which can shift advising from a purely

transactional exercise towards more meaningful, relational interactions (Snyder-Duch, 2013;

Troxell, 2018). Troxell (2018) explicates the need for institutions to laude the scholarship of

academic advising by supporting efforts for scholar-practitioner research in the field of advising.

Allowing the recipients of academic advising to take part in research related to academic

advising is a fundamental aspect of scholar-practitioner research that seeks meaningful change

(Nguyen, et al., 2019; Troxel, 2018). However, not only is institutional buy-in needed, but

further research into how FGCS perceive advising experiences and advisor leadership could be a

significant boon to local advising efforts and industry best practices by uncovering how advising

can meet student needs.

Furthermore, a foundational understanding of academic advising involves characteristics

of leadership as they relate to the advisor-advisee relationship (Gordon et al., 2008). Barbuto et

al. (2011) explicate leadership studies and leadership theory as beneficial frameworks for

understanding the advisor-advisee relationship. Increasing the body of literature on how advisors

can lead FGCS in a manner that serves their unique needs could improve professional

development content (Troxel, 2018). Uncovering critical information related to leadership in

academic advising could also inform future advising programs and procedures by including elements of leadership development based on leadership theory models.

Theoretical Framework

Topical research and personal interest work in tandem with the theoretical framework of this study, namely sensemaking and the behavioral approach to leadership. Sensemaking involves engaging in reflection and retrospection after an event occurs to process that experience (Marion & Gonzales, 2014). The concept of sensemaking relates to the purpose of this study, namely that to better understand how FGCS describe their lived experiences with academic advising and advisor leadership, it is critical to grasp how individuals generally "make sense" or perceive of events, people, places, and experiences. Sensemaking also aligns with the research questions of this study which seek to document the perceptions and descriptions of FGCS regarding their advisor's leadership and advising experiences. Sensemaking provides language to help explore the behavior and experiences of individuals and groups, which made it a valuable framework for understanding perceptions provided by FGCS (Weick, 1995). FGCS had the opportunity to share their thoughts and perceptions in this study, and sensemaking offered an analytical and interpretive scaffolding that helped reveal how the participants framed and reacted to their advising experiences. Sensemaking occurs inherently and can influence an individual's actions, beliefs, and perceptions (Weick, 1995). Thus, sensemaking was crucial for helping this researcher understand FGCS perceptions of advising and its role in student success.

Working in conjunction with sensemaking, this study also incorporated the behavioral approach to leadership. The behavioral approach posits two main strains of leadership behavior, namely task behaviors and relationship behaviors (Northouse, 2019). The difference is that "task behaviors facilitate goal accomplishment: they help group members achieve their objectives.

Relationship behaviors help followers feel comfortable with themselves, with each other, and with the situation in which they find themselves" (Northouse, 2019, p. 73). This theory of leadership focuses on a leader's ability to influence their followers towards helping them achieve their goals (Northouse, 2019).

The behavioral approach provided this researcher a lens through which FGCS perceptions of their advisor could be understood. Lerstrom (2008) argues that effective leadership in advising involves balance between task and relationship behaviors. Barbuto et al. (2011) furthers this idea by asserting that "too few studies have tested the relationships between advisor behaviors and student outcomes" (p. 656). Thus, there is precedent for understanding the advisee-advisor relationship similarly to the leader-follower relationship utilizing leadership theories such as the behavioral approach. Northouse (2019) explains the behavioral approach as descriptive and not prescriptive, which further lent itself to this study. The inclusion of the behavioral approach to leadership was not to impel participants to force an advisor's behaviors or actions into two rigid categories. Rather, the purpose was to reveal FGCS understandings of their advisor as a leader and consequently being able to identify their behaviors as task or relationship behaviors and if these interactions were influential.

Sensemaking and the behavioral approach to leadership worked in tandem for this study. The purpose of the study was to understand how FGCS make sense of their advising experiences and advisor's leadership, as well as the influence these interactions had on subsequent actions or dispositions related to student success. It is fundamental to listen to the voices of FGCS through qualitative research to discern how these students experience college (Quinn et al., 2019). Utilizing the dual framework helped reveal how participants perceived and reacted to their advising experiences and how this affected academic and social matters (Northouse, 2019). The

goal of this dual framework was to bring to light the essences of experience the FGCS

participants described in relation to their education and goal attainment (Northouse, 2019). This

approach helped inform and interpret the experiences of FGCS, thus guiding the data analysis

and interpretation (Northouse, 2019). The theoretical framework operated purposefully within

the overall conceptual framework by (1) acknowledging comparatively deficient educational

outcomes for FGCS, (2) noting the barriers and challenges inherent in the college experience for

FGCS, (3) recognizing the value of advising for all students, including FGCS, and (4) seeking to

listen to the real voices of FGCS and their experiences with advising and advisor leadership.

Thus, the conceptual framework aligned and integrated with the data collection and analysis

process, as well as the purpose and research questions of this study.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

Several assumptions and limitations were present in this study, which shaped the scope of

the study. The first assumption was that all participants would answer interview questions

truthfully. Some participants may have been afraid to share genuine perceptions of academic

advising experiences or advisor leadership. However, the data collection process was designed to

ensure that all participants felt comfortable in knowing their rights and that confidentiality was

protected by using pseudonyms and other protective measures. A second assumption was that, as

evidenced by the literature, academic advising is a helpful resource for FGCS (Glaessgen et al.,

2018; Peeters, 2018; Swecker et al., 2013; Troxel, 2018). While this assumption is not

ungrounded, some FGCS may have different or alternative experiences with academic advising,

especially at an institution like SMU that has a decentralized model. However, all of the

participants' varying experiences were beneficial contributions towards answering the research

questions. A final assumption was that each of the FGCS participants had sufficient interaction

with an academic advisor, as prescribed by the research site SMU, throughout their education to share perceptions on advising and advisor leadership.

Additionally, this study included specific limitations. The first limitation was the single location of the research site SMU. While all institutions may share certain commonalities, the site is not representative of the totality of advising experiences possible for FGCS in the state of Tennessee or in the United States. The study focused on the lived experiences of FGCS at a single site, and thus findings may not be generalizable to all FGCS at all institutions. Regardless, transcendental phenomenology inherently utilizes small sample sizes to provide rich descriptions of the central phenomenon, and the study itself is transferrable to other contexts (Creswell, 2015). Further, since this qualitative study included FGCS seniors and recent graduates, volunteer bias may have limited this study. Volunteer bias can happen because those who volunteer for research are often more successful individuals (Salkind, 2010). But this study sought to document experiences of current seniors and recent graduates, an inherently successful subset of FGCS, thus uncovering useful information for improving support efforts (Demetriou et al., 2017).

A final limitation was the researcher conducting the study at a place of employment, which may be perceived as a conflict of interest or a constraint of scope. However, the researcher received no compensation or other benefits for conducting the study, monetary or otherwise. Confidentiality and privacy measures during data collection and coding helped protect participants, and the researcher had no personal or direct ties of authority or oversight to any participant. The researcher conducted the study out of genuine scholarly interest in filling the aforementioned gap in the literature, as well as a personal interest in uncovering information that can better serve FGCS needs.

The assumptions and limitations give rise to the scope of the study, which involved understanding how FGCS make sense of their advising experiences and advisor leadership at a small, private university in Tennessee. The focus was on uncovering rich, thick detail of how FGCS within this context experience the central phenomenon, and how such information could be beneficial for aiding future students and advising programs. The study was not indicative of the totality of all FGCS experiences. Instead, the study uncovered information that may be beneficial for readers and researchers to envision aiding their own institution. Further the study illuminated real advising experiences that may improve advising programs and fill the gap in the literature related to FGCS perceptions of advising and advisor leadership.

Significance of Study

Despite being such a large proportion of the enrolled student population, FGCS are more likely to drop out of college without earning a degree (Cataldi et al., 2018; Manzoni & Streib, 2019; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Even among FGCS who do graduate, they "typically accumulate fewer signals of success" that may bolster a resume, such as internships or prominent extracurricular activities (Manzoni & Streib, 2019, p. 579). In general, FGCS are less likely to achieve their educational aspirations than peers coming from college-educated families (Gibbons et al., 2016).

Many FGCS report feeling underprepared for college, either academically, socially, or both (Gibbons et al., 2016). Academic and social unpreparedness can often come as a result of lacking social capital related to college, or "limited access to people and resources with knowledge of higher education" (Lozano-Partida, 2018, p. 3). FGCS can struggle with acculturation to college, financial issues related to low family income, a lack of social capital, and intentional or unintentional microaggressions that can inhibit them from achieving their

academic goals (Ellis et al., 2019; Lozano-Partida, 2018). These compounding issues create unfavorable, sometimes imposing conditions that prevent FGCS success at many institutions. An investigation such as this one into how to better serve and support FGCS within a defined context could help improve educational success and goal attainment for many FGCS.

Various support efforts aim to aid and mentor FGCS and improve intervention opportunities (Horowitz, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2018). Further, many institutions focus on FGCS mental and emotional health and certain approaches do help improve educational outcomes (House et al., 2019). Regardless, too many FGCS still fail to graduate from college with a post-secondary credential (Cataldi et al., 2018). Additional qualitative studies utilizing individual interviews on FGCS experiences could help improve advising programs in a way that benefit FGCS (Havlik et al., 2020). Further, Demetriou et al. (2017) assert that studies on successful students are useful, and that additional research on successful FGCS will be beneficial for uncovering things that helped them succeed. Peeters (2018) shares positive qualitative data on FGCS freshman to sophomore persistence related to developmental advising. Still, Peeters (2018) agrees with Demetriou et al. (2017) that there would be value in additional studies aimed at understanding the aspects of advising that were helpful for FGCS in persisting to graduation.

This study sought to add to the corpus of literature on FGCS support efforts, academic advising programs, and advisor professional development strategies. Further, while advising is known to be helpful for FGCS retention efforts, the lack of research into exactly how advisor leadership and advising experiences best influence FGCS success was apparent (Swecker et al., 2013). This study focused on uncovering the perceptions of FGCS surrounding their lived experiences with academic advising and advisor leadership. These real experiences could help

policy makers and academic administrators improve their advising programs by better understanding how advising interactions and experiences influenced FGCS.

Furthermore, advising research can benefit from the perspectives of leadership and leadership theories (Barbuto et al., 2011; Kerr, 2018; Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015). Additional investigation into understanding how FGCS perceive advisors as leaders could further build on such perspectives. Troxel (2018) calls for academic leaders to champion continuous involvement and engagement in the scholarship of advising. Listening to the real experiences of FGCS with their advisor, through the lens of the behavioral approach to leadership, proved useful for understanding advisor influence. Thus, this study is also significant in its contributions to understanding the intersection of educational leadership and academic advising.

Definition of Terms

Academic Advising: Academic advising refers "to situations in which an institutional representative gives insight or direction to a college student about an academic, social, or personal matter. The nature of this direction might be to inform, suggest, counsel, discipline, coach, mentor, or even teach" (Kuhn, 2009, p. 3).

Autonomy: Autonomy "refers to the notion of self-governance and the ability to make separate responsible decisions" (Cullaty, 2011, p. 425). The development of autonomy is considered "an important developmental goal for college students" (Cullaty, 2011, p. 425).

Continuing-Generation College Student: Continuing-generation college students can be defined as enrolled college students "who have at least one parent with a bachelor's degree or a higher level of educational attainment" (Redford & Hoyer, 2017, p. 3).

First-Generation College Student (FGCS): This study accepts and utilizes the operational and conceptual definition for FGCS proffered by Peralta and Klonowski (2017), namely that a

"first-generation college student [is] an individual who is pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a post-secondary degree" (p. 635).

Persistence: Students persist, while institutions retain (Hagedorn, 2006). The basic definition of persistence is, "a student [who] enrolls in college and remains enrolled until degree completion" (Hagedorn, 2006, p. 2). Persistence, then, is a student measure and can be understood as various factors related to remaining enrolled and achieving graduation.

Retention: Retention can be defined as "the rate at which an institution retains and graduates students who first enter the institution as freshman at a given point in time" (Tinto, 2012, p. 127). Thus, retention involves the measures and support efforts of an institution for keeping students enrolled to graduation.

Sensemaking: sensemaking involves "such things as placement of items into a framework, comprehension, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding, and patterning" (Weick, 1995, p. 6). It involves how individuals frame experiences, and how those experiences influence subsequent actions, beliefs, and perceptions.

Social Capital: Social capital in higher education settings refers to "access to people and resources with knowledge of higher education" (Lozano-Partida, 2018, p. 3).

Student Success: Student success is "the outcome of a personal, rigorous, and enriching learning experience that culminates in the achievement of a student's academic goals in a timely manner and fully prepares them to realize their career aspirations" (Lawton, 2018, p. 34).

Conclusion

The value of a college degree for social mobility, career earnings, and closing the opportunity gap is clear (Scheld, 2019). While access to a college education has improved for many formerly underserved student groups, issues of equity in completion rates persists (Lawton,

2018). Despite improvements in support initiatives aimed at helping FGCS, too many students fail to achieve their goals. Institutions must be aware of these barriers. Improving support efforts and retention strategies, such as academic advising, should be paramount.

While academic advising is known to benefit FGCS retention rates (Swecker et al., 2013), too little is known about how FGCS make sense of advising experiences and advisor leadership. The dearth of qualitative research documenting FGCS experiences with academic advising, and whether these experiences influence student success and persistence to graduation implicated the need for this study. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how FGCS at a small, private university in Tennessee perceive their lived experiences with academic advising and advisor leadership, and whether such experiences influenced student success. The bipartite theoretical framework of sensemaking and the behavioral approach to leadership created an informative lens through which FGCS experiences and perceptions could be understood. The results of this study provide crucial insight into FGCS lived experiences, which could help policy makers and higher education leaders implement new policies or re-envision current advising best practices to help improve FGCS retention and completion rates.

Chapter Two provides a detailed exploration into the literature on three main thematic categories, namely FGCS, academic advising history and best practices, and the nature of advising and advisor leadership for FGCS. This chapter also explicates the conceptual framework as it was borne from the literature and guided by contemporary research. Chapter Three describes the methodology of transcendental phenomenology, including site information, sampling and participant information, data collection and analysis procedures, limitations, and ethical considerations. The chapter also defends the chosen methodology and synthesizes it with

the conceptual and theoretical framework, as well as the research questions of the study. Chapter Four provides the detailed results of rigorous data analysis utilizing the modified van Kaam methodology (Moustakas, 1994). Four primary themes are presented alongside individual textural-structural descriptions for each participant, culminating in a cohesive composite textural-structural description that captures the essences of experience for the participants. Finally, Chapter Five presents this researcher's interpretations and conclusions of the findings, as well as implications, recommendations for action, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

First-generation college students (FGCS) experience barriers to success that are unique and different from continuing-generation peers. These barriers often inhibit student success and persistence to graduation (Gibbons et al., 2016). Colleges and universities must consider more thoroughly how to best support these students, including the role academic advisors can play in helping FGCS succeed. This study sought to understand how FGCS make sense of advising experiences and advisor leadership and whether such experiences influenced FGCS persistence and success. This chapter acknowledges disparate FGCS success rates, while also exploring retention, current support efforts, and best practices. Academic advising is explored historically and currently as a prominent support for students, including its potential influence on the persistence and motivation of college students. Further, the literature related to the specific role of advising for FGCS success is examined.

FGCS graduate at roughly half the rate of continuing-generation students (Cataldi et al., 2018). Institutions have designed various support programs that have helped a multitude of FGCS succeed academically and socially (Quinn et al., 2019). However, many FGCS still fail to persist to graduation and achieve their educational goals (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). This issue is troubling, as many students do not persist to graduation due to challenges and barriers inherent in the college experience that are more difficult for students who have no familial knowledge of college norms (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Therefore, this researcher agrees with Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) that it is critical for institutions to acknowledge FGCS barriers in order to discern how to help students overcome them, realize their potential, and navigate a path towards achieving their goals.

Higher education has shifted its focus in recent decades from access, which is still a critical consideration, to a combined effort of both access and completion for all students (Lawton, 2018). Rather than instituting piecemeal efforts towards providing support for underprepared or underrepresented students, which typically include FGCS, institutions need to address how to close the opportunity gap for these students through equitable and systematic reform approaches. Academic advising can be one prominent tool that can lead the way and advising administrators could design their programs with equity in mind to ensure greater support based on both well-documented and individualized needs (Lawton, 2018).

Advising programs can sometimes lack adequate resources, most especially staffing and time, which are crucial for meaningful support of students (Lawton, 2018). Without adequate resources and structure across an advising program, advising can become disjointed and inequitable depending on program design and advisor capacities (Joslin, 2018). As a university registrar, this researcher oversees the content and resources of an academic advising program. Advisors sometimes bemoan a lack of training for specific advising situations, which influences their capacity to provide meaningful experiences to all students. Thus, a broad overview of the literature helps situate this study into the overall corpus on academic advising best practices and FGCS support efforts, while also acknowledging the need for additional research.

This literature review is first preceded by the conceptual framework of this study, which is the melding of personal interests, topical research, and a theoretical framework into a cohesive lens through which the study operates (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). A bipartite theoretical framework of sensemaking and the behavioral approach to leadership served as the lens through which this study framed the research questions, data collection, and data analysis. The behavioral approach to leadership focuses on a leader's behaviors, including "what they do and how they

act" (Northouse, 2019, p. 73). This leadership theory designates two fundamental behaviors leaders use towards followers to help them achieve their goals: namely, task behaviors and relationship behaviors (Northouse, 2019). In conjunction with the behavioral approach, this study also incorporates the framework of sensemaking as a means of understanding FGCS perceptions of advising and how such interactions influenced their success (Weick, 1995).

The theoretical framework is one component of the holistic conceptual framework that synthesizes current research and the personal and professional interest of this researcher as the guiding foundation of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Further, the literature review informs this framework and seeks to analyze and synthesize current research on three thematic categories, namely FGCS, academic advising, and the specific benefit and influence of academic advising and advisor leadership on FGCS success. Therefore, the literature review and the conceptual framework were informative, complementary, and supportive of this study's overall goal to fill a gap in the literature pertaining to how FGCS make sense of academic advising and the potential for such findings to benefit future FGCS support efforts and advising best practices.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is comprised of three vital facets, namely personal interest, topical research, and a dual theoretical framework of sensemaking and the behavioral approach to leadership. This combinatory structure was a crucial lens for understanding how FGCS perceive and understand their advising experiences, as well as whether their experiences were influential in helping the students persist and succeed. This researcher's experience as a registrar, the literature on FGCS and academic advising, and a dual-theoretical framework helped ground the study in the need for additional research into how FGCS make sense of academic advising experiences.

Further, this study acknowledges that advising has the capacity to champion equity on college campuses and serve the unique needs of FGCS (Lawton, 2018). FGCS face barriers which are well-documented as inhibitors to acculturation and success (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Pratt et al., 2019). Higher education institutions have an important responsibility for fostering conditions that combat such barriers and improve feelings of belonging for FGCS (Petty, 2014). Tinto (2012) identifies feelings of belonging as crucial for student persistence and institutional retention. Advising can be a source of encouragement and stability for FGCS by providing unique support based on student needs that focuses on institutional inclusiveness and guidance through academic or social requirements (Pratt et al., 2019).

Academic advising is an important, established component of successful retention and student success efforts in higher education (Tinto, 2012). Research consistently affirms advising as a positive influence on college students in general, but also on underprepared and underrepresented students (Joslin, 2018; Lawton, 2018; Young-Jones, et al., 2013). Advising connects students with institutions in a repetitious and interpersonal manner that inculcates both student success skills and institutional values and norms (Tinto, 2012). These experiences can be in individual or group settings, promoting both encouragement and academic guidance to help students persist through their college careers. Academic advising's connection to retention is clear (DeLaRosby, 2017; Swecker et al., 2013). Yet, little is known about how FGCS make sense of these meetings as well as the interplay of advisor leadership behaviors and FGCS success (Morgan, 2019). Exploring such intricacies could benefit FGCS support programs and advising strategies by documenting real, lived experiences with advising and whether aspects of advising contributed to their success or persistence to graduation.

Sensemaking Theory

This study utilizes a bipartite framework of sensemaking and the behavioral approach to leadership for understanding the central phenomenon of participant experience. The combined approach provided the researcher with a coherent tool for understanding the relationships between advisors and FGCS, including the degree to which such relationships were meaningful and influential. Both theories are not prescriptive, but rather provided a salient framework for listening to and understanding lived experiences of FGCS, which helped this researcher interpret the findings of data analysis.

Broadly, sensemaking is "about making sense of an event after it happens" (Marion & Gonzales, 2014, p. 216). Weick's (1995) seminal work, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, explores how the sensemaking process influences organizational structure and behavior. Sensemaking is a "placement of items into a framework, comprehension, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding, and patterning" (Weick, 1995, p. 6). Individuals engage in reflection and retrospection after an event occurs in order to process an experience and adaptively create logic, meaning, and responses (Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Marion and Gonzales (2014) explain sensemaking at its core:

> This is how we make sense of things; how we create patterns; how we draw conclusions; how we become friends or enemies; how we institutionalize or what is politically correct or not; how we vote; how we decide what is ethical or unethical, legal or nonlegal. (p. 217)

While real people, places, things, and concepts do exist, an individual's perception of these things is what brings about meaning and reality (Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Sensemaking as a framework can help interpret student perceptions, which in turn can inform decision-making, the

types of policies and educational approaches that are implemented, and how institutions understand student persistence and success. This framework can be exceedingly beneficial for unveiling how individuals, such as FGCS, perceive academic advising experiences, make sense of them, and adapt their thinking and resultant decision-making processes.

Sensemaking actions help individuals frame their reality and make decisions regarding their world. Engaging reality helps individuals devise a plausible grip and understanding of a fluctuating world. Leaders utilize sensemaking to understand their environments and make decisions on the direction of an organization or group (Ancona, 2012). Sensemaking can help educational leaders make sense of unintelligible or failing situations, as well as adaptive challenges (Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Adaptive challenges are "those that require a response outside our existing repertoire – [and] often present a gap between an aspiration and an existing capacity – a gap that cannot be closed by existing models of operating" (Ancona, 2012, p. 4). This is where sensemaking aids educational leaders in responding to challenges through actionable responses towards understanding a new reality based on reflection of the past (Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Uncovering meaning and reasoning behind such situations provides opportunities for change and improvement, which can benefit students and other stakeholders.

Weick (1995) expounds upon seven main properties of sensemaking: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Understanding the seven main properties provides a process for how individuals make sense of their worlds, which was paramount for the purpose of this study in uncovering how FGCS make sense of their lived advising experiences. First, identity construction refers to the nature of an individual's differing personalities that can be expressed depending on the situation. These identities are influenced by

projecting themselves into the environment and discerning the effects, which in turn affect who we understand ourselves to be. Thus, when individuals select an interpretation of something, they are taking on an identity, which further influences decision-making and leadership within organizations or groups (Weick, 1995).

Second, "retrospective" involves the blending of past, present, and future. The past helps individuals make sense of the present. Weick (1995) explains that this process can be jaded, wherein memory is selective and can be biased or limited to our preconceived notions. Selection of memory can also be influenced by a present event itself, resulting in mutual influence of both the past and the present. Self-reflection in sensemaking takes these past and present experiences, identifies patterns, and thus situates them for future use.

Third, "enactive of sensible environments" involves how people enact their environments through biases or beliefs. While our actions result from environmental factors in one sense, our actions also affect the environments themselves in another. From this perception, individuals act on these understandings and make choices. By believing in these enacted realities, individuals also assume others should adhere and agree to these realities (Weick, 1995). Within organizations, these expectations for adherence result in pressures for conformity.

