

The Pennsylvania State University
The Graduate School

ACADEMIC ADVISING OUTCOMES ACROSS ADVISING STRUCTURES AND
STUDENT SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

A Dissertation in
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by
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Abstract

Advising is an important resource for students in higher education, helping them to select a major, find connection to university resources, and meet degree requirements. Contact with an academic adviser has also been found to improve students' academic performance. Recent research suggests that students approach academic advising for different reasons, often connected to differences in socioeconomic status. However, previous studies do not focus on the structures and institutional expectations supporting academic advising despite the fact that there is variation in how academic advising is delivered across and within institutions of higher education. This variation is reflected in who takes responsibility for advising, the structure and location of academic advising offices, and professional expectations and other responsibilities.

This research explores how students engage with academic advisers across two different academic advising models. Using a case study approach, I interviewed undergraduate students enrolled in two academic colleges that employed different models of academic advising. To illuminate the culture of academic advising in each college, I also interviewed academic advisers and an advising administrator in each college and analyzed publicly available documents about academic advising from each colleges' website.

Both students and academic advisers interviewed saw academic advising as primarily about the scheduling of courses. This view of academic advising was narrower than the Faculty Senate's view of the role and purpose of academic advising. This divergence between policy and practice indicates a problem with the implementation of academic advising practice. Some student participants also reported that advisers discouraged their goals and plans.

Each of the two advising structures I examined had benefits and challenges for students. Students and advisers in the decentralized advising model noted the specialized knowledge of faculty advisers. By contrast, the centralized advising model I examined allowed flexibility in

who students could choose to meet with and how they met with advisers. However, the centralized advising model had challenges with a high rate of adviser turnover.

In this thesis I also focused on differences in experiences of students across socioeconomic status. My interviews support previous findings concerning the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic advising, but with two additional observations. First, my interviews reveal that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who began at a different campus experienced challenges with academic advising. Second, some academic advisers were unaware of students' background characteristics. Therefore, those academic advisers could not vary their practices and approaches to meet different needs of students, especially when it pertained to socioeconomic status.

As a result of these findings, two conclusions emerged from the data. The first is that systemic barriers prevented implementation of the institution's Faculty Senate policy on academic advising and caused challenges for students. A second finding is that advising systems limited relationship building between students and advisers. Barriers to building relationships include large advising rosters, other professional responsibilities, lack of knowledge about varying student demographics, and inconsistent expectations for academic advisers. Recommendations for practice and future research are provided.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
Acknowledgements	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Background	5
History of Academic Advising at The Pennsylvania State University	12
Significance of this Dissertation	20
Chapter 2: Literature Review	23
Conceptual Framework	24
Sense of Belonging in Higher education	29
Socioeconomic status in education	31
Socioeconomic Status and Academic Advising	34
Academic Advising Structures	39
Chapter 3: Research Methodology	44
Description of Sites	45
Data Collection Procedures	47
Analysis	51
Researcher Positionality	52
Limitations	56
Description of Participants	57
Students From Lower Socioeconomic Backgrounds	60
Students From Mid-Socioeconomic Backgrounds	63
Students From High Socioeconomic Backgrounds	66
Information on Academic Adviser Participants	71
Academic Advisers in the College of Agricultural Sciences	72
Academic Advisers in the Bellisario College of Communications.	77
Chapter 4: Research Findings	82
The Culture of Academic Advising in the College of Agricultural Sciences	83
The Culture of Academic Advising in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications	87
Students' Experiences with Academic Advising in the Two Colleges	91
Differences across Advising Models	95
Decentralized Model	96
Centralized Model	98

Academic Advising across Socioeconomic Status	99
Purposes of Academic Advising	99
Expectations for Academic Advisers	102
Role of Families in Educational Decision-Making	104
Approaching and Navigating Institutional Resources	107
Academic Advisers Knowledge of Socioeconomic Background	109
Navigating the Multi-Campus System	110
Chapter 5: Discussion	117
Key findings	118
Systemic Constraints on Academic Advising	121
Barriers to Relationship Building	124
Changing Advising Structures	129
Recommendations for Practice	132
Implications for Future Research	135
Conclusion	137
References	138
Appendix A: Semi-structured interview questions for students	153
Appendix B: Annual Household Income Ranges	155
Appendix C: Semi-Structure Interview Questions for Second Student Interview	156
Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Academic Advisers	157
Appendix E: Semi-structured Interview with College Administrators	159

List of Tables

Table 1: Descriptive data on academic college sites used in this study. _____	47
Table 2: Criteria to Determine Student Socioeconomic Status _____	59
Table 3: List of Student Participants _____	60
Table 4: List of Academic Adviser Participants _____	72

List of Figures

Figure 1: Inputs, Environment, and Outcomes Modeled from Astin’s I-E-O framework (1993)	27
Figure 2: Conceptual framework combining cultural capital, IEO model, and structuration	28
Figure 3: Demographics of Student Participants by College of Enrollment	58
Figure 4: Number of Codes for Appointment Topics for Students in the High Socioeconomic Status Across Both Colleges	100
Figure 5: Number of Codes for Appointment Topics for Students in the Mid-Socioeconomic Group Across Both Colleges	101
Figure 6: The Number of Codes for Appointment Topics for Students in the Lower Socioeconomic Group Across Both Colleges	102
Figure 7: Campus of Admission by Student Socioeconomic Status for All Student Participants	111

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis investigates the interactions of college students and academic advisers within specific advising models. Relationships between students and advisers across different advising models are not well studied but are important to understand students' engagement patterns. Academic advising in US higher education developed to help students in navigating increasingly complex institutions and curricula (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010). The development of advising was linked with the increasing number and diversity of college students enrolling in institutions of higher education. Academic advising systems expanded most rapidly after the 1970s as they became more structured and organized (Frank, 1988). As advising programs grew, variation in advising structures also grew within and across institutions. By the early 1990s, seven types of academic advising were common. Each type of advising was delineated by who held responsibility for the delivery of academic advising. This variation in structure resulted from ambiguity in the role and purpose of advising, growing complexity in curriculum and rules for undergraduate students, and in shifting responsibilities of faculty members. The resulting advising models reflect commonly held assumptions of the majority culture in higher education that may not support all students. Understanding how students experience academic advising is important for understanding the success of specific models. Learning how student characteristics and advising structures influence these experiences is also important.

Research on the effectiveness of advising models on student engagement is limited (McFarlane, 2013), and focuses on institutional perspectives and less on student experiences. For example, in 1997, the American College Testing program (ACT) conducted a survey of American colleges to learn more about academic advising structures (Habley, 1997). This survey gathered data on the type of advising model employed at each institution (Habley, 1997) as well as the effectiveness of each model on program goals and variables as evaluated by institutional

representatives (Habley & Morales, 1998). Additional studies have addressed adviser experiences (Martinez & Elue, 2020) and adviser perceptions on program effectiveness (Wiseman & Messitt, 2010). More recent research has focused on student experiences. Most previous studies are quantitative in their methods. For example, Brett McFarlane (2013) conducted a survey to measure student satisfaction and first year retention across academic advising models. Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and institutional website reviews, April Belback (2021) examined the relationship between advising models on first year student retention and six-year graduation rate. While previous quantitative studies can describe overall satisfaction, they fail to capture the student experience across models of academic advising. This is a key focus of my dissertation.

Beyond academic advising structures, differences in student characteristics influence academic advising outcomes. Previous research (Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Yee, 2014) indicates that socioeconomic status partly determines students' advising needs. From these studies, we have learned that the type of information students seek from academic advisers varies by socioeconomic status. We know that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to approach advisers for information about the institutional culture and choice of major. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, with higher cultural capital and a network of well-connected family and friends, tend to approach advisers for different information as they may be more likely to use their personal resources to learn about institutional culture and make significant educational decisions, such as choice of major (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013).

There have been few studies examining students' experiences with academic advising across socioeconomic status, and even fewer that explicitly address advising structures and

systems. Without examining the influence on students, advising structures may unintentionally exacerbate socioeconomic disparities that exist within society. Previous research (Lareau, 2011) has indicated that socioeconomic status affects the ways in which students and families interact with educational institutions in primary and secondary schools. It is likely that socioeconomic status also influences the ways students and their families engage with institutions of higher education. As a professional concern, academic advisers must understand how socioeconomic status influences student behavior to create structures, policies, and practices that support students from all socioeconomic groups. If not examined, institutions and advisers may unintentionally replicate social status by using structures that favor specific student groups.

To help fill the gap in existing literature, my research investigates the intersection of advising structures and student experiences with academic advising across two distinct advising models at one institution's largest campus, University Park of Penn State University. This research will address the following questions:

1. How do students experience academic advising?
2. Are there differences in student experiences across advising models?
3. In what ways do students' expectations and needs for academic advising vary by socioeconomic status across two different types of advising?
4. In what ways does student engagement vary across socioeconomic status within an advising model?

Answers to these questions will increase our understanding of how social and cultural influences shape the ways in which students interact with academic advisers across varied academic advising models. The answers may also inform potential changes to academic advising systems. Typically, academic advisers make themselves available to students through pre-

scheduled appointments, drop-in office hours, and email communication. Individual advisers may prefer one of these modes when working with students. Individual students also may prefer one mode when working with an adviser. In many cases, it is the adviser who dictates the modes available for students. Understanding how students engage with different advising structures across socioeconomic statuses can shape institutional change, not only in the systems of academic advising, but also in the policies, procedures, and daily work of advisers.

Different academic advising systems and structures within an institution can result in differences in how students understand and engage with those systems. Students at one university may have different opportunities and resources when it comes to academic advising. For example, a faculty member who also serves as an academic adviser will advise students in addition to performing their teaching and research responsibilities. The multiple expectations on a faculty adviser's time may impact the time available to work directly with undergraduate students. Conversely, an academic adviser whose primary responsibility is to advise undergraduate students may have more availability for student appointments and expertise for the broader context of the curriculum but less disciplinary knowledge. Academic advisers may have different levels of knowledge about higher education and student characteristics. This varied experience and knowledge may lead to different strategies and approaches to working with students. How do students with diverse demographic characteristics connect with advisers in these two models? Faculty advisers bring distinct knowledge and experience from their respective disciplines while primary-role academic advisers may be advising students in a program in which they have not studied themselves. How do these different areas of expertise benefit students?

Background

The history of higher education in the United States is characterized by increasing variation in the number and types of institutions, in the diversity of students, and in the choices available in the curricula. The same changes are reflected in academic advising across the United States. Expansion and growth resulted in increased awareness around academic advising, which—at some points in history was confused with other student support services. As a field of practice, academic advising has grown in the diversity of people serving as advisers and in the number of institutional structures in place to support this practice. Next, I briefly review the historical context of academic advising.

Before 1850, the role of faculty member as academic adviser was to serve as a disciplinarian to strengthen the relationships between students and faculty members. The latter was not necessarily realized (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016). After 1850, college curricula expanded and allowed for more student choice which required guidance from a faculty adviser (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010). Given the role and expertise of faculty members, they were best positioned to help students make choices in the curricula. The first documented formal systems of academic advising can be found at Harvard and Johns Hopkins where an administrator oversaw the select group of faculty members serving as academic advisers (Cook, 2009; White & Khakpour, 2006). This new faculty responsibility was needed to assist students in selecting a major or concentration of study and in the selection of courses (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010).

At the same time students needed more help in making academic choices, other expectations for faculty members became more specialized and focused on disciplinary research. Institutions in the United States started to hire faculty members with advanced graduate degrees. This shift emphasized the production of research in promotion and tenure (Labaree, 2017).

Graduate programs were created, and faculty members were expected to focus on graduate education and disciplinary research (Labaree, 2017) rather than on undergraduate academic advising.

College enrollments grew sharply in the 20th century. The increasing rates of college attendance resulted in growing diversity in demographic characteristics and included more women, middle-class students, and students with less academic preparation (Wall, 1987). Colleges and universities gave more attention to helping students navigate their academic choices and educational challenges. As a result, new structures were created to support the growing student demand for assistance. For example, Carleton College, a small, private liberal arts institution in Northfield, Minnesota, decided direct contact between students and faculty members was important. Carleton College's Bulletin from the academic year 1939-1940 stated that each student was to be "assigned to a member of the faculty who serves as his academic adviser for two years" (Carleton College, 1940, p. 110). In addition to a faculty adviser, the Bulletin also described "personnel officers" as "available to all students who wish guidance or counsel in personal, academic, and vocational areas" (Carleton College, 1940, p. 111). Meanwhile, the University of Minnesota, a large public institution, created the General College in 1932 to accommodate larger enrollments and diverse educational needs of students (Cremin, 1964). University President Lotus D. Coffman said the new structure was meant to provide, "a superior intellectual opportunity for a body of university students whose needs cannot now be adequately met by the existing organization of the university" (Cremin, 1964, p. 314). The General College was created to meet the needs of students who attended the university for a year or two then left due to poor performance because they were not prepared for college level course work (Cremin, 1964). The mission of the institution and demands on faculty time, as well as the

size and diversity of students differed between Carleton College and the University of Minnesota in the 1930s and 1940s, yet both created new offices and expanded services to support students' academic decision-making.

Despite the growing attention and resources for academic advising, faculty advisers were seldom incentivized to advise undergraduate students. In 1955, a survey of 19 institutions reported that advising responsibilities were layered on top of other expectations, concluding that “increases in salary, reduction in teaching load, or reduction in committee assignments in recompense for faculty advising seems to be uncommon” (Tinsley, 1955, p. 220). It is no wonder that, after studying academic advising systems at several institutions, James Robertson (1958) observed, “...there is very little responsible involvement of the faculty” (p. 232).

Some institutions began to fill the gap between student needs and changing faculty demands with student personnel services. These included many services outside of classroom teaching such as orientation, health and psychological services, and career counseling (Raskin, 1979). A growing group of specialists with backgrounds in the new fields of psychology and educational psychology contributed to the Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1949). The Student Personnel Point of View explicitly emphasized the holistic development of the individual, including academic development as well as social development (American Council on Education, 1949). This approach was based on research in psychology and focused on the importance of individual differences in background, ability, interests, and goals (American Council on Education, 1949). A student's personal development required institutions to provide “skilled counselors trained in the art of stimulating self-understanding without directing decisions” (American Council on Education, 1949, p. 5). The first dedicated

academic advisers used their educational background in the social sciences to inform their practice (Himes and Schulenberg, 2016).

The student personnel approach differed from the view of academic advising by faculty advisers, who were rooted in their respective disciplines (Raskin, 1979). Many faculty members viewed the role of academic advising as one of record-keeping and clerical functions. The Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1949) brought a heightened focus to the individual student and a call for interpersonal relationships. “Advisers, mostly faculty, were expected to show more concern for students and to develop closer relationships with [students]. Neither faculty nor counselors were receptive to these expectations” (Grites, 1979, p. 8). Terms such as “academic advising” and “counseling” were used interchangeably in the literature at the time, thereby contributing to the confusion around the purpose of academic advising and the role of the adviser/counselor. This dichotomy resulted in an opportunity for non-faculty roles to fill the broader needs for academic advising: “...continued avoidance of responsible participation by the faculty simply creates a vacuum which the professionals are eager to fill” (Robertson, 1958, p. 237). This resulted in diverging advising structures and roles.

As student enrollments increased, there was more awareness of the importance of exploration and specialization of pre-major advising. Advising responsibilities grew namely because the number of students on an adviser’s roster grew (Wall, 1988a). Some institutions began to use a combination of faculty adviser and specialized counselor. A partnership of faculty advisers and specialists capitalized on the faculty member’s expertise in the curriculum and academic discipline as well as the counselors training in understanding a student’s needs and abilities (Wrenn, 1941). In 1979, there were four primary systems of academic advising employed, “(1) instructor-counselor, with instructor doing the advising; (2) counselor-instructor,

with counselor doing most of the advising; (3) counselor only; and (4) instructor only” (Raskin, 1979, p. 107). During this time, results of a survey of academic advising systems at 820 institutions showed that most institutions primarily used faculty advisers (Carstensen & Silberhorn, 1979). However, institutions continued to add structures and staff dedicated to academic advising.

Beginning in the 1970s, institutions adjusted structures and systems with an eye toward increasing student retention. There was growth in research on student retention (Tinto, 1975; Habley, 1981) and academic advising was seen as an important component of institutional retention strategies (Crockett, 1978). Retaining students was seen as imperative for institutions. This important initiative was directly connected to academic advising. “The rate of student retention closely ties to the quality of academic advising” (Trombley & Holmes, 1981, p. 5). Some institutions created new offices based on retention and advising literature at the time.

The Student Personnel Point of View of the 1950s provided a foundation for the creation of the student development philosophy within academic advising. Championed by Burns Crookston (2009/1972) and Terry O’Banion (1972), developmental advising sought to help students grow in all aspects of their full self: personal, academic, and vocational. The emphasis of developmental advising was on the individual student and the relationship between learner and teacher (Crookston, 2009/1972). Developmental advising became a gathering point for those working full-time in academic advising and related services as it distinguished the advising done primarily by those titled counselor from faculty advisers. This connection came during a point in history when more people were dedicated to supporting students in navigating their academic choices and challenges.