Fourth, "social" refers to the social process of sensemaking. Individuals communicate with one another and seek collective understandings of their experiences. Sensemaking is "never solitary because what a person does internally is contingent on others" (Weick, 1995, p. 40). Organizational players develop meaning collectively, and various individuals can influence others through a multitude of interactions. As these players interact, develop, and share through a common language, they devise meaning communally.

Fifth, "ongoing" involves the repetitious nature of sensemaking. Even as individuals experience similar or exact experiences in life, they still require constant interpretation and evaluation. This process of continual assessment further shapes identity, behavior, actions, and perceptions. Life continually changes and requires constant sensemaking in order to cope with all forms of changes, both big and small (Weick, 1995). Marion and Gonzales (2014) explain the nature of bracketing as it relates to ongoing sensemaking. They explain that "we bracket certain events, usually dramatic events…and use these brackets to make sense of our world" (Marion & Gonzales, 2014, p. 220). Through ongoing sensemaking, these brackets help individuals make decisions and draw from the meaning we ascribed to similar, key situations.

Sixth, "focused on extracted cues" relates to the "qualities or impressions of bracketed events" (Marion & Gonzales, 2014, p. 221). It is impractical to process and analyze every bit of information about every event or situation. Extracted cues are key facets of these events or situations that help individuals make general assumptions about how one should act (Weick, 1995). These extracted cues serve as generalizations of the entire experience and are the most crucial for making sense of them in the present and for the future.

Finally, "driven by plausibility rather than accuracy" involves the nature in which meaning given to an experience must seem reasonable but does not necessarily have to adhere to some absolute sense of accuracy. Organizations and people require good, plausible plans that can help orient and guide what happens next. Acting quickly and decisively are critical aspects of sensemaking, which speaks to the need for plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). Agreeing that something makes sense does not require some immaculately accurate explanation or understanding, but rather it involves devising plausible and rational interpretations that are collectively beneficial.

Sensemaking has the capacity to significantly influence the work and development of educational leaders (Marion & Gonzales, 2014). The cohesive phases of sensemaking described by Weick (1995) give a framework for helping individuals "talk about reality as an ongoing accomplishment that takes form when people make retrospective sense of the situation which they find themselves and their creations" (p. 15). Weick (1995) explicates the need for sensemaking amidst uncertainty in organizations, as much of its value lies in helping individuals to collectively articulate meaning of their experiences. Leaders and educational administrators should see sensemaking as a prominent tool for better understanding facets of the educational experience, and how students perceive or respond to them. Thus, advising administrators can benefit from sensemaking for understanding students' lived experiences with advising and how it relates to student success, aligning with the purpose of this study.

Sensemaking is a powerful framework for discerning the internal, external, cognitive, and physical interplay of human experience, including how individuals both perceive and respond to their environment. All college students who experience academic advising receive certain prescriptive or developmental benefits from the advising process, which can be influential to their success academically and socially, as well as feelings of belonging and the procurement of social capital (DeLaRosby, 2017). Sensemaking is a crucial tool that helps researchers understand how humans perceive lived events and how these events are influential collectively and individually. For the purpose of this study, sensemaking helped this researcher with interpreting the meanings behind advising experiences and advisor leadership described by FGCS and how these experiences affected student perceptions of identity, motivation, retrospection, feelings of belonging, and student success.

Behavioral Approach to Leadership

In conjunction with sensemaking, this theoretical framework incorporates the behavioral approach to leadership, which focuses on a leader's behaviors in two realms, namely task behaviors and relationship behaviors. Northouse (2019) explains that "task behaviors facilitate goal accomplishment: they help group members achieve their objectives. Relationship behaviors help followers feel comfortable with themselves, with each other, and with the situation in which they find themselves" (p. 73). Northouse (2019) asserts that leaders can combine both approaches to varying degrees in an effort to influence and care for their followers for the purpose of helping them and the organization achieve goals.

Key studies in the twentieth century at The Ohio State University (OSU) and the University of Michigan (UM) served as the foundation for what is now known as the behavioral approach to leadership. Researchers at OSU concluded that earlier personality and trait leadership theories were no longer viable for understanding the dynamics of the leader-follower relationship (Bass, 2008). Stogdill (1974) further explains that from these studies two fundamental types of leadership behaviors arose: initiating structure and consideration. These were seen as more appropriate for understanding the leader-follower dyadic relationship. Northouse (2019) likens initiating structure and consideration to task behaviors and relationship behaviors respectively. Simultaneously, the UM research studies on leadership identified very similar results by defining production orientation and employee orientation as two major types of leadership behavior (Bowers & Seashore, 1966). These two categories also were likened to task behaviors and relationship behaviors respectively (Northouse, 2019). Both studies asserted conclusions that were divergent from popular personality and trait theories of leadership (Bowers

& Seashore, 1966). Ongoing studies continued debating about whether individuals were one or the other or could incorporate both into leadership.

Northouse (2019) describes that despite numerous subsequent studies from the 1950's onward, results were inconclusive and did not lead to a "universal theory of leadership" (p. 76). Blake and Mouton (1964) followed with their own studies on leadership behavior in the context of organizational management. The managerial grid they created has been widely utilized in various organizational and managerial training settings (Northouse, 2019). The grid was retitled to further focus on leadership and how leaders help people and organizations achieve goals through "concern for production and concern for people" (Northouse, 2019, p. 76). Blake and Mouton (1981) argued for an intersection between task and relationship behaviors utilizing their grid, positing that it was possible to exhibit both behaviors simultaneously to varying degrees. Thus, from these key studies, the tenets of the behavioral approach to leadership took shape as a framework for understanding various aspects of leader behavior and follower goal attainment.

Northouse (2019) describes the behavioral approach to leadership as "not a refined theory that provides a neatly organized set of prescriptions for effective leadership behavior" (p. 80). Rather, the focus lies on discerning how a leader's behaviors align with two major strands: task and relationship. The approach itself is descriptive rather than prescriptive and allows for both self-reflection and external assessment of leadership behaviors that are either beneficial or those that are detrimental (Bass, 2008). When individual leaders can appropriately assess the nature of their task and relationship behaviors, they can better understand their own actions in relation to both situations and personal characteristics. The behavioral approach can also be a lens through which follower perceptions of leader behaviors can be interpreted. Rather than leadership being about a leader's character or inherent traits, the approach focuses on how leaders choose to act

with their followers and in what ways followers perceive these interactions as beneficial or influential (Northouse, 2019).

Understanding advising through leadership theories can be helpful (Barbuto et al., 2011; Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015). Kerr (2018) explores the interplay of leadership amongst directors of advising programs and further calls for additional research into understanding the effectiveness of advising programs and advisor leadership. Thus, the behavioral approach is practical, and utilizing it bolstered this study's capacity to add to the literature by better understanding how FGCS make sense of advising and their academic advisors within their educational experiences.

Combining Sensemaking and Behavioral Approach to Leadership

Sensemaking worked in conjunction with the behavioral approach to leadership by blending as a theoretical framework that informed how this study listened to the voices of FGCS and their perceptions of an advisor's leadership behaviors. This combination helped the researcher understand FGCS experiences with advising by providing a structure that scaffolds human experience and categorizes the perceptions of participants (Northouse, 2019). The focus was not on forcing an advisor's leadership behaviors into rigid categories, but rather to utilize the behavioral approach as a tool for interpreting how FGCS describe their advisor in their reflections on advising experiences. Sensemaking also supplied language for this researcher to interpret how FGCS described various aspects of advising and advisor influence (Wang, 2012). It served as the lens for considering how FGCS understand and respond to educational interventions, such as academic advising, and how these interventions affected them academically and motivationally (Almeida, 2015). Sensemaking helped reveal how FGCS cogitate on academic advising in a retrospective manner, including how those experiences related to the attainment of their college goals. Further, sensemaking allowed for the researcher

to better understand the resultant actions and dispositions of FGCS following advising experiences, which influenced the advisor-advisee relationship.

The bipartite theoretical framework guided this study's focus on the lived experiences of FGCS with advising. The framework aligns with the call by Barbuto et al. (2011) for additional research on the "relationship between advisor behaviors and student outcomes" (p., 656) as well as Moore's (2020) call for additional research into student perceptions of faculty-led advising. This approach sought to fill the gap in the literature, which included calls for greater investigation into what advising approaches or experiences lead to increased satisfaction and academic success (DeLaRosby, 2017). The lens of sensemaking added value to this study and aligned with the transcendental phenomenological research design by serving as a tool that revealed the ways FGCS thought about advising and reacted to advising. The behavioral approach dovetailed naturally with sensemaking by providing a guide for interpreting and translating the perceptions of advisor actions. Thus, the results of this study could improve advisor professional development and FGCS support initiatives at post-secondary institutions documenting the nature of advising and advisor approaches that were beneficial for FGCS.

First-Generation College Students

Varying definitions exist for FGCS. Generally, definitions focus on being the first in their families to attempt post-secondary education (Gibbons et al., 2016). However, inconsistent descriptions of FGCS have implications for understanding various study findings and research results, as well as how institutions should rationalize these results, implement change, and improve support initiatives (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). It is crucial to understand these discrepancies and determine an operational definition for effective research.

Common definitions of FGCS include students whose parents have no college education, have some college education but no degree at all, and have some college education but no bachelor's degree (Horowitz, 2017). Some definitions also differ on whether "family" should include parents only, immediate family only, or also include other extended family members (Horowitz, 2017). Each of these definitions alter the amount and characteristics of students in question, which can influence data collection and interpretation, as well as various discrepancies during research efforts.

Peralta and Klonowski (2017) surveyed 24 current research articles on FGCS and found that half did not provide an operational definition. Nine out of 12 articles that did provide a definition for FGCS had differing definitions. The most widely used definition of FGCS involves those students whose parents or guardians do not have a bachelor's degree and have attempted little or no post-secondary education (Gibbons, et al., 2016; House et al., 2019; Pratt et al., 2019; Swecker et al., 2013). This definition appears to be the most common and widely accepted in research efforts on FGCS. Thus, to understand FGCS unique needs and barriers, as well as uncover new strategies for advising and student success initiatives, this review considers various definition, yet accepts the following operational and conceptual definition as the foundation for the current research: students whose parents or guardians do not have a bachelor's degree. Accepting an operational definition helps appropriately grasp the current literature on FGCS and helps guide this study.

Current Research on First-Generation College Students

The three main tracks of research on FGCS involve issues of college preparedness and demographic characteristics, barriers and challenges, and motivation (Pratt et al., 2019). FGCS represent approximately one-third of all currently enrolled college students in the United States

(Cataldi et al., 2018). FGCS are twice as likely as continuing-generation students to leave college after the first year of enrollment and often end up with student debt and no degree, which continues cycles of income inequality and wage disparity (Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2018). Academically, many FGCS tend to have lower GPAs and often take fewer credits than continuing-generation peers (Schwartz et al., 2018). Such issues persist for FGCS despite many attempts by institutions of higher education to develop and implement support programs.

Recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) studies show that half as many FGCS had obtained a college degree ten years after their sophomore year of high school in comparison to continuing-generation peers (Cataldi et al., 2018; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). More FGCS report an inability to afford college as a reason for dropping out than do continuing-generation students (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). FGCS have higher attrition rates and are more likely to be students of color, from low-income families, and are less likely to achieve their educational goals coming out of high school (Manzoni & Streib, 2019; Schwartz et al., 2018). Academic and social unpreparedness often comes as a result of lacking social capital related to college. Social capital refers to "limited access to people and resources with knowledge of higher education" (Lozano-Partida, 2018, p. 3). A lack of social capital resources can create challenges related to college transitions when students do not have family members with knowledge of higher education (Lozano-Partida, 2018). FGCS are a diverse group of students with varying backgrounds, social experiences, and economic situations, as well as a diverse set of needs.

Overall, this information conveys that different students bring different characteristics and experiences into their post-secondary education and need varying, unique forms of support to help them succeed (Tinto, 2012). The data surrounding FGCS matriculation, persistence, and graduation reveal the struggles and unique challenges they face. While all students struggle with

college transitions, motivation, and persistence, FGCS face barriers that are unique and sometimes heightened in comparison to continuing generation peers who have family members to offer guidance (Gibbons et al., 2016). Therefore, it is pertinent to understand the matriculation and persistence data of FGCS through the lens of their unique challenges and barriers to formulate a grasp on how these students navigate their way through educational experiences.

First-Generation Challenges and Barriers

Subpar FGCS matriculation and persistence rates have prompted a great deal of research into why these students experience higher education differently than continuing-generation peers (Pratt et al., 2019). Generally, FGCS encounter a wide array of barriers that inhibit their success from initial enrollment (Gibbons et al., 2016). Barriers can be immaterial obstacles that separate, impede, or block access or progress (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Therefore, the data, which show FGCS do not matriculate or graduate at the same rate as continuing-generation peers, becomes more salient with a stronger understanding of the unique challenges that these students face.

FGCS are the first individuals in their immediate families to pursue achieving a post-secondary degree, which can mean they often lack critical social capital, information, and assertiveness to find sources of help and support (Gibbons et al., 2016). FGCS are often underprepared in terms of college readiness, including the academic or practical information needed to navigate college and succeed in the classroom (Manzoni & Streib, 2019). These students typically have lower high school GPAs and standardized testing scores (Falcon, 2015), as well as minimal self-regulated learning which can influence motivation (Antonelli et al., 2020). Many FGCS also report experiencing issues with social disparity, racism, and cultural differences while enrolled in higher education (Falcon, 2015).

One of the more fundamental barriers is the lack of social capital. Social capital involves key relationships and points of contact that provide support in social situations (Lozano-Partida, 2018; Nichols & Islas, 2015). Continuing generation students frequently identify parents as very important forms of social capital in navigating the higher education process (Nichols & Islas, 2015). Continuing-generation students not only have parental social capital to fall back on, especially in their first year, but they also have been found to be more proficient at deliberately finding additional forms of social capital after arriving on campus (Schwartz et al., 2018). FGCS students lack these resources from family members and can be less assertive in identifying and finding social capital resources on campus as they more frequently report struggles with feelings of belonging (Manzoni & Streib, 2019; Moschetti & Hudley, 2014).

Compounded by a lack of adequate social capital support systems, FGCS struggle to handle the stress of their other barriers and challenges. Another fundamental challenge for FGCS is the lack of feelings of belonging in the higher education environment (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). These students often report a sense of "cultural dislocation," which involves feeling marginalized when confronted with social situations and cultural experiences that are beyond their normal experience from home (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016, p. 37). FGCS may even experience perceptions of hostility and negativity from peers, or even staff and faculty members, when they encounter situations that are dissimilar to their prior social or educational contexts (Ayeni, 2018). Swanbrow-Becker et al. (2017) explain that intense feelings of disconnect can directly affect FGCS pursuing new forms of social capital. An intense disconnect can increase academic burdens and mental or emotional stress, which can result in poor grades, reduced educational motivation, and a desire to leave an institution.

The findings of Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) align with Swanbrow-Becker et al. (2017) that a lack of feelings of belonging can also be amplified by experiences of guilt and tension related to family members. Adequate familial support is crucial in FGCS success and persistence (Gibbons et al., 2016). However, FGCS more frequently come from low-income families (Antonelli et al., 2020). Tension over finances and the guilt of leaving home creates mental and emotional challenges that can affect well-being (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017). This, in turn, can degrade educational motivation when these students fail to see the purpose or outcomes of their education, or fail to make connections between their learning and their goals (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017). Lacking the support of family and local community means FGCS do not have a stable source of encouragement to persist and maintain educational motivation that continuing-generation peers have, which can be detrimental for class attendance and homework completion (Nichols & Islas, 2015). Thus, concentrated and intentional support efforts aimed at combating these unique barriers and challenges can be a significant boon to both FGCS as well as institutional retention.

Support Efforts and Best Practices

Many institutions and researchers report awareness of the unique barriers faced by FGCS that affect persistence and graduation (Pratt et al., 2019). Schools in the United States have created programs and support measures at both the secondary and post-secondary education levels as a response to such barriers (Falcon, 2015; Quinn et al., 2018). First-generation success programs often include aspects of mentorship to help students better acculturate to a campus (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017). Some institutions have recruited faculty members to help identify struggling students in their classrooms, offer academic support, and advocate for them in

learning experiences and campus acculturation (Horowitz, 2017). Integrative approaches involving multiple departments, staff, and faculty have received greater attention as well.

College integration involves ensuring students receive support, understand expectations, receive helpful feedback, and get involved in campus and social life (Tinto, 2012). Retention and support efforts for FGCS have often focused on these key areas. Certain programs place significant efforts towards improving the mental-wellbeing of FGCS as they deal with unique stressors (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017). Institutions often provide counseling services to deal with stress, mental breakdown, and other emotional frustrations (House et al., 2019; Jenkins et al., 2013). Further, institutions have also tapped into academic advising programs to offer an additional layer of support (Swecker et al., 2013). Advising can improve FGCS retention efforts by providing structured support services aimed at degree completion and time management (Glaessgen et al., 2018; Remsing, 2013). Due to increased efforts, some institutions have seen as many as 25% of FGCS achieve a bachelor's degree in four years, which is an increase from previous decades (Falcon, 2015). These efforts are promising, but many institutions still want to do better and find more effective options for helping FGCS succeed.

First-Generation College Students and Educational Motivation

Pratt et al. (2019) delineate three general tracks of research on FGCS: (1) demographic characteristics related to high school outcomes, college selection, and college preparedness, (2) challenges and barriers unique to FGCS that can affect success, and (3) examining motivation for persistence. The first two are examined in previous sections above, making it important to also consider the third track as well. The current study does not purport to examine the psychological and cognitive nature of educational motivation, but it will be helpful to review recent studies that explore such themes. Varying factors influence educational motivation for

FGCS, including the challenges and barriers previously mentioned. Motivation is critical for academic success and, in educational settings, is increasingly considered to be "…more important to a child's education than any other single factor" (Koca, 2016, p. 5). Some FGCS find motivation from their families, albeit not always from positive associations (Lozano-Partida, 2018). Family motivation can sometimes result from negative familial associations wherein FGCS desire a better life than they previously experienced. Environmental and social conditions can sometimes enflame FGCS motivation towards striving for something better, as college can often provide a new, safer, more stimulating and enriching environment for learning (Green, 2017). Motivation can also be influenced by factors such as perceived autonomy and personal choices (Duvall, 2018). Students must learn positive decision-making practices and discernment in order to make wise choices, which in turn can influence their chances of staying motivated towards achieving goals. Educational success is dependent on the level of a student's educational motivation (Duvall, 2018). Thus, uncovering facets of the college experience that influence motivation to persist can improve retention and success efforts.

Educational motivation also involves the underlying desires of students to achieve educational goals, outcomes, or rewards (Petty, 2014). Institutions must be aware of the factors that affect motivation and consider what programs or support measures best improve motivation to combat barriers and challenges. Lacking motivation has the capacity to affect a student's chances of academic success, as a lack of motivation can influence class attendance and coursework quality (Petty, 2014). Every student enrolls in college with motives and goals that are shaped by cultural and social backgrounds, as well as intrinsic values instilled by those backgrounds (Forbus et al., 2011). Forbus et al. (2011) acknowledge that FGCS are usually found to be less positive regarding academic goals and frequently lag behind continuing-

generation peers in academic and social acculturation, which agrees with Petty's (2014) findings. These factors compound and negatively influence motivation, which can result in lower grades, less peer engagement, and reduced learning achievement (Forbus et al., 2011).

Petty (2014) further asserts that understanding motivation begins with understanding factors such as environments, beliefs, challenges, barriers, and other social and cultural factors. He further explicates that, "there is no magical remedy for motivating students" and that educators should be wary of trying to uncover ways to motivate students due to the complexity of factors (Petty, 2014, p. 260). It is important not to think of institutional action as a magical remedy, and many aspects of motivation itself are intrinsic matters. However, it is necessary and helpful to understand the role that institutions can play in developing programs and institutional culture that fosters healthy extrinsic motivators for students (Tinto, 2012).

Urdan and Bruchmann (2018) highlight the concept that motivational beliefs have the capacity to be changed by "altering conditions in the achievement context" (p. 114). Motivation can be affected both consciously and non-consciously through explicit and implicit associations, including teachers, peers, and other social groups (Urdan & Bruchmann, 2018). These considerations allude to the idea that institutions may have the capacity to influence FGCS educational motivation through well-designed programs and trained people.

Certain studies have examined motivational factors in relation to academic success. Gaudier-Diaz et al., (2019) found a correlation between high expectancy motivation and high GPA's in neuroscience undergraduate FGCS. Their findings further led to suggestions for institutions to consider intervention efforts for students with low-motivation in order to improve academic performance (Gaudier-Diaz et al., 2019). These findings agree with previous research that found FGCS motivation included facets of social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization

needs (Petty, 2014). Beyond acknowledging these facets, institutions can and should consider how they can foster an institutional culture that supports and bolsters FGCS educational motivation and self-efficacy (Petty, 2014; Falcon, 2015). Not only are pedagogical adjustments feasible for faculty, but academic advisors serve as prime individuals for aiding FGCS academic performance through addressing issues of educational motivation (Gaudier-Diaz et al., 2019). Advisors are continuous points of contact between a student and the institution (Tinto, 2012). These individuals serve as key guides and mentors that have the capacity to serve as the first line of defense for students who self-report low motivation (DeLaRosby, 2017). However, further research is needed as to exactly how FGCS make sense of their advising experiences and advisor's leadership, including whether these experiences are positive influences on student success and persistence to graduation.

Academic Advising

Academic advising serves as an essential facet of the higher education experience for many students. All college students experience different challenges during transitions and need guidance to navigate their college enrollment (Frost, 2008). The earliest colleges and universities in the United States utilized advisors that helped students navigate their courses of study, vocational opportunities, and intellectual goals. Faculty have always played a role in educating students, but when academic advising became more established as a function in American higher education in the twentieth century, faculty further integrated themselves into the social, ethical, moral, and vocational development of students (Habley, 2008). These principles persist in academic advising today, although advising programs are as diverse and unique as various higher education institutions.

Institutions can employ faculty and staff advisors, and many operate entire advising departments or divisions (McGill, 2019). The main function of an academic advisor continues to be the successful guidance of students through their program of study, commonly known as transactional or prescriptive advising (Habley, 2008). As student populations grew more diverse and programs to serve them were developed, academic advising followed suit to provide a more meaningful connection between a student and the institution, commonly referred to as developmental or transformative advising (McGill, 2019). To assist the entire population of students enrolling in college in the twenty-first century, advising programs have further expanded to better assist international students, first-generation students, multi-lingual students, and students from varying socio-economic backgrounds (DeLaRosby, 2017). Advising is now a multifaceted institutional resource within the field of higher education that serves a crucial function for supporting student persistence and graduation.

Current Advising Strategies and Shortcomings

Academic advising continues to undergo various changes within higher education. Numerous iterations of academic advising programs exist in colleges and universities, including varying assessment measures and best practice recommendations from national organizations that help shape these programs (Filson & Whittington, 2013). While traditional, prescriptive advising measures focused on simply guiding students in choosing the correct sequence of courses, current developmental models of advising also include facets of mentorship, career and vocational advice, internship preparation, encouragement, leadership, and social support (McGill, 2019). Good advising remains one of the most critical functions of retention in higher education (Tinto, 2012). Thus, reviewing the successful current strategies in academic advising provides a framework for understanding how to best support students from all backgrounds.