Also, during the 1970s, the growing number of specialists in academic advising formed a community through a national organization, then called the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), now called NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising. NACADA was founded with a commitment to the process of advising and increasing visibility and scholarship for the advising profession (Beatty, 1999). Through annual conferences and scholarly publications, NACADA strengthened the community of those serving as academic advisers. “For the first time, a community of researchers, practitioners and makers of policy regularly communicate with each other and interested constituencies” (Trombley & Holmes, 1981, p. 4) This community led to an increase in scholarship dedicated to academic advising.

Continuing into the late 20th century, scholars identified competing priorities and limited time of faculty members as ongoing challenges for advising. Faculty members continue to be seen by some as best positioned to advise students but are seen to have limited time available to do this work (Polson & Cashin, 1981). Many advising models and systems still incorporated faculty members as academic advisers. According to a review (King, 1993), by 1993 there were seven models of academic advising used in the United States. These included: faculty only; supplementary (faculty as primary adviser, with an advising office as a resource for students and advisers); a split model (faculty and primary-role advisers advise students); a dual model (students have two advisers; faculty and staff); total intake model (students first work with primary-role advisers, then students move to faculty); satellite model (advising is controlled within academic subunits); and self-contained model (all advising occurs in a central unit). By 1997, Habley (1997) found that 48% of institutions included in the fifth ACT survey on academic advising used a faculty-only advising model or a supplementary model where students

were assigned to a faculty member for advising, but an advising office also was available to students.

In the late 1990s, several important articles were published that challenged the developmental view of advising. Marc Lowenstein (1999) and Martha Hemwall & Kent Trachte (1999) advocated for a view of academic advising as teaching and learning, a view consistent with the mid-20th century scholarship. An academically centered philosophy aims to facilitate the student's connection to the curriculum and focuses on the student's academic learning (Lowenstein, 1999). The teaching-learning paradigm of academic advising strengthened into the 21st century and led to efforts to align academic advising more closely with teaching. With variation in institutional structures and in academic advisers' characteristics, such as educational background, position within the institution, and other professional responsibilities, NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising tried to define the role of academic advising more clearly through the lens of teaching and learning. It advocated for a Concept of Academic Advising, which it created in 2006 and stated, "Academic advising, based in the teaching and learning mission of higher education, is a series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of student learning outcomes" (NACADA, 2006). With this statement, academic advising was more clearly identified as an educational function.

Many institutions have continued to expand the number of staff working within academic advising. They have created new offices and hired people to fill these roles, which requires significant investment by the institution. In 2011, there emerged a shared split system, where advising responsibilities were divided between a faculty member, who advised within the academic discipline, while staff assumed responsibility for pre-major/undeclared students (Carlstrom, 2013). In a more recent survey, 17% of institutions surveyed continue to use faculty-

only advising models (Carlstrom, 2013). Despite the increase in staff members in academic advising, almost half of the institutions included in the 2011 study still assigned faculty advisers to students in some capacity.

History of Academic Advising at The Pennsylvania State University

The history of academic advising at Penn State follows the patterns of the broader history sketched above. Originally, Penn State offered few undergraduate majors with very prescribed academic plans and little curricular choice (Wall, 1987). Students often took the same courses in their first semester with little attention to variation in preparation and without most academic support or student services familiar on college campuses today (Wall, 1987). Deans and faculty members served as academic advisers when academic choices were limited. Reflecting on the quality of academic advising early in Penn State's history, Dr. Harvey Wall critically said that "advising tended to be fragmented, inequitable, and inconsistent" but that "advising was generally effective for students well-prepared for college" (1987, p. 62).

Along with growing attention to academic advising and other student support services at institutions across the United States, Penn State created the Division of Intermediate Registration (DIR) in 1948 to work with students who had poor study habits, academic deficiencies, and uncertain future goals (Wall, 1987). The DIR was partially created to support the high number of adult veterans returning from World War II, many of whom were first-generation students with less knowledge about academic requirements and gaps in their academic preparation (Wall, 1987). Like the broader history of academic advising, the DIR was run primarily by people with educational backgrounds in psychology (Wall, 1987).

As curricular choice expanded and research grew in the diverse educational needs of students, so did the offices that provided support resources. The DIR was renamed to the

Division of Counseling (DOC) in 1955 and restructured to take on a broad role of counseling new students. The role of the DOC included topics such as mental health counseling as well as academic fit with college major, adjustment to college, and sharing information on academic requirements (Wall, 1987). The DOC also generated research to help understand changing student needs within higher education. For example, Samuel Osipow, Jefferson Ashby, and Harvey Wall (1966) published a study on uncertainty in choosing a college major concluding that uncertainty was part of a normal developmental period. This finding contradicted more commonly held beliefs and assumptions at the time (Wall, 1988b).

Although its proponents cited the growing research on the importance of academic exploration, the counseling emphasis of the DOC had a negative association for students. There was a stigma associated with the need for counseling and with uncertainty in choice of an academic major, “academic attitudes of the day held that students who were “bright” and “stable” did not change their minds or their majors” (“Project Inform IV: Undergraduate Studies,” 1974). Penn State’s Faculty Senators recognized the importance of providing support and assistance in academic exploration and in the development of academic skills especially during the initial transition into college. “Educational uncertainty was no longer equated with weakness; instead, it began to be accepted as a sign of normal growth and development” (“DUS: New in almost every respect,” 1974). At the same time, Faculty Senators recognized that advising was a low priority for faculty. According to Benson M. Lichtig, Undergraduate Student Government President and a member of the Ad Hoc Committee to explore the creation of a University College, many faculty “...did not seem to feel that the reward structure in the University put much emphasis on this [advising] function and felt that they, therefore, could not give the commitment to advising that they would like to” (University Faculty Senate, 1972, p.

26). While faculty members were primarily responsible for academic advising, there was room for improvement.

In 1973, Penn State's Faculty Senate created the Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) to meet the advising needs of first year and second year students (Wall, 1988b). DUS did not enroll all first- and second-year students, as envisioned in the University College proposal. However, "...the development of DUS symbolized the growing importance that the University gave to the entire process of academic advising" (Wall, 1988a, p. 91). DUS was established under the Vice President for Undergraduate Studies and charged with creating a university-wide academic communication network and to evaluate academic advising (Project Inform IV: Undergraduate Studies," 1974). Harvey Wall was named the first director of DUS on March 21, 1974 (Division of Undergraduate Studies, n.d.). According to Wall (1988a), DUS addressed the specialized needs of students making important decisions about their educational plans, leaving faculty members in other academic units to advise students in their discipline.

The creation of DUS as a centralized advising unit also impacted academic advising in academic colleges. Required to create an academic information network, DUS established Undergraduate Academic Information Centers at each campus and in each college ("DUS: New in almost every respect," 1974), an exception, initially, was in the College of Science (Barr, 1974). These centers were staffed with DUS consultants (E. Danis, personal communication, September 27, 2022) to serve as a contact and network for information sharing between faculty advisers and DUS ("DUS: New in almost every respect," 1974). In some cases, DUS consultants were the first non-faculty academic advisers within the colleges (E. Danis, personal communication, September 27, 2022).

Around this time, the Faculty Senate removed the required signature on registration forms. This change provided an opportunity for colleges to restructure their advising programs. The College of the Liberal Arts instituted a self-advising program in which a student could take responsibility to fulfill graduation requirements and sign their own registration cards. This function previously required approval from an academic adviser (Burritt, 1973). In addition to self-advising, the College of the Liberal Arts, the College of Business Administration, and the College of Human Development gave student advisers the same responsibilities as faculty advisers (Burritt, 1973). Many colleges retained their advising models (Ostrosky, 1973). At the time, the College of Earth and Mineral Sciences, the College of Agriculture, the College of Arts and Architecture, and the College of Engineering continued to rely on faculty advisers and had no plans to incorporate other advising structures (Ostrosky, 1973).

Penn State's students, faculty, and administrators have reported continuing challenges with academic advising. A survey of students in 1980 found that 25% of seniors rated their academic advising experience as poor (Palfrey, 1981). As a result of the feedback, a report on the state of academic advising was commissioned. This comprehensive survey of academic advising across all Penn State campuses, conducted in 1982, provided important information that guided restructuring of academic advising within some colleges. This analysis employed questionnaires and interviews of students, faculty, deans, campus academic officers, and department heads. The survey found that 43% of faculty advisers infrequently or never discussed majors outside of their own disciplines yet 81% of newly admitted students expected to change their major at some point during college (LoMonaco, 1983). In fact, the survey indicated that faculty advisers preferred not to advise students in pre-major status (Sebastianelli & Wade, 2004). It was clear

that the purposes of academic advising were not always being met by those serving in advising roles.

The Academic Advising Analysis showed inconsistency in advising across Penn State. At the time of the study, only nine colleges had a statement of purpose for academic advising and there was no attempt to develop consistent statements across these colleges (Higginson et al., 1982). Beyond the required orientation program “students are not given any other systematic opportunity to discuss their educational plans” (Higginson et al., 1982, p.8). John Wyckoff, assistant director of the Division of Undergraduate Studies said, “Advising varies from college to college and campus to campus” (O’Matz, 1985).

In the 1980s, President Bryce Jordan made growth in graduate education and research a priority (E. White, personal communication, October 3, 2022). The Strategic Planning Guide from the Office of the President stated, “historically, graduate education has not been emphasized at Penn State,” and acknowledged that much of the discretionary budget had been “...used for dealing with the undergraduate enrollment pressures” (University Planning Advisory Committee, 1984, p. 6). The shift in using resources towards graduate education and research led to re-prioritizing responsibilities for many faculty members. As a result, academic advising continued as a lower priority for faculty members. “Because the University promotion and tenure policy does not recognize advising as an important aspect of promotion and tenure deliberations, faculty are not motivated to provide quality advising” (O’Matz, 1985). Stephen J. Wright, senior academic adviser in the College of the Liberal Arts stated that, “many faculty do not perceive academic advising as a terribly important function” (Palfrey, 1981). Carl Wolgemuth, associate dean of engineering said, “We try to keep the role of the adviser to counseling and technical elective selection, while reducing their scheduling functions” (O’Matz, 1985). According to a

faculty member cited in the Academic Advising Analysis, “since advising comes after research and teaching, it is unlikely that there will be any dramatic improvement in advising in the near future” (Higginson et al., 1982, p. 11).

As a result of the Academic Advising Analysis, the committee recommended a reform of academic advising across the institution (Higginson, et al., 1982). The recommendations made by the committee included: demonstrate the importance of academic advising in undergraduate education; establish a central system of advising with distinct stages for new students, pre-major, and in major students; and colleges, campuses, and DUS should determine costs, personnel, and reporting lines needed to implement the recommendations (Higginson et al., 1982). As a result, some colleges created advising centers to advise pre-major students (White, personal communication, October 3, 2022). The College of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation and the College of Engineering each developed central advising offices in their respective colleges to help first- and second-year students explore majors (O’Matz, 1985). Yet critics worried that the goal was to turn academic advising completely over to professional academic advisers (Ferrell, 1984). Many of the people associated with the Division of Undergraduate Studies were trained clinical psychologists (White, personal communication, October 3, 2022). Some faculty believed advising should not be done by professional counselors and should instead be done by people experienced in the field of study (O’Matz, 1985).

To support faculty advisers, the DUS Academic Information Support Program with DUS Coordinators was implemented in 1986 within each academic college and at all campuses (Sebastianelli & Wade, 2004). This network was designed to provide accurate and timely information to students, faculty, and staff (Sebastianelli & Wade, 2004). Later assessment of the university-wide academic information network showed that it was an important part of the

academic community, and supported student transition around the university. This ultimately helped retention and graduation rates (Sebastianelli & Wade, 2004).

Despite the attention to improve academic advising, inconsistency continues. At the University Park campus (the focus of this dissertation), there are thirteen undergraduate academic colleges and units. Each college uses a different advising structure. This includes variation in who is responsible for advising, how advising is assessed, and how students are expected to interact with advisers. The number of primary-role academic advisers has continued to increase, although no central data on this growth exists.

Today, Penn State's advising policy (University Faculty Senate, 2019a) lists three goals of advising. These are: 1) to help students identify and achieve their academic goals, 2) to promote intellectual discovery, and 3) to encourage students to take advantage of in and out of class opportunities to develop as self-directed learners and decision makers. To achieve these goals, Penn State's Faculty Senate policy (University Faculty Senate, 2019a) states that each academic unit must have a model of advising that delivers effective advising and each advising unit must have a comprehensive assessment to measure the effectiveness of the program. Since assessment efforts are not collected or shared in any way, it is not clear that academic colleges and advising units considered the needs of students in determining the structure of an advising program. Since the advising system is determined at the college or campus level, there is no central reporting process or institutional accountability.

Recent efforts by Penn State's Faculty Senate have sought to improve academic advising. Faculty Senators discussed, "How can we improve and expand academic advising so that it meets the goals of the Advising Report—and the needs of all Penn State students?" (Senate Committee on Admissions, Records, Scheduling, and Student Aid & Senate Committee of

Education, 2019). In this discussion, issues raised in 1972 were raised again. For example, in 2019, Senator Stephen Snyder from the Berks campus reported that some faculty advisers, “...don’t seem to enjoy advising” and continued to suggest that faculty who enjoy advising should be incentivized to advise a larger number of students (University Faculty Senate, 2019b, p. 19). Moreover, faculty senators shared a range of challenges to academic advising, from large advising rosters to faculty members preferring to advise students in their program starting in the students’ first semesters. These discussion points focused less on student needs and concerns and more on the concerns and challenges for faculty members.

In 2020, seven committees of the University’s Faculty Senate put forth a consultative report, “Enhancing Academic Advising Across Penn State,” which included specific recommendations on how to strengthen academic advising practice across the university (Senate Committee on Admissions, Records, Scheduling, and Student Aid et al., 2020). The changes to Faculty Senate policy 32-00 were designed to encourage “colleges, enrollment units, and campuses to think more deliberately about what they want students to learn through academic advising and to structure its delivery in a manner that ensures even access, consistency of outreach, accuracy of information, and effective referrals...while maintaining active faculty involvement” (Senate Committee on Admissions, Records, Scheduling, and Student Aid et al., 2020). This report also identified several gaps in improving academic advising. The first gap was a lack of recognition of the role of faculty members in advising, and evaluation of the substance of academic advising responsibilities (Senate Committee on Admissions, Records, Scheduling, and Student Aid et al., 2020). Second, the report acknowledged that primary-role, staff advisers sometimes have responsibility for large numbers of students that prevent forming substantive relationships (Senate Committee on Admissions, Records, Scheduling, and Student Aid et al.,

2020). Third, advising offices should be incentivized to examine their advising model to ensure the best approach is used (Senate Committee on Admissions, Records, Scheduling, and Student Aid et al., 2020). Finally, the report noted inconsistency, both in resources available as well as in practice, across the University and called for more coordination in measuring effective academic advising practices (Senate Committee on Admissions, Records, Scheduling, and Student Aid et al., 2020). These recommendations were sent to the university President, Dr Eric Barron. In July 2020, university President Eric Barron agreed with the recommendations put forth in that report (Barron, 2020), although little to no action has occurred.

Significance of this Dissertation

The history of academic advising across the United States in general, and in particular at Penn State, shows expansion in the ideas of the role and purpose of academic advising. However, practice has changed little and continues to be constrained by large advising rosters, competing demands, and sharing of advising responsibilities between faculty and primary-role advisers. According to George Steele and Eric White (2019), many decisions around changes may claim to be for students but appear to respond instead to institutional needs. The institutional focus is evident through historical documents examining academic advising at Penn State. For example, when colleges began to institute self-advising, student/peer advising, and centralized centers, reasons given in support of or to refute these changes were based on institutional needs such as “...relieving pressure on the faculty...” or program structure (Auerweck, 1974, p.6). The College of Arts and Architecture claimed there was “too much program variety for one consolidated advising procedure” (Auerweck, 1974, p.6). When Penn State’s Faculty Senate removed a requirement for advisers to approve registration, one student felt this was decided based on the best interest of faculty, “It’s easy on the faculty members. This is another example of how the

faculty senate makes their job easier year by year” (Palfrey, 1981, p.5). From the Faculty Senate’s view, this change was to make academic advising consultative rather than required (Palfrey, 1981). Even in recent discussions around academic advising at Penn State, challenges raised included faculty responsibilities and faculty preferences. For example, one Faculty Senator shared, “All the other things that come up in advising. I can do curricular advising till the cows come home. I did not really plan as an educator to become so familiar with our Title IX Office. I did not plan to become quite so familiar with a number of other agencies on campus” (University Faculty Senate, 2019b). Another Faculty Senator shared, “we were trying to figure out whether it's [a transfer course] quite equal to the syllabus, and things like that. And it took about an hour or an hour and a half for the faculty member. So, this is going beyond our call sometimes” (University Faculty Senate, 2019b). If it is the case that decisions concerning the structure of academic advising are made based on the needs and interests of faculty members, then it is still important to understand how these decisions affect students.

As a result of the consultative report, then Penn State President Eric Barron supported the initiative to review current advising structures with the goal of supporting academic advising (Barron, 2020). Understanding how student characteristics interact with institutional structures and policies can help us find ways to support all students. For institutional leaders and academic advisers, it is important to understand the sociological influences that contribute to students’ engagement with academic advising. This understanding can improve advising systems and practice. Advising is an important resource for maximizing higher education (i.e., selecting a major and co-curricular experience that fits students’ interests, abilities, and goals; academic success; connection to other important university resources; and meeting curricular requirements). Moreover, contact with an academic adviser has also been found to improve

students' academic performance (Young-Jones et al., 2013). The frequency and content of these advising contacts are important for student success. What explains the differences in frequency and content? Recent research suggests students approach academic advising for different reasons which are often connected to differences in socioeconomic status (Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Yee, 2014). However, many of these studies do not include information about the structure and institutional expectations around academic advising. My dissertation seeks to build upon previous research on advising structures and student socioeconomic status to understand the varied experiences students have on one university campus.

The theoretical issues described above also have policy implications because postsecondary institutions are creating new units and hiring more specialists to advise larger numbers of students and to address diverse student needs. A central question of this dissertation is: how can those structures effectively meet these students' needs? More information about the structures and models that enhance and inhibit engagement with academic advisers is important. The relationship between student outcomes and organizational structure and assumptions must be examined. If misunderstood, academic advising policies and structures may unintentionally replicate social status through inherent philosophies and structures of academic advising and by "cooling out" students (Clark, 1960) or lowering students' goals. To illuminate this disparity and recommend changes to advising structures, my dissertation examines variations in student expectations, perceptions, and outcomes from academic advising across socioeconomic status and in two distinct advising structures.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To study the intersection of academic advising and student characteristics, this thesis is grounded in existing literature on both academic advising and student demographics. My research draws on three different conceptual frameworks. First, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and habitus can be used to illuminate the role of socioeconomic status in students' experiences within higher education. Second, Alexander Astin's input-environment-outcome model connects student background to the higher education environment and outcomes. Finally, structuration theory provides a framework to understand how structures within institutions constrain adviser and student behaviors.

After discussing these conceptual frameworks, I will review current research and literature on college students' sense of belonging and current research on the role of the academic adviser in supporting students' sense of belonging. Then I will review the literature on the role of student demographic characteristics on educational outcomes in the United States educational system. I will also review literature on socioeconomic measures and how these measures intersect with research in higher education. Two common measures of socioeconomic status in education are parental education and family income. The ways students from different socioeconomic groups work with academic advisers are likely to differ depending on students' informational needs and parents' role in their student's educational decision-making. Finally, I will review the research on academic advising structures. This survey of previous research suggests that socioeconomic characteristics may impact engagement with educational institutions and academic advisers. A survey of previous research also shows a gap in understanding of student experience with academic advising and across academic advising models.

Conceptual Framework

Higher education institutions exist as a culture. There are expected behaviors, expectations, and attitudes of students participating in this culture. Cultural capital, as described by Bourdieu (1986) and developed by Patricia McDonough (1997), helps to explain how students navigate this system. There are three types of cultural capital: embodied as long-lasting dispositions, objectified as in cultural goods and objects (and in the appropriate use of these items), and institutionalized, such as academic credentials awarded by the educational system (Bourdieu, 1986). In addition, those with cultural capital can add cultural capital through education because they have the tools necessary to get it (Bourdieu, 1973). Therefore, higher education is an important avenue for students seeking to increase their cultural capital, but not all students have access to the same tools to successfully navigate the system.

In the terminology of Bourdieu (1973), the “habitus” is a system of unconscious and culturally developed predispositions that influence the way an individual understands and interacts with an institution. Habitus is a “...common set of subjective perceptions held by all members of the same group or class that shapes an individual’s expectations, attitudes, and aspirations” (as restated by McDonough, 1997, p. 9). This unconscious set of beliefs is formed from observing people within the individual’s community and family (McDonough, 1997). McDonough extends habitus beyond family and community to include school culture and climate (1997). Students who enter education with certain skills, assumptions, and tastes will interact with that environment in a way that either helps or hinders their success.

Cultural capital and habitus extend to understanding how students engage with educational institutions, such as colleges and universities. Bourdieu (1973) argues that the educational system is steeped in the dominant culture. Students possessing skills aligned with the dominant culture are more likely to successfully navigate the system. Students from lower

socioeconomic groups are less familiar with the dominant culture. They may therefore lack the cultural capital and habitus to acquire the same gains through post-secondary education as compared with students from higher socioeconomic groups. Institutions of higher education “presuppose those students have the basic resources (e.g., financial, human capital) necessary to access and utilize the cultural and social capital needed for college success. That is, the institution makes the fallacious assumption that students know what they do not know, share the same lexicon as educators, and possess the experience to ‘act, speak, or think the same way’ as those in the dominant context, when this may or may not be the case” (Strayhorn, 2022, p. 27). In fact, previous research has found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to study less, be less involved, and report lower GPAs than students from higher socioeconomic groups (Walpole, 2003).

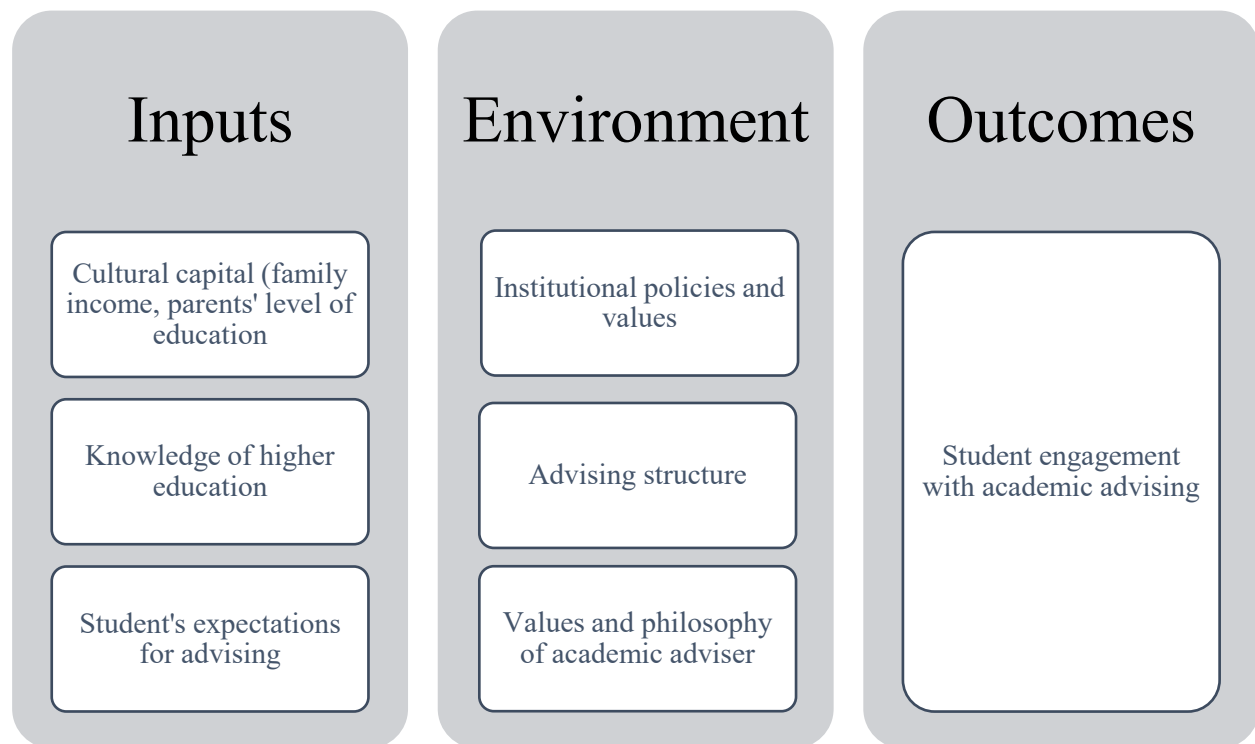
As evidence of an embodied culture, educators in higher education often assume students possess knowledge of the higher education system, language, and expectations. This knowledge is typically gained through the family. However, about a third of undergraduate students in the United States today attend higher education as first-generation college students. They are the first in their family to attend college (Cataldi et al., 2018). "The cultural system of higher education often operates on a very different set of cultural beliefs and values than those to which some students are accustomed" (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 58). Many first-generation students lack the cultural capital necessary to succeed in higher education culture. Not that the dominant culture in higher education is the “right” culture, simply that students may have different cultural capital than that needed for success within the institution. James Rosenbaum, Regina Deil-Amen, and Ann Person (2006) identified three types of information important for success: instrumental information, such as information on course requirements; bureaucratic requirements, such as

placement exams; and behavioral information, such as student-initiated contact with advisers. When looking at advising interactions, Julie Traxler noted, “advising interactions and other academic processes are enmeshed in institutional structures that are based in cultural assumptions that are largely invisible because they mirror dominant expectations” (2009, p. 236). Students attending higher education with less cultural capital may have less information in these crucial areas.

In addition to considering cultural capital, as indicated indirectly by socioeconomic status, it is also important to understand how students will engage with the educational environment of higher education. Another important concept has been suggested by Astin (1993) and termed an input, environment, and outcomes (IEO) model. This model provides a conceptual framework by which to organize the relationships between students’ background characteristics and the institutional environment of academic advising explored in this research. According to Astin (1993), “inputs” refer to student characteristics at the time of initial entry to the institution. “Environment” refers to the programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational opportunities that the student experiences at the institution. “Outcomes” refers to the student characteristics after exposure to the environment. The environment is particularly important to this study because research has shown, “...the culture and climate of college environments that have traditionally catered to white students and those from wealthier backgrounds require minority, low-income, and first-generation students to negotiate myriad unfamiliar cultural norms...” (Green, 2006, p. 22). In my dissertation, input includes the student’s cultural capital indicated by socioeconomic measures (family income and parents’ level of education). Students’ knowledge of higher education and expectations for advising are also considered. The environment includes the academic advising structure, the institutional policies and values that directly influence the ways

students engage with advisers, and the values and philosophy of academic advisers. Finally, outcome is the student’s engagement with academic advising, see Figure 1. If students do not engage with academic advising, advisers and students cannot achieve the learning outcomes.

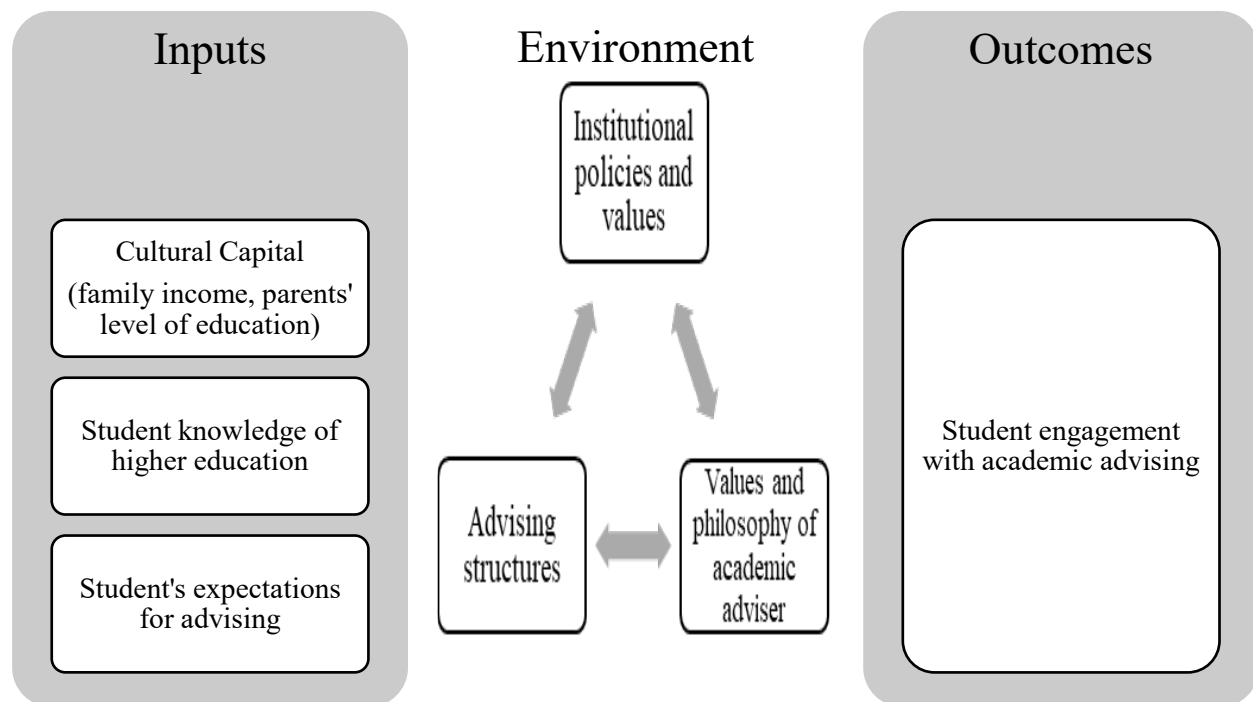
Figure 1: *Inputs, Environment, and Outcomes Modeled from Astin’s I-E-O framework (1993)*



Finally, structuration theory provides a framework to understand the role of advisers as agents replicating or changing the structures of an institution. Actions by advisers, as actors of the institution, are limited by the structures (policies and procedures) in place at the institution. These structures may be obvious or hidden throughout the environment of the institution; “structures are mutually sustaining cultural rules and sets of resources that empower and constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that action” (Sewell, 1992, p. 27). In fact, some researchers argue that institutions of higher education “...are set up in ways that advantage high-socioeconomic students but disadvantage low-socioeconomic students” (Jury et al., 2017).

In my dissertation, structuration theory is helpful for understanding how the components of the environment in Astin's IEO model are connected. Academic advisers are part of the institution and are included as part of the institutional environment that students encounter. Institutional policies and values influence academic advising structures and the values and philosophies of individual academic advisers. At the same time, academic advisers influence the advising structures and institutional policies and values. See figure 2 for the conceptual framework used in this study.

Figure 2: *Conceptual framework combining cultural capital, IEO model, and structuration*



Structuration theory is particularly relevant for my dissertation's focus on academic advisers and academic advising structures. The environment within higher education is not fixed. People within the institution influence the structures and values of the institution and the structures and values of the institution influence values and actions of faculty and staff. Herta Teitelbaum (1994) explains that academic advisers mediate between students and the institution

and are well-positioned to identify challenges and propose changes that benefit students and institutions. To influence change, Teitelbaum (1994) recommends preparing a proposal for the change, securing support, and implementing and evaluating the change. However, institutional structures may hinder efforts at organizational change. Brian Kapinos (2021) found that some advising coordinators in community colleges claimed their institutional advising model limited their role in supervising and coordinating consistent academic advising practice.

Sense of Belonging in Higher education

Research in higher education has linked students' sense of belonging to their college persistence, success, and graduation (Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2019). Sense of belonging is defined as a "... feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (Strayhorn, 2019, p.4). A sense of belonging is particularly important in environments where some individuals feel unsupported, unwelcomed, or alone, such as an unfamiliar campus environment (Strayhorn, 2019). Feelings of belonging are influenced through individual characteristics as well as the university environment. The actions of institutional representatives, such as administration, faculty members, and academic advisers can influence students' sense of belonging. "Every interaction matters for even a single negative interaction can reverberate in ways that alter students' sense of belonging within the institution" (Tinto, 2017, p. 261).

Academic advisers have an important role in building and confirming students' sense of belonging on campus. Speaking at the 2014 annual NACADA Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Terrell Strayhorn said:

Effective academic advisors, as cultural navigators, care about their students and they signal in meaningful ways that students matter. They know their students—their names, where they are from, what they bring with them, their strengths and weaknesses... They help make the implicit explicit, the hidden known, and the unfamiliar commonplace.

They help students navigate college by making clear what students need to know and do to be successful. They help students find a sense of belonging on campus. (2015, p.62)

Research connecting academic advising and sense of belonging suggests that the relationship between the student and academic adviser is important for trust and connectedness. To support first-generation students' sense of belonging, researchers recommend advisers establish a climate of support before students arrive on campus in order to begin building a strong and trusting relationship (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Intrusive (i.e., adviser initiated) advising approaches better serve first-generation students who may be unfamiliar with the value of academic advising (Longwell-Grice, et al, 2016). Similarly, in studying the impact of academic advising on rural students' sense of belonging, Caolfionn Yenney (2020) found that the advising relationship was important to building trust and confidence in the adviser's recommendations. In studying racial and ethnic minority students at predominantly white institutions, Samuel Museus and Joanna Ravello (2010) found that humanizing the advising experience, and using proactive advising strategies, contributed to student success. Humanizing the advising experience requires that the adviser show care and commitment to the student (Museus & Ravello, 2010). A consistent and humanistic advising relationship helped students feel connected.