Historically, institutions employed advisors as course sequence facilitators through transactional or prescriptive advising meetings (Habley, 2008). Some advising programs still reflect this practice today (Carlson, 2020; Filson & Whittington, 2013; McGill, 2019). However, it is a significant boon for retention efforts when academic advisors have developmental or transformative interactions with advisees regarding student advancement, advocacy, career opportunities, and other conversations that help connect student learning with vocational and social goals (Carlson, 2020; Suvedi et al., 2015). Critics of wooden and rigid advising models that focus only on course selection assert that such advising neglects the vast array of interpersonal and professional needs of students (Carlson, 2020). When advising incorporates a more attentive focus on student needs, the experiences can be transformative.

Institutions can incorporate individual advising, group advising, advising by major, faculty or staff advising, strategic advising, appreciative advising, or other prominent models. However, DeLaRosby (2017) notes that key results such as student satisfaction, student confidence, student engagement, and student retention should be crucial outcomes for any advising program models. Student satisfaction with advising can directly affect that student's satisfaction with an institution (DeLaRosby, 2017). Moore (2020) further explores how advisors make sense of their own roles regarding perceived success within advising, leading to calls for additional research from student perspectives. This implicates the need for colleges and universities to pay greater attention to the advising experiences for students, especially students struggling with transition, which directly interfaces with the purpose of this study for understanding FGCS experiences with advising and advisor leadership.

Institutions frequently suffer from disjointed advising programs that are piecemeal between various offices, departments, and degree levels (Joslin, 2018; McGill, 2019). Joslin

(2018) explains that when institutions lack a cohesive advising structure, inequities ensue, and students can receive disparate advising quality. McGill (2019) affirms Joslin's (2018) assertion and further acknowledges disjointed advising programs as affecting the professionalization and success of advising. Lawton (2018) agrees and suggests that advising programs need more cohesion, with an overarching focus on equity, student success, and satisfaction. Further, advising is an emotional and invested activity for both the students and the advisors (Snyder-Duch, 2018). Academic advisors need professional development to preserve their own well-being, while also helping encourage students motivationally, in learning outcomes, and achieving academic and social goals (McGill, 2019; Suvedi et al., 2015).

Lawton (2018) explores the current promising practices that some individuals and institutions are taking to inject equity into advising experiences. Culturally responsive approaches to advising, establishing shared responsibility for student success across the system, responding to changing needs, and initiating early, meaningful relationships between students and advisors are a few of the approaches that foster equity-minded academic advising (Lawton, 2018). University registrars and other academic administrators can both champion such values within advising programs, as well as encourage the scholarship and development of advising in higher education (Troxell, 2018). Instilling such values could alter institutional culture, student feelings of belonging, and student success, each of which can be issues of concern for FGCS (Lawton, 2018; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Institutional buy-in from administrators and academic advisors is a critical step towards improving the quality of advising support (Joslin, 2018). Further research into how FGCS understand advising experiences and the role of an advisor's leadership in the educational journey could be a significant boon to advising efforts and best practice recommendations.

Another foundational tenet of academic advising involves characteristics of leadership as they relate to the advisor-advisee relationship (Gordon et al., 2008; Kerr, 2018). Advisors can influence a student's chances of success as well as their satisfaction with the institution (Tinto, 2012). When student satisfaction increases, there is often an increase in first-year retention and upper-classman persistence (DeLaRosby, 2017). While these connections between advising and student satisfaction have been established, there is a continual need for further research into the scholarship and development of academic advising. Therefore, an increased understanding of exactly how advisors can interact with FGCS in a manner that serves their unique needs could improve advising program efforts and professional development opportunities (Troxel, 2018). Uncovering critical information related to leadership in academic advising (Kerr, 2018) could also inform subsequent professional development opportunities for advising programs by understanding the advisor-advisee relationship in relation to known theories and methods on leader-follower relationships.

Advisors serve as a main point of contact between an institution and a student, which creates responsibility for advisors to manage and cultivate those relationships (Vianden, 2016). Thus, while advisors play a crucial role in retention, and the amount of advising interactions positively influences student retention, more research is needed into how FGCS make sense of their advising experiences, as well as what content of advising meetings influences student success and persistence to graduation (DeLaRosby, 2017; Swecker et al., 2013).

Academic Advising for First-Generation Students

The value of academic advising for retention and student support efforts has been well established for all students (Tinto, 2012; Troxel, 2018). Light (2001) affirms that "good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. 81).

Good advising practices aid all students, but FGCS especially benefit from quality advising experiences (Swecker et al., 2013). Thus, understanding the overall value advising has for FGCS, as well as how these students make sense of their advising experiences, is crucial for discerning new ways that advisor leadership may benefit these students in succeeding and persisting to graduation.

Value of Advising for First-Generation Students

The value of academic advising for FGCS has been shown to be a significant boon in first year retention efforts (Swecker et al., 2013). Fundamentally, academic advising provides an opportunity for institutions to deliver meaningful and unique support to students from all backgrounds (Lawton, 2018). Advising has the potential to function as a program aimed at ensuring persistence amongst varying groups struggling with transition and change. Advisors can serve as agents of student-institution relationship management, as high satisfaction with advising can affect satisfaction with the institution (Vianden, 2016). Thus, while advising can and must be unique for each student situation, FGCS can benefit from quality advising as a means of overcoming unique barriers and challenges.

Advisors who build strong, interpersonal relationships with advisees can foster bonds that help instill pride in the institution, which could fundamentally affect whether FGCS feel as though they belong (Vianden, 2016). McCallen and Johnson (2019) found that academic advisors were key institutional agents in the lives of FGCS, providing significant and influential support during difficult transitions. The most continuous and earliest connections between a student and the institution comes from academic advisors (Tinto, 2012). Advisors can serve as the first instance of acquiring social capital on campus for FGCS in their first year (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). When FGCS perceive that their institution cares about aspects of diversity,

inclusion, and equity it can positively affect their perception that they belong. They can better envision their success when they feel they belong at the institution (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Therefore, since advisors can influence a student's perception of the institution and students are more satisfied with institutions due to positive advising experiences, advisors reasonably have the capacity to influence FGCS motivation, success, and the acquisition of social capital on campus (Tinto, 2012). Carlson (2020) acknowledges that advising can become a transformational experience for FGCS by offering a creative space that helps the advisor explore the student's needs and possible strategies for success. Thus, the purpose of this study was further solidified as the research indicated a great need for understanding the intricacies of FGCS experiences with advising and advisor leadership.

Additionally, if institutions care about utilizing academic advising as a form of promoting equity on campus, then advisors must ensure that their advising approach is conducive to the diverse needs of FGCS (Lawton, 2018). Advisors can help FGCS with campus acculturation, which can lead to increased retention (Glaessgen et al., 2018). The moment FGCS enroll and set foot on campus, advisors can introduce their role and help provide social capital by sharing the purposes of advising for student success (Glaessgen et al., 2018). Peeters' (2018) findings agree with the findings of Glaessgen et al. (2018) and further uncover that developmental advising approaches were beneficial for FGCS freshman to sophomore persistence. While Swecker et al. (2013) find that the number of advising meetings can positively influence FGCS retention, and Peeters (2018) uncovers the value of developmental advising for freshman FGCS persistence, little is known about how FGCS make sense of advising and advisor leadership as a facet that may lead to student success and their persistence to graduation (DeLaRosby, 2017; Glaessgen et

al., 2018; Peeters, 2018). Thus, additional research into the role that advising can play in improving FGCS success can help determine how to bolster existing advising programs.

Advising Strategies and First-Generation Student Success

FGCS can be some of the more vulnerable students on college campuses, due in part to the unique challenges and barriers that prevent their persistence to graduation (Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017). While institutions have developed support programs to help FGCS succeed, many still struggle with transition, acculturation, finances, time management, and more (Glaessgen, 2018; Swanbrow-Becker et al., 2017). While some FGCS report having access to good support resources, many students still self-report feeling inadequate or unprepared, which can significantly influence educational motivation (House, et al., 2019).

The unique barriers that FGCS experience are coupled with the standard challenges that all college students face (Gibbons et al., 2016). Transition and acculturation can be difficult for first-year students due to experiencing new relationships, new living scenarios, and new academic expectations (Gibbons et al., 2016), which can inhibit student success and motivation (Remsing, 2013). College students who feel supported by institutional personnel like advisors are more likely to report feeling motivated to succeed, while conversely, a lack of perceived support results in decreased levels of motivation (Burt et al., 2013). McCallen and Johnson (2019) uncovered student perceptions of their own success as relating to faculty who provided encouragement and recommendations for social resources. Similarly, faculty who serve as advisors can provide microaffirmation, or "subtle messages related to affirmation" through advising meetings that can help improve feelings of belonging (Ellis et al., 2019, p. 268). This further implicates how the behavioral approach to leadership was a useful theory for understanding FGCS perceptions of advisor leadership in the current study (Northouse, 2019).

While FGCS can receive support from numerous sources in college, academic advising presents an environment that allows for one-on-one, face-to-face interactions based on an assessment of student needs and program outcomes (Burt et al., 2013). A need for awareness and assessment prompts a deeper investigation into the ways that advising could assist FGCS.

FGCS enroll from varying cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. FGCS have frequently reported both a lack of understanding collegiate processes and instances of everyday discrimination, microaggressions or microaffirmations, encouragement or discouragement, and a variety of other personal, social, and emotional challenges that can be distinct from other student groups (Ellis et al., 2019). Microaggressions are brief intentional or unintentional exchanges that can be demeaning, hostile, insulting, or invalidating communication. Conversely, microaffirmations are intentional or unintentional exchanges of inclusion, support, appreciation, or validation that help affirm students (Ellis et al., 2019). These encounters can occur at conscious or subconscious levels, but regardless, contribute to FGCS feelings of belonging, social acculturation issues, and other academic stressors (Gray et al., 2017). Each of these issues influence how these students perceive their place on campus and whether they feel welcomed, which is something that can directly influence educational motivation and classroom participation (Gray, et al., 2017; Remsing, 2013). Institutions must consider the types of messages that FGCS are receiving through academic advising experiences due to the relational importance of advising and its connection to retention (Grasky, 2018). It is of further importance to examine how advisors stand in the gap between an institution and a FGCS, as well as their ability to help students make sense of their educational experiences and how their leadership could influence student success.

Institutions must be aware of how FGCS interact with institutional staff, especially advisors. Learning patterns and motivational factors can still be influenced within a student's first year in college (Remsing, 2013). Remsing (2013) asserts that "advisors can influence student motivation by helping students set obtainable educational goals, and designing instruction around student strengths and interests" (p. 2). Advisors also can provide first-year students with vocational and major-specific information to help them see value in their studies, as well as affirmation and encouragement. Advisors have the capacity to serve as advocates and utilize pedagogical techniques aimed at instructing students on how to make connections between academic content and personal goals (Burt et al., 2013). The personalized nature of the advisor-advisee relationship further affirmed utilizing the behavioral approach to leadership alongside sensemaking theory in this study (Northouse, 2019; Weick, 1995).

Advising can also involve unique, instructive interactions outside of the classroom, but in a manner that helps students make connections with content from the classroom, which can help improve motivational outcomes (Burt et al., 2013). Advisors "may influence the development or decline of motivation by helping students identify strategies they can employ for academic success" (Demetriou, 2011, p. 19). While the value of academic advising is well known as a means of improving retention efforts "empirical literature offers little information about the complex relationship between advising, academic motivation, and student achievement" (Burt et al., 2013, p. 52). Peeters (2018) further uncovers a positive relationship between developmental advising and FGCS freshman persistence to the sophomore year. However, the author calls for additional research for determining how advising helps FGCS persist to later academic years and, ultimately, to graduation (Peeters, 2018).

Further, advising is known to be valuable for college retention efforts, especially for FGCS by giving students a regular point of contact (Swecker et al., 2013). High percentages of student retention are beneficial for both students and higher education institutions (Tinto, 2012). Quality retention efforts benefit students by helping to ensure they see a return on investment through degree completion, while at the same time providing stable tuition dollars and resources for institutions (Tinto, 2012). Troxel (2018) asserts that "academic advisors interact with students, by design, while they are still enrolled at the institution. Therefore, they have influence on the academic journey of students, including their decisions and situations related to remaining enrolled or not" (p. 23). Thus, advising can and does play a role in both institutional FGCS retention efforts and student persistence, two sides of the same coin, both of which are paramount for mutual success (Troxel, 2018).

Barbuto et al. (2011) also explain the value of incorporating leadership theories in academic advising strategies but noted the lack of studies on the interplay between advisor leadership behaviors and student outcomes. Additional research is needed into how FGCS make sense of an advisor's leadership and how this interplay influences the student. Thus, there is a gap in the literature related to understanding how FGCS make sense of their advising lived experiences and whether such experiences helped them achieve their goals.

Advisor Training and Professional Development

A final critical aspect of delivering quality academic advising to FGCS worth noting is to ensure that advisors are socially and culturally informed about such students (Horowitz, 2017). Institutions are facing newfound pressure that moves beyond educational access, to ensuring that all students matriculate and graduate in a timely fashion (Lawton, 2018; Lynch & Lungrin, 2018). One of the key roles for helping students matriculate, explore career opportunities, receive

vocational development, and synthesize academics and professional goals is the academic advisor (Lynch & Lungrin, 2018).

As faculty and staff advisors take on such roles for ensuring that FGCS succeed, institutions must also acknowledge the emotional and relational strain this expectation places on individuals (Snyder-Duch, 2018). Providing quality academic advising experiences that benefit FGCS must not only incorporate fresh methodology for student success, but also consider how to properly train and develop competent, ethical advisors (Snyder-Duch, 2018). Advising programs and advising administrators must consistently seek out new ways for practitioner-based research and scholarship to inform current best practices and strategies (Troxell, 2018). It is critical, then, to provide research-based professional development aimed at informing advisors of approaches that best serve students, including leadership development. Barbuto et al. (2011) call for additional studies on the interplay of advisor leadership behaviors and student success. Thus, this study also had a scholar-practitioner focus that adds to the literature on educational leadership.

Uncovering how FGCS make sense of their advising meetings and advisor's leadership could help bolster existing advising programs and professional development resources. The current study did not observe advising from the perspective of advisors but focused on student experiences with advising as a way of uncovering rich data that could aid future students. Thus, this study not only sought to uncover information that can assist FGCS support efforts, but also information that can fill the gap in the literature, improve advising programs, and result in implementable professional development strategies.

Conclusion

Academic advising has historically proven to be a beneficial support for students struggling with transition (McGill, 2019; Suvedi et al., 2015). Students who meet frequently with

advisors and create strong advisor-advisee relationships are shown to have increased satisfaction with the university and with their educational experience (DeLaRosby, 2017; Filson & Whittington, 2013). Advising has the capacity to provide students with prescriptive guidance on courses, majors, internships, and career opportunities, as well as developmental support and encouragement surrounding transition and change (McGill, 2019). Advising can be valuable for FGCS by developing positive relationships, promoting the location and use of social capital, and offering encouragement (Vianden, 2016). Thus, advising programs can benefit from additional research into how advisors can best support at-risk student groups.

Further, FGCS persistence can improve with increased meetings with academic advisors (Gibbons et al., 2016; Roscoe, 2015; Swecker et al., 2013). When FGCS struggle with unique barriers and challenges, advisors can serve as a crucial point of contact to help students locate resources (Swecker et al., 2013). While the amount of advising and interpersonal advisor interactions is known to be helpful for FGCS retention rates, little is known about the exact content of advising meetings that fosters conditions for improved FGCS success (DeLaRosby, 2017; Swecker et al., 2013).

Therefore, this current study was supported by the literature above and sought to add to current knowledge regarding the nature and scope of FGCS experiences with advising in a local context (DeLaRosby, 2017; Swecker et al., 2013). The evidence that FGCS experience unique challenges and barriers that inhibit their success, and that these students need unique support to aid them in their college transitions, were foundational in developing the conceptual framework. By observing how FGCS made sense of advising and advisor leadership, this study was grounded in a scholar-practitioner frame that sought to both improve outcomes for students and provide rich data to enhance advising programs.

The current study was also based in the need for institutions to consistently assess and improve programs designed to aid FGCS and to better utilize institutional resources. Leveraging academic advising to help FGCS may help improve graduation rates, student success, motivation, and student well-being. This study, then, adds to the literature on FGCS support, academic advising, and educational leadership. Chapter Three explains the methodology of this study, including how it aligns with the problem, purpose, research questions, and research site of the study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Chapter Three delineates the research methods and methodology that grounded and informed this study. The problem of practice involved disparate graduation rates of FGCS and the dearth of research into how FGCS make sense of and perceive advising and advising leadership. Additionally, the conceptual framework, which incorporates sensemaking and the behavioral approach to leadership as a theoretical framework, supported the data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings. Chapter Two examined relevant literature on the main themes of FGCS, academic advising history and best practices, and the value of advising and advisor leadership for FGCS. Further, the literature review illuminated clear calls for future research on FGCS success and advising. From this established platform, Chapter Three sets forth the research design which aligns with uncovering how FGCS make sense of advising experiences and their perceptions of how advisors helped them achieve their goals.

A transcendental phenomenological design was best suited to research the central phenomenon as this approach focuses on gaining a deeper understanding of lived experiences. The central phenomenon involved documenting how FGCS in a small, private university in Tennessee described academic advising and advisor leadership, and whether these experiences influenced student success and persistence to graduation. The researcher incorporated two rounds of semi-structured interviews that were conducive for participants to discuss their lived advising experiences and to share their perceptions regarding the role of their academic advisor. The study utilized a purposeful, criterion-sampling method to identify current seniors during the 2020-21 academic year and May 2020 graduates who were FGCS.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how FGCS at a small, private university in Tennessee perceive their lived experiences with academic advising and advisor leadership, and whether such experiences influenced student success and persistence to graduation. The problems of inequitable graduation rates for FGCS, as well as a dearth of literature into how FGCS perceive advising and advisor leadership informed this purpose (Cataldi et al., 2018; Peeters, 2018). It is critical to continue exploring the nature and scope of FGCS support efforts to discern facets that did or did not help FGCS succeed in college (Demetriou et al., 2017).

One such support effort that can be invaluable for student success is academic advising (Joslin, 2018). Advisors have the capacity to provide unique, individualized, equity-minded support to FGCS based on their needs (Lawton, 2018). While the value of advising for FGCS is evident, there is a dearth of research that documents the lived experiences of FGCS seniors and recent graduates with advising, as well as whether advising influenced student success and persistence to graduation (Glaessgen et al., 2018; Peeters, 2018; Swecker et al., 2013). Uncovering such information could provide meaningful data that informs improvements to advising strategies based on the verbatim responses and perceptions of participants.

Therefore, identifying the gap in the literature informed the purpose of the study, which also aligned with the dual theoretical framework of sensemaking and the behavioral approach to leadership. Sensemaking theory was beneficial for interpreting lived experiences and the behavioral approach to leadership worked in tandem by providing a lens through which the researcher could view and understand FGCS perceptions of advisor behaviors. Thus, the purpose of the study, the theoretical framework, the research questions, and the research design of

transcendental phenomenology created an integrated and informative approach towards uncovering rich, meaningful data.

Research Questions and Design

Understanding FGCS lived experiences with advising and the role of the advisor within their college journey formed a central phenomenon that transcendental phenomenology was best suited to explore. To better understand the participants' experiences with advising, and potential connections to student success, this study was guided by two key research questions:

1) How do FGCS at a small, private university describe and understand their lived experiences with academic advising and their advisor?

2) How do FGCS perceive and relate the role of academic advising and their advisor in their success and persistence to graduation?

Creswell (2015) explains qualitative research as most fitting when variables are unknown and there is a central phenomenon that needs to be studied. Studying such central phenomena falls outside of the nature and scope of quantitative research that deals with variables and hypotheses about relationships between these variables (Creswell, 2015). Phenomenological research seeks to listen to the voices of participants and understand the lived experiences of these individuals in relation to the central phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). Thus, utilizing a qualitative, phenomenological approach to capture commonalities of experience was the best fit in relation to the nature, purpose, and scope of the study.

The transcendental phenomenological research design proved to be the most opportunistic option for filling the identified gap in the literature of qualitative studies that explore the lived experiences of FGCS with academic advising and its potential to influence student success (Demetriou et al., 2017; Glaessgen et al., 2018; Peeters, 2018). Phenomenology

assumes "that there is some commonality in human experience and [phenomenologists] seek to understand this commonality, or *essence*" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 54). Phenomenology focuses on learning about an experience or a phenomenon in and of itself from the perspective of those experiencing it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenology strives to uncover the essences of personal experience, all with a lens of attentiveness and thoughtfulness towards people and meaning (van Manen, 2017). Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge the uniqueness of being the first in one's family to earn a college degree and that FGCS's lived experiences with advising are valuable and worth exploring.

Two main strains of phenomenology are descriptive (transcendental) or interpretive (Moustakas, 1994). The transcendental approach has roots in psychological inquiry and aligns with the descriptive strain, which lends itself to concentrating on developing a composite description of the experiences of the FGCS participants (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology became apparent as the logical method for this researcher to use based on the purpose of the study, as it helped this researcher document the commonalities of experience for FGCS with academic advising, which helped uncover valuable insights and implications.

The transcendental methodology integrated ideally with the theoretical framework of sensemaking and behavioral approach to leadership. The participants had the opportunity to describe what they experienced in advising and whether or how it was important. Sensemaking provided the language for grasping the progressions of the participants thinking and actions resultant from advising. Similarly, the behavioral approach to leadership provided language for understanding how the FGCS described their advisors and their behaviors. This study is informative by providing rich information as to the promise and problems of academic advising

for FGCS success. The data helped this researcher proffer meaningful recommendations for improving advising programs, advisor professional development, and FGCS support efforts.

Site Information and Population

The research site selected for the study is referred to with the pseudonym Smoky Mountain University (SMU). SMU awards associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees and is regionally accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. According to the provost of SMU, approximately 22% of the undergraduate, face-to-face student body at SMU were classified as FGCS (Provost, personal communication, May 4, 2020).

Additionally, SMU incorporates a decentralized advising model wherein individual school and program faculty or staff conduct student advising (Provost, personal communication, May 4, 2020). Decentralized advising allows departments and schools within an institution to handle advising in varying formats and capacities, depending on independently decided guidelines (Gordon et al., 2008). Decentralized advising, while providing autonomy within advising for faculty discretion, can also result in disjointed experiences across various programs or departments (Joslin, 2018). The Provost of SMU explains that the office of the registrar assigns advisors based on a student's declared major, and the student retains their advisor indefinitely unless they change majors (Provost, personal communication, May 4, 2020). Advisors at SMU play a crucial role in helping students register for classes, track degree progress, and monitor academic standing. Many advisors also help students socially, mentally, and emotionally through a variety of means. Further, FGCS graduation rates at SMU are similar to the disparate rates reported nationally regarding degree attainment (Cataldi et al., 2018; Provost, personal communication, May 4, 2020).

The population of FGCS, the inequitable graduation rates, and the nature of the advising structure at SMU made it an exemplary research site for understanding the central phenomenon. Further, the researcher is a current employee at SMU, which allowed for appropriate collaboration with key institutional leaders for access to the site and advising program details. Current employment may be perceived as a conflict of interest. However, this researcher received no benefits or compensation for the current study, nor was the research tied to any administrative mandates or other underlying requirements. The researcher included stringent measures to ensure the study did not result in any ethical issues or other problems. All proper protocols were followed related to ethical research standards and Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations. Access to the site and participants was granted by the Director of Institutional Effectiveness and the chair of the IRB at SMU. Support from the director of the FGCS social group on campus was also beneficial. Overall, the site and population proved to be a valuable opportunity for a quality sample to incorporate into this study.