These studies have implications for academic advising practice. Yenney (2020) recommends that advising leaders work to retain advisers within their roles to maintain consistency for students. Retention efforts may require careful review of compensation packages

and of a unit's culture around health and well-being (Yenney, 2020). Academic advisers need support and funding for professional development to understand the unique challenges students from certain backgrounds, such as first-generation students, may experience (Longwell-Grice, et al., 2016). Additional resources are needed to ensure academic advisers have time to provide a humanistic, holistic, and proactive advising experience (Museus & Ravello, 2010). While much has been learned from individual students on sense of belonging, there is gap research on understanding how institutional characteristics and practices influence students' sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019).

Socioeconomic status in education

Socioeconomic status, and the cultural capital attached to this status, is an important characteristic to understand how students engage with institutions of higher education. Research into the effect of socioeconomic status on educational achievement has been prominent since the 1960's (Cowan et al., 2012). Over that time, many research studies have examined the role of socioeconomic status on education. However, the definition and parameters used to determine socioeconomic status often vary (Cowan et al., 2012). Generally, socioeconomic status is reflected in students' access to resources (including economic, social, and cultural resources) and is often measured using a combination of family income, parental education, and parental occupation (Cowan et al., 2012). This study also uses these measures to determine socioeconomic status.

Parental level of education is one indication of socioeconomic status. Research on the impact of being the first in the family to attend college is abundant. For this study, first-generation students are defined as students who are the first in their family to attend college. First-generation students are more likely to come from diverse and low-income backgrounds and

have less involvement with peers and teachers while enrolled in high school (Terenzini et al., 1996). During college enrollment, first-generation students reported more hours working off campus. In addition, they were less likely to perceive faculty members as concerned with student development and teaching (Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation students are less likely to seek help from on-campus resources. According to April Yee (2014), many first-generation students report an independent approach to their academic life, taking on the responsibility of success on their own. Conversely, students from higher socioeconomic statuses tend to take a more interdependent approach, utilizing resources and opportunities to improve and support their success (Yee, 2014). This could be seen as a deficit wherein first-generation students do not utilize the resources available to aid in their success. However, "...universities tend to promote cultural norms of independence (e.g., "pave your own path") rather than interdependence (e.g., "be part of a community")" (Jury et al., 2017, p.33). Not all independent strategies are deficits. First-generation student participants in a qualitative study at a predominantly white institution in the southwest United States reported a method of self-reliance when help was needed, trying to figure it out on their own (Payne et al., 2021). Online resources (internet searches) were often used first. Self-reliance was only the initial strategy used to solve a problem; students did use on-campus resources as needed. While independent and self-reliant patterns of behavior are often associated with lower help-seeking behavior (and a deficit), Payne et al. (2021) found that self-reliance was represented as a positive characteristic because it indicated motivation and initiative of the students.

Another frequently studied student characteristic in educational engagement and attainment is family income. Low-income students are more likely to attend community colleges, where students are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). Low-

income status has been defined as an annual household income of \$25, 000 or less (Engle & Tinto, 2008). While in college, low-income students may have more difficulty in acclimating to the culture on campus (Berg, 2010). Beyond income, other student characteristics, such as ethnicity and parents' education, can add more challenge in completing a degree. In many studies, demographic characteristics are often connected to others. For example, low-income and first-generation designations are often paired together in studies based in educational environments.

Putting these individual characteristics together, socioeconomic status can play an important role in the way students and families engage with educational institutions. In an extensive qualitative study of middle school students, Annette Lareau (2011) identified the largely invisible but powerful ways that parents' social class impacts children's life experiences. These social class origins have powerful and long-lasting effects on education (Lareau, 2011). Lareau (2011) found that parenting styles of middle class and poor families differed significantly. Middle class parents engaged in "concerted cultivation," a parenting style that emphasizes children's structured activities, frequent use of negotiation and reasoning at home, and active intervention at school (Lareau, 2011). The working class and poor parents used what Lareau called an accomplishment of natural growth approach. This parenting strategy was characterized by less structure, more time spent with relatives, use of clear directives from parents, and more child autonomy in solving problems (Lareau, 2011). Differences in parental involvement may affect educational experiences and decisions surrounding educational outcomes by preparing (or not) students to meet expectations of schools and school officials.

Socioeconomic Status and Academic Advising

Students make many academic choices during college. These include choosing a major and selection of classes and co-curricular opportunities, among many others. Academic advisers, both faculty and primary role, are influential in helping students make academic choices and navigate the institution. The ways in which students engage with academic advisers may vary depending on varied structures and expectations of the institution and of the academic adviser. It is possible that students approach decision-making differently, depending on their different past experiences and available resources.

The higher educational environment evolved to support students from higher socioeconomic statuses. However, students from lower socioeconomic statuses do not have the same information as students from higher socioeconomic statuses. Academic advisers serve as an important source of information for students from lower socioeconomic statuses who lack the cultural capital of middle-class students. The choice of a college major is a mandatory and significant choice students make during college. Choice of the right major could “motivate academic engagement and achievement, while choosing the wrong major- or failing to choose a major at all- could significantly deter engagement” (Yee, 2014, p. 51). Therefore, choosing a major is an important process in academic success regardless of socioeconomic background (Yee, 2014). Helping students navigate this decision-making process is an important goal of academic advising.

Students benefit from engaging with academic advisers in making important educational decisions. However, research has shown that perceptions about academic advising can vary by student characteristics. In 2006, Cathleen Smith and Janine Allen found that students’ perceived level of importance of advising functions differed along such characteristics as ethnicity, gender, and academic class. However, socioeconomic status was not included. These studies reveal a

possible connection between institutional structures, advising practice, and student characteristics.

Some researchers (Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Roksa & Kinsley, 2019) have identified the importance of academic advisers' knowledge of social class differences in supporting students. In examining social class and academic advising, Krista Soria and Mark Bultmann (2014) sought to learn more about working-class students' experiences in a four-year public institution. Using data from the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey, Soria and Bultmann (2014) focused on sense of belonging, social involvement, and perceptions of campus climate. This survey used student self-reported parental income, education, and occupation to determine social class. Academic advisers should be aware of students' social class. When an adviser is aware of a student's background, the adviser can be a source of social and cultural capital for working class students (Soria & Bultmann, 2014). "In overlooking the influence of social class background in shaping students' collegiate experiences, academic advisers may fail to attend specifically to the social class-based concerns of their students and thus unknowingly perpetuate social class inequalities and classism" (Soria & Bultmann, 2014, p. 51). The survey used in Soria and Bultmann's study did not address academic advising structures and use of advising services by students. However, the researchers concluded that academic advisers should better understand the ways in which institutions unintentionally erect barriers.

Parents play an important role in educational decision-making for their children entering higher education (Traxler, 2009; Yee, 2014). The relationships between parental involvement (often connected to socioeconomic status) and academic advising (as a potential source of cultural capital) can either support or hinder students' academic choices. Researchers have found that the presence or lack of parental involvement directly impacts student needs related to

academic advising. According to Josipa Roksa and Peter Kinsley (2019), the role of family, especially for low-income students, in providing informational and emotional support is important in their student's success. However, the ways in which families support their students can vary by socioeconomic status. For example, parental education and income were found to be significantly correlated with students' reported information on academic requirements (Rosenbaum et al., 2006). In addition, researchers found that some students often make educational choices without considering alternatives, and often make decisions on choice of major with little, and often incorrect, information (Rosenbaum et al., 2006). It is not only student characteristics that lead to this challenge. For example, community colleges assume students have time to attend meetings outside of class and the skills necessary to understand information and make decisions based on that information. However, this assumption isn't always correct. This assumption results in a cyclical system of a hidden curriculum, only available to students who hold the social prerequisites (Rosenbaum et al., 2006).

For students from higher socioeconomic statuses, parents are an important source of information about educational choices while in college. Yee (2014) concluded that advice and knowledge about majors represented a form of cultural capital. Parents influenced their children's choice of majors by encouraging them to focus on career paths known through social networks (Traxler, 2009). These career paths would provide future economic stability, security, and success (Traxler, 2009). Parents' influence is based on their own education and life experience. Some parents provide cultural capital in information, educational experience, and networks of people who can provide additional information about other choices (Yee, 2014). Some students have an advantage when choosing a major using parental involvement because parents and academic advisers provided different kinds of information and therefore different

kinds of cultural capital. However, these parental messages and influences varied, likely because of differences in parents' previous educational experiences (Traxler, 2009). For example, many middle-class parents attended college, chose their major, and were able to draw on an extensive network of friends, family, and colleagues. However, parents of first-generation students did not have these experiences, and so were less likely to discuss choice of major with their students. First-generation students needed more support from academic advisers in making decisions about their major. However, the first-generation students in Yee's (2014) study did not receive this support.

Since higher education evolved originally to serve middle- and upper-class students, the advising system may be less well-adapted for the needs of first-generation or lower socioeconomic status students. That is, advisers may work with students assuming they possess knowledge and support systems of the dominant culture in making important educational decisions. "Because exploration requires that participants balance ideas from many influences (parents, friends, and institution) as they weighed major options, academic advisers were positioned by the institution to promote institutional messages and play a crucial role in student choice" (Traxler, 2009, p.180). Academic advisers are potential sources of information, and they have expertise in course planning and major selection. However, "novice" students are less knowledgeable about advising resources (Traxler, 2009, p. 181). To better understand how academic advisers work with students from different backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses, I asked advisers about student characteristics important in their work with students.

For some students, academic advising does not meet their informational or networking needs. Traxler (2009) found that students reported a desire for advisers to get to know them as individuals but found that advisers rarely asked questions to reveal key influences, family

messages, or other contextual factors that affected student decision making. Additional research indicates that academic advising was unable to match the cultural capital of middle- and upper-class parents; therefore, advisers perpetuated the disadvantages that first-generation students experienced during choice of major (Yee, 2014). This evidence indicates that middle class students were able to discuss and select a major with strong support, discussion, and information from their parents while first-generation students were missing these critical pieces.

Similar evidence has been found in other studies. Based on ethnographic research at a public four-year institution, Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton (2013) found that parental resources, such as money, social connections, cultural understandings, and educational aspirations give advantage to students in college. In speaking of working-class and lower-middle-class students some of whom were first-generation and some with one or more parents with a postsecondary education, Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) claimed, “standard college advising did not meet these students’ needs” (p. 157). None of the working-class students graduated from their institution during the five-year study (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). While some students left the institution to attend regional campuses closer to home, others were still enrolled. “We suspect that part of the problem was that advisers were accustomed to advising more affluent students—those with the means and interest to have a more social experience” (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013, p. 157-158). Again, socioeconomic background appears to play an important role in the way students interpret and engage with the university environment. This dissertation gathers data to learn more about how student characteristics influence academic advisers’ strategies when working with students.

Although research has provided a better understanding of the complex influences on a students’ educational planning, these studies have not examined the role of specific advising

structures and models. Previous research lacks information about the environment in which students engage with advisers. Both Traxler (2009) and Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) are missing important information about the institutional advising structures and the stated purpose and role of advising at the institutions used in their research. Yee (2014) only provided summary data about the advising context at her study site (A. Yee, personal communication, March 9, 2018) and noted the average adviser to student ratio of 417:1 with uneven distribution of advisers across several different academic schools.

Academic Advising Structures

Examining academic advising models, offices, and academic advisers is important in understanding academic advising outcomes. McDonough (1997) found that the underlying philosophy of a guidance counseling office in a high school influenced student decision-making on where to attend college. The structure of high school counseling offices varied along socioeconomic status. These differences resulted in class-based patterns in students' college choices (McDonough, 1997). Guidance counselors contributed to the students' habitus by limiting the range of reasonable colleges through the idea of bounded rationality as counselors to "...suggest appropriate choices to students, highlight certain goals for college, assume a status background regarding the majority of students, arrange the physical layout of the guidance operation, and provide environmental stimuli" (McDonough, 1997, p. 91). The structure of the guidance counseling office conveyed important information about the underlying mission and curriculum of the school (McDonough, 1997). These impacts of environment on practice may not be obvious to students or counselors but they can greatly influence students' academic decisions.

The physical structure of the institution, the philosophy of practitioners, and implicit messaging conveyed through the environment in which students make decisions are all important. As academic advising systems grew, models and structures became more diverse. Even today, institutions of higher education employ a variety of academic advising models. This variety in structure within one institution can “create basic inconsistencies with implications for student experiences” (Troxel & Kyei-Blankson, 2020, p. 8).

The structure and location of academic advising offices and personnel play an important role in students’ engagement with advising in community colleges (Rosenbaum et al., 2006). Moreover, the physical location of advising offices influences advising interactions. Advising offices throughout campus or on the periphery of campus means that advisers were only available for students who seek them out (Rosenbaum et al., 2006). These physical and informational challenges result in less engagement with advisers and poor advising outcomes.

Researchers have examined the relationship between students’ assessments of their advising experiences and learning as measured through grades and students’ perception of learning. The findings of this research support the idea that individual interactions with academic advisers are important for student learning, yet these findings varied significantly across institutions (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019). The variation across institutions led the researchers to conclude that this difference is likely due to variable advising models indicating that some advising models are not as effective at supporting student learning (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019). Information about the advising models for the institutions included in this study was not available. Advising structures, models, and missions vary across and within institutions; therefore, it is critical academic advisers learn more about how these diverse structures help or hinder student access and participation with academic advising.

Studies examining academic advising models and structures often focus on retention, completion, and student satisfaction. Using a quantitative approach to studying the influence of advising models on student retention and completion, Belback (2021) found a statistically significant relationship between academic advising structures and first year retention and six-year graduation rates. In fact, a shared-model of academic advising, with centralized and decentralized advising services, was associated with greater rates of first-year retention and six-year graduation rates (Belback, 2021). Additionally, the role of advising structures on first-year retention and student satisfaction has been studied (McFarlane, 2013). These findings indicate that first-year students are more satisfied with advising, and they reported greater learning when advised by a professional (primary-role) adviser than with a faculty adviser (McFarlane, 2013).

Studies of the student experience with various advising models are often narrowly focused. For example, Shane Barker and Ketevan Mamiseishvili (2014) studied students' experience when transitioning between a centralized and decentralized advising model. Student participants had universal experiences of this advising transition, which included evaluating adviser trustworthiness based on perceived professional responsibilities, preference for a personalized advising relationship, uneasiness of the unknown, and relying on previous advising expectations (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014).

In summary, there is a growing body of literature on the influence of cultural capital and socioeconomic status on educational engagement and outcomes. However, gaps remain in our understanding of how socioeconomic factors shape students' engagement with academic advisers. Moreover, there is little understanding on how socioeconomic status intersects with academic advising structures and practice. This lacuna compels us to raise more questions. Were students at these sites engaging with similar or different advising models? Who was advising:

faculty or primary-role staff? What were the qualifications to be an academic adviser at these institutions? Was meeting with an academic adviser required or optional? These institutional characteristics, and others, are important for understanding how students perceive advising at their institution, what expectations students have, what expectations advisers have for advising, and how students and advisers interact with each other. The advising environment is important for understanding the relationship between student socioeconomic status and advising outcomes. “Additional research about the process of choosing a major could also inform the creation of better advising structures and policies to support college student success” (Yee, 2014, p. 58). In addition, we need research about the role socioeconomic status plays in informational needs of students and how students make decisions. As reviewed previously, the growth of primary-role advisers in the late 20th century corresponded with growing student enrollments, changing student needs, and increasing curricular and procedural complexity. Concomitantly, institutions and students have come to rely on professionals in academic advising, as opposed to disciplinary faculty advisers. However, many institutions continue to rely on mixed models and structures to provide academic advising. What impact does this variability have on students? There are many studies that look at “student success” and institutional policies and structures, but not many that consider academic advising structures and student characteristics. More research is needed on the qualitative differences between advising models to understand the impact on student outcomes. As Mu & Fosnacht (2019) have advocated:

Despite the three primary forms of advising being prominently featured in the advising literature for over 40 years and the near universal opinion that advising is critically important to student success, it is remarkable that these forms of advising have not been directly compared systematically. Given this glaring need, we believe such a study should

be a high priority...Additionally, such research should examine if particular subgroups of students disproportionately benefit from a particular form of advising (p. 1301).

Building on this insight, in this dissertation I aim to fill this gap by examining the differences in students' experiences with different advising structures and examining how socioeconomic status affects these experiences. I will also learn more about how academic advisers approach working with students from diverse backgrounds and if there are differences in these approaches across different advising models.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Previous research indicates student characteristics matter in understanding how students experience academic advising (Smith & Allen, 2006; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Yee, 2014). Additionally, advising structures matter to student experience (McDonough, 1997; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Mu & Fosnacht, 2019). In this dissertation, I use a comparative case study approach within a single institution to illuminate the intersection of student characteristics and institutional structures on students' experiences with academic advising. This research was conducted at the Pennsylvania State University, University Park campus because several different advising models are employed across the constituent colleges.

The broader institutional context is relevant. The Pennsylvania State University is a large, multi-campus, four-year, public research institution. Penn State University includes 20 undergraduate campuses (The Pennsylvania State University, 2022a). At the time this research was conducted, the University Park campus enrolled 40,639 undergraduate students, which was 53% of total undergraduate enrollment at the institution. The remaining physical campuses enrolled 27,100 undergraduate students, which was 36% of total undergraduate enrollment. World Campus, the online campus, enrolled 8,360, 11% of undergraduate students (Office for Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research, 2020).

Upon admission, undergraduate students may begin at any campus. Once a student has completed their second year of enrollment, they can change to another campus to finish their degree (Office of Undergraduate Education, 2017). Requests for early change of campus action are usually approved to help a student continue normal degree progress (Office of the University Registrar, 2022). This extensive campus structure is designed to meet students in their own communities and expand access to underrepresented students in higher education. Dr. Neeli Bendapudi, Penn State's current President said, "If you think about the land-grant mission and

the promise of social mobility, the campuses show that in true color. It's palpable when you're on the various campuses — the access, the affordability, the promise" (Chan, 2022).

Penn State's University Park campus is ideally suited for a study of disparity in academic advising because different advising models exist within the institution. Also, students from diverse backgrounds (including socioeconomic status) are admitted, and advising is not mandatory. As demonstrated in previous research, students do not always engage with institutional resources in the same ways. These variations could lead to disparities in the frequency of advising meetings, in the substance of advising interactions, and in the ways students interact with advisers (Yee, 2014). To examine the importance of the environment (i.e., advising structures) in how students engage with advisers, for this study I have focused on two academic colleges: the Bellisario College of Communications and the College of Agricultural Sciences. These two colleges employ very different models for academic advising.

Description of Sites

The Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications was established in 1985 as the School of Communications. The School of Journalism housed within the College of the Liberal Arts was combined with the film program housed within the College of Arts and Architecture (Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, 2022a). Programs within the School of Communications grew, becoming the College of Communications in 1995. Programs were organized to maintain a "philosophy of cross-programmatic integration" and departments were established in 2000 (Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, 2022a).

The Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications has a centralized advising center staffed by full-time academic advisers. The College of Communications enrolls approximately 2,500 undergraduate students at the University Park campus. See table 1 for a summary of the

college. The college offers five majors, all of which are advised in a central advising center. Students work with five primary-role, staff advisers and one Assistant Dean. Faculty members do not have a role in academic advising for students enrolled in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications.

The history of the College of Agricultural Sciences is as long as the University itself. Agriculture is the oldest subject taught at Penn State, which was first known in 1861 as the Farmer's High School. Penn State's first graduating class included 11 graduates earning degrees in Bachelor of Scientific Agriculture (Penn State University Libraries, 2022a). The institution was renamed the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania in 1862 (Penn State University Libraries, 2022a). This name remained until 1874, when the name changed to The Pennsylvania State College (Penn State University Libraries, 2022a). Penn State underwent one final name change to The Pennsylvania State University in 1953.

Agricultural programs expanded once Penn State became Pennsylvania's only land-grant institution (The Pennsylvania State University, 2022b). In 1896, the School of Agriculture was established as one of seven schools and was later renamed the College of Agriculture in 1953 (Penn State University Libraries, 2022b). Today, the College of Agricultural Sciences has nine departments and offers sixteen undergraduate majors (College of Agricultural Sciences, 2022a). See table 1 for a summary.

The College of Agricultural Sciences has a department-based, decentralized advising model. In total, the College of Agricultural Sciences has approximately fifteen faculty advisers and four staff advisers. Enrolling 2,100 undergraduate students at the University Park campus, the College of Agricultural Sciences has taken care to develop advising competencies for advisers (faculty and staff) and a series of training sessions to support all advisers in the college.

Table 1: *Descriptive data on academic college sites used in this study*

	College of Agricultural Sciences	Bellisario College of Communication
Total Undergraduate Enrollment	2, 100	2, 500
Number of Majors	16	5
Number of Faculty Advisers	15	0
Number of Primary-Role Advisers	4	6

These colleges were deliberately selected for this research because, although they are comparable in the size of undergraduate student enrollment, their advising is structured differently. The College of Agricultural Sciences advising is based within academic departments and is split between faculty and staff. The College of Communications relies on staff advisers in a centralized advising office. Using colleges of similar size is important to comparing advising roster size as overall undergraduate enrollment would be an additional variable that could impact the advising experiences of students and advisers.

Data Collection Procedures

For this research, I used a case study approach. A case study is focused on observation of a case or multiple cases (Gerring, 2017). A case is a contemporary bounded system studied through multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2013). A case study approach is helpful to understanding student experiences with academic advising across two different cases. In this case study, I have focused on two sites with clearly defined boundaries. I use several sources of information to get an in-depth understanding of the sites and academic advising. Interviews are used to gather a textual and structural description of the experiences of the participants around

the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2013). I used interviews to collect perceptions, expectations, and experiences related to academic advising at Penn State from students, academic advisers, and administrators in both cases. Interviewing students provides insight into their experiences with meeting with academic advisers and navigating educational decisions. Interviewing academic advisers and advising administrators is important for an understanding of the structure of academic advising practice. Academic advisers provide important information about expectations for student engagement, insight on academic advising meetings, and how they work with students. Due to the focus on human subject research, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was necessary and was received in December 2018. Approval was subsequently curtailed at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020.

Given the focus on the undergraduate advising experience, I interviewed undergraduate students enrolled in the College of Agricultural Sciences and undergraduate students enrolled in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications. Students in all academic classes (first year, second year, third year, and fourth year) were invited to participate. I sent recruitment emails through college level undergraduate list serves in each participating college beginning in April 2019. Students were directed to a Microsoft form requiring authentication. This allowed for names and email addresses to be automatically recorded. Students were then asked to indicate their interest in participating in the study by selecting either yes, they would like to participate or no, they would not like to participate. I emailed every student who indicated an interest in participating in the study to schedule a time to meet. At the end of each student interview, I asked the student to share the study with their peers. I followed up by email, thanking them for participating and asking for them to share the link to a Microsoft form to help recruit additional students. Two student interviews occurred in April 2019. Additional email announcements were

sent in September 2019, resulting in five student interviews, and again in late January 2020, resulting in twelve additional student interviews. All interviews were completed by mid-February 2020. A short time after the last interviews, the COVID pandemic caused research with human subjects to be restricted. A total of nineteen students were interviewed as part of this study. Due to a technical malfunction of the audio recorder, one student interview was not included in the data analysis, so 18 student interviews were included in the analysis. I assigned each student a pseudonym for the purpose of reporting on them in this dissertation.

Meetings with students took place in a group study room in Pattee Library, one of the central libraries on campus. Student interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes. A written consent form was provided to participants immediately preceding the interview. Participants read the consent form and agreed to participate before the interview. Interviews were semi-structured using a list of open-ended questions. Additional questions were included based on answers provided by the participant. Questions for students solicited information on their socioeconomic status, academic standing, major, perceptions of the role of advisers, information on their experiences with academic advising, expectations of their adviser, frequency of advising appointments, topics discussed during advising appointments, and perception on how advisers supported their educational journey and decision-making processes. Open-ended questions allow students to share their experiences as they experienced them. Open-ended questions also provide a starting point to generate conversation and additional avenues of investigation. See appendix A for the full list of questions used during interviews with students.

At the end of the interview, student participants were asked if they had a scheduled advising appointment. If so, participants were asked whether they would be willing to participate in a second interview following their upcoming advising appointment. If the student agreed, a

second 30–45-minute, semi-structured interview was scheduled. See appendix C for a list of questions used in the follow up interviews. As in the initial interview, a written consent form was provided to participants immediately preceding the interview and consent was collected before beginning the follow-up interview. During the initial interview, two students reported upcoming advising appointments and agreed to schedule a follow-up interview to discuss that advising meeting. The first student to agree to a follow-up interview was “Sara” (a pseudonym), who was a fourth-year student in the Bellisario College of Communications. The second student was Ashley, a third-year student in the Bellisario College of Communications. No students enrolled in the College of Agricultural Sciences agreed to a follow-up interview after a future meeting with their academic adviser.

To learn more about the advising interaction with students, I also interviewed academic advisers in both colleges. These interviews occurred between August 1, 2019, and September 20, 2019. To solicit adviser participants, I emailed advisers directly to request their participation. Meetings were scheduled through email and took place in the academic adviser’s office. To learn more about the individual’s view of academic advising, I asked questions about their experience, advising structure, and their work with students. See appendix D for the full interview protocol. Interviews with academic advisers lasted between 23 and 58 minutes. Student and adviser participants were not connected. That is to say, the students whom I interviewed had not necessarily worked with the academic advisers who volunteered to participate in this study.

In addition to interviewing students and advisers, I also interviewed college-level administrators in each college to better understand the culture of advising in the college to include the structure of advising, expectations of advisers and students, and stated and implicit philosophies of advising. Leadership in each college, to include Associate Deans, Assistant

Deans, or Advising Directors, were contacted by email to ask for their participation. Again, semi-structured interview protocol was used. See appendix E for the interview protocol. These interviews occurred on February 3 and 11, 2020.

To better understand the advising structure of the college, document analysis was used to gather information on the advising structure and expectations. Publicly available documents and websites were used to gather information on academic advising for each college. I started on each college's main website, then navigated to academic advising information. Documents and websites reviewed for the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communication included an advising syllabus and academic advising website. Publicly available documents reviewed for the College of Agricultural Sciences included the academic advising landing page, *Find an Adviser* website, information on the Advising Excellence Award, and a list of academic advisers by major.

Analysis

After each interview, I used memos to record context, observations, initial thoughts, and new questions. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and stored on a password protected computer. Within the transcript text, participants were assigned an acronym based on their role (S: student, A: adviser, AA: Academic Administrator). No identifiable information such as participant name or names of academic advisers are included in the interview text.

Analysis was facilitated using Atlas.ti software. Interviews were grouped based on college affiliation of the participant (the student's college of enrollment or the adviser or administrator's college of employment), socioeconomic status, and first-generation (for students only). Groups included "Ag Advisers," "Comm Advisers," Ag students," and "Comm students." Student responses were also grouped and analyzed by socioeconomic group: low socioeconomic status, mid-socioeconomic status, and high socioeconomic status. Each interview was coded for

significant themes related to the description of the case and the research questions. Patterns of codes were identified within groups as well as across groups. Codes were regularly revisited and refined.

Researcher Positionality

Given the subjective nature of knowledge and meaning, it is important to acknowledge the influence of the researcher's background in setting the research questions and in the interpretation of meaning (Creswell, 2013). By positioning my educational experience, socioeconomic status, and academic advising within this larger study, I can acknowledge my personal experiences and the influence these experiences have on this research. My past experiences as a student and my current work as an academic adviser are relevant to my interpretations of experiences shared by participants.

I grew up in a two-parent household with three brothers. Both parents were in the military, which required our family to move every two or three years. As a result, we lived in several different places in the United States, but also experienced places outside of the United States. When I was 10, we lived in Iceland for two years. Even though we lived on military bases, we often traveled off base to see and experience the local culture.

Military bases often reflect the diversity of the world. People from different backgrounds were brought together in an insulated space. I had friends from different experiences, backgrounds, religions, and hometowns. I do not remember giving this difference much thought. It was normal to be different. Everyone had moved here from somewhere and we would all move again somewhere else.

Being from a military family also led to unique educational experiences. My mother worked with our local school to allow me to start kindergarten a year early because she said I

wanted to go to school. After kindergarten, we moved. My next school was in a very diverse community in Virginia. Then we moved to Iceland where the schools on base were American. Classes were small and incorporated regular lessons of Icelandic culture. When my family returned to Virginia, and I returned to my previous school district, I became more aware of the disparity within our community. The schools were majority African American. Gangs were prevalent, even in middle school. I had my first personal experience with discrimination.

After 7th grade, we moved to a suburb of Philadelphia. The community and the schools were in stark contrast to the school I previously attended. The affluent schools and communities were majority white with little racial and cultural diversity. I learned about the differences between education in poor communities and education in wealthy communities, although I did not have the language to describe it at the time. In 7th grade, girls were pregnant, and kids were killed in gang violence. In 8th grade, my friends were planning international exchange programs and taking advanced math in high school. I felt like an outsider in both schools.

My socioeconomic status changed over time. When I was a child, I would say my family was working class or middle class. As a kid, I often felt that money was tight. I did not get everything I wanted, but we were comfortable. When we moved to the affluent Philadelphia suburb and our financial situation changed, our status did too. Afterwards, my father retired from the military and took a well-paying position in the private sector. I felt we gained more comfort.

There was an expectation that my siblings and I would attend college. Most of my peers went to college. While I did not work directly with a guidance counselor on my plans, I worked alongside my fellow students on sharing information and submitting applications. My parents helped to pay tuition and other expenses but did not dictate what we would study or where. I chose anthropology as my college major because of a high school project. I do not remember my

parents ever questioning that choice, although others often did. My father always said, do what you love, and the money will follow. This perspective of education was a luxury of my privilege.

As an undergraduate student, I attended Penn State University and began at a Commonwealth Campus (part of the larger university campus system). My academic advisers were always faculty members. My first academic adviser was a faculty adviser in a similar program, but he did not have expertise in my major of study. I only met with him once during my first year of college. I found him to be nice and he worked to find answers to my questions. I learned to navigate the university's curriculum and resources on my own. After I entered my major, my academic adviser became a faculty member in my program. I also had this adviser as an instructor in an introductory course. He did not seem approachable, so I continued navigating my educational choices on my own. Through my academic journey, I did not perceive faculty members as particularly helpful in my educational choices.

After I completed my undergraduate degree, I worked as an archeologist and a teacher in a before and after school program in a local elementary school. At that time, I was applying to graduate programs in anthropology and education. I was trying to decide what direction I wanted my professional life to take. I always felt pulled toward education. I enjoyed working with students and enjoyed reading, writing, and research. However, I chose to pursue a graduate degree in anthropology. In graduate school, I did not work with anyone on selecting my courses but did work closely with a faculty member on my thesis research.

After graduate school, I stumbled into a part time position serving as an educational consultant for Penn State's orientation program. As an educational consultant, I worked with six students to confirm their college enrollment. I learned that I enjoyed working with college students. I pursued this position again the following summer and was able to add in more

advising responsibilities by working with students to schedule their first semester courses. This position allowed me to work as an educator and have a positive impact on students' educational journeys.

After two summers working in an advising capacity, I took a full-time academic adviser position. My primary responsibility was to advise undergraduate students in the institution's exploratory unit. I helped students with their choices around academic major, minor, and curriculum. I worked in a central advising office that included many other primary-role academic advisers.

In my current role, I continue to work with undergraduate students directly, but I also work with primary-role academic advisers and with faculty academic advisers. I am responsible for assessing academic advising within a hybrid advising model, similar to that of the College of Agricultural Sciences in this study. I have firsthand professional experience in both advising models studied in this research.

My current role as Director of Advising and Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) Coordinator in the College of Earth and Mineral Sciences may have influenced my interactions with students, advisers, and administrators. Many administrators and advisers know me as a colleague in advising. This may influence their answers to reflect university policy and procedure. In a few instances, academic advisers or administrators acknowledged my experience during the interview. Students may see me as an authority within the Penn State community and may be less likely to provide perspectives that reflect negatively on advising or the university. To try to combat this influence, I reminded administrators of the confidentiality of their interview. For students, I did not hide my position or interest in advising, but I tried to minimize my "authority-ness" by dressing casually during their interview and eliminating my professional

email signature. One student did ask about my position on campus before the interview, but my answer did not seem to influence their responses as they still appeared comfortable sharing their advising experiences.

Limitations

Given the protocol for this study, there are some limitations on student participants. First, students who volunteered to participate may be more inclined to engage with academic advisers. Students were asked to volunteer to participate in this study, so the sample includes students more inclined to engage with university administrators and who were, therefore, more likely to have engaged with academic advisers. Since I contacted students through college level list serves, students responding to my call for participants were already reading and following college-level email communications.

All students in this study engaged with their academic adviser, and so the experiences represented are from students who knew how to connect and found some value in meeting with their adviser. When students mentioned experiences from a friend or peer, the feedback was always critical of academic advisers. After each interview, I asked the student participant to share my contact information and research study with other students. In this request, I emphasized the importance of talking to students with a range of experiences with academic advising. Yet much of the feedback shared second-hand from peers was that of students who did not meet with their adviser regularly. This study is not inclusive of all students' experiences with academic advising because those who did not meet with an adviser were not included.