Sampling Method

Qualitative research inherently utilizes purposeful sampling or judgment sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Merriam and Tisdel (2016) posit 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. 96). The form of sampling that was utilized for this study was criterion-based (or purposeful) sampling. Criterion sampling involves "participants [who] are chosen because they meet a certain set of criteria as predetermined by the researcher" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 385). The purpose of this study involved understanding the perceptions of FGCS with advising and advisor leadership, and whether these experiences influenced student success or persistence to graduation. Thus, the

research site of SMU represented an opportunistic context for this research to employ criterion-based sampling for finding volunteers to participate in the study.

Criterion sampling identifies individuals who have ideally experienced the same phenomenon. It is necessary to determine what attributes of the sample are most critical to the study and explicate why these are important (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Criterion sampling further aligned with the conceptual framework, which (1) acknowledged a lack of qualitative research that documents how FGCS make sense of advising experiences, (2) sought to understand how FGCS make sense of their lived experiences with academic advising and how these experiences influenced success and persistence, and (3) appreciated that academic advising historically benefits students in successfully navigating academic expectations (Peeters, 2018; Swecker, et al., 2013).

Demetriou et al. (2017) assert that studies on successful FGCS are crucial for identifying information that can be integrated into future support programs and strategies. This study involved the criteria of FGCS participants who were current seniors during the 2020-21 academic year or were recent graduates from the May 2020 graduation, as these students either achieved their goal of earning a 4-year degree or were on the cusp of graduation. The researcher contacted the current seniors and recently graduated FGCS by way of an invitation email to the student's institutional or personal email (Appendix A). Eight individuals who responded to the email were invited to participate from a pool of approximately 70 who met the criteria. The researcher selected participants from multiple majors and programs to diversify the scope of advising experiences at SMU, which utilizes a decentralized advising model. Involving seniors and recent alumni who could reflect on years of advising experiences bolstered the data by providing rich, thick data. Such individuals had a viewpoint from which they could describe and

make sense of whether or how advising and advisor leadership was influential in their transitions or persistence.

The researcher attained assistance from the director of the FGCS social support group and the Director of Institutional Research for identifying senior and recently graduated FGCS, as well as obtaining email contact information. These individuals serve as "gatekeepers" who assisted in locating participants who meet the explicated criteria (Creswell, 2015). Merriam & Tisdell (2016) describe the need to sample until saturation or redundancy occurs. This study involved eight FGCS participants and the researcher began seeing redundant or repeatedly similar descriptions by the end of each round of interviews, thus satisfying the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedures

The primary instrument for data collection was semi-structured interviews (Appendix C, Appendix D). The interviews helped the researcher collect perceptual information and verbatim responses regarding academic advising experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews took place over the online video conferencing platform Zoom as a way of protecting the health and wellness of participants and the researcher in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic fundamentally altered higher education by pivoting most of the instruction and student interaction between advisors and advisees into online formats as many institutions went remote in the 2020-21 academic year. Thus, online interviews were the safest option for all participants.

Transcendental phenomenological investigations seek to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of certain individuals (van Manen, 2016). The phenomenological design aligned with both of the research questions, as the questions sought to uncover perceptual and descriptive information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Patton (2015) explains that

phenomenological interviews help researchers understand the perspectives of participants. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) note that, "it is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate" (p. 108). The semi-structured interviews were key to this study. Two rounds of interviews allowed the researcher to ask semi-structured and open-ended questions based on the literature and participant responses, both positive and negative.

The researcher first discussed and obtained participant consent using an informed consent form (Appendix B). The first interviews started by obtaining demographic data confirming FGCS status as well as age, gender, and current or final grade point average (GPA). Certain demographic information can be helpful for explaining "what may be underlying an individual's perceptions, as well as their similarities and differences in perceptions among participants" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 188). The remaining time of the first interviews utilized a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C) and guided the researcher in asking the participants about their experiences with academic advising using questions based on the literature. Perceptual information helped this researcher uncover what the "participants believe to be true," thus helping fill in the gap in the literature pertaining to the nature and content of advising meetings and how FGCS make sense of such experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 188). The second interviews took place within one month of the first round. The second interviews included follow up questions (Appendix D) based on the emerging themes drawn from the coding of the first interview transcripts. Participants further clarified perceptions of advising and their advisor as it pertained to the key themes uncovered directly from the participant's experiences and from the key words and phrases they shared.

Each semi-structured interview was conducted one-on-one through Zoom. First round interviews ranged from 35-60 minutes in length, while second round interviews ranged from 25-

40 minutes in length. The interviews were recorded via the built-in recording feature within Zoom and saved on a password protected laptop computer (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recordings were transcribed utilizing NVivo Transcription software, with minor revisions and checks for accuracy by the researcher. The manual review and correction process for transcript accuracy helped this researcher become intimately familiar with the data, in addition to extensive reading and coding. The first and second-round interview questions directly applied to the research questions of this study centering on the experience of advising and the advisor as a key role player. This design helped ensure the interviews stayed focused on the purpose of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Further, the interview questions were sent to the director of the FGCS social group and to the Director of Institutional Research at the research site, as well as utilized in a pilot test with an individual not part of the study, to test and refine the questions. The interview transcripts were reviewed thoroughly and sent to participants for member checking purposes, including the ability to correct or clarify any details or statements (Creswell, 2015). The overall process was both detailed and ordered, helping ensure that all participants felt heard and understood regarding the nature of their advising experiences.

Data Analysis

Participants had the chance to share their lived experiences with advising and their advisor(s) through semi-structured interview questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). FGCS were encouraged to share their perceptions of academic advising and the transcendental phenomenological methodology helped uncover essences of experience from the perspectives of the participants. Epochè, described below, further served as a means of removing personal biases to focus on the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas' (1994) seminal approach to phenomenological research, including the processes of epochè,

Phenomenological Reduction, Imaginative Variation, and Synthesis, provided the foundation for data analysis. First, Moustakas (1994) explains the following about epochè:

> From the Epoche, we are challenged to create new ideas, new feelings, new awarenesses and understandings. We are challenged to come to know things with a receptiveness and a presence that lets us be and lets situations and things be, so that we can come to know them just as they appear to us. (p. 85)

This process is not a rejection of reality, but rather a way the researcher set aside biases and preconceived notions about academic advising, FGCS, and advisor leadership in order to focus on the lived experiences of participants (van Manen, 2016). This researcher followed Moustakas' (1994) recommendation to "label prejudgments and write them out" (p. 89). Utilizing a research journal, as well as consultations with a research team, program advisors, and an affiliate advisor were critical to the success of this process. Epochè was repetitious and became a pre-interview ritual that helped make this researcher become attentive to biases immediately before and after an interview, making impotent any prejudgments that may have adversely affected data analysis.

Second is transcendental phenomenological reduction, which involved thematic coding of the qualitative interviews. Moustakas (1994) explains reduction as involving (1) bracketing, or placing the research process in line with the purpose and research questions; (2) horizonalizing, or treating every statement with equal value; (3) identifying horizons or deleting repetitive or irrelevant material; and (4) identifying clusters of horizons or themes, and organizing the themes into coherent descriptions of the phenomenon. Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) explanation of coding and identifying themes helped further clarify this approach by providing a system of category construction and open coding. Developing structural and textural categories through coding utilizing the exact words of participants was of critical importance (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). The categorical coding and thematic identification also aligned with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) explication for categories to be "responsive to the purpose of the research…exhaustive… mutually exclusive…sensitizing…and conceptually congruent" (p. 212). The thematic coding took place in three rounds, assisted by NVivo qualitative research software. Emergent themes were identified after analyzing all transcripts and creating a cohesive overview of how FGCS described their experiences with advising. This coding process adhered closely to the modified van Kaam model explicated below, in order to identify primary themes, individual textural-structural descriptions for each participant, as well as a composite description representing all participants (Moustakas, 1994).

The first round of coding involved detailed reading of the text to find significant statements (or horizons) during transcription and review. The second round involved identification and development of major themes based on key statements and phrases from round one, as well as collapsing and reducing of original codes. The third cycle similarly collapsed and reduced codes further to focus on "the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, and concepts…" (Saldana, 2016, p. 8). This third round ultimately resulted in primary themes, which were used to help formulate a composite textural-structural description of the phenomenon. These three rounds of coding aligned with steps one through three of Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam model described below.

The third piece of Moustakas' (1994) approach was imaginative variation, which involved finding the structural essences of the phenomenon. The imaginative variation process aided the researcher in uncovering the lived experiences of FGCS through the data itself, by incorporating the inclusion of various perspectives. Moustakas (1994) shares the following about his explanation of imaginative variation:

The aim is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and

precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced; in other words, the

"how" that speaks to conditions that illuminate the "what" of experience. How did the

experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is? (p. 98)

Identifying underlying content and themes can help explain how the central phenomenon came

to be what it is or how it came to be experienced in such a manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Viewing the phenomenon from various angles and perspectives allowed for engagement with the

data that focused on finding the meaning and essence of FGCS experiences that informed the

individual textural-structural descriptions. This step then naturally flowed into the fourth piece:

Synthesis, or "the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into

a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole"

(Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). Thus, a composite textural-structural description was the summative

piece of this salient process.

With Moustakas' (1994) quadripartite framework for phenomenology in view, this study

incorporated a modified van Kaam method as defined by Moustakas (1994) to actually guide the

data analysis. This modified model helped break the four tenets of phenomenological analysis

listed above into a seven-step process, with a final eighth "step" for creating a composite

description. Moustakas' (1994) modified model of seven steps includes:

(1) Horizonalization, or preliminary grouping to "list every expression relevant to the

experience;"

(2) Reduction and elimination, or "to determine the invariant constituents" through

testing expressions;

(3) "Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents," or developing core themes;

(4) "Final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application," or

  validation and testing against the transcripts;

(5) Utilize validated invariant constituents and themes to construct individual textural

  descriptions of the phenomenon for each participant, which includes verbatim

  examples from transcripts;

(6) Utilize imaginative variation and the individual textural descriptions to construct

  "individual structural descriptions" of the phenomenon for each participant;

(7) "Construct textural-structural descriptions of the meanings and essences of the

  experience" for each participant. (p. 121-122)

Each of the steps were crucial for discerning participant transcripts and interpreting the rich,

thick data. The first four steps were completed via the three rounds of coding explained above,

which helped uncover horizons, invariant constituents, and primary themes. Once the first four

steps were completed for each participant, steps five, six, and seven helped formulate individual

textural-structural descriptions. Finally, the individual descriptions were utilized to construct "a

composite description of the meanings and essences of the experiences, representing the group as

a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 121-122). The data analysis was fundamentally focused on

uncovering a rich description of the essence of experience of FGCS with academic advising

using this seven-step modified van Kaam analysis and coding method. Thus, data analysis was

consistently oriented towards the central research questions of how these students perceived the

role of advising and advisors within their educational experiences and student success.

Limitations of the Research Design

  Qualitative studies are generally noted as having limitations such as subjectivity, small

sample sizes, and the time-consuming nature of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2015).

One specific limitation was the singular location of SMU. While similar in many ways to other small, private institutions, SMU does not represent the totality of enrolled FGCS in small private institutions in the United States. The descriptions of FGCS lived experiences with academic advising may be different depending on the type and size of the institution, as well as the advising structure of an institution.

A secondary limitation was the idea of "volunteer bias" in the research sample (Salkind, 2010). Volunteer bias can occur in qualitative research that seeks volunteers to participate in a study. Salkind (2010) explains that, "in general, volunteers are more educated, come from a higher social class, are more intelligent, are more approval-motivated, and are more sociable" (p. 1). The participants of this study were relatively successful academically, with all student GPA's being 3.2 or higher. However, this study sought to uncover the lived experiences of academic advising with current seniors and recent graduates, thus exploring a segment of FGCS that are considered "successful" (Demetriou et al., 2017). Thus, the sample aligned with the overall purpose and nature of the study, by providing thick data on FGCS experiences. Transcendental phenomenology inherently utilizes small, distinct sample sizes, with the intent being to uncover in-depth, rich detail on the phenomenon, which may be transferrable to other research contexts and beneficial for future readers seeking to replicate this study.

A final limitation may have been a perceived conflict of interest of the researcher enacting the study at a location of employment. Recognizing researcher bias is critical in qualitative studies, especially in transcendental phenomenological studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Bias is not inherently detrimental to a research study, but it is critical to acknowledge it as a facet of the methodology and understand its place in the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). However, the researcher participated in epochè to understand and notate any preconceived

notions to make them impotent as it related to understanding the central phenomenon

(Moustakas, 1994). Further, the researcher conducted the study out of genuine scholarly interest

in filling the aforementioned gap in the literature, as well as personal interest in uncovering

information that can better serve FGCS. No payments, fees, favors, requests, or other monetary

or social exchanges occurred before, during, or after this study.

Credibility

Credibility involves the assurance that "participant's perceptions match up with the

researcher's portrayal of them" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 202). This researcher ensured

credibility through utilization of the transcendental phenomenological methodology, which

inherently involves understanding the central phenomenon from the perspective of the

participants (van Manen, 2016). The process of epochè further helped the researcher identify and

comprehend any preexisting biases or notions about the study or participants. Keeping a research

journal before, during, and after the interviews was a way of mitigating such biases while

engaging in epochè or bracketing (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The interview questions were

sent for review to the director of the FGCS social group and the director of institutional research.

Further, a pilot test and examination ensured questions made sense and were applicable. These

actions bolstered credibility by including multiple checks and balances for quality assurance.

Member Checking Procedures

Member checking involves soliciting "feedback on your preliminary or emerging

findings from some of the people you interviewed" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). Member

checking processes helps ensure that participants have been represented as accurately as possible

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Member checking was incorporated within the data synthesis

process, and feedback was solicited from participants before the second-round interviews.

Transcripts of participant interviews were also provided for review, allowing for clarification or corrections to be made. After the first round, six participants responded and confirmed accuracy while two did not respond. After the second round, five participants responded and confirmed accuracy, one responded with minor edits that were corrected, and two did not respond.

Transferability

Transferability or external validity explores whether or how research results may be applicable to other contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research inherently utilizes small samples for more in-depth explorations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The idea of transferability in phenomenological research involves providing rich detail, site information, and prominent contextual factors that can prove beneficial for readers and other researchers to envision the study at their own institutions (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019). The focus of this transcendental phenomenological study was not to create generalizable results in the same manner as quantitative methodologies (van Manen, 2016). Rather, to help ensure transferability. this researcher outlined (1) detailed descriptions of the aforementioned criterion sampling strategy, (2) robust contextual and participant descriptions, and (3) a salient presentation of primary themes, individual descriptions, and a composite description via rigorous data analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Incorporating such features allows readers to grasp the study contextually, while also applying descriptions to future contexts, studies, and change initiatives.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability involves both the comprehension and defensibility of one's findings as properly answering a study's research questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Merriam & Tisdell (2016) explicate the need for researchers to produce vibrant and trackable audit trails. While not all data and research notes were included in the final version of this study, this researcher

adhered stringently to the transcendental phenomenological methodology, which involved a careful, meticulous, and accurate presentation of findings. Further, member checking and interview transcript reviews helped ensure the accuracy of findings. Each of these tasks aided the researcher in continually linking the findings to research questions and purposes.

A final facet of trustworthiness for this study is confirmability, or the clear establishment of conclusions directly from the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). It is important to acknowledge factors of researcher bias, while also ensuring that conclusions are derived from the data and from participant's perceptions. Epochè and researcher journaling played a crucial role in this continuous and integrative process (Moustakas, 1994). Further, the continual connection of conclusions back to data, verbatim responses, and themes is saliently presented in Chapter Four.

Ethical Considerations

Stringent measures towards ensuring the protection and respect of all research participants and contexts were incorporated into this study. The required IRB protocols for both the University of New England and the research site were followed meticulously. Consent forms that delineated protective measures and addressed participant rights, informed consent, and confidentiality were presented to, and signed by, each participant (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Privacy was a genuine concern for ensuring participant rights were protected, but also to ensure the individuals felt comfortable in sharing perceptions (Creswell, 2015). The researcher assigned pseudonyms to participants and redacted all identifying information from the findings presented in Chapters Four and Five. All data and audio recordings were kept on a password-protected computer. Clear communication measures ensured that FGCS had detailed explanations about how their data was kept confidential from academic advisors. Thus, no information was linked to any academic advisors or other individuals at the research site.

Further, as previously mentioned, this researcher ensured that no conflict of interest arose from the study. No compensation, monetary or otherwise, was received by or given by the researcher. The researcher also was not an advisor for any students, nor was there any direct administrative oversight over advisors. No local administrative mandate, charge, or directive was given regarding this study.

Conclusion

Transcendental phenomenology served as an ideal approach for studying the central phenomenon by helping focus this study on documenting the lived experiences of FGCS. Disparate graduation and success rates, personal interest for improving FGCS support services, and genuine scholarly interest acted as the driving forces for understanding how FGCS make sense of academic advising, including whether these experiences benefited student success. The transcendental phenomenological approach aligned with the research questions which involved listening to and understanding the perceptions of participants and making sense of their experiences. Phenomenological methodology focused this study on documenting the lived experiences of FGCS with advising, while appropriately neutralizing the bias of the researcher. The criterion-based sampling procedures identified participants, while two rounds of semi-structured interviews uncovered rich data that was coded into primary themes and descriptions utilizing Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam method as a guide. Chapter Four outlines the rich, thick data uncovered and analyzed using the methodology and processes outlined above.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Earning a college degree has the potential to significantly alter the social and economic course of an individual's life (Scheld, 2019). Despite the notable value of earning a college degree, certain student groups do not experience equitable instances of success related to degree completion (Lawton, 2018). First-generation college students (FGCS) are one such group that graduates at subpar rates when compared to continuing-generation students (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). FGCS are half as likely to leave college with an earned credential compared to other student groups, which has prompted extensive research into how institutions can better improve support efforts (Demetriou et al., 2017; Glaessgen et al., 2018; Morgan, 2019). One resource that can be beneficial for underprepared students is academic advising (Joslin, 2018; Tinto, 2012).

Academic advising is known to provide structure, clarity, and guidance for helping students succeed and persist to graduation (Grasky, 2018; Joslin, 2018; Lawton, 2018). Regardless of the known value of advising and certain studies identifying its usefulness for supporting FGCS (Carlson, 2020; Swecker et al., 2013), FGCS are still graduating at half the rate of continuing-generation peers (Cataldi et al., 2018). Furthermore, greater research is needed into the unique experiences of successful FGCS with academic advising, including whether such experiences influenced student success (Glaessgen et al., 2018; Morgan, 2019; Peeters, 2018).

Few studies were found that documented the lived experiences of FGCS with academic advising and advisor leadership. Further, certain key studies called for additional research into successful FGCS and facets of experience that helped them succeed (Demetriou et al., 2017; Havlik et al., 2020). This study sought to fill the gap in the literature and contribute to the corpus of studies on academic advising, FGCS, and educational leadership. The purpose of this

transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how FGCS at a small, private

university in Tennessee perceive their lived experiences with academic advising and advisor

leadership, and whether such experiences influenced student success and persistence to

graduation. Utilizing a theoretical framework of sensemaking and the behavioral approach to

leadership, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1) How do FGCS at a small, private university describe and understand their lived
   experiences with academic advising and their advisor?

2) How do FGCS perceive and relate the role of academic advising and their advisor in their
   success and persistence to graduation?

The next section outlines the methods for collecting and analyzing data, as well as general

demographic information about the participants. The third section presents the thematic findings

that arose from data analysis and three rounds of coding (Saldana, 2016). The final section

includes individual textural-structural descriptions for each participant as guided by the modified

van Kaam method of data analysis, followed by a composite description representing the

essences of experience for all participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Overview of Data Collection and Analysis

Permission to commence research and collect data was obtained from both the University

of New England's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Smoky Mountain University (SMU). In

early Fall of 2020, the Director of the FGCS group on SMU's campus provided a list of

approximately 70 current FGCS seniors and recent graduates from May of 2020. The researcher

sent invitation emails (Appendix A) to all 70 individuals, seeking approximately eight volunteers

to participate in the study. Eleven individuals responded initially with interest, and eight

followed through to participate in the study. All eight individuals signed consent forms to

participate (Appendix B) and were given a chance to ask questions or seek clarifications before signing the form.

The individuals participated in two rounds of semi-structured interviews utilizing Zoom video conferencing software, which were guided by semi-structured interview protocols (Appendix C, Appendix D). The first-round interview questions were based on the research questions of this study and the literature examined in Chapter Two. The second-round questions were developed around the emerging themes and key phrases from the first-round transcripts. The semi-structured interview format allowed for both structured questions based on the literature and open-ended questions based on participant responses to gather rich data on experiences and perceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The first-round interviews began by obtaining demographic information such as age, gender identification, grade point average (GPA), and confirmation of FGCS status.

The interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences with academic advising and their advisor, including whether they associated these things with their student success. The researcher audio recorded the interviews for accuracy (Creswell, 2015). The audio files were uploaded into NVivo Transcription software and then manually corrected for accuracy, which further assisted the researcher in becoming intimately familiar with the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The researcher emailed transcripts to participants after both rounds for member-checking purposes and to confirm accuracy or allow for any clarifications. After the first round, six of the participants confirmed transcript accuracy while two did not respond. After the second round, five participants confirmed accuracy, one made minor edits that were corrected, and two did not respond. Data saturation occurred by the eighth interview of each round in relation to the interview questions and research questions, wherein knowledge and answers began appearing

redundant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All participants were assigned pseudonyms to help ensure confidentiality. Transcripts were then uploaded into NVivo qualitative research software to assist the researcher with coding.

The data analysis was guided by the modified van Kaam method as detailed earlier in Chapter Three (Moustakas, 1994). The modified van Kaam method involves seven salient steps, which result in developing individual textural-structural descriptions for each participant that help describe the meanings and essences of the experience in question (Moustakas, 1994). The first three steps of this modified model involve identifying invariant constituents and key themes, which happened via three rounds of coding (Saldana, 2016). From there, the remaining steps involved formulating the individual textural-structural descriptions for each participant and ultimately a composite textural-structural description (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, epochè, discussed in Chapter Three as a way of identifying and neutralizing bias, continually helped the researcher bracket preconceived notions in order to focus on participant descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). All data analysis was completed with the research questions in focus and through the theoretical framework of sensemaking and the behavioral approach to leadership, which oriented the analysis towards helping the researcher understand lived FGCS experiences.

Participants

Eight participants volunteered for this study, including six May 2020 graduates and two students who were seniors during the 2020-21 academic year. The purpose of this study prompted including seniors and recent graduates as they had experienced multiple years of advising upon which they could reflect. These individuals are also considered "successful" FGCS which are a critical population for further research (Demetriou et al., 2017; Havlik et al., 2020). Six females and two males comprised the sample population. Six professional majors

were represented in the sample, which have been redacted to help protect privacy. Only two

participants shared the same primary advisor. The GPA's of the participants ranged from 3.2 to

3.9. Furthermore, all eight participants confirmed their status as first-generation college students,

with neither parents nor guardians having already earned college degrees (Peralta & Klonowski,

2017). Table 1 displays the demographic data.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Enrollment Status	GPA	First Generation
Emma	Female	May 2020 Graduate	3.8	Y
Laura	Female	May 2020 Graduate	3.6	Y
Rachel	Female	Current Senior	3.7	Y
Sophia	Female	May 2020 Graduate	3.5	Y
Kim	Female	May 2020 Graduate	3.3	Y
Robert	Male	May 2020 Graduate	3.9	Y
Paul	Male	May 2020 Graduate	3.2	Y
Jennifer	Female	Current Senior	3.9	Y

Presentation of Thematic Findings

Each participant had a unique story with varied advising experiences. Despite the

uniqueness of each account, common essences of experience became evident and four main

themes emerged through extensive data analysis, including (1) expectations and understandings

of advising, (2) influence of encouragement and support, (3) advisor availability and access, and

(4) perceptions and development of autonomy. Each of the four themes also includes subthemes

that are beneficial for further understanding the participant perceptions and descriptions. Table 2

below presents the main themes and subthemes. A description of each theme follows along with

supporting data and verbatim responses. The themes and subthemes are also discussed in relation to the theoretical framework of sensemaking and the behavioral approach to leadership.

Table 2

Primary Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subtheme(s)
#1 Expectations and Understandings of Advising	• Challenges of being a FGCS • Forming expectations over time
#2 Influence of Encouragement and Support	• Advisor treatment and relationship development
#3 Advisor Availability and Access	• Consistency and reliability • Importance of communication
#4 Perceptions and Development of Autonomy	• Self-advocacy

Theme #1: Expectations and Understandings of Advising

The interviews revealed several issues for the FGCS related to their understanding of academic advising, its purpose, and how to best utilize it. Coming from families in which parents or guardians had not earned college degrees, the participants explained a challenging lack of knowledge related to certain college norms, including matters of course scheduling and academic advising. All eight participants described having no solid expectations or clear knowledge of academic advising or its purpose during their initial enrollment, which resulted in some confusion that proved difficult for their transition into the college experience.

When asked to describe anything related to advising that did not meet their expectations, many of the participants shared a lack of understanding advising or how it worked. Emma explained, "I didn't even know it existed. Honestly, like I didn't know people talked you through

that." Similarly, Paul stated, "Zero. They just told me this is a part of college and you're gonna go to this person and that's all I knew." Laura also shared, "...I think I was pretty clueless."

This theme became quite apparent as the other five participants answered in kind. Rachel shared that when she initially heard about advising, she wasn't "quite sure" what it was about. She went on to say, "I felt like I… I had questions and a lot of uncertainties that weren't answered or clarified right away..." Rachel expressed frustration at times with developing expectations and understandings of advising. She explained: "I felt like I didn't receive as much help as I would have liked at first. Just from how much I've had to learn my own." This insecurity with how to navigate college was slowly mitigated through advising meetings and other support opportunities on campus, but initially her experiences were challenging and unpleasant until those questions were answered.

Sophia recalled similar feelings, stating, "so when I first enrolled, I uh, I had no idea what to expect um... It was one of those like I was just kind of throwing myself into it and hoping that somebody would help out..." Likewise, Kim shared the following about her initial perceptions of advising: "I remember being clueless. I had absolutely no idea..." Robert reflected on whether he had any understandings of advising when he first enrolled and concluded, "…I don't think so." Jennifer shared the following similar thoughts about having prior knowledge of advising: "No, not at all. Like, I definitely didn't." The participants relayed a dearth of knowledge related to advising and its purpose. All eight participants stressed this idea emphatically and noted that this lack of advising knowledge hindered them initially as they were at times unsure of who to contact with questions, or who to visit for academic support. Two subthemes emerged that dovetailed from these descriptions, namely (1) challenges of being a FGCS and (2) forming expectations over time.

Challenges of being a FGCS. Many of the participants went on to explain how their experiences as a FGCS compounded with a lack of advising knowledge. Six of the eight participants described the difficulties of not having familial connections to fall back on for answering questions or working through college transitions. Paul explained, "I didn't know what school was about and… especially my freshman year." He went on to share that "especially as a first-time college student, I didn't have any idea of how to take notes, of how to um, how to how to do anything, really." Navigating issues with financial aid, class registration, student life, and college jargon were some of the challenges and barriers the FGCS mentioned.

Laura shared that she struggled getting accustomed to college as a FGCS and she felt she "was kind of walking into it blind" and that "…like coming in as a freshman, as a first-generation freshman, I was so confused." When reflecting back on how valuable it would have been to have a greater understanding of advising as a resource, she explained the following:

> But I think as a first gen student, like uh, having somebody that's checking in on those things for you um, and just being like intentional, like, hey, how's this going? Did you figure this out? Um... Do you need help… would be very helpful ...

Similarly, Robert shared similar thoughts that "I didn't really have a lot of foreknowledge going into college about what, you know, how you register for classes, what that even, what that process looks like." He described the minimal experience of advising and its benefits as a disadvantage for him at the time. Robert went on to share that as a new college student, "it was a little a bit daunting um, especially I think that was probably more so freshman year, um, and I don't even remember who my advisors were freshman year… to be honest." For many of these students, they felt as though they were starting behind their peers in terms of social and institutional connections, as well as feelings of belonging on campus.

Rachel reported that even down to the jargon of higher education she felt lost at times. She stated, "…and there's a lot of, I remember thinking there's a lot of terminology that I did not know. Like credit hours, I had no idea what that meant." Emma had related thoughts, explaining that at first, she "didn't really understand how college worked." She thought advising helped mitigate some of these challenges down the road, and she shared, "…so it was kind of nice to have someone guiding more strictly." The eventual help from advising she experienced in later semesters would have been beneficial from the onset of her enrollment. Kim shared a similar sentiment of early challenges with advising, noting that "it was very confusing for probably the first year, first year and a half. I... couldn't quite understand what exactly I was supposed to do." This discrepancy made it hard on her student success at times, as she shared: "I knew I had to do it in October or November, but I didn't know what I was doing and how I should be doing it. And so I really wish that had been explained a little bit more."

The participants that expounded on these challenges acknowledged some basic understandings of advising, but not enough to fully grasp or perceive advising as a support effort for helping them succeed. Challenges associated with being the first in their family to attend college became more difficult without a strong initial connection to an advisor. These individuals made sense of their experiences from early in their college career, noting that a lack of initial knowledge of advising affected their feelings of connection on campus. However, the FGCS explained that although their initial lack of knowledge surrounding advising may have been challenging at first, they went on to develop a greater sense of advising over time through experience. The formation of expectations helped them make sense of their advising experiences and further shifted their perceptions of its usefulness and the advisor-advisee relationship.

Forming expectations over time. All eight participants explained that they overcome their initial dearth of knowledge about advising through practice. Their experiences helped them make sense of advising as a support tool and affected their perceptions of their advisor. Sophia described how she overcame her misconceptions of advising and the initial daunting feelings of meeting with an advisor. She characterized her experience as one of growth, and she began to make sense of its purpose and how it could benefit her. She shared the following:

> Um... but then once I got used to um, you know, understanding what the academic advising part of it was, that it was actually not somebody telling you what you had to do, but advising you, you know, as it says, um... it became a lot easier and, uh, it became a very nice experience after a while, because it was… not only was it helpful, it was also very encouraging, um, especially towards the end.

Robert's experience mirrored Sophia's, as he explains that he appreciated advising more through additional opportunities to meet with his advisor and that "the work that I did with my advisor was so like integral to like choosing classes and like, understanding my schedule and my like my path for the next like few semesters..." Similarly, Paul began to enjoy advising as he started making sense of its purpose through face-to-face meetings, noting that he did not have expectations at first, "but I think I built them after like the first two years, I started to like... so like have expectations of, OK, I'm getting in the groove of things."

This shift for the participants gave them a greater sense of how their advisor could help them through college. Emma echoed this sentiment in her description of how her expectations changed, explaining the following as she developed a better sense for advising: "It made me feel a lot more comfortable about choosing my courses and just going about finishing my degree. I felt like I was in it a lot less on my own um... than I think I first anticipated." As the FGCS made

sense of advising, it increased their confidence in their own academic progress, but also fostered more satisfaction with their advisor-advisee relationship. They described this development as giving them a more salient understanding of how to overcome unique challenges related to their student success and viewing their advisor as a key point of contact within SMU. In the next theme, participant descriptions portray how their understandings of advising were shaped in part by encouragement and how the development of the advisor-advisee relationship influenced their student success.

Theme #2: Influence of Encouragement and Support

A common thread throughout the FGCS' experiences with advising involved developing relationships with their advisors. Despite early struggles with expectations and understandings of advising, participants became more satisfied with advising over time as they became closer with their advisors. Rachel described her meetings with her advisor as refreshing amidst confusing transitions and shared the following about the progression of their advisor-advisee relationship:

> So I… then I went and talked to her and I was like, man, this... she's incredible. She's just like... I don't know she, her… her, I loved her energy, very positive person, very encouraging, and I met with her like the first time and she explained to me a little bit like what the field was like as much as she could, and the type of classes I would be taking.

Jennifer provided comparable sentiments, noting after a few meetings, "…and she's just like giving me, I guess, positive reinforcement, positive encouragement towards… my goals, which makes me feel like she's rooting for me." Emma offered related thoughts by describing the reassurance that came from having someone to help her navigate college as a FGCS. She expressed the following: "I felt really supported being a first gen student and having someone like sit down and talk me through that process like, until I understood it." All eight participants

described the influential nature of receiving encouragement from their advisors both in terms of how they perceived advising, and in their own success and development as college students.

Kim explained that her advisor's encouragement helped her feel more confident and capable about her success as a student. She shared "I left... every meeting I left I was like, okay, I can do this." Robert also expressed his satisfaction with advising as a resource for success, and he further clarified his advisor's support as being "super encouraging um, not just from an academic standpoint, but again, just as a person, like as an individual, they know what I'm going through." Laura shared similar perceptions as she affirmed that, "honestly, her consistent presence as like a support figure um...was the best part." These participants lauded the encouraging behaviors enacted by their advisors. Their descriptions focused on the relational aspects of their advisor's actions, which involved encouragement and made them feel more confident in matters of academics, course selection, and degree progress tracking.

All eight FGCS narrated the value of encouragement as influential at some stage of college for helping them with student success, motivation, and feelings of belonging. As they made sense of the ways their advisors were encouraging them, many participants expressed having a more propitious experience related to academic matters. Once the FGCS knew their advisors cared about their success, they developed more trust in their own decision-making abilities and in their advisor to help them navigate college. Kim shared the following about how her advisor's encouragement helped increase her confidence in the advising process:

> Um, he was very intentional in making it known that, um, he wanted us to be successful
> and he wanted us to do well in our studies to not just get good grades but to learn, um,
> and to take that with us once we're done at SMU um... and so that... that meant a lot, and I
> knew that I could... because of that, I could trust him and I could ask questions and I

could go to him for just about anything. And so that that made advising, um, just a lot

smooth so... yeah.

Sophia described similar feelings, noting the following of her advisor: "She cared about our

success and cared about um, you know, how we were doing even outside of academics as I've,

you know, said many times, that she just was very, very much a… encouragement." Her

reflection outlined the role her advisor's encouragement played in helping her succeed

academically and in growing their relationship. She went on to state, "Yeah. Um... I think the

most helpful aspect of as... advising was, was the encouragement." Paul similarly suggested that

his advisor helped him overcome challenges through encouragement. He shared:

> I don't think I really had confidence in myself and she would be the one person that if I
>
> had a problem, I'd go into her office and tell her what it was and she'd give me honest
>
> feedback and just... reassure me.

Many participants described various reasons for their persistence in overcoming barriers related

to college. However, instances of verbal encouragement and relational support from advisors

were acknowledged as a clear benefit for helping the FGCS persist through challenges towards

graduation. Encouragement provided them with a sense of motivation for accomplishing their

goals. Over time, the FGCS made sense of their advisor's relationship behaviors, which boosted

their personal confidence in themselves and their ability to succeed in the classroom. One

subtheme emerged surrounding encouragement that helps further portray how FGCS described

their experiences with advising, namely, advisor treatment and relationship development.

Advisor treatment and relationship development. Participant responses varied when

asked questions about how their advisor treated them and if their relationships developed over

time. All participants spoke positively of the ways their advisors treated them, noting instances

of respect, concern for well-being, and the humanizing aspect of connecting with an advisor.

Paul felt his advisor genuinely cared for him and his success, and stated, "I think it felt more not like a student to... it didn't feel like a student to teacher aspect, it felt more… more like family than anything else." Jennifer offered related sentiments about the way her advisor treated her:

> I would... I don't know if I would say that she treats me special, but it almost, I guess, sort of feels like that because it doesn't, again and I don't know how she interacts with other people. But I do know when I go in, she treats me with like kindness and she treats me with respect to the point that like it makes me feel like welcomed.

Jennifer went on to explain how she felt heard, which benefited their relationship. She felt as though her needs were met related to her academic success, that her advisor treated her well, and that she developed a strong connection with a key figure on campus.

Rachel also described good treatment from her advisor as a meaningful aspect of their relationship. She expressed satisfaction that her advisor exhibited more than simple task-oriented behaviors such as course selection, but also seemed to care about relationship development:

> She's very friendly. Like she just... I don't know, I felt like I was being treated as a...I don't want to say like a co-worker, but like someone who worked at SMU rather than just a student. And she kind of kept that treatment like throughout even in our, like advising meetings and stuff. So, yeah, I just felt very like, I guess seen by her. That's a good way to put it...

Rachel experienced this positive treatment both in advising meetings and in other contexts, further solidifying a sense of mutual trust. Laura narrated similar thoughts, explaining the following of her advisor: "She's one of my favorite um...people that I've interacted with at SMU. I think she's a really caring person and she makes it known even just in academic um...meetings

like that. So I was truly blessed to have her." Developing meaningful relationships with advisors may not have been an initial expectation of advising, but over time it became important to the participants. Creating a strong relational foundation helped many of the students feel more encouraged and more confident in handling task-oriented responsibilities such as class registration and degree-progress tracking.

While all participants experienced positive treatment from their advisors, responses were varied in how these experiences developed the advisor-advisee relationship. Kim shared like-minded sentiments to others when describing how her advisor treated her with encouragement and respect. When asked if that treatment changed over the years, she stated, "If it did, it was for like the better. Like, maybe we got closer um... We got to know each other better over the years." Robert felt his relationship with his advisor grew stronger over time, noting that the trust built through various meetings helped him better make sense of their interactions. He reflected:

> In some ways, I think as... as I… like was ending my time, like I would say that our like relationship as like friends, I guess… became more prominent… compared to like advisor-advisee relationship, which was just kind of cool. I… I would say I was hoping that by the time I got to the end of college, you know, that like relationships with professors and advisors would kind of become that. And so that was definitely a big encouragement for sure just knowing that, like they're also my peers, which is cool.

Emma also provided positive reflections on the caring behaviors of her advisor, noting that she "felt like he supported me and my endeavors as a... not just a student, but as a person." She acknowledged enjoying advising meetings where she experienced encouragement and support academically, socially, and emotionally. However, those positive experiences waned over time,

and her relationship with her advisor became strained due to issues with availability. After reflecting on these experiences, she shared the following:

> Um... my, my freshman year, our advising meeting I think is the first interaction that I really had with him that was personal. So, I do think that that shaped how I viewed him as a, as a human, not just a professor. And I think that it shaped him positively in my perspective... and likewise my senior year, whenever he was impossible to get a hold of, that also shaped my perspective of him a little bit more negatively.

Emma noted many positive aspects of her advising experiences, however she encountered frustration when she felt a lack of consistency in connecting with her advisor that did influence their relationship. Despite this lack of consistency, she was thankful for the key moments she did experience encouragement and affirmation. Each participant described encouragement as a positive facet of advising, but accounts varied as to how the advisor-advisee relationship developed related to advisor availability. Thus, the following theme explores descriptions related to advisor availability and access, and how those experiences influenced satisfaction and success.

Theme #3: Advisor Availability and Access

All eight participants mentioned aspects of advisor availability and access in their interviews. Satisfaction with advising grew over time as their advisor-advisee relationships developed through encouragement, support, and developing expectations for advising. However, experiences varied with both positive and negative instances of availability affecting student perceptions. Interviews revealed that advisor availability and access played a role in how participants made sense of their experiences, which in turn ultimately affected decision-making and personal confidence in overcoming challenges.

When asked if she felt satisfied with her advisor's availability, Kim quickly affirmed "Oh, absolutely. Yeah." Paul also felt his advisor was available when he needed to meet. He described going in when he needed her, and "if there was something going on in my classes or if I felt like I was too stressed out um, a lot of my academic advising came from just like meeting to talk to someone right away." Robert acknowledged satisfaction with being able to access his advisor, noting, "I always thought he was pretty available." Similarly, Rachel was happy with the fact that her advisor was easy to get in touch with, sharing, "I would say whenever I have needed her, she was always like available within a range of few days of me wanting to meet with her." This helped ease many of her burdens related to academics questions and other decision-making opportunities, and she followed up by stating, "Like every time I felt like I needed to meet with her, I did. And I had my questions answered and my concerns resolved in a way."

Jennifer shared that her advisor had an open-door policy, thus exhibiting behaviors that gave her confidence and "security" as she put it. She further explained: "I feel confident that if I did need her to be available, that she would be." Overall, six of the participants described good access and availability as key facets of their relationship with their advisors, which they in turn attributed as a piece of their success in college. Conversely, two others explained mixed experiences related to consistency and communication. Sophia noted difficulties contacting her advisor "every great now and then." Likewise, Emma expressed frustration at her advisor's lack of availability. This aspect created some animosity between her and her advisor, as she shared how "hot and cold" advising could be at times. She expressed, "So I was grateful that I could have conversations with my advisor to talk me through how certain things worked. But at the same time, sometimes leaving me on my own was not helpful." While she valued the good aspects of advising, she wished for a more reliable sense of connection with her advisor to feel

more connected to her program and the institution. Thus, the following two subthemes further reveal how participants described their advising consistency and communication.

Consistency and reliability. Access and availability were important to the FGCS, as well as consistency in being able to interact with one another. The participants were not as focused on the quantity of meetings, but rather on the ability to meet with their advisor as needs arose. Jennifer explained that her advisor made meeting expectations clear. She shared that her advisor "runs a tight ship so, like, you schedule a meeting and you, then you have a time and so there's never, I don't think there's ever really been a problem." This structure helped her understand clearly when they could see each other, thus helping her feel confident that she could get answers to questions surrounding registration or internships. Laura also appreciated the consistency of her advisor, noting that her relationship with her advisor was improved due to having good access. She explained: "And if I had like concerns or something that I wanted to talk to her about, like she would be available right then and there to talk about it um... so I would say she is very available" and that "honestly, her consistent presence as like a support figure um...was the best part." Paul also shared that even during busy times, he felt his advisor would make time for him. He described the following:

> But even if she wanted to take five minutes with me, she could like... if her door was open, and I walked in and I said, I need you. She'd be like OK, I got five minutes close my door. What have you got? Um... never would she turn me away unless she absolutely had something that was way more important. And she always made me feel like I was most important.

This consistency helped the participants to further make sense of their relationship with their advisor and feel a sense of connection to their programs and to the university. When asked if she

felt her advisor was available when she needed, Kim also affirmed "Yes. Yes, absolutely" and that "because of that, I could trust him and I could ask questions and I could go to him for just about anything. And so that that made advising, um, just a lot smoother."

While six of the participants described this consistency as positive, two noted issues that shaped their perceptions of their advisors. Sophia described general satisfaction with her advisor's availability but noted times that it was more difficult to connect. She explained:

> Um, she was a very busy woman. She taught a lot of classes and it was difficult to make uh time for meetings with her, um... just because especially at certain, certain semesters, I had certain work schedules that were hard to um... that were not very compatible with her hour... her work hours um... But she also was willing to within, within a reasonable uh... schedule, I suppose… she would be able to meet outside of work hours or, uh, meet when, when we both had time.

Sophia went on to explain that she felt her advisor overcame some of these challenges through good communication, which helped alleviate some of the stress of availability. She went on to clarify of her advisor that "She definitely made her …herself available even if she was very busy um... And she was also very good at commuting when she absolutely would not be able to meet." The effort that her advisor put into communicating helped their relationship and clarified a mutual understanding of the expectations for meeting together, and Sophia went on to say: "But she was very accommodating… which was very helpful."

Emma shared similar feelings, but with greater challenges. She initially felt satisfied with their meetings, but as she progressed in college things became more difficult. She expressed: "I think towards the end of... my senior year, he just kind of wasn't available very often, even outside of advising meetings, it was just difficult to get a hold of him." This posed challenges for

their relationship, as she went on to share: "I wanted to have an in-person meeting at one point or to like talk about what graduation or like grad school would look like and if he had any advice. But he was... he just wasn't there." She described generally feeling supported through her advisor's encouragement during most of her college career. However, when she faced challenges and confusion regarding her major in later years, but could not access her advisor, it affected how she made sense of their relationship. She explained: "towards the end of my college career, whenever I was not able to get a hold of him… I think that that kind of diminished how I felt." These challenges proved difficult for her when she needed to connect with her advisor. Other participants expressed that even during busy times, they felt their advisors communicated well, helping them still feel connected to the institution.

Importance of communication. Six participants identified how busy they felt their advisors were. Despite being happy with advisor availability, the FGCS felt their advisors were overloaded with the number of advisees they managed. For Rachel, when she perceived how busy her advisor was it helped her value the time they did spend together. She explained:

> And I was like she has a lot on her plate right now. Like, they need to have someone to help her out, type thing. And I think in a way that helped a lot with my experiences, like when I saw like first-hand how much she has to do for so many students and like, all grades and all these different problems, it kind of created this like natural empathy between us where I was like, I'm not complicating things for you.

These experiences caused her to understand the mutual benefit of good communication, which helped her perceive that even during busy times her advisor was "very available for sure." Paul also was aware of how busy his advisor was as he explained, "she's like one of the busiest people on campus. So when her door's open it's open, when it's closed, it's closed." However, good

communication helped them navigate busy times and he went on to say, "Um, but I would say that... if I emailed her first. Totally OK. And she would get me in as soon as possible."

Jennifer also perceived her advisor as overwhelmed at times, and it sometimes hindered their ability to meet. She shared that "there's been times before where like I go in and my meeting's supposed to start but she's taking really long with someone else." She explained, though, that her advisor communicated well with her through other means to help her, stating, "I definitely think that if I e-mailed [my advisor] at any point in time that she would make time to like chit-chat. Um, email wise, if I email her, she normally responds within the same day um, if not sooner." Each of the participant's experiences related to advisor availability and access were varied. However, they all described making sense of their advisor's availability and learning to navigate competing schedules and challenges for their own success. Some developed rhythms with advising, creating a beneficial line of communication that gave them a key person to contact during registration times or when participants needed encouragement. For all participants, the positives and negatives of advisor availability influenced how they learned to make decisions, which dovetails into the final theme related to autonomy.

Theme #4: Perceptions and Development of Autonomy

Interviews uncovered how the participants developed expectations, made sense of advisor encouragement, and responded to advisor the positives and negatives of advisor availability. Six of the FGCS went on to describe making sense of their experiences in ways that influenced their perceptions of student autonomy and success. Emma noted that before encountering issues with advisor availability later in her college career, she appreciated the guidance her advisor provided. For her, advising was a useful tool that helped her make some important decisions about credit loads. She also felt her experiences aided her in learning self-advocacy and in becoming more

autonomous in decision-making. She went on to say of advising: "I think it's important and it's definitely necessary um... But again, you just have to be your own advocate." Sophia felt that her advisor listened well, which helped her "feel heard." This bolstered their relationship and influenced how she viewed her advisor as a resource. She shared:

> She, uh, she always tried to give us as much information as we felt we needed or if we asked questions, she tried to help with that as much as she could… to help us make a decision, but never to like force us into a decision if that makes sense.