Since the sample for this study included only students who responded, the demographic characteristics were limited to students who replied. Future research might gather experiences from students with different demographic characteristics in addition to socioeconomic status. For

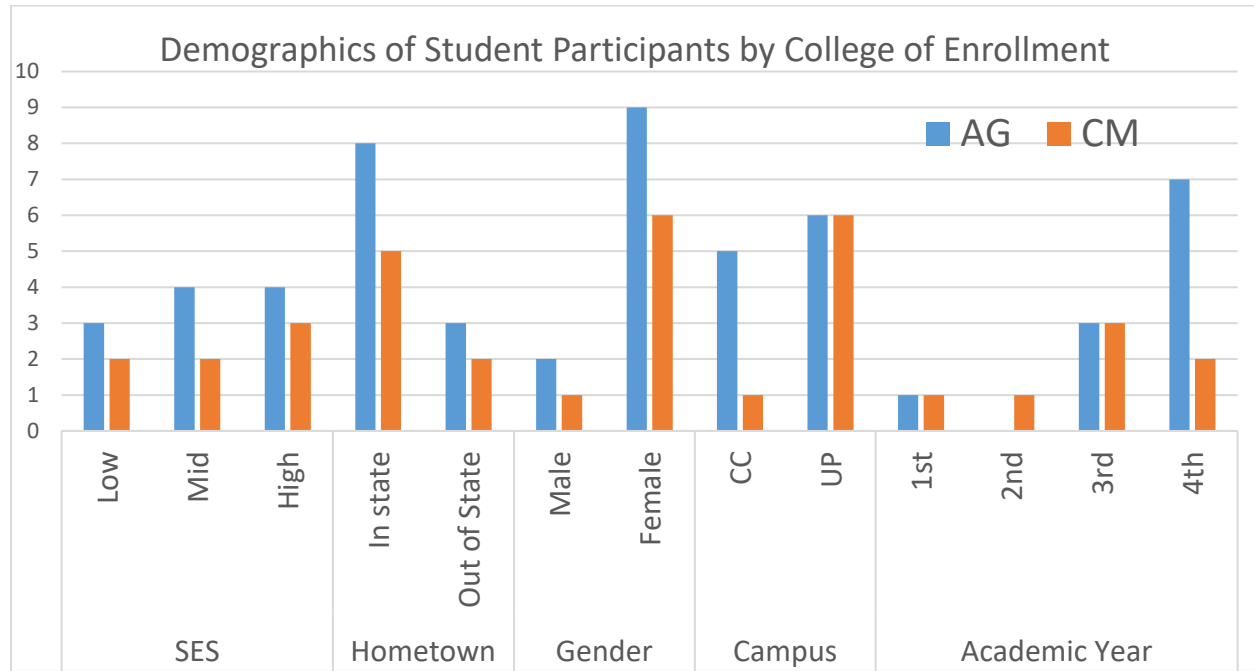
example, I did not account for, or collect data on, race and ethnicity. This additional data would be important in evaluating the role other demographic characteristics have in engaging with an academic adviser.

Finally, data collection was completed in February 2020, just prior to the start of the global COVID pandemic. Student experiences with academic advising have likely changed. These changes are likely in advising structures, but also in the ways students and advisers connect and in expectations of advisers and students. These changes are not examined by this study but are areas that would benefit from continued research.

Description of Participants

Of the 18 student interviews used in the analysis, seven participants were enrolled in the Bellisario College of Communications and 11 participants were enrolled in the College of Agricultural Sciences. Demographic information collected from student participants included gender, hometown (in state and out of state), and campus of admission. These data are available in Figure 3. It was important to ensure I had a broad group of students in each college, representing diverse characteristics. The group of participants did display a distribution across socioeconomic status, college, residency, and gender. Of the 18 interviews, students were majority female (15), with three male students participating. Six students started their enrollment at another Penn State campus, five of whom were enrolled in the College of Agricultural Sciences at the time of this study.

Figure 3: Demographics of Student Participants by College of Enrollment



Note. AG=College of Agricultural Sciences, CM=Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications. For Campus, CC=Commonwealth Campus, UP=University Park campus.

Socioeconomic Status was measured using student reported level of parental education, parental occupation, and parental income range. Subsequently, I classified student participants into groups based on socioeconomic status: low, mid, or high (see table 2). Income ranges were based on income ranges used by the U.S. Census Bureau (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Since these ranges included much smaller intervals, and I expected it would be difficult for students to estimate their household income to within \$5,000 dollars, I combined several U.S. Census Bureau brackets. See appendix B for the annual household income document used in the student interviews. The first bracket used in this study was listed as “under \$5,000” to mirror the U.S. Census Bureau’s first level. The upper level for this study was listed as “over \$250,000” because the U.S. Census Bureau uses “\$250,000” as the amount used for the open-ended interval of “200,000 and over.” At the time, the federal poverty line for a family of 4 was \$25, 750 which was included in the second income bracket (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and

Evaluation, n.d.). Parental occupation was used to triangulate socioeconomic status since family income was estimated by students and several students reported they were not confident in estimating their annual family income.

Table 2: *Criteria to Determine Student Socioeconomic Status*

	Low socioeconomic status	Mid-socioeconomic status	High socioeconomic status
Reported annual family income	< \$69,999	\$70,000-\$99,000	>\$100,000
Parental level of education	One parent with associate degree or less	At least one parent with a bachelor's degree	Both parents with bachelor's degree, often at least one parent with graduate level degree.
Parental Occupation	Working class	Mid-level	Professional

Of the 18 student participants, five were from low socioeconomic backgrounds, six students were from mid-socioeconomic backgrounds, and seven were classified as high socioeconomic status.

All students were given pseudonyms. Table 3 provides brief demographics of the student participants. Each student's background is helpful to understand how they came to Penn State and their experiences with academic advising. A brief introduction of each student follows this table.

Table 3: *List of Student Participants*

Pseudonym	Advising Model	Gender	Socioeconomic Status	Academic year
Stephanie	Decentralized	Female	Low	Fourth Year
Megan	Decentralized	Female	Low	Third Year
Kaitlin	Decentralized	Female	Low	Fourth Year
Ashley	Centralized	Female	Low	Third Year
Max	Centralized	Male	Low	Second Year
Shannon	Decentralized	Female	Mid	Fourth Year
David	Decentralized	Male	Mid	Fourth Year
John	Decentralized	Male	Mid	Fourth Year
Allison	Decentralized	Female	Mid	Fourth Year
Kate	Centralized	Female	Mid	Fourth Year
Erin	Centralized	Female	Mid	Third Year
Laura	Decentralized	Female	High	Third Year
Jessica	Decentralized	Female	High	Fourth Year
Abby	Decentralized	Female	High	Third Year
Monica	Decentralized	Female	High	First Year
Sara	Centralized	Female	High	Fourth Year
Adrienne	Centralized	Female	High	Third Year
Olivia	Centralized	Female	High	First Year

Students From Lower Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Stephanie was from a small town in northeast Pennsylvania enrolled in her fourth year. Stephanie attended a small high school. The high school was so small, it did not have its own soccer team. Stephanie had to play soccer for a neighboring school. Stephanie was second in her graduating class and very involved in clubs and organizations during high school. Given an experience she had at Penn State between her junior and senior year of high school, Stephanie had narrowed her choice of major and had a clear idea of her academic path prior to college.

Stephanie enrolled at a commonwealth campus near her home to begin her college journey. Stephanie reports that she was the only student enrolled in her major at her first campus and felt isolated. In her transition to the University Park campus, Stephanie brought her dog and a horse. She needed to find an off-campus lease and a place to board her horse. Her father

worked as a heavy equipment operator and her mother is deceased. At the time of our interview, Stephanie worked three jobs for about 30 hours a week to help cover her expenses. Stephanie relied on scholarships to cover her tuition, namely from a scholarship she receives from the Honors College. The Honors College is a specialized unit at Penn State that includes additional academic standards and requirements. Students in the Honors College must maintain a high cumulative grade point average and complete a senior thesis. Students accepted into the Honors College at the time of their original admission to the university also earn a scholarship.

Megan is a first-generation student from Philadelphia. Megan's father is deceased, and her mother is not in her life. Therefore, Megan identified as an independent student. In preparing for college, Megan worked with her high school guidance counselor, mostly on issues around financial aid. When enrolling in college, Megan started at another campus in the unit for exploratory students because she was not sure exactly what she wanted to study. When she chose a major and changed academic colleges and campuses, Megan discovered she was not happy. She changed academic colleges again to the major she was enrolled in at the time of our interview. Megan was enrolled in her third year, pursuing a science-based major.

Kaitlin was most recently from northeast Pennsylvania but moved around a lot during high school. She attended three physical high schools and graduated from a cyber academy. Kaitlin is a first-generation student. Moreover, Kaitlin shared that her mother attended school in South America, so she was not familiar with the American system of education.

Kaitlin started her college enrollment at a campus close to home, only a five-minute commute. Despite having clear academic goals, Kaitlin initially worked with an academic adviser in the exploratory unit before officially changing her major and entering her current academic college. Kaitlin had planned to complete an early change of campus (ahead of the

normal transition after four semesters), but her adviser directed her to take math courses that she did not need for her intended major. Kaitlin later realized she should have taken a different course needed to make degree progress instead. This delayed her transition and had a significant impact on her family life. When Kaitlin planned to move to the University Park campus for the spring semester, her mother planned to move to New Jersey to be closer to Kaitlin's younger sister. Kaitlin's mother rented their house and made plans to move. When Kaitlin found out she needed to remain at her campus for another semester, Kaitlin's house had already been rented. Kaitlin had to secure housing for one semester. After her transition to the University Park campus, Kaitlin found housing about thirty minutes away because she needed a rental space that allowed animals. Moreover, housing farther from campus is less expensive. During our interview, Kaitlin was in her fourth year.

Ashley attended a small all-girls high school in Philadelphia. Ashley was very involved in extracurricular activities such as the school newspaper, athletic teams, and multicultural organizations. During high school a local news station donated equipment and software for students that inspired Ashley's choice of major. Her high school guidance counselor was instrumental in guiding and supporting her application to colleges. A teacher inspired and encouraged her continued work toward her major.

While Ashley's parents did not attend college, her older sister recently graduated from college. Ashley is a third-year student who started at the University Park campus. She was also completing a minor based on courses she took in high school. Ashley noted ongoing challenges with the Bursar's office that delayed scheduling. She found help and formed strong relationships with staff in the college who provide time management strategies and a quiet place to work.

Max is a first-generation student from western Pennsylvania. While his parents strongly encouraged attending college, they let Max make the choice about where to attend. Max spent his first year of college at another campus closer to home to save money. Max originally enrolled in the university's exploratory unit because he was not sure what he wanted to study. Max was in his second year as a student, but he had 34 credits from a local community college that he completed while still in high school. So, Max reached third year standing. Max felt that the money saved by graduating college early was important. Due to this large number of incoming credits, Max changed his campus after just one year. This is earlier than the normal two-year requirement because Max could not continue to make degree progress at his initial campus. With his major and minor, Max would like to attend law school and work in professional sports.

Students From Mid-Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Shannon was a fourth-year student from Pittsburgh. Each of Shannon's parents earned a bachelor's degree in business. Shannon has an older brother who attended college but did not finish his degree. Shannon was academically focused during high school, earning high honor roll every semester. When applying to colleges, Shannon had some teachers and a guidance counselor who helped her in the application and selection process.

Shannon began college at another campus in the exploratory unit because she was broadly interested in science. After taking several science and math courses, Shannon selected a major slowly over time, first changing to pre-major status in her current college of enrollment, then entering the major. She ultimately selected her major because she wanted to impact cancer research and she learned of faculty members conducting relevant research in her chosen major. Her parents were supportive of her goals, yet wanted to be sure she would be employed after

graduation. Shannon's parents joined her for at least one meeting with her academic adviser to learn more about her future opportunities for employment and graduate programs.

David was a fourth-year student who met with me just months before graduation. David identified his major while enrolled in a high school that specialized in this area. David participated in the state science fair competition where he gained experience in research. David also attended the Pennsylvania Governor's School for the Sciences held at Penn State one summer during high school. The Pennsylvania Governor's School for the Sciences is designed to connect high school students to research experiences in science, technology, engineering, and agricultural sciences (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, n.d.)

David was the third member of his family to graduate from college. David's mother attended and graduated from the same institution. David's father attended college but did not complete his degree. David's cousin was the second person in his family to complete a college degree. Both parents were supportive of David's goals but left the planning to David. David started at another campus because the university offered students a special scholarship if they chose to spend one year at another campus. This program was called the 1+3 program, meaning students spent one year at another campus then transitioned to the University Park campus. David accepted the scholarship. However, David's schedule got off track. As a result, David contacted an academic adviser at the University Park campus to review and adjust his plans to fit his academic goals.

John, with his family, recently relocated to Pittsburgh from South Carolina. While in high school in South Carolina, John's guidance counselor was very helpful in understanding application deadlines and the application process. John focused on engineering classes in high school and applied to Penn State for the reputation of those programs. Each of John's parents

earned a bachelor's degree from Penn State. John's father is a landscape architect and John's mother began working in special education then moved to the human resources field.

John was originally admitted into a different academic college at the University Park campus. After struggling and repeating a foundational course, he began to work with academic advisers to identify a new direction. John was referred to the exploratory unit where he met with an academic adviser who showed him some helpful tools to explore alternative programs. Afterwards, John identified a new major of interest and met with an academic adviser in the new program. During this time of exploring, John took a reduced course load and had some academic difficulty.

Allison was just weeks away from completing her bachelor's degree. She was a fourth-year student enrolled in a science-based major from northeast Pennsylvania. Allison's parents were involved in her academic life. According to Allison, her parents made sure she was keeping up with her academic adviser, scholarships, and resources. Each of Allison's parents attended Penn State and completed bachelors' degrees. Allison's parents own a small business.

Allison attended a small Catholic high school. She took several Advanced Placement (AP) classes, which helped prepare her for the rigor of college courses. However, Allison was surprised by the work required at Penn State. Allison applied to 11 different institutions, utilizing support from her AP government teacher and an aunt who is an admissions counselor for another institution. Allison eventually chose Penn State because the campus felt like home. She shared that she applied to many schools because she did not want her parents to influence her to attend Penn State. At the time of our interview, Allison's younger sister also attended Penn State.

Kate grew up in a small town in south central Pennsylvania and attended a very small high school. Her graduating class was 56 students. Kate was in almost every club offered by her

high school. She was president of student council, in the National Honor Society, and captain of the archery team. Kate worked closely with her mother to research colleges and review applications. Kate's father worked for Penn State and both her mother and sister also attended Penn State. Kate's mother completed an associate degree and a bachelor's degree. Kate's sister is a current student at another Penn State campus. With her scholarship from the Honors College and her father's employee tuition discount, most of Kate's tuition was covered.

Kate was pursuing two majors and a minor. Kate was planning to graduate the following semester and was completing her honors thesis. During her time as a student, Kate participated in two separate study abroad programs, both times traveling to locations in Europe. At the time of our interview, she was working about 32 hours a week.

Erin attended a very large high school near Pittsburgh, graduating with a class of approximately 400 students. Erin was very involved with clubs in high school, such as cheerleading, Spanish club, Art club, and the Community Action program. Erin has two older twin sisters, one of whom also attended Penn State. Erin's father earned a bachelor's degree and is an air traffic controller. Erin's mother works in business.

Erin started at the University Park campus in the same college in which she is earning her degree. Erin is pursuing a major, a minor, and a certificate. Erin also rushed a sorority. Erin shared that she meets with her academic adviser several times each year and has developed a good relationship. She also mentioned she has had three advisers and has not yet met her new assigned academic adviser.

Students From High Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Laura was a third-year student from Pennsylvania. Laura attended an academic magnet school that was focused on academic success with a strong culture of attending college. In

Laura's 10th grade English class, all students were required to research five colleges and complete a common application to learn more about the process and admission requirements. Her guidance counselors helped Laura with her applications to college, but she always knew she wanted to attend Penn State. Laura started at the University Park campus and has always pursued her current major.

Laura's parents each earned a bachelor's degree. Laura's father also earned a master's degree. Laura's mother is a librarian and Laura's father is a professor at Penn State. Laura's parents were involved in her decisions, guiding Laura on decisions around working on campus and encouraging Laura to stay on campus in the summer to gain more experience.

Jessica was a fourth-year student just weeks from completing her undergraduate degree. Jessica attended a private college preparatory high school in Ohio. She was required to meet with guidance counselors frequently to talk about her academic plans. Jessica was the president of the school's honor society. Her guidance counselors encouraged her to take a practice ACT test, helped research colleges, and even coordinated visits to campuses.

Jessica's parents each earned a master's degree, and both work as engineers. Jessica's family sometimes helps her talk through decisions, such as choosing between two different courses. Jessica reports that her family does not tell her what to do, but instead gives her advice. Her family often encourages Jessica to meet with her academic adviser.

Jessica changed her major during her second year. Jessica's goals were to work in a field related to the health professions. She balanced information on meeting her degree requirements as well as meeting admission requirements for her intended graduate program. This required meeting with her academic adviser in her major, as well as advisers in the health professions advising office located in a different academic college.