Sophia found her advisor's approach helpful and it made decision-making easier, as she further reflected: "So um, she kind of gently led me to that this is how it's going to be. You have to make these decisions on your own um... So she was very good at, at that aspect of it."

Jennifer focused on how her advisor helped to equip her to make good choices, noting that her advisor helped her feel "well-informed to be able to look back and make the decisions that I wanted to make." As her satisfaction with the advisor-advisee relationship grew over time, so did her sense of autonomy and ownership of her studies, as she went on to share, "And like that, just like little... I guess freedom... you know all of it's freedom but... in the decision making is encouraging." Laura also narrated her experiences with developing autonomy through advising by explaining: "But anytime we have opportunities to make decisions, she leaves it on us. It's not her trying to... lead us into one… she will just give the benefits or the risks and allow you to make that decision."

Robert described how his experiences with advising helped him develop a greater sense of autonomy because his advisor took time to invest in him and make sure he understood consequences. He explained: "I think a big piece of... it helped me figure out like, how I could kind of, solve problems on my own, and I think it kind of like my mee... my meetings with my

advisers at the beginning kind of gave me the tools to do that." Kim similarly described that she

felt more comfortable with making decisions because her advisor helped her understand potential

outcomes rather than making choices things for her. She recounted:

> But he um, offered a lot of help in making those decisions. Regarding like the quote
>
> unquote electives or like the special classes I got to take that I had choices within my
>
> major… he'd offer his advice. He knew me personally, so he knew like either where I
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> needed to grow or where I'd flourish um... and he'd take that into consideration. And
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> that's why I often asked him. I knew he'd be honest with me. And so… so yeah, I, I asked
>
> for his guidance pretty much every session we had.

These participants described various levels of autonomy development through advising. All eight

FGCS acknowledged a desire to have guidance and help, but not to be told "what to do" as Laura

put it. The balance was found, as participants described, in developing relationally with their

advisors, which helped foster a dual sense of trust and self-efficacy. The FGCS knew their

advisors supported them, which gave them more freedom to explore and grow as students. This

dovetails into a subtheme that emerged regarding autonomy, namely self-advocacy.

Self-advocacy. When discussing the development of autonomy through advising, five of

the participants went on to detail experiences of self-advocacy. They described a facet of their

advising experiences as learning to assert themselves and advocate for their needs with their

advisor. Emma described her issues with advisor availability as requiring self-advocacy, stating:

> I was more on my own with it. I could decide how I wanted to do classes, if I wanted to
>
> do certain classes… So I just made my schedule. I sent it to him and he approved it and
>
> that was the end of it.

As she made sense of advising and reflected on her experiences, it shaped her perceptions of the advising process as a tool, and went on to clarify, "I think it's just important for people to realize that the advisor's a guide, but they can't spoon feed you everything. You have to remember to… to stand up for yourself and make your own decisions."

Rachel expressed frustration in her earlier years related to making decisions with her advisor, sharing: "I mean, I get like a lot of it, like was... with everything it's like it's my decision. It's up to me. But I feel like I didn't have enough to make a decision." This lack of confidence with decision making was something she addressed with her advisor and as their relationship grew it helped orient advising meetings more towards helping her understand her options. Rachel described this process as formative and it helped her increase her sense of self-advocacy, sharing, "Ask every single question that comes to mind. You just, just keep asking till you make sure you figure it out."

Paul expounded upon his development of autonomy with advising in relation to his expectations, as noted earlier. He started to take ownership of his academics and began to develop a salient understanding of his own goals. He shared:

> I started to like... so like have expectations of, OK, I'm getting in the groove of things. I know what I'm doing. I know my professors. I know, uh, what classes I should and shouldn't take. So I think that's a big part of that is getting comfortable.

He went on to describe that he always sought time with his advisor to continue to invest in their relationship, but that over time he felt more confident in his own ability to make decisions and advocate for his needs. He further clarified the following:

> She helped me build a lot of my confidence because I didn't think I could be a very effective college student... And she continued to encourage me and remind me that… you

know, it takes longer than one semester to be able to do this college thing, it even took

longer than a year. So, um, I think just her encouraging uh words helped me out

tremendously… I just started having more confidence in myself. I didn't need other

people to, uh, have an opinion on it. I would just have my own opinion.

Thus, as participants made sense of advising and their advisor's role in helping them through

college, they began to establish expectations of advising, formulate relationships built on

encouragement and support with their advisors, reflect on consistency and communication, and

grow in their autonomy and decision-making abilities. These facets of experience varied for each

participant. However, common threads were revealed in the interviews which offer an account of

how the FGCS describe and make sense of their advisor's roles in helping them make informed

decisions that were best for their own student success.

   This section has presented the primary themes and invariant constituents that emerged

from data analysis. Verbatim responses and common essences of experience helped portray

commonalities related to the central phenomenon of academic advising for FGCS. The next

section will provide individual textural-structural descriptions for each individual participant,

followed by a composite textural-structural description that synthesizes the data and addressed

this study's research questions.

Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions

Participant #1: Emma

   Emma described her college experience like many FGCS, acknowledging that she "didn't

really understand how college worked" when she first enrolled. Her stories about her experiences

with advising were useful because they included details of the highs and lows of persisting to

graduation. Emma shared her perceptions confidently and with poise, and was a high achieving

student, graduating with a 3.5 GPA. She noted many barriers and burdens of college that FGCS experience such as financial stressors and a lack of social capital. When discussing these challenges, she described advising as a positive experience in helping her overcome them:

> I remember like… I would… I was I was really stressed about money through college, which I think is common with first gen students, since a lot of us pay for school ourselves. And I enjoyed that my specific advisor would take some time, 30 minutes just to talk with me about like those stressors and how to make the ends meet and how to kind of go with financial aid or the inner workings of SMU to get what I needed out of it, and… I felt really supported being a first gen student and having someone like sit down and talk me through that process like… until I understood it.

She went on to explain that she felt she had input in the advising process, and that in addition to the support she received, she felt heard during many of the advising meetings. Emma appreciated this input, such as a desire to take less credit hours, about which she said, "I felt like I did a lot better in my grades and it gave me more confidence in the university." While this advice helped her when she needed a lighter semester, it did result in heavier course loads later, which was overwhelming at times, but she felt "definitely more responsible and able to do that."

Emma did feel that her advisor encouraged her and cared about her success, as she reflected that he "would generally talk highly to me of my like academic achievements and thinks like that," which she went on to say "made me feel pretty supported." Despite affirming key aspects of advising as helpful and supportive, Emma was one of the participants that described issues of advisor availability as she progressed in her degree. She said of these availability challenges: "So it was a little frustrating in that aspect… because I couldn't, I couldn't schedule an in-person meeting. And it's not necessarily even that I needed to. It just

would've been nice to have face to face affirmation." For Emma, the challenges of her advisor's availability were frustrating, and ultimately "diminished how [she] felt" about him. She believed that her advisor cared about her and her success, but the lack of consistency was "disappointing." As she reflected on what she wished were different, Emma shared that "advising should be consistent with students throughout all four years, all eight semesters or however long it takes them to graduate." She felt her advising experience was "hot and cold," at times being a resource and other times generating disappointment, especially when she had critical questions regarding her program and career opportunities.

However, Emma describes this experience as formative in her autonomy as a student. Due to challenges related to availability and communication, she became more confident in her own abilities to make decisions, find information, and "to be [her] own advocate." Emma grew in her expectations of advising through experience, valued the relational aspects of encouragement and support, yet wished for more consistency. She found ways to overcome her challenges with advising as she made sense of her experiences, and she concluded the following about advising: "I think it's important and it's definitely necessary um… but again, you just have to be your own advocate."

Participant #2: Laura

Laura explained her experiences with her advisor as structured and productive. She was a strong student, graduating with a 3.6 GPA and attributing some of her academic success to her advisor's structure. She shared:

> So that work of like her being prepared and knowing where to prioritize classes, um, was
>
> like fundamental to my success, because without it, I would have been lost. I would have

missed a lot, um, and would have been suffering for it later. But instead, she comes [to advising meetings] very prepared."

Laura described being a FGCS as fraught with barriers that initially impeded her success. She found her advisor to be practical and relational, noting that her "college experience would've been very different without having a good advisor, especially being a first-gen student and not knowing what to expect even..." Laura described her advisor as "knowledgeable, which was helpful" in keeping her on track to graduation. Coupled with that was "her consistent presence as like a support figure," which she said, "was the best part."

Laura noted multiple times that her advisor guided her in both academics and as an interpersonal role model. She explained that she did not expect it to be so interpersonal, but that it was a welcomed "surprise" and that her advisor brought "life into it." Laura "looked forward to those meetings because I got to spend time with [her]… She's a friend to me. She's a mentor. She's somebody that I very much look up to." Laura doted on her advisor and was grateful for the encouragement she received, along with the structure and consistency that helped her transition through early semesters.

Laura expressed satisfaction that her advisor provided her with so much structure and information, as it helped her gain confidence in making decisions for herself. She explained that her advisor was "very realistic, but kind. You know, she offers a lot of like caring confrontation." This approach helped develop mutual trust. Laura felt that her advisor helped her garner confidence through encouragement, describing her advisor as "caring and like loving towards me and that we have a good relationship." By developing that strong relationship built on care and consistency, Laura described her advising experiences as meaningful for her success in

academics and in social life at SMU. When her advisor took time to invest in the advisor-advisee relation, she explained: "I think that really like transformed the experience, um, for me."

Participant #3: Rachel

Rachel shared many experiences with academic advising and her advisor. She is a high-achieving student and currently holds a 3.7 GPA. Rachel described the challenges of being a FGCS as compounding with growing up internationally and English not being her first language. For her, she enrolled at SMU "not knowing anything [about college]" and struggling to even understand the jargon necessary to navigate the college experience. She shared: "I would say that at the beginning I feel like I was never really taught like the different terminology commonly used in colleges." Meeting with her primary advisor helped, and she further explained "I loved her energy, very positive person, very encouraging." She described her advisor as helping get her onto a trajectory for success in her early semesters.

However, at the same time early on, she felt a lack of autonomy as she described how her advisor "pretty much did everything for me." Rachel further clarified the following:

> There's a lot of things I could not have figured out on my own if it wasn't for her. But at the same time, it's like there's a lot of things I haven't figured out on my own because she does them for me.

She desired balance in her advising and shared this with her advisor to better clarify her needs. Rachel described being able to overcome some of these frustrations by addressing them with her advisor, which helped form a sense of self-advocacy and ownership over her academics.

Rachel started to advocate for herself and ask questions, which boosted her confidence in adding and completing an additional major. Rachel explained how "asking questions helped [my advisor] understand what I'm looking for in classes." She further clarified:

So um, yeah, she was very like open to listening about any concerns I had, which was very big for me because I think that was very important to helping her understand like what I wanted and what I wanted to get out of classes.

Rachel wanted her advisor to help her better understand terminology, class options, internships, and other key aspects of college. As she expressed her needs, it helped her solidify her goals and create strategies for success. Rachel valued that her advisor listened, which became a crucial part of her developing expectations for how to utilize advising meetings. She explained the following of her advisor: "She… she provided me with options and answered all my questions. Communication was just very... she gave me like an environment where it was comfortable where I could do that." She went on to describe feeling more confident with advising and said:

At this point of where I'm at, I would say like what I know now is enough and is informing enough where I don't feel confused about what's happening. But it was, hadn't always felt that way. But like with now, where I'm at, like I would say that is true.

Further, when she needed to ask questions, she described that her advisor would make the time, saying: "I would say whenever I have needed her, she was always like available within a range of few days of me wanting to meet with her." Rachel felt satisfied with how accessible her advisor was and having someone she felt was "rooting for" her, which helped her feel a sense of belonging at SMU.

Rachel went on to clarify that as their relationship grew, not only did she feel heard but also encouraged. She described that her advisor "just like radiates joy and happiness." In fact, for Rachel, her advisor's constant encouragement helped her in advocating for herself and in her decision making. Consistency was key and as her satisfaction with her advisor grew, she explained how this encouragement affected her:

It's made it very easy to talk to her and ask her questions… and like always, consider her as a resource, like if every time I've ever, like, needed a question… whether it was an important question or something I could have possibly figured out on my own, I never felt like I would hesitate to go to her and seek her advice or help on something.

She described further that "the advising part is crucial to academic success. So I would say in a way that, um, I mean, there's a lot of things I could not have figured out on my own if it wasn't for her." Rachel was satisfied with her advising experiences, thankful that her advisor was so encouraging, and attributed some of her success to the guidance she received.

Participant #4: Sophia

Sophia described herself as a "nervous" type of person. She was a strong student, graduating with a 3.5 GPA. Her experiences with advising were varied, and she described them as daunting at first because she "didn't know what to expect." However, as her relationship developed with her advisor over time, she explained that advising became "a very nice experience after a while, because it was… not only was it helpful, it was also very encouraging." Sophia felt that at first, she had a "mindset that I had to... I had to be able to do it myself" when referring to academic decision-making. However, as she began having regular meetings with her advisor, this perception changed and she described: "I think the most helpful aspect of as... advising was, was the encouragement. It was this pointed leadership that you had." Thus, her experiences helped her make sense of advising and view her advisor as a leader.

Sophia doted on her advisor and viewed her as both encouraging and helpful for her student success. She explained:

And it was just nice to know that I had someone there to lean on who had more life experience than I did, um, which I absolutely loved. And I don't think I could have made

it through college without that… It was just, uh, very... I, I feel like a broken record, very

encouraging and very uh... enjoyable. It was never stressful, it was never... upsetting. It

was always making sure, you know, just across the board, making sure that it was OK

and that I knew it was OK.

Good communication was a beneficial aspect of their advising relationship. Sophia shared

experiences where advisor availability became challenging, noting that certain semesters she

"had issues every great now and then" with connecting with her advisor. However, her advisor

proactively sought to mitigate these challenges with good communication via email or phone.

She shared that even through challenges of connecting, their meetings were meaningful: "When I

would meet with her, it would be very in-depth. Even if it was quick… so I felt that I... you

know, got the answers that I was looking for." For Sophia, this helped grow their relationship

and help build confidence in her program and career goals.

Sophia went on to explain that through advising she found a source of encouragement

and support. She said the following about how this affected her:

But, you know, aside from giving me courage, it gave me confidence and, you know,

kind of like a... domino effect from there helped with other things. And uh that was very,

very good. And I'm very glad almost every day for... for having her there.

Sophia found joy in having an advisor who cared, and it made her want to turn to her advisor for

academic and emotional support. She explained that "advising's there… you should use it,"

which is ultimately advice she wished she incorporated more. Sophia summarized her experience

with how advising affected her by sharing: "But for me specifically, I do think it was wonderful

and was very helpful. And the relationship that I was able to build through it was incredible and

it absolutely did help me throughout my college career."

Participant #5: Kim

Kim described her experiences with advising in relation to her difficult first year, in which the barriers and challenges of being a FGCS hindered her success. She shared, "so I distinctly remember my freshman year um... like I had fallen behind just because I... I wasn't prepared for college." Her initial lack of understandings about advising were mitigated when her advisor took time to help her overcome her academic struggles through pointed intervention. She recalled the following after her advisor called her in for a key meeting:

> But by the time I left that day, like he had it all sorted out and I wasn't worried about the next semester um... So he, he... it took a minute. It took a while to make sure we had everything and I would graduate on time still. But um... and he was very gracious and very encouraging as well... despite my grades slacking and me feeling overwhelmed that semester. So it was... yeah. That got me back up on my feet after that.

Kim described her advisor's encouragement as a major boon for her mental wellbeing and academic success. She went on to say that her advisor's encouragement helped boost her motivation, and that: "it gave me confidence um... And even if I didn't have confidence, I knew that someone had my back and had the confidence in me. And if I need to be reminded, I knew that I could ask him." This growing sense of confidence in her own abilities to succeed academically came through advising, thus helping her to ultimately graduate with a 3.3 GPA.

Kim described her advisor as available at critical times when she needed him. She explained that positive encouragement and strong communication were key factors in working through academic struggles in her first year. She went on to share the following:

> And I think that kind of just formed into this really cool relationship where like, yeah, you're my professor, but you're also somebody I can trust and I can talk to um... He, yeah,

he was great. And... And I will forever cherish that, in all honesty, like it, it shaped my

college experience um, in more ways than one.

Kim reflected that she grew more confident in how to navigate course selection and tracking

degree progress because her advisor identified what she needed to succeed. When she had to

make decisions, she explained how her advisor helped, stating, "He knew me personally, so he

knew like either where I needed to grow or where I'd flourish um... And he'd take that into

consideration." Kim discussed growing in autonomy, overcoming a difficult first year, and

feeling a sense of belonging through her experiences with advising. According to Kim: "I, I give

credit to him as to as to me falling back in love with my studies and not being overwhelmed and

knowing that I can do it despite any barriers that popped up in the early years."

Participant #6: Robert

Robert described himself as a "verbal processor," so in his interviews he reflected on the

relational value of his advisor listening to his needs. He was a strong student, graduating with a

3.9 GPA and feeling confident in his academic abilities. Despite his academic preparedness, he

still described a lack "of foreknowledge going into college about what, you know, how you

register for classes, what that even… what that process looks like." These barriers to acclimating

to college processes were difficult, but his advisor helped him through these issues by being

attentive and affirming. Robert said the following of this support: "And so I, I thought it was

encouraging that um, that I could come in with little knowledge of the process and still be heard

and listened to, even if I didn't know the technicalities of it."

For Robert, having someone that listened to him and his goals helped him become more

confident in decision-making. He valued having input into his academics, while having someone

simultaneously working alongside him to support his endeavors. He shared:

> I had the kind of, I guess, authority to say, you know no, I would rather do this um... Or at the very least, [my advisor] would give me options. Like, here are a few different classes that sound like they may interest... like based on your, your focus or your desired concentration. Um, like, these are some courses that may help you guide, guide yourself on that on that route.

When he developed that rapport with his advisor, Robert described feeling more at home at SMU. He went on to explain that while the academic support was helpful, he very much valued the relational aspects of advising as well. He explained of his advisor:

> A lot of my most memorable, memorable experiences I had there were um, talking about, you know, what the future looks like or like um, like interests that I might have or even just like I don't know, just having regular conversation with another person… I thought that that was... those situations were pretty like humanized, which was helpful because I think for me like it was kind of intimidating coming in to college and feeling like I didn't necessarily have the leg up that other students might have, um, in regards to experience. And so, um, I did feel that like advisors kind of help level the playing field in a way, um, which was really helpful.

Robert described feeling encouraged holistically in his advising, sharing that he felt his advisor cared for his success and helped him achieve his goals. He went on to say, "but not even just from an advisor-advisee relationship, but also from a friendship… and almost like a mentor-mentee relationship too… yeah. Yeah. Just really encouraging." Advising was enjoyable because of the vulnerability and relatability of it. Robert described feeling bolstered by having a key figure who was available and honest. His advisor took the time to help him relate his academics to his vocational aspirations, which improved his motivation. Robert hopes future FGCS have a

similar experience so that they know they don't have to "put all the weight on their shoulders…

or bear like the entire burden, but like there are people there to support you."

Participant #7: Paul

Paul described his advising experiences in relation to a difficult start as a freshman. He

persisted through his troubles and graduated with a 3.2 GPA. Paul met with his advisor a great

deal to help him through these challenges. He explained about those experiences:

> But it began... it was more comfort. Like, I needed to get comfortable with what it was
>
> like being in college and my first semester I, mean, you know this, I had a 1.5 GPA, so
>
> um, I was stressed. I did not want to fail out. I didn't want to screw things up. So I was in
>
> her, her office quite a bit.

Paul described the availability and frequency of his advising meetings as key factor in his

academic recovery and success. He felt he had input into what he and his advisor talked about,

which helped him gain confidence in his ability to make his own decisions and discover new

academic success strategies. Paul attributed this confidence to his advisor's encouragement and

guidance, and he explained: "I think just her encouraging uh words helped me out tremendously"

and that "she was a very big advocate for me." He shared that her caring demeanor helped him

overcome challenges he was facing, knowing he had someone "who just wanted to make sure

that I succeeded at everything I did."

Paul was glad to have his advisor when he needed her and her presence in key moments

helped alleviate stress. He shared that "like helping me throughout college... she's the

encourager. She always from day one, she saw it in me and she knew I was going to succeed."

Paul describes himself as a confident person. Having someone who could help orient that

confidence into academic and student success was important for him. He shared high praise for

his advisor's personal approach to advising, but also acknowledged that at times he felt it clouded his advisor's judgment. He shared the following about unhelpful parts of advising: "Yeah, that would be not being able to move in certain situations of like, what I wanted to take per semester, because sometimes she would have a build on what she wanted to do for me." Paul described appreciating the strong relationship he built with his advisor, but that at times he needed to advocate for his own needs over his advisor's opinions.

He explained that her encouragement did help him with making decisions and become more autonomous. He shared, "…like I helped like my own self. Especially my last two years. Having that flexibility putting my own schedule in place and her just saying, OK, go for it." His advisor's guidance helped him establish success strategies, which actually led to visiting his advisor less for help with academic decisions as time went on. He shared the following about these instances: "I ended up taking my own advice, going against what she said. And I still did great." Paul expressed satisfaction with his advisor's support and encouragement, but as he grew more confident in his decision-making, he sought out what was best for himself even if it went against his advisor's guidance. His growing self-advocacy helped him more easily enjoy the relational and emotional support of his advisor while defining his own path.

Participant #8: Jennifer

Jennifer described herself as "a fairly good student" with "fairly good grades" as evidenced by her current 3.9 GPA. She explained being a good student in high school, so she always had expectations of succeeding academically, but was unsure of what advising was or how to utilize it when she enrolled. She shared: "I had no expectations of what having an advisor would mean" but then went on to explain that, "I think advising definitely gets easier the longer you're here." For Jennifer, her advising experiences provided her with a sense of confidence that

she was on track to graduate, especially as she completed multiple majors. She noted that "comfortability, I think is one of the biggest differences" when referencing how her expectations of advising changed over time.

Jennifer had varied advising experiences and mentioned appreciating how available and communicative her primary advisor was, while wishing that was true of the advisor for her second major. Her primary advisor made time for "personal communication" and for helping her feel heard when she needed it, but her secondary advisors for her other major were less engaged. Jennifer did express frustration at times with the inconsistencies of advising between her two programs. Her primary advisor she described as "helpful and wonderful" but her experiences with secondary advisors she described as: "there's not been real clarity" in relation to making decisions and understanding her program. Jennifer appreciated how her advisors supported her, but she noted the lack of consistency from one to the other as "challenging" and it made her dislike meeting with secondary advisors at certain times.

Jennifer described how her primary advisor helped her overcome some of these challenges by going above and beyond to fill in gaps. She shared the following of her primary advisor: "I really feel that she knows me and that she understands like why I am here and what my goal is." This confidence in her primary advisor has shaped her confidence in her own abilities to make decisions and to track degree progress. She went on to share:

> But I do know when I go in, she treats me with like kindness and she treats me with respect to the point that like it makes me feel like welcomed, I guess, in the in the meeting, because it's my schedule. It's my degree. It's my... and so I definitely feel that I have that like power, I guess I have that authority over schedule as far as I can have authority over the schedule and the classes that I have to take.

As their relationship developed, Jennifer became more satisfied with her advisor's guidance with classes and as someone she could look to for encouragement. She stated, "And she's just like giving me, I guess, positive reinforcement, positive encouragement towards… my goals, which makes me feel like she's rooting for me." Jennifer likened some of the support she received to her student success, noting: "I feel like her encouragement has made me feel better in… overall about how much I'm taking on and being able to take it on and feeling capable to take it on." She doted on her advisor as being a caring individual, and that the mutual trust they built together improved her motivation for her studies. Further, she explained the structure and attention to detail her advisor exhibited would "definitely be a piece to my academic successes."