Abby was a third-year student from Maryland. Each of Abby's parents work in white collar jobs. Abby is an only child. Abby described her experiences at two different high schools. The first was, in Abby's words, "very poor" and very diverse. The resources, such as textbooks and athletic uniforms, were very old and outdated. The guidance counselor had other areas of focus than that of college applications. She shared, "... [the guidance counselor] ...saw I had good grades and haven't been suspended from school. And he's like, yeah, you're good, keep doing what you're doing..."

Abby transitioned to a boarding school for her last two years of high school. Abby described the transition as a culture shock. At her new school, everyone wore blazers. Her AP calculus class only had seventeen students, which was much smaller than the classes at her previous high school. There were several guidance counselors available, some who focused on "feelings and stuff" and another who specialized in college applications. The college adviser taught a required English class in which students were required to apply to eight colleges. Abby is a third generation Penn Stater, so she knew she was likely to attend Penn State.

Abby started in the exploratory unit at the University Park campus. Abby's parents did not dictate her choices but did ask her questions to encourage careful reflection. Abby's father suggested questions for Abby to ask her academic adviser. During Abby's first semester, she got ill, which impacted her academic performance. She reports her academic adviser was helpful during this time.

Monica was a first-year student from a small town in eastern Pennsylvania. Monica had not yet entered her major and was classified as a pre-major student at the time of our interview. In addition to her intended major, Monica was planning two minors. Monica's family included two parents, a younger brother, and several grandparents. Both parents completed bachelor's

degrees and her grandfather earned a master's degree. Her father also attended Penn State, so it was always on her list of schools. Her father works as a project manager for an engineering company and her mother works in their local school district. Monica describes her parents as supportive of pursuing her interests. She never felt pressured to be successful or pursue certain fields. Monica also talked a lot about the emotional and financial support she receives from her grandparents. Monica feels that she can ask anyone in her family for advice and they are happy to provide it.

Monica attended a large high school with a strong academic reputation, which offered and encouraged many advanced placement (AP) classes. Monica was ranked very high in her graduating class, fifth or sixth overall. The high school had few guidance counselors for the number of students, so Monica did not feel she received enough time with her counselor to discuss her high school classes. However, guidance counselors did spend more time working with students on their college plans and applications. After applying to nine different institutions, Monica decided to attend Penn State because she was accepted into the Honors College which included a scholarship. This was very influential in her decision. She shared, "...really money was probably one of the biggest reasons and also the fact that I did get into the Honors College..."

Sara was from upstate New York and was finishing her last semester. Her graduating high school class had about 300 students. No one helped her with her college applications or plans. Sara applied and was accepted to two colleges. Sara selected Penn State because both of her parents went to Penn State, and so she was familiar with the institution and the campus. Her mother earned a master's degree, and her father earned a bachelor's degree in business.

Sara started her college career at the University Park campus in her current college. Throughout her enrollment, Sara worked with several advisers, although not by choice. The academic advisers assigned to her left and she was repeatedly assigned to someone else. In addition to courses, Sara was also in a club related to her major. She volunteered at a local animal shelter and was in the sign language club.

Adrienne was a third-year student pursuing a major and two minors. Adrienne is an only child whose family lives in eastern Pennsylvania. Both parents earned master's degrees. Adrienne's father was in the military, then worked as a teacher, and is now retired. Adrienne's mother was an operating room nurse, then also became a teacher and plans to retire soon.

Adrienne attended a small all-girls private Catholic high school. Adrienne was active in theatre and music. Adrienne reported very strong relationships with her teachers and guidance counselors in high school. One guidance counselor helped Adrienne with her application to Penn State because Adrienne did not feel it was strong enough. Overall, Adrienne applied to seven different institutions.

Adrienne enrolled in the exploratory unit her first summer so she could have a little extra time to acclimate to campus. Adrienne shared that a medical challenge within her family caused her to fail a course in her first semester. She was able to work with her academic adviser in the exploratory unit to have the grade "dropped" from her transcript. Adrienne was in a sorority, but recently disaffiliated.

Olivia was a first-year student from New Jersey. Olivia attended a small high school with about 170 students in her graduating class. She took several honors and AP classes that resulted in her earning several college credits. While Olivia had a strong relationship with her guidance

counselor, she did not feel she needed help when applying to colleges. Olivia applied to nine colleges. Selecting Penn State was a surprise to her friends and family.

Olivia's mother earned a master's degree, and her father completed a bachelor's degree. Neither parent attended Penn State. Olivia's mother works with students with special needs in local school districts. Olivia's father is a cybersecurity expert in New York City. Olivia is an only child. Her parents have supported her in pursuing her goals and interests. Olivia's mother joined the Penn State Parent's Council so she could share the concerns and issues from Olivia's experience. The Parent's Council is a group of parents and family members of current University Park students. Members of the council provide input to senior administrators, learn more about Penn State resources and opportunities, and shape the parent and family experience for others (Penn State Parents Program, 2022).

Information on Academic Adviser Participants

Nine academic advisers across both academic colleges participated in interviews. At the time of this research, there were five academic advisers in the Bellisario College of Communications. Three academic advisers participated in the interview. In the College of Agricultural Sciences, fourteen advisers were invited to participate. Seven advisers agreed, but, due to scheduling conflicts, only six participated. All adviser participants held graduate degrees; the majority held master's degree, and one adviser held a Ph. D. Of the nine advisers interviewed, only one was male. Adviser participants were diverse in the amount of time in academic advising, the size of their advising rosters, educational background, and awareness of socioeconomic factors. All academic advisers were given pseudonyms, see table 4 for a list of academic advisers and demographic characteristics.

Table 4: *List of Academic Adviser Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Experience in Advising (Years)	College	Roster Size	Awareness of SES	Education	Position
Lily	F	2	AG	150	low	Masters	Staff
Emma	F	8	AG	68	low	Masters	Staff
Mike	M	7	AG	151	high	PHD	Faculty
Sophia	F	9	AG	100	mid	Masters	Staff
Ava	F	5	AG	170	low	Masters	Staff
Isabella	F	19	AG	50	mid	Masters	Faculty
Evelyn	F	20	COMM	360	mid	Masters	Staff
Charlotte	F	<1	COMM	360	low	Masters	Staff
Willow	F	1	COMM	400	mid	Masters	Staff

Academic Advisers in the College of Agricultural Sciences. Lily was an academic adviser in a department with a full team of primary role academic advisers co-located in one office suite. Lily’s office was bright with natural light streaming in through two windows. At the time of our interview, Lily had been an academic adviser for two years. This position was her first in academic advising. Students can schedule an appointment with Lily through Starfish or use drop-in advising hours. Students can meet with their assigned adviser or choose to meet with any academic adviser in the department. Lily enjoyed working with the team of advisers in the department. She felt the advising structure was organized and served students.

Emma was an academic adviser for a small program within a large department. Emma had been an academic adviser for 8 years. Prior to being an academic adviser, Emma was a research technician within the same program for which she now advises. Given the small program, each student was assigned to Emma and to a faculty adviser who was responsible for assisting in planning the required internship and future career plans. Emma reported most students worked with her on general advising questions, course selection, and other challenges. As way of explanation, Emma shared, “I think that students sometimes are intimidated by

someone who has Dr in front of their name and, to be honest, I'm easier to find than a lot of the faculty. They have other obligations and I'm usually here, so, you know, I'm easier to find."

Emma is accessible to students but admits the building is confusing to navigate. I had my own challenges finding her office on the day of our interview. Emma's office was in a large building on the same floor as several research labs.

Emma shared that she appreciated making decisions about advising at the local level. She was able to work with her direct supervisor to resolve any academic or advising issues for students whereas the department head may not know all the intricacies of the program. When meeting with students, Emma expected them to be prepared with topics and questions to address during the advising meeting. Emma also expected students to take some responsibility for their plans, "it helps if [the students] ...know that it's a partnership. You know, there's the adviser expectations and...my responsibilities, but...the student has responsibilities also..."

Mike served as an academic adviser in an assistant teaching professor position. Mike advised all students in one department. Mike's office was part of a student services center which includes a waiting area and student study lounge. Mike's office had lots of windows and natural light. Mike had been an academic adviser for seven years, previously serving as an academic adviser for online programs. At the time of our interview, he was in his current position for almost two years. His current position included academic advising, recruitment activities, teaching a first-year seminar, and awarding scholarships.

As part of a small program, Mike shared that he had lots of connections to students and professional autonomy. With a doctorate in education, Mike brought a unique skill set to a faculty team of scientists. Mike shared, "I'm [the undergraduate students'] primary adviser. However, since I got here, we took all those advisees away from those professors, but we did not

want them to lose that student interaction, so I created a mentor program and now [faculty members] are [students'] secondary advisers. That way they come to me for anything academic. Career related, they go to their mentors..." Mike had clear expectations for students, which included checking information in Canvas, emailing questions 24 hours prior to an advising meeting, pulling a degree audit, and canceling a scheduled appointment if unable to attend. As a result of the preparation by students, Mike shared, "I'm able to focus on the more meaningful conversations that typically students do not get to have with their advisers because advisers are so overwhelmed." Mike shared general information and resources with students through club meetings and in every class he teaches.

Sophia had been an academic adviser for nine years. Sophia's office was in a small, older building in central campus. Her office was off a small student lounge. No students were there when I arrived for our interview, so it was very quiet. Sophia shared, "this is a safe place where they have a student lounge, and they want to come and just tell me about their day..." The program recently moved into this space. According to Sophia, students were beginning to come and "hang out" in the space.

Sophia is the only academic adviser for one program, and she is available to any student in the major. Many students are assigned to her directly, but some are assigned to the faculty member in charge of the program. Yet Sophia's position includes many other responsibilities. In addition to academic advising, Sophia's position also includes marketing and communications, alumni relations, recruitment activities, and administrative tasks like mailing packages. In addition, Sophia teaches a first-year seminar and co-teaches courses that include international travel. Sophia talked a lot about prioritizing responsibilities and student appointments, "this is the first year that I blocked out some time on Tuesdays and Thursdays for students to kind of

schedule themselves. But I like to prioritize what's important, and I feel like I can't do that with Starfish as much."

As far as academic advising, Sophia reports that she sees about 80% of her advising roster each semester. Sophia expected students to begin building their resume, "...come with your laptop in the advising meeting...research, internships, study abroad, knowing their check sheet." Sophia meets many students during the first year through the first-year seminar class she teaches. She often works with students through graduation and as alumni. Sophia says, "I like having conversations with students and I like seeing them grow from that first-year student all the way to graduation."

Ava worked as part of a team of academic advisers within a department working with students in several majors. Ava's office was located within a small advising center and was clean and organized with paintings and pictures on the walls. Ava's primary responsibilities were in academic advising, but she also coordinated a weekly student newsletter. Ava had advising appointments available in Starfish and held drop-in advising hours twice a week. Ava was in academic advising for five years, four of those years in her current position.

Ava reported about 70% of her students meet with her each semester to discuss classes and internships. Many students arrive prepared for their appointment. Ava commented on the relationships she built with several students, "I'm always amazed how many peoples' names I remember but it's because we've had this relationship established that a lot of them are in that classroom across the hall..." When meeting with students during scheduled appointments, Ava expected students to have a list of questions or topics prepared and be ready to review their academic requirement report. However, Ava found that many students did not understand the

academic requirements report. During appointments, Ava shared that she made notes on the academic requirements report, saved the file, and sent it to the student.

Isabella was an assistant teaching professor who served as an academic adviser for students across two majors. At the time of our interview, Isabella had been an academic adviser for almost 20 years. In these programs, Isabella worked with many students, but some students were also assigned to other faculty advisers. As Isabella shared, “I certainly want our students to have contact with other faculty, you know, with their sort of faculty advisers who were teaching their courses and doing related research because it's just a great resource for them to get to know those folks.” Isabella reported that she often advised students who were still exploring majors, new students in the programs, and students with more complicated educational records, such as transfer credits because these cases are not always as straight-forward. Isabella shared, “there are certain parts of advising that I think are really a lot to expect everybody to know about, I mean, just all the rules, the policies...So I often tell our...other faculty advisers that I'm happy to work with students on that, you know, if you have any questions just send them to me...” Isabella also works with new first year students and change of campus students so she can “...try to get them all squared away in terms of where they are and what they have yet to do and then share that information with whomever they are assigned to.”

Isabella shared that students did seem to form relationships with faculty in the department, “it is nice to be in a smaller program in a smaller college because the students they are really able to make connections...” During our conversation, Isabella referred to students who are unfamiliar with resources and institutional processes. When I asked her to elaborate, she mentioned there are challenges for first-generation students who are not familiar with institutional expectations. When asked about challenges around socioeconomic status and

different income levels, Isabella shared there are challenges in paying tuition or taking summer classes, but these are sometimes more difficult to learn about since it is based on what students are willing to share.

Academic Advisers in the Bellisario College of Communications. Evelyn was an academic adviser for 20 years and in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications for 1 year. At the time of our meeting, Evelyn's advising roster was higher than normal because of an open academic adviser position. In addition to advising undergraduate students, Evelyn coordinated New Student Orientation (NSO) for the college and the freshman check-in program. The freshman check in program occurs during a student's first semester when they schedule for the next semester, usually in early November. Academic advisers hold 15-minute sessions in a conference room to review how to schedule and a typical semester schedule. Evelyn described the advising structure as flexible. Students could meet with an academic adviser during drop-in advising hours. Essentially, any student can work with any academic adviser. When meeting with students, Evelyn expected students to respect the adviser's time and to take ownership of their education. Evelyn estimated that over half of students meet with academic advisers, and many meet with an adviser more than once each semester.

When talking about parents and families, Evelyn shared that some parents coach their students on speaking and working with adults. Other families may need help navigating higher education. Evelyn observed that a student's circumstances could change unexpectedly because of a change in their family life, such as divorce, loss of a job, or family illness. As an academic adviser, Evelyn shared that when she is aware of these issues and challenges, she helps the student by connecting them to relevant resources on campus, providing relevant policies, and recommending adjustments to academic plans.

Evelyn shared challenges in the advising office because of high levels of adviser turnover. With open academic adviser positions, forming relationships with all students is a challenge. Evelyn shared, "...because advisers are supposed to be their [students'] support, when it's a new person it's like, do I trust this person? Why did this person leave?" Using academic advising notes helped her connect with students, even when she has not formed a relationship because she can bring up topics other advisers included in advising notes, such as an internship they did over the summer. Building rapport with a student during a meeting is important; "when they come in just to make him feel like they're at home or...that this person cares...". Evelyn shared, "if you can get them to laugh, it breaks the ice because a lot of times they know that we know their GPA (grade point average) and we know that they switched [their] major three times and for us we don't care about that, they feel like they've done something wrong or they're going to the principal's office and I think that the more you make it as easy as possible, the better..." Evelyn added that students who put effort into getting to know an academic adviser may get frustrated when they leave and they need to start over. In speaking about turnover of advisers broadly, Evelyn shared, "...turnover is always happening...a lot of advisers get bored or stuck in that same position. There's not much of a stepping ladder for us to move. You either go as an adviser...go up to like the 4th level and then after that you have to go into administration."

Charlotte's office was large with few personal decorations and no windows. Charlotte had a bowl of chocolate by the door, inviting visitors to have a treat on their way out. Charlotte was a graduate of the Bellisario College of Communications, then completed a master's degree in student affairs with an internship in academic advising. Charlotte was a new adviser, joining the college less than a year before our meeting. Given her more limited experience in academic advising, Charlotte reported that she did not yet have experience working with students from

low-income backgrounds. In the few cases where financial background came up, it was often with limited details and usually when the student needed help paying for something.

Charlotte also mentioned adviser turnover as a challenge for students. Shortly after Charlotte was hired, another academic adviser left. Charlotte heard students were frustrated because their adviser assignment kept changing. Charlotte wrote to students re-assigned to her temporarily to clarify "...the message of [this adviser] is temporarily taking over. Then you'll transition to our new staff member but in the meantime again that you can meet with whoever you feel comfortable with and if that's me, great let's set up a meeting so trying to give them some of that consistency..."

When working with students, Charlotte emphasized building a relationship. In a 30-minute meeting, Charlotte tried to get to know students on a personal level. Charlotte "...wants...students to know that we [academic advisers] are a resource even though we are a very large institution...that we still know you as an individual person and are here to help you..." Charlotte shared a recent example: "I had a student in here the other day who had an interview for the daily collegian later, so it's kind of just making notes to myself to kind of bring that back up so there is that personal connection. Like, hey, how did the interview go?" Charlotte tried to get to know students, but she was also aware that students have different levels of comfort in what they share about themselves. Charlotte will also "...see where they [students] kind of take it and provide me with those details based on their comfort level..." Charlotte used the student's responses and reactions to determine where the student wanted to take the conversation.

Like Charlotte, Willow had also been an academic adviser for almost a year. The Bellisario College of Communications was the first place she served as an adviser. Willow's

office was set up in a way that made having a conversation and sharing the computer challenging. The chairs were at a small round table adjacent to the desk, farthest from the computer. In addition to academic advising, Willow was the commencement coordinator for the college, managing the spring reception and ceremony as well as details for the summer and fall ceremonies.

The central advising office was located near the Internships and Career office and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. While these offices served different roles for students, Willow shared that the staff work together, often referring students to the other offices. In fact, Willow reported that she had met jointly with students and colleagues in these associated offices to learn more about their perspectives. This served as a form of professional development and helped form a tighter network around the student.

Willow shared that large advising rosters were a challenge. With a roster of 400 students, Willow could not possibly meet with all of her students. Her appointments in Starfish were booked for several weeks after our interview. The size of her roster and pace of her appointments also made it difficult to connect the right information to students who needed it. For example, Willow shared, "...something will come out about a program, and I'll think, oh I talked to a student a couple weeks ago that would really love this, but I will have no idea who they are and I, you know, I would never be able to take the time to figure that out..."

When discussing socioeconomic status, Willow did share that she noticed some change of campus students having trouble in courses at University Park campus and discussed withdrawing and catching up in the summer. These students shared personal details about their families or financial situation that would make summer courses difficult. Willow observed that there are often factors that impact academic success that students are not always open to sharing

with others, including their academic adviser. Sometimes these sensitive topics are financially based, other times they may be related to a health issue or a learning disability. Willow shared that academic advisers may be able to help more when the issues are shared.

The in-depth case study data allows the researcher to document the details of the case, to include the history, events, and day-to-day activities (Creswell, 2013). For this study, I used interviews with undergraduate students, academic advisers, and advising administrators to understand the day-to-day activities within each academic advising model. By interviewing people across the case, I learned about the advising experience from different perspectives (students and advisers in two different colleges) and through different experiences depending on the families and educations of my interviewees. Analyzing publicly available documents also provides insight into the culture and expectations embedded within each site. In the next chapter, I will describe the culture of each case and detail my findings.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

The interview data described in the previous chapter, coming from students, advisers, and administrators, adds to our understanding of students' experiences in two contrasting structures of academic advising. In this chapter, I first explain the context of each college's advising structure and culture of academic advising as shared by students, advisers, administrators, and in publicly available documents. Next, I examine the view of academic advising as primarily pertaining to scheduling courses from both students and academic advisers. Then I explore reports that advisers discouraged some students' goals and plans. I will examine differences across advising structures by addressing the benefits and challenges associated with specialized faculty adviser knowledge in the decentralized advising model. I will further discuss the high rate of adviser turnover in the centralized advising model. Finally, I discuss student interview data according to their socioeconomic status. My interviews support findings from previous research concerning the relation between socioeconomic status and academic advising, but with two additional observations. First, my interviews reveal that students of lower socioeconomic status that begin at a different campus experience challenges with academic advising. Second, some academic advisers were unaware of students' background characteristics. Therefore, those academic advisers could not vary their practices and approaches to meet different needs of students, especially when it pertained to socioeconomic status.

Previous research (Yee, 2014; Jury et al., 2017; McDonough, 1997) indicates that the culture of the institution, as manifest through physical spaces such as advising offices, plays an important role in how students engage with these offices. An important first step in a case study is to describe the structure and culture of each college's advising model as described by administrators, advisers, students, and publicly available documents. The structure is described in size, organization, how students access advising services, expectations of advisers, and other

responsibilities outside of academic advising. Strengths and challenges identified by administrators, advisers, and students also are shared.

The Culture of Academic Advising in the College of Agricultural Sciences

In the College of Agricultural Sciences, academic advising is based in departments. Academic advisers in each department work with students pursuing majors administered within that department. The college academic advising website states the goal of academic advising is for advisers to “...share career and collegiate expertise, resources that empower, and tips to maximize your time here...” (College of Agricultural Sciences, 2022b). Assignment of advising rosters and management of appointments varies by department, as do additional responsibilities for each adviser. Academic advising responsibilities are assigned to those in faculty positions as well as staff positions. The college website lists contact information for 13 academic advisers by major. This listing includes six individuals with titles of professor, associate teaching professor, or assistant teaching professor. It further lists seven individuals as advising coordinator, undergraduate student services coordinator, or academic adviser (College of Agricultural Sciences, 2022d). Based on interviews with academic advisers, I learned that advising rosters vary between 50 and 170 students, depending on the size of the department and the number of advisers.

The structure of academic advising varies by department within the College. Some departments have advising centers which house several academic advisers. In other departments, the academic adviser is positioned within space designated for student use. The advising administrator in the College of Agricultural Sciences explained, “we have some units that have an advising center, they call it, where we have professional advisers who offer support for a lot of the lower division, the academic nuances of advising.” Other departments distribute academic

advising responsibilities across faculty members within the program. Finally, some departments use a shared model of advising that includes faculty and staff positions. In areas with a shared model, the responsibilities between faculty and staff roles seem to divide between disciplinary expertise and institutional policies and procedures. Ava, a staff adviser, stated, “Yes... they [faculty] can...advise students if they want but typically, they’ll leave it to us to be the face of any advising questions.” Students with more complex academic advising questions are often assigned to those with primary responsibilities in advising. Isabella, a faculty adviser, said, “there have been occasions where I’ll ask her to assign a particular student to me and often that’s a student who is changing majors, or who is still somewhat undecided, has a lot of transfer credits, and some other things going on that I want to have sorted out before they might start working with someone else.” This flexibility by department was seen by one adviser as a strength of the college. Emma, a staff adviser, shared “I think it’s good that the college allows us to structure it [the advising program] the way each program wants to because that gives us flexibility...” for local decision-making.

There are also variations in other responsibilities assigned to those serving as academic advisers, and these varied by position and department. Some additional responsibilities included: teaching a first-year seminar, marketing, alumni relations, career preparatory/exploration, awarding of scholarships, and prospective student events. Academic advisers in faculty positions were also expected to teach courses and conduct research. Jessica, a fourth-year student, shared that her adviser “... does research, teaches classes, and also advises.”

In addition to advisers in each department, the College of Agricultural Sciences also has a central advising office. This office includes a director of advising, who is available to meet with students exploring several majors within the college. According to Ava, a staff adviser, the

advising director “would meet with any student who is...considering an AG [agriculture] major or was just considering any major really because [the advising director] was very good at advising all the majors.” The director of advising also shares information on changes to policies and procedures, and tracks students in academic difficulty. Many advisers mentioned this central office. However, none of the student participants mentioned this central office.

The college has made a significant effort to support and reward academic advising. A link to the Community of Advising Excellence Award is accessible from the college’s academic advising website. This award seeks to recognize and reward excellent academic advisers. All advising positions (faculty and staff) are eligible for the award (College of Agricultural Sciences, 2022e). The advising administrator shared, “the award was developed based upon a strong theoretical base associated with successful advising and that doesn't change.”

Students spoke of the importance and value of building a relationship with their adviser. In the College of Agricultural Sciences, Monica reported she scheduled an appointment early in the semester because, “I knew that I needed to reach out to her to help with my scheduling for the spring semester. Then I wanted to just meet her to start developing that relationship, too.” Other students in the College of Agriculture also wanted to get to know their advisers outside of academic advising meetings. Stephanie said, “It's helpful to get to know them outside of just advising...if you could take a class ...or [are interested] in a club. One of my advisers is also a club adviser. It's easier to get to know them.” When choosing between courses, Jessica reported her adviser was able to offer insight into the course and her interests, “if I'm debating between courses, they can be like...based off what you've told me about your interests and things, maybe this would be a good fit for you.”

Most advisers also acknowledged the importance of the relationship between adviser and student. In the College of Agricultural Sciences, many advisers also described connecting with students outside of academic advising appointments. These examples included student clubs, first-year seminars, and traveling as part of a study abroad experience. In addition, academic advisers in the College of Agricultural Sciences met students through prospective student events or New Student Orientation (NSO) and worked with them throughout their time at Penn State. This allowed them to form strong relationships with students and get to know them. For example, Mike said “When I meet with them [prospective students] and I recruit them in, chances are that I get them, they come to NSO.” Then Mike shares a Canvas pride on academic advising and teaches a first-year seminar. As a result, “by the time they get to the first class they’ve gone through a lot of this, which allows me to go through the higher order thinking things, the more important things,” Mike said. Sophia shares another example, “I like having conversations with students and I like seeing them grow from that first-year student all the way to graduation.”

Students also reported inconsistent experiences with academic advisers. Since the advising model is decentralized and housed within each department, there is variation in the structure, ratio of adviser to student, and additional responsibilities. One student cited lack of email contact and other faculty member responsibilities as barriers to access and relationship building. Allison reported, “Sometimes, just being accessible on email has been an issue with trying to get in touch with them. Sometimes I have to email twice to get an appointment with an adviser...” This seemed to be the only student participant expressing concern about access. Other students reported their academic advisers were responsive and available. For example, Monica reported, “we communicate on a fairly regular basis. So, she kind of gets me quote, unquote, at

this point, so I appreciate that.” Laura shared, “I feel very comfortable going in whenever I need. I know a lot of advisers in other colleges will use Starfish so you can just schedule and he doesn’t use that, he’s not on it. So, it’s an email basis and I feel that’s more personable...” Stephanie felt that advisers did get to know students, “... at least in [major]... the people who want to know their advisers, their advisers will get to know.”

The Culture of Academic Advising in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications

In the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, academic advising is provided through a central advising office located near other college offices that provide support to students. These other offices include the internships and careers office as well as the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. According to the Academic advising website for the college, the mission of academic advising is to help students “...plan and achieve their academic and career goals” (Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, 2022b). The college academic advising website includes a prominent link to an advising syllabus. This advising syllabus lists items that academic advisers can address with students. These topics include developing skills for academic success; course selection; choosing majors, minors, and certificates; co-curricular experiences such as study abroad and internship programs; and requirements for completing a degree (Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, 2020).

The central advising office has five advisers and one advising administrator. Each member of the advising staff has a roster of between 350 and 400 students. All advisers help students working towards all majors in the college. All academic advisers are staff positions with different additional responsibilities which include commencement coordinator, New Student Orientation coordinator, and planning additional student programming.

Several years ago, the Bellisario College of Communications shifted the academic advising model from faculty advisers to primary-role academic advisers. In the early 2000's, the college was growing, and a new student system was implemented. Because of the lack of rewards for advising, the college dean pulled faculty members out of academic advising. This change also limited the number of people with access to students' educational records. According to the advising administrator in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communication, students are still referred to faculty members for discussions around post-graduation plans, but primary advising responsibilities are assigned to this central office.

The central advising office has a consistent advising schedule which includes drop-in advising (on demand) and scheduled appointments. The drop-in and scheduled appointment information is clearly provided on the college's academic advising website. The advising administrator said, "drop-in appointments everyday act as our triage approach to having students have access to advisers every day from 8:30 to 11:00 and then afternoons are all scheduled appointments with advisers." Within this consistent schedule, students do have flexibility to meet with any academic adviser. Willow shared that, "Every day of the week we do drop-in advising...in the morning for about 3 hours and students can either sign up, sign in to see me specifically because they are my advisee or just because they want to see me for some reason...or they can just take the first available person." In addition to regular drop-in and appointment times, each adviser also gets one afternoon (4 hours) of administrative time to work on additional responsibilities.

Student participants were knowledgeable of this structure and how to access advising. Student participants described the morning drop-in hours and the ability to schedule longer appointments in Starfish. Kate reported, "...in the morning they have general office hours, you

go in, you sign up on Starfish and any adviser will take you.” Student participants explained the importance and value of each type of advising interaction. Ashley reported, “I usually schedule beforehand on Starfish just so I know, I have these certain questions I know it's not going to work on a drop-in basis...They do have drop-in hours, but I usually don't like to go to those because it's like a really quick, you have one question, let's sit down and just bang it out really quick. The ones I usually schedule for are 1/2 hour and that's because I have a couple of good questions I need to ask, and I know they can sit with me and like really plan it out.” All students appreciated the flexibility of choosing how best to connect with an academic adviser. For example, Kate said, “having those morning office hours is really great because I can just go and say, hey look at my schedule.”

The Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications has a very clear strategy of flexibility and availability. Evelyn said, “Our college is all about flexibility.” The advising administrator said, “Everybody advises students and we have assigned advisees, but it's an open-door policy in that a student can see any adviser through a drop in or through a scheduled appointment.” This structure aims to get students connected to an adviser. Willow shared, “our goal is to more get them [students] into an adviser quickly versus to a specific person.” This view was reported clearly by students. When asked if there was anything else she wanted to add about her experience with academic advising, Ashley said, “Definitely just the fact that they are available whenever I can be. Like with the drop-ins and then I can always find a good scheduling day on Starfish if it's early enough.” Sara reported, “I like drop-in hours, if they weren't so early in the morning because drop-in hours you have a better chance of, like, (A) it is working in my schedule and (B) seeing the person that I wanted to see or seeing a different person if I did not want to see my actual adviser.” Some students appreciated being able to see any adviser. For

example, Erin said, “I love how [academic advising] is run because I’m able to meet with any adviser so I don’t have to be stuck with one.”

In the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, students and advisers frequently raised the importance of relationships during interviews. Charlotte, a new adviser in the college, shared, “students are assigned an adviser, so they always have that, but we tell students, if you feel more comfortable meeting with someone else... and you want to do that, we are open to it. As long as you’re seeing someone, we are happy about that.” “I think we are pretty hands-on in terms of relationship building with our students,” said the advising administrator. Charlotte shared, “... it’s really just gauging based on the student’s reaction of where they want to take it...at least trying and putting it out there like ‘I’m open to a relationship, are you?’” These sentiments were also shared by students. Max reported, “obviously, my adviser I think knows me best. You know, I can come in, and I think she knows me by name at this point.” Shannon expressed a high level of comfort with her adviser, “I felt comfortable with her especially since I like to say she knows a little too much about me. It was more so like catching up with like a friend.”

Despite the recognition of the importance of building relationships with students, there were systemic challenges to building those relationships with every student. Large advising rosters and high adviser turnover made it difficult for advisers and students to build ongoing relationships. “I mean, I just can’t know all 400. I just can’t,” said Willow. These challenges can also influence the kind of information shared with students because sometimes advisers can’t track their students. For example, Willow said, “...something will come out about a program and I’ll think, oh I talked to a student a couple weeks ago that would really love this but I will have no idea who they are and I would never be able to take the time to figure that out.”

As a result of the frequent turnover of advising staff, students were often shuffled across advising rosters. Evelyn said, “To start all over again...they put all their effort into this one person. It's like why did they leave, you know?” Two students reported having multiple advisers. Sara shared, “I switched advisers. But then she got pregnant and left. So, I switched advisers again. Then she left.” Erin was on her “third adviser in three years...”

Students’ Experiences with Academic Advising in the Two Colleges

Students reported many positive experiences with academic advisers in both advising models. However, some students reported experiences where academic advisers discouraged their plans. In addition, students and advisers indicate the purpose of academic advising is primarily for scheduling and understanding the curriculum. This view of the role of advising does not fully meet the institution’s advising policy.

Academic advisers were knowledgeable, welcoming, and supportive. For example, Monica, a first-year student in the College of Agricultural Sciences, brought in many transfer credits. Monica said her adviser clarified how those credits met degree requirements. “She was able to actually go through like each of them and figure out what Gen Ed's I was going to be able to...cross off through those classes, which was fantastic,” said Monica. Max, a second-year student in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, said, “regardless of how many times I've ever walked into their office, they've always seen a smiling face and a welcoming attitude, and been willing to answer anything and everything that I have [asked].” Some students noted an expectation that advisers be supportive of students’ goals. Sara said, “If I went to my adviser and I was like, I'm graduating a year early and they discouraged that I would be upset. That's my journey.” Students value the knowledge and welcoming environment when working with an academic adviser.

Despite these positive experiences, some students shared experiences of advisers discouraging their goals and plans. For example, Allison reported, “I came in saying... I want a minor in leadership or Italian. And he was like, oh, why would you do that? How is that going to help you with grad school? The only minor you should have is nutrition, because that was his specialty. So then I ended up calling my mother on the way home and crying. I thought they [academic advisers] were supposed to support study abroad and all those different things. And I felt like he just discouraged me.” Stephanie shared an experience where her adviser doubted her goals. Stephanie said, “I met with him, and I told him I was going to [grad] school just like every [major] student is going to do, and he said probably not, but OK.” Megan also felt discouraged by her adviser and she felt the adviser would be disappointed with her plans to change her major. Therefore, so she did not use her adviser for help in the transition to a new major. Olivia shared a similar feeling of discouragement. Olivia said, “I felt as though she wanted to place me in a lot of what I like to call the...minimum classes for me, because my view on college is I'm paying a lot of money to be here, I may as well challenge myself while I'm here. I don't want to really skirt by. I did express that to her. I said I'm very open to taking a bit harder class. But she kind of rationalized it as it'll be a break and you'll get an easy