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Textural-Structural Composite Description

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The previous two sections detailed the primary themes and invariant constituents that arose from data analysis, as well as the individual textural-structural descriptions for each participant, in keeping with the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994). The following section details the composite textural-structural description, also known as Synthesis in transcendental phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994), which describes the essence of experience for the participants as a group. This section helps portray how the FGCS participants describe their experiences with academic advising (RQ1) and how they perceived and related the role of advising in their success and persistence to graduation (RQ2). The primary themes are once again presented, along with composite textural-structural descriptions, providing overall conclusions of the data analysis.

Theme #1: Expectations and Understandings of Academic Advising.

All participants in the study described a lack of knowledge and expectations of academic advising when they enrolled as first-year students. The participants related some of these

difficulties to challenges they faced as FGCS with not having family members to help them with college concerns. The length of time varied for participants, but all of them explained how they developed expectations for advising over time through experience meeting with their advisor. Many wished for earlier contact with advisors to help establish a connection. Making sense of their experiences helped them become more satisfied with advising, and further established rapport and relationships that were beneficial to student success.

Theme #2: Influence of Encouragement and Support

Each of the participants described positive experiences with their advisors related to verbal encouragement and relational support. The FGCS explained forming understandings of advising through experience, which corresponded with improved advisee-advisor relationships. Individuals described feeling supported, well-treated, cared for, uplifted, and emotionally bolstered through encouragement, which six participants described as helping them better make sense of their own motivation and student success. Seven participants noted their appreciation for the consistency of encouragement. One participant desired more reliability in her interactions with her advisor, including experiences of verbal encouragement and support. However, all participants acknowledged the value of their advisor's relational behaviors, including encouragement and its role in helping them overcome challenges, increase motivation, and feel a sense of belonging at SMU.

Theme #3: Advisor Availability and Access

Several factors affected whether participants described satisfaction with their advising experiences, including the concept of advisor availability and access. Six of the participants explained satisfaction with how often they met with their advisor, which improved the advisor-advisee relationship and provided a sense of support during key times of need. Two participants

experienced challenges related to availability and utilized similar language in which they wished for more consistency and reliability. All eight participants explained the value of good communication in advising, with seven participants noting good communication as both a helpful facet of advising and a mitigating factor regarding scheduling difficulties. One participant expressed frustration with a lack of good communication and availability, which prevented the advisee-advisor relationship from deepening, yet increased her own sense of self-advocacy. However, they all defined how these experiences affected their perceptions of their advisor and their own self-efficacy related to decision-making and student success.

Theme #4: Perceptions and Development of Autonomy

Advisors were revealed as key role players in helping students make sense of their college experience and in their development of autonomy, but in varying ways. Each of the participants described becoming more confident in their academic decision-making abilities over time, attributing some of this confidence to the information and attentiveness of their advisor. Forming expectations of advising over time helped the FGCS become more satisfied with the advisor-advisee relationship, which in turn aided the student's development of self-efficacy. This fostered greater independence that influenced motivation. Seven participants then went on to describe leaning more on their advisor's relationship behaviors in their later years, which helped ease stressors. One participant verbalized a desire for more of those experiences during her senior year, citing an initial appreciation for them. All eight FGCS affirmed satisfaction with having an advisor to help them make decisions, but not tell them what to do.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how FGCS at a small, private university in Tennessee perceive their lived experiences with academic

advising and advisor leadership, and whether such experiences influenced student success and persistence to graduation. This chapter has reasserted the problem and purpose of this study, as well as detailed the rigorous analysis procedures used to examine the data. Eight participants were interviewed in two rounds, utilizing semi-structured interview protocols aimed at documenting their perceptions and descriptions of lived experiences with academic advising. The participants included six recent graduates and two seniors during the 2020-21 academic year. Four primary themes emerged from analysis of the data, namely (1) expectations and understandings of academic advising, (2) influence of encouragement and support, (3) advisor availability and access, and (4) perceptions and development of autonomy.

Subthemes emerged from the primary themes to offer greater clarity, and individual textual-structural descriptions were developed for each participant (Moustakas, 1994). Utilizing the themes and individual descriptions, a composite textural-structural description was created, which helped provide a rich description of the essence of participant experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The FGCS enrolled initially with minimal understandings and expectations of academic advising. Participants made sense of advising through experience, and not only formed expectations for utilizing advising, but also developed relationships with their advisors. The FGCS affirmed the positive influence of encouragement and other caring actions from their advisors. Advisor access and availability were also important for the FGCS, and challenges related to consistency and reliability were noted. Over time, the participants made sense of advising as a tool that helped them formulate success strategies and affected their development of autonomy. The final chapter will provide a summation of the findings in relation to the research questions, as well as the implications of this study for future research, practice, and usefulness for stakeholders.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Graduating with a college degree is one of the most economically and socially beneficial accomplishments for individuals in the United States (Abel & Deitz, 2019; Busteed, 2019; Scheld, 2019). The value of a college degree is apparent, yet not all student groups succeed equitably in earning such credentials (Cataldi et al., 2018; Lawton, 2018). One student group that graduates from college at disparate rates is first-generation college students (FGCS) (Pratt et al., 2019; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). FGCS are about half as likely to leave college with an earned degree or credential when compared to continuing-generation students (Cataldi et al., 2018). These disparities have prompted a great deal of research into how institutions of higher education can better serve and support FGCS, which includes the resources of academic advising (Carlson, 2020; Peeters, 2018; Swecker et al., 2013). Despite the known value of advising for boosting retention, many FGCS continue to experience challenges and barriers that prevent their success and persistence to graduation (Carlson, 2020; Peeters, 2018).

Key studies show the value of advising for helping FGCS yet many researchers call for additional investigation into FGCS support efforts and student experiences with academic advising (Carlson, 2020; Glaessgen et al., 2018; McCallan & Johnson, 2019; Morgan, 2019; Peeters, 2018). Limited studies explore FGCS experiences with advising and advisors, including whether these encounters influenced student success or persistence to graduation. Further, very few qualitative studies exist that document FGCS perceptions and conceptualizations of academic advising, leaving a gap in the literature for researchers, higher education policymakers, and advising practitioners to utilize for informing best practices.

To address this lack of information, a qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was conducted to understand how FGCS at a small, private university in Tennessee perceive their lived experiences with academic advising and advisor leadership, and whether such experiences influenced student success and persistence to graduation. Two research questions guided this study:

1) How do FGCS at a small, private university describe and understand their lived experiences with academic advising and their advisor?

2) How do FGCS perceive and relate the role of academic advising and their advisor in their success and persistence to graduation?

Further, this study was bolstered by a dual theoretical framework of sensemaking and the behavioral approach to leadership. Sensemaking provides language for comprehending the experiences, results, actions, and beliefs of individuals and groups, which made it particularly useful for exploring how FGCS rationalize and perceive their advising experiences (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking involves reflection and retrospection of reality after events occur, which in turn helps individuals make decisions, form perceptions, interpret surprises, and create logic out of events (Marion & Gonzales, 2014; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking was crucial for helping this researcher comprehend how FGCS made sense of, and reacted to, academic advising encounters.

This study also utilized the behavioral approach to leadership to specifically understand how FGCS made sense of their advisor as a key leader in their college experience. The behavioral approach asserts that a leader's behavior can be understood in two general categories, namely task and relationship behaviors (Northouse, 2019). Task behaviors focus on logistics and assignments aimed towards goal attainment, while relationship behaviors focus on helping followers feel comfortable and supported for success. This theory is not a "set of prescriptions

for effective leadership behavior" (Northouse, 2019, p. 80). Rather, this theory is a descriptive framework that helped this researcher assess the descriptions provided by FGCS participants regarding their advisor. Therefore, the theories worked in tandem as a cohesive framework for understanding how FGCS made sense of both advising experiences and their advisor.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews in two rounds. Seventy individuals were sent invitations to participate, and eight agreed to be involved in the study. A transcendental phenomenological methodology was used to document the perceptions and lived experiences of the eight FGCS with academic advising. Six females and two males participated, with six being spring 2020 graduates and two being current seniors during the 2020-21 academic year. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using NVivo Transcription software. After transcription, documents were sent to participants for member checking purposes. The data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam methodology as a seven-step process. While every participant account was unique and distinct, four main themes emerged from extensive data analysis: (1) expectations and understandings of advising, (2) influence of encouragement and support, (3) advisor availability and access, and (4) perceptions and development of autonomy. These four themes became evident during the development of individual participant descriptions, which helped formulate a composite textural-structural description that describes a summative essence of the participants' experiences. This chapter includes an interpretation of the findings in relation to the research questions of this study, as well as implications, recommendations for action, and recommendations for future studies.

Interpretation of Findings

This study sought to understand how FGCS at a small, private university in Tennessee perceive their lived experiences with academic advising and advisor leadership, and whether such experiences influenced student success and persistence to graduation. Eight participants were asked questions that offered them a chance to describe their perceptions and how they made sense of advising. All participants described their advising experiences as generally positive, perceiving advising as beneficial to their own college success. Although most participants focused on positive aspects of advising, some described challenges and negative aspects of advising that proved difficult at times. Despite some of these challenges, the FGCS believed advising was a key resource for their own persistence to graduation and could be for future FGCS. The following two subsections outline how rigorous data analysis helped answer the two research questions of this study by capturing the essence of experience as described by the FGCS participants. The first research question is answered through the primary themes that arose in data analysis, while the second research question is answered based on the composite textural-structural description that captures the summative essence of experience of the participants.

RQ1: How do FGCS at a small, private university describe and understand their lived experiences with academic advising and their advisor?

FGCS participants described several aspects of their academic advising experiences, including descriptions of how they made sense of these experiences over time. These descriptions helped illuminate the essence of their experiences. The FGCS explained advising and their advisors through four main categories, which became the four primary themes of (1) expectations and understandings of advising, (2) influence of encouragement and support, (3) advisor availability and access, and (4) perceptions and development of autonomy.

Expectations and understandings of advising. All eight participants acknowledged having little to no understandings or expectations of academic advising upon initial enrollment to SMU. Some participants held general assumptions, but most explained a complete unawareness that certain institutional staff were designated to guide students through the college experience. The participants frequently described this lack of understanding as frustrating or challenging when trying to discern answers to questions or concerns about their academics, thus missing out on a key piece of social capital in college (Carlson, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2018). This insecurity with advising persisted until many of the participants had at least one formal meeting with their advisor, and sometimes multiple meetings over multiple semesters. Tinto (2012) notes the value of advisors meeting early and often with students to establish rapport and a connection with the institution. This aligns with how participants of this study perceived advising as useful through experience. Repeated exposure to advisors helped the FGCS develop stronger feelings of belonging and an increased satisfaction with their own abilities to succeed academically.

Further, the participants were aware that they did not have immediate family members to turn to for answering questions related to their college experiences. The FGCS felt thrust into a new world in which they had no experience and little foreknowledge. Heavy workloads and new expectations were challenging but advising eventually helped them compartmentalize and manage these burgeoning responsibilities. The FGCS explained that advisors became leaders in helping them find solutions to problems and make progress towards their goals. This concept aligns with findings of Swecker et al. (2013), which show that advising should be an institutional priority for helping FGCS overcome challenges and barriers early in their enrollment.

While initially daunting, participants explained a recognition of advising as a resource after a few meetings with their advisor. Developing relationships with advisors happened

through meeting together, which helped the FGCS grasp how their advisors could help them succeed through college. As they formed expectations, the FGCS described how it shaped their perceptions of their advisor and their satisfaction with the advisor-advisee relationship. These descriptions align with Grasky (2018), who explains, "Personal experiences on campus and with institutional actors influenced the level of comfort achieved" (p. 112-113). Thus, students described forming expectations of advising through experience, which in turn increased their satisfaction and comfort with their educational experiences.

Influence of encouragement and support. All participants described feeling encouraged and supported by their advisors at some point during their enrollment. Verbal encouragement and affirmation were consistently noted as key facets of experiences and advisor-advisee relationship development. Receiving verbal encouragement increased confidence in the FGCS' abilities to succeed academically and it made them feel more confident navigating challenges while in college. These findings align with Gibbons et al. (2016) and McCallen and Johnson (2019), as both studies identify concepts such as encouragement from key institutional agents as factors that helped students overcome barriers to success. While some participants were frustrated at a lack of consistency with quality advisor engagement, all FGCS appreciated the times their advisors invested in them and provided encouragement. This encouragement helped FGCS participants improve relationships with their advisors and more frequently turn to them for support.

Advisor availability and access. The participants described value in their advisor being available to them for various academic or relational needs. Most participants expressed satisfaction with how often they got to meet with their advisor and feeling as though their advisor was accessible during times of need. Two participants described challenges related to advisor availability, which at times frustrated their efforts to find information, have questions answered,

or receive encouragement. One of those two individuals explained overcoming availability challenges with good communication from their advisor. The concept of good communication through electronic or interpersonal means was a key theme amongst seven of the participants for ensuring a consistent advisor-advisee connection. One participant described significant challenges related to availability of her advisor, something that diminished the advisor-advisee relationship and caused issues at times.

Having adequate and satisfactory access to one's advisor aligns with McCallen and Johnson's (2019) study that notes FGCS were influenced by full-time faculty members who were available outside of normal class instruction. The participants of this study felt similarly regarding academic advisors and normal advising meetings. The negative aspects of advisor availability and poor communication described by some participants also agrees with Suvedi et al. (2015) who finds similar weaknesses as resulting in poor student perceptions of advising and the institution. The participants of this study were cognizant of the importance of regular interaction with their advisors for encouragement. Many attributed significant value to their advisor making adequate time for them as a facet of their student success.

Perceptions and development of autonomy. While each participant experience was unique, the FGCS all described advising experiences in relation to their own development of student autonomy. They explained forming expectations of advising over time, which in turn led to more salient understandings of how to utilize advising services. Participants noted the positive nature of encouragement and relationship development with their advisor, as well as both the positive and negative aspects of advisor availability as influencing their own autonomy. Individuals made sense of their experiences and grew more confident in their own abilities to make decisions about their academics. All participants noted increases in autonomy because their

advisors exhibited care for student success. These descriptions align with Burt et al. (2013) finding that students reported satisfaction with advising relationships that supported student autonomy and decision-making. Duvall (2018) notes that students must practice decision-making to learn to make wise choices. Advising relationships that are supportive of student autonomy in decision-making can influence student motivation to persist to graduation (Duvall, 2018). The participants of this study reported increased confidence in their abilities to make wise choices because advisors provided sufficient information for decision making. The one participant that expressed frustrations with the lack of advising consistency in later years noted learning self-advocacy as a result. All eight participants expressed satisfaction with having someone guide them in college, but not tell them what to do.

RQ2: How do FGCS perceive and relate the role of academic advising and their advisor in their success and persistence to graduation?

All eight participants spoke positively of advising and its usefulness for helping them succeed to various degrees. Despite certain negative experiences or frustrations with advising, the participants all acknowledged the relational and logistical value of meeting with their advisors. The FGCS initially enrolled with little to no knowledge or expectations of advising, which was mitigated through meeting with advisors and gaining experience of advising's usefulness. These minimal understandings compounded with the challenges of being a FGCS, which made certain academic and social transitions difficult for the students. As they made sense of advising's purpose and the role their advisor played in their college experience, the participants explained developing relationships with their advisors that were integral for navigating academic and social facets of college. This concurs with the suggestions of Forbus et al. (2011) regarding the importance of early institutional support efforts for FGCS. Developing

expectations for advising helped give the participants an understanding of college processes that many continuing-generation peers already hold. Some FGCS desired advising connections to start earlier. Other participants cited advising as key in helping them overcome poor grades and a lack of engagement in their first year, which was crucial for their persistence to graduation.

Regular contact through advising helped participants deepen their relationships with their advisors. Participants described feeling encouraged and cared for by their advisors, which inculcated feelings of belonging and a sense of connection to the institution. Advisors provided verbal encouragement and affirmation, as well as other tangible and intangible forms of encouragement that influenced student motivation. Many participants cited their advisors as key leaders in helping them succeed academically through increased relational behaviors such as encouragement, as well as logistical management of class schedules and degree progress tracking. These descriptions were similar to findings by Filson and Whittington (2013) who ascertain that "advisors who have meaningful and engaged interactions with students contribute to students' advancement" (p. 16). All eight participants noted encouragement and relational interactions with their advisors as providing mental and emotional inspiration at certain junctures. While varying in consistency, there was a positive consensus of the value of encouragement and a desire for future FGCS to experience similar inspiriting for student success.

Further, the participants described varying levels of satisfaction with advising related to advisor availability and access. Six participants perceived their advisor as available whenever they needed, leading them to a greater confidence in themselves to navigate academic decision-making. Being able to quickly schedule a meeting, talk on the phone, or correspond through email helped these FGCS quickly overcome barriers to their success. Setting up class schedules, connecting with other departments, and linking classroom learning to vocational goals and life

skills were some benefits of good advisor access. Some students shared experiences of poor advisor availability. At times these disparities caused frustration and a lack of security in their progress, department, or decision-making. Horowitz (2017) asserts the need for higher education faculty and staff to be advocates and allies for FGCS, which aligns with how the participants of the current study described their advisors as available and accessible. Meeting regularly with advisors caused the participants to feel included and that their needs mattered, which helped them grow in their own autonomy. One participant who described genuine issues with a lack of advisor availability noted that she enjoyed the initial connection she had with her advisor and that early experiences helped provide a platform for success. The dearth of availability in her final year caused frustration and diminished their relationship. However, this ultimately led to greater self-advocacy and autonomy in navigating her degree program. Both positive and negative experiences with advisor availability shared by participants implicated the importance of having adequate time with advisors and the desire of the FGCS to utilize advising in all phases of their educational journeys.

Each participant described how advising helped them develop a sense of autonomy as it pertained to decision-making and college progression. Participants noted varying experiences of how their advisor helped them make decisions, obtain information, and learn how to persist to graduation. However, the FGCS all perceived some development of autonomy and ownership over their education. Most participants felt supported by their advisors in ways that helped them increase self-advocacy, which directly influenced motivation to graduate. These descriptions agree with Falcon's (2015) conclusions that FGCS need to "develop the problem-solving skills to navigate the college process…" (para. 19). The participants in the current study explained valuing their advisors more for relational reasons over time. The relational values of

encouragement and mentorship provided senses of stability and boosted feelings of belonging, giving them space to make their own choices to get to graduation. Within these reflections, all eight participants generally acknowledged advising as an important facet of their student success.

Implications

This study documented descriptions and perceptions of FGCS and their lived experiences with academic advising, including the ways in which the participants perceived advising as helpful in their student success and persistence to graduation. FGCS participants discussed the importance of forming expectations of advising, advisor encouragement, advisor availability and access, and the benefit of advising for developing student autonomy. The results of this study aligned with similar results from studies by Antonelli et al. (2020), Gibbons et al. (2016), Gist-Mackey et al. (2018), Glaessgen et al. (2018), Lawton (2019), Longwell-Grice et al. (2016), McCallen and Johnson (2019), Moore (2020), Morgan (2019), and Swecker et al. (2013). Findings of this study substantiated the findings of Swecker et al. (2013), that academic advising is an effective resource for helping students persist. The results of this study also concur with Lawton (2018), who asserts the benefit of advising as a means of providing equitable support for all students. Further, this study's results aligned with the recommendations for future research into the need to explore FGCS experiences to better understand how to support future students (Demetriou et al., 2017; Havlik et al., 2020; Morgan, 2019; Swecker et al., 2013). Academic advisors, advising administrators, college faculty, and other higher education professionals should consider the following implications for FGCS success and persistence to graduation.

Implication #1: Timing and Early Contact

Based on the descriptions provided by the FGCS participants, advising was a confusing and muddled concept when they initially enrolled in college. The compounding challenges of

being a FGCS during transitions into college resulted in frustrations for the students. Without having a strong understanding of advising early in their first semesters, the participants explained experiencing delayed professional and personal connections with their advisor. Mandatory advising meetings late in the first semester or even in the second semester or later helped participants formulate stronger expectations of advising as a key resource. Tinto (2012) explains the value of obtaining good advising in a student's first year, especially for student groups like FGCS that lack certain social capital or "shared knowledge" about the "nature of the college experience and what it takes to succeed" (p. 11). Glaessgen et al. (2018) assert the need for advisors to explain their roles to students as early as possible in order to help them understand the multi-faceted benefits of advising. Having key institutional role players like advisors connect with FGCS as soon as they enroll could improve chances of academic success, retention, and student development (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

Implication #2: Words Matter

Policymakers and advising administrators should consider the messages that students receive from advisors. As FGCS developed expectations and continued meeting regularly with advisors, they described the development of the advisor-advisee relationship. Encouragement was identified by all eight participants as meaningful and beneficial to their student success. The types and styles of encouragement were varied in each student experience, however verbal encouragement was consistently noted as affecting satisfaction with advising, motivation, and feelings of belonging. Institutions of higher education need to be aware of the messages FGCS receive from faculty and staff, especially in one-on-one advising meetings, and the positive or negative influence on a student's motivation and sense of belonging (Ellis et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2017). The participants of this study were grateful for the encouragement and support they

received at certain points in their educational experiences. These messages influenced the advisor-advisee relationship and student satisfaction with advising. Thus, advising administrators should discern the current nature of their advisor training programs to ascertain how socially and interpersonally equipped advisors are to provide meaningful support to students.

Implication #3: Consistency is Critical

Each of the FGCS in this study discussed aspects of their advisor's consistency and availability. Many participants appreciated having good access to their advisor during times of need or confusion. While not at their beck and call, advisors who were available within a reasonable amount of time helped the FGCS address challenges and avoid letting issues linger. Conversely, participants who described a lack of advisor availability noted having to turn to other sources of support, which at times depreciated the advisor-advisee relationship. This diminished their satisfaction with their advisor and at times hindered student success. Lawton (2018) explains the importance of developing meaningful advisor relationships and asserts the need for institutions to implement practices that allow advisors to dedicate more time to advisees. McCallen and Johnson (2019) also assert the need for key institutional agents to prioritize increased availability for mentorship and consistent contact with FGCS. Advisor availability and access can be key in relation to student success (Young-Jones et al., 2013). Participants who had difficult semesters or academic struggles early on described increased motivation when they felt consistently supported by advisors. Policymakers and advising administrators must be aware of how advisor availability influences FGCS perceptions of advising, as well as the ease of access for FGCS to find assistance when needed.

Implication #4: Advising Affects Autonomy

Each participant described unique, yet related experiences with advising and the development of autonomy and self-efficacy. Advising encounters contributed to the FGCS' growing confidence in decision-making related to academics and other facets of college. Participants appreciated having an advisor as a key leader, and over time developed a sense of self-advocacy through the encouragement and support of their advisors. Even participants that expressed frustration with advisor availability and access noted that advising played a role in helping them gain confidence in matters of course selection, degree progress tracking, course load management, and goal attainment. Being well-informed, asking good questions, and having opportunities to advocate for oneself were consistent facets of experience that the participants described as helpful focal points in advising. Falcon (2015) explains the importance of helping FGCS develop self-efficacy skills such as problem-solving and informed decision-making. The participants of this study similarly explained advisors as key leaders in helping them develop autonomy and learning to navigate college more independently over time.

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Recommendations for Action

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Built upon these implications are four recommendations for action for advising administrators, higher education policy makers, and other academic and education leaders. Academic advising is a critical resource for retention in higher education (Tinto, 2012). Advising is helpful for all students but can be pivotal for providing equitable support to underprepared or underrepresented student groups, including FGCS (Lawton, 2018; Morgan, 2019). As institutions strive to improve FGCS retention efforts and student persistence to graduation, educational leaders need to consider the following recommendations that are related to the primary findings of this study. The data analysis indicated a dearth of expectations for academic advising, the

benefits of positive encouragement and communication, the value of advisor availability and access, and the importance of developing autonomy and self-efficacy in decision making for the FGCS participants. These recommendations emerged directly from the results and help inform advising best practices. Therefore, it is recommended that institutions consider the following: (1) develop advising orientations; (2) provide professional development on the relational aspects of advising; (3) make adequate time for FGCS advisees; and (4) use advising to support autonomy.

Recommendation #1: Develop Advising Orientations

FGCS deal with countless barriers and challenges to success during their initial transitions into college (Gibbons et al., 2016). FGCS must manage the normal stressors of transition that all college students encounter. However, these stressors are compounded with lacking social capital or prior knowledge of college norms (Pratt et al., 2019). Early interactions between FGCS and institutional personnel can mitigate the stresses of transition and help students feel as though they belong (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018). Students need assistance from institutional personnel to navigate college and succeed in their early semesters (Grasky, 2018). Rather than waiting until class registration for a subsequent term, institutions should proactively help students integrate into college through early encounters with academic advisors.

According to Glaessgen et al. (2018), "academic advisors must explain their role as early as possible in their interactions…" in order to help advisees understand how to utilize advising as a resource (p. 32). Developing advising orientations that could be led by an advisor in individualized or group settings with all first-year advisees, including FGCS, could help inform them of the benefits and purposes of advising. Moschetti et al. (2015) also call for designing programs that benefit FGCS in understanding how to develop social capital. Academic advising

can provide social capital to FGCS but must be better implemented to be successful (Joslin, 2018; Schwartz et al., 2018). Early advising orientations could offer meaningful connections to help FGCS feel a sense of belonging. Further, advisors can supplement orientations with individualized meetings with their FGCS in the first few weeks of a term to build rapport as well as define the nature of advising and how it can benefit student success. Grasky (2018) asserts that "it's never too soon to advise," which is an important concept for institutions to consider for improving advising for FGCS success (p. 118).

Recommendation #2: Professional Development on the Relational Aspects of Advising

The behavioral approach to leadership theory utilized in the theoretical framework of this study was immensely valuable for understanding advisor behaviors as perceived by participants. The theory posits that leaders employ task and/or relationship behaviors in varying contexts to help followers (and organizations) achieve their goals (Northouse, 2019). Understanding the advisor-advisee relationship in light of the leader-follower relationship as comprehended through the behavioral approach to leadership helped this researcher discover perceived value amongst the FGCS of an advisor's relational behaviors for helping them persist to graduation (Northouse, 2019). This notion should bolster advising professional development.

Professional development and training for academic advisors is vital for the success of students, advisors, and advising programs (Moore, 2020; Peeters, 2018; Troxel, 2018). Similarly, it is crucial for advisors to be trained in matters of relational support and cultural competence as a means of helping encourage and care for their advisees (Lawton, 2018; Snyder-Duch, 2018). Advising has moved beyond simple course selection and degree progress tracking, and now may include aspects of relational support that seeks to develop and support students holistically

(Snyder-Duch, 2018). Thus, advisors should be trained to listen and respond to the needs of their advisees, particularly FGCS, through positive communication and encouragement.

Institutions need to understand that FGCS experience a vast array of negative and positive messages within their college experience (Ellis et al., 2019). Instances of microaggressions, which are intentional or unintentional discriminatory communications towards certain marginalized groups, can harm FGCS' feelings of belonging on campus (Gray et al., 2017). These experiences can affect academic success and the ability for FGCS to locate individuals they trust on campus (Ellis et al., 2019). Institutions need to audit themselves and become aware of the methods, styles, and types of messages advisors give to FGCS.

However, more than simply being aware of negative messages, institutions need to equip faculty, staff, and advisors to provide positive encouragement and support to FGCS. Advisors must develop meaningful relationships with their advisees for advising to have meaningful influence (Lawton, 2018). Professional development can be bolstered by including training on how to listen and perceive the needs of FGCS, and to subsequently respond not only with academic support but also verbal affirmation (Ellis et al., 2019). Advisors should also be trained to manage encounters that may be beyond their expertise by knowing the key people or departments to send FGCS to for the support they need (Grasky, 2018). Advisors are not responsible for managing all FGCS needs. However, advising culture that is grounded in aspects of leadership and relational support can help build mutual trust and provide FGCS with vital social capital for their success and persistence.

Recommendation #3: Make Adequate Time for FGCS Advisees

Advising can be valuable for FGCS success when advisors have ample time to meet and develop relationships (Lawton, 2018; Swecker et al., 2013). Advising administrators must

encourage advisors to allow for adequate amounts of meaningful advising encounters with FGCS (Kerr, 2018; Moore, 2020). DeLaRosby (2017) notes increases in student satisfaction with advising when students perceived having an adequate amount of contact with their advisor. Advisors, then, must be good listeners in order to become aware of a FGCS' needs for interaction and make adequate time to meet with and support them.

Six participants of this study expressed general satisfaction with the amount of contact they had with their advisor. Two participants noted issues related to availability and consistency over time that caused them to feel they did not have adequate time with their advisors. Both positive and negative experiences explored in this study related to availability implicates the value of advisors providing adequate time to FGCS advisees. Morgan (2019) argues for institutions to make academic advising a priority for FGCS. Advisors need to self-audit their advisee rosters to identify FGCS, allotting additional time as necessary to support these students and help them persist to graduation.

Recommendation #4: Use Advising to Support Autonomy

Educational policymakers and advising administrators should explore ways to help FGCS develop autonomy and self-efficacy for making decisions about their college experiences. Positive encounters with institutional personnel such as advisors can help influence FGCS motivation and academic success (Falcon, 2015). When institutional conditions promote the support of FGCS holistically, it helps them better develop self-efficacy for navigating the college experience (Antonelli et al., 2020; Falcon, 2015). Gaudier-Diaz et al. (2019) summarize the important factors for successful undergraduates as, "students who feel autonomous and efficient, who feel they belong in their academic environment, and who experience lower levels of

anxiety," which more often results in "higher grades" (p. 145). Advisors can support autonomy in students by providing them with ample information and guidance to make informed decisions.

The participants of this study voiced appreciation for having advisors to guide and direct them, but not to tell them what to do. Advisors must listen to students and allow space for them to advocate for their academic and educational needs (Burt et al., 2013). FGCS in this study appreciated strong advisor support in earlier years guiding them in decision-making and wanted to develop their own abilities to make choices as time went on. Advising relationships that are supportive of student autonomy in decision-making can also serve as a teaching opportunity for students to learn to make life decisions (Burt et al., 2013). Further, advising programs need to create resources for FGCS that are easy to understand and help students make good decisions. Thus, advisors must devise strategies that incorporate helpful resources to inform FGCS of curricular options, while simultaneously supporting their freedom to choose their own paths.

This researcher recommends that institutions consider developing advising orientations, offering professional development on relational advising, balancing advisor loads, and advising to develop student autonomy. These recommendations represent the researcher's interpretation of interview findings related to FGCS experiences with academic advising and advisor leadership. Additional research into FGCS, academic advising, and advisor leadership could result in further recommendations and additions to the corpus of literature.

Recommendations for Further Study

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study explored how FGCS at a small, private university in Tennessee perceive their lived experiences with academic advising and advisor leadership, and whether such experiences influenced student success and persistence to graduation. The results of the study aligned with several other studies on FGCS and academic

advising. However, further research is needed into both areas to continue adding valuable information to the literature that could help inform advising and FGCS support practices. Below are five recommendations for further study.

Recommendation #1: Conduct Further Studies on Successful FGCS

This study sought to understand the lived experiences of FGCS seniors and recent graduates with academic advising. Understanding the facets of experience that helped successful FGCS succeed and persist to graduation can help uncover strategies for improved support efforts (Demetriou et al., 2017; Havlik et al., 2020). Seniors and recent graduates have achieved success by persisting through all or most of their degrees, making them an ideal student group for this study. Future studies should also explore other facets of successful FGCS experience beyond advising that helped them succeed and persist to graduation.

Recommendation #2: Explore the Experiences of At-Risk or Low-Achieving FGCS

While studies on successful FGCS can be valuable (Demetriou et al., 2017; Havlik et al., 2020), it is also important to understand the factors and experiences of FGCS that struggle with college persistence. This study experienced a limitation of "volunteer bias" wherein individuals who volunteer to participate in a study are often "more educated, come from a higher social class, are more intelligent, are more approval-motivated, and are more sociable" (Salkind, 2010, p. 2). This is evidenced by the participants of this study all having grade point averages (GPA) of 3.2 or higher. Future studies should explore the lived experiences of FGCS with low GPA's or longer time to degree completion. This type of study could help uncover issues with advising or other college experiences that were unhelpful for FGCS.

Recommendation #3: Expand the Study to Varying Institutions of Higher Education

This study explored the lived experiences of FGCS at a small, private university in Tennessee. The smaller student body size and various student experiences at small, private universities may be different from larger institutions of higher education. All institutions should consider and explore best practices with academic advising for FGCS within their own organizations (Morgan, 2019). Thus, studies on FGCS at larger private and public institutions could reveal information that could benefit all institutions of various sizes and with various advising models.

Recommendation #4: Advisor Sensemaking of Academic Advising

Further research can focus on how academic advisors make sense of academic advising. While this study focused on student experiences, future studies that explore advisor experiences could uncover valuable information for improving advisor professional development (Moore, 2020). Every institutional culture is different and exploring advisor perceptions with advising could identify instances where advisor and student expectations align and where they differ. Additionally, gathering advisor perceptions could uncover instances of advisor overload and dissatisfaction, all of which could improve cohesion in advising programs.

Recommendation #5: Explore Additional Leadership Theories in Academic Advising

Comparing the advisor-advisee relationship to the leader-follower relationship proved to be a useful aspect of this study's theoretical framework. The behavioral approach to leadership was a beneficial theory in understanding student perceptions of advisor behavior and served as a vital lens for grasping how students understood advisors as helping them achieve their goals. Utilizing the language for task and relationship behaviors was not prescriptive, but rather served as a descriptive model of participant responses (Northouse, 2019). Future studies should explore

advising in relationship to leadership theory, examining advisor behaviors through the lens of leadership models (Barbuto et al., 2011; Moore, 2020). Such studies could inform advisor professional development programs and provide valuable data for advising administrators.

Conclusion

FGCS graduate at disparate rates when compared to continuing generation students, which has led to a multitude of studies focused on supporting this student group (Cataldi et al., 2018; Pratt et al., 2019). While many studies explicated the value of academic advising for FGCS retention (Carlson, 2020; Moore, 2019; Peeters, 2018; Swecker et al., 2013), few studies existed that explored the lived experiences of FGCS with academic advising and whether these experiences influenced students. To address this dearth of literature, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how FGCS at a small, private university in Tennessee perceive their lived experiences with academic advising and advisor leadership, and whether such experiences influenced student success and persistence to graduation. Results revealed that while participant experiences were varied, common essences of experience showed advising was helpful for student success and persistence to graduation.

Participants held minimal knowledge or expectations of advising and developed these understandings over time and through experience with advisors. Many participants were pleased with the availability of their advisor, while others sought greater consistency. FGCS described varying instances of encouragement and advisor availability, which affected the development of autonomy and self-efficacy as college students. The data analysis and interpretation of these findings help inform future practice and professional development. Policymakers, advising administrators, and advisors should consider developing advisor orientations, providing professional development for relational aspects of advising, making adequate time for FGCS

advisees, and focusing on advising that is supportive of student autonomy. Addressing these

opportunities has the capacity to improve advising programs and FGCS support efforts. This

study showed that advising and advisors can serve as valuable resources and leaders to help

FGCS persist to graduation.

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Appendix A

Email to Potential Participants

Subject: Doctoral Research Study - Seeking Participants

Dear (SMU Student),

I am the current University Registrar at Smoky Mountain University (SMU) as well as a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am working on my dissertation, "First-Generation College Students: Making Sense of Academic Advising and Advisor Leadership for Student Success." I am looking for approximately eight to twelve volunteers to participate in two rounds of interviews regarding their personal experiences with academic advising. The criteria for participation includes:

- Current senior or recent graduate (within one year) of SMU.

- Neither parents or guardians have earned a bachelor's degree.

- Be eighteen years of age or older.

Interviews will be conducted through online video software Zoom and will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The researcher will discuss and review a consent form at the beginning of the interview to help ensure volunteers understand the study, their rights, and other pertinent information. Volunteers will be asked to sign the consent form. An electronic signature or email consent will be accepted for online video interviews. The interviews will be recorded so that I may accurately analyze and study the results. Also, volunteers will have an opportunity to review a transcript or recording of the interview as well as the compiled data and emerging themes to ensure that information was accurately captured. The researcher will ensure that the identity and confidentiality of all participants will be protected.

I would thoroughly appreciate your participation in this study. Your participation could benefit future students, as well as improve academic advising programs to better help first-generation students succeed. If you would like more information about this study or would like to schedule an interview, please contact me at afrazier5@une.edu.

Thank you,

Andrew M. Frazier

Appendix B

Participant Consent Agreement Form

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

First-Generation College Students: Making Sense of Academic Advising and Advisor
Leadership for Student Success

Principal Investigator: Andrew M. Frazier
Email: afrazier5@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 that 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.

Purpose of the study:
The purpose of this study is to understand how first-generation college students in a small,
private university in Tennessee make sense of and perceive their academic advising experiences
and advisor's leadership. The study further seeks to uncover whether or how such experiences
and interactions influenced success and persistence in college.

Who will be selected for the study?
To be selected, a participant must meet the following requirements:

- Current senior at, or recent graduate of, Smoky Mountain University (SMU).

- Neither parent nor guardian(s) have earned a bachelor's degree.

- Be eighteen years of age or older.

What will I be asked to do?
Participate in two rounds of one-on-one interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes, via
video conferencing platform Zoom (or other applicable online communication software). The
researcher will review this consent form before the first interview begins and the participant will
have an opportunity to sign this form. For online video interviews, electronic signatures or email
consent will be accepted. **Please note: these interviews will be audio recorded.** Signing this
consent form indicates your willingness to be audio recorded.

Participants will also be asked to review a transcription of the interview and may comment, make changes, or offer clarifications through additional interviews, video conference, email, or phone call.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?
There are no identifiable risks associated with participating in this study. You may skip or refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason. The researcher will take measures to help ensure confidentiality of all participant responses and perceptions (further information provided below).

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?
Participants will not receive any monetary or physical benefits.

Your participation also may help policymakers and educational leaders understand the facets of academic advising that are most beneficial for first-generation college students. These findings could help advising administrators improve advising programs that will support future first-generation students and could improve student persistence and degree completion.

What will it cost me?
There are no financial costs associated with participation. Online interviews will take place through a free video conferencing platform, Zoom (or other applicable, free platform).

How will my privacy be protected and data be kept confidential?
- Pseudonyms will be assigned to the university and all participants.
- No academic advisors or other institutional administrators will know of participation in this study.
- Paper documents including the consent forms and transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet that only the investigator has access to. Documents will be maintained by the researcher for five years after the study is completed; after which they will be destroyed.
- Electronic documents will be stored on the password protected personal laptop of the researcher.
- Audio recordings will be stored on the password protected personal laptop of the researcher and erased after completion of the study.
- Transcripts will be sent to participants for review directly to their institutional or personal email address.
- Certain information may be shared with the faculty advisor at the researcher's home institution. However, all proper confidentiality and privacy protocols required by the home institution will be followed.

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 interactions with the university or any academic advisors.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any interview question for any reason.
- You may withdraw from the study at any time. Withdrawing from the study will not result in any penalties or loss of the small monetary benefit you receive for participating in the study.

- The principal researcher may terminate your participation in the study at any time for any reason, with or without notice to you.

<u>Whom may I contact with questions</u>?
- The researcher conducting this study is Andrew M. Frazier. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact him at <u>afrazier5@une.edu</u> or via phone at (865) 599-5486.

- The faculty advisor, Dr. Cynthia Kennedy may be contacted at <u>ckennedy5@une.edu</u> with any questions, comments, or concerns about this study.
- If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you contact Mary Bachman DeSilva, Sc.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4567 or <u>irb@une.edu</u>.

<u>Will I receive a copy of this consent form</u>?
- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

<u>Participant's Statement</u>

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   Date
Legally authorized representative

_____
Printed name
<u>Researcher's Statement</u>

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 C

Interview Protocol (Interview #1)

Date:
Time:
Location or Modality:

Introduction: Hello, my name is Andrew Frazier and I am a doctoral student conducting research at the University of New England. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. The reason I would like to talk with you today is I would like to listen to you describe your experiences with academic advising during your undergraduate college education. With your permission, I will be recording our interview session, which should last approximately 45-60 minutes. I am going to ask you questions about your experiences with academic advising and I would like you to describe them as much as you would like. Not only would I like you to describe your experiences with advising, but also your experiences with your academic advisor. Your answers are confidential, so please feel free to share as much as you wish.

Purpose of study: The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of first-generation college students with academic advising and advisor leadership. I would like to understand your personal experiences with advising over your time in college, and the role advising (and your advisor) played in your journey to graduation.

Review of Informed Consent: At any time, you may stop this interview or withdraw from the study (with no negative consequences). Everything we discuss will be kept confidential. It may be possible that someone reading this dissertation could identify you by the experiences you share, but every precaution will be taken to ensure that nothing will be included that could identify you. Please review the informed consent form that you signed.

Interview Protocol: Before we begin, may I have your permission to audio record our conversation? The recording will be transcribed utilizing NVivo software and then manually corrected by me (the researcher). I will also take notes during our conversation, but please continue speaking as I do so. I will begin with some demographic questions and then move on to the interview questions. If you do not wish to answer any question, please feel free to say so. I will now turn on the recording, so please state for the recording that you agree to be recorded.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Demographic Questions:
1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
   a. Age (now, and age when you enrolled in first year)?
   b. Gender?
   c. Senior or Recent Graduate?

        d.   Current or Final GPA?
2. Do either of your parents or guardians have a college degree?

Interview Questions:
1. Can you describe what your advising meetings were like over the course of your college experience?
    a. Probe 1a: Did your advising meetings differ between years? If so, how?
    b. Probe 1b: How often did you have advising meetings each semester / year?
2. Can you describe any helpful aspects about academic advising?
    a. Probe 2a: Did you feel as though you had input in what happened during advising meetings?
    b. Probe 2b: Was there anything that you learned or experienced during academic advising that helped you with more than academics?
3. Can you describe any unhelpful aspects about academic advising?
    a. Probe 3a: Did you ever encounter issues with advising?
        i. If yes: can you describe that?
        ii. If no: why do you think there were never issues?
    b. Probe 3b: Was there anything about advising that did not meet your expectations?
4. Can you describe your relationship with your academic advisor?
    a. Probe 4a: Did you have multiple advisors? If so, did you have a primary advisor?
    b. Probe 4b: Did you interact with your primary advisor outside of advising meetings?
        i. If yes: can you describe when, where, how, why? What did you think of those experiences?
        ii. If no: what did you think of that?
5. Can you describe how your primary advisor handled advising meetings?
    a. Probe 5a: can you describe how they treated you and acted during advising meetings?
    b. Probe 5b: Can you describe any times your advisor helped you connect with another support office on campus (career services, academic support, counseling center, student government, etc)?
        i. If no: did you ever talk about any of these other support offices or services?
    c. Probe 5c: can you describe the types of things your advisor focused on?
6. Can you describe how your advisor did or did not help you in college?
    a. Probe 6a: What things did they do to related to your academic success?
    b. Probe 6b: Was there anything your advisor did that set up back academically?
    c. Probe 6c: Did you feel your advisor was knowledgeable and trustworthy?
        i. If yes: what made you perceive that?
        ii. If no: what do you think about that?
7. Can you describe anything you wish your advisor had done better or differently?
8. Overall, how satisfied were/are you with academic advising?
9. Is there any other experience with advising or your advisor that you would like to share?

10. Do you have any questions for me?

Closing:
- Thank you for your time and participation in this interview.
- A reminder: everything we have talked about today will remain confidential (no personally identifiable information).
- You will have the opportunity to provide any comments about the interview once I transcribe the audio recording. What email address is best for you?
- I would like to have a follow up interview with you to discuss any emerging themes or findings within the next month. Would that be okay?
- Again, thank you for your participation!

Appendix D

Interview Protocol (Interview #2)

Date:
Time:
Location or Modality:

Introduction: Hello and thank you again for your willingness to participate in this second interview. I would like to follow up with you today to listen to you describe your experiences with academic advising as it relates to the emerging themes and questions I have uncovered from my first round of interviews with participants. With your permission, I will be recording our interview session, which should last approximately 30-45 minutes. Again, your answers are confidential, so please feel free to share as much as you wish.

Purpose of study: the purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of first-generation college students with academic advising and advisor leadership. I would like to understand your personal experiences with advising over your time in college, and the role advising (and your advisor) played in your journey to graduation.

Review of Informed Consent: at any time, you may stop this interview or withdraw from the study (with no negative consequences). Everything we discuss will be kept confidential. It may be possible that someone reading this dissertation could identify you by the experiences you share, but every precaution will be taken to ensure that nothing will be included that could identify you. Do you have any questions about the consent form that you signed?

Interview Protocol: before we begin, may I have your permission to audio record our conversation? The recording will be transcribed utilizing NVivo software and then manually corrected by me (the researcher). I will also take notes during our conversation, but please continue speaking as I do so. If you do not wish to answer any question, please feel free to say so. I will now turn on the recording, so please state for the recording that you agree to be recorded.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. Can you describe your expectations or understandings about advising when you first enrolled in college?
    - Probe 1a: Was there ever a time you felt like advising started to make sense?
        - If yes, when?
        - Did that change your perception of advising?
    - Probe 1b: Is there any thought or idea about advising you know now that you would tell your "freshman" self?

2. Can you describe your advisor's communication style?
   - Probe 2a: What was their mode(s) of communication and how often did they communicate with you?
   - Probe 2b: Were their ever any issues with communication with your advisor?
3. How would you describe your advisor's availability?
   - Probe 3a: Were you satisfied with how often you met together?
   - Probe 3b: Did you ever have any issues connecting with your advisor?
4. Can you describe if or how your advisor helped you make decisions related to your academics or overall college experience?
   - Probe 4a: Did you feel well-informed by your advisor to make decisions about your academics?
   - Probe 4b: Is there anything you wish your advisor had done differently to help you make decisions?
5. Can you describe if you felt encouraged by your advisor?
   - Probe 5a: If yes – how did that encouragement affect you?
   - Probe 5b: Were there any things you would describe that your advisor did to make you feel supported? (Can you elaborate on specifics)
   - Probe 5c: Did you feel as though your advisor cared about you and your success?
6. One question we discussed last time was how your advisor treated you. Can you elaborate again on this idea and describe if it affected your relationship?
   - Probe 6a: Did this change your perception of them?
   - Probe 6b: Did you feel this treatment changed over time?
7. Do you have any other final thoughts or reflections about academic advising experiences or your advisor?

Closing:
- Thank you for your time and participation in this final interview.
- A reminder: everything we have talked about today will remain confidential (no personally identifiable information).
- You will have the opportunity to provide any comments about the interview once I transcribe the audio recording. I will send you a copy of the transcript once it is ready.
- Do you have any other questions for me?
- Again, thank you for your participation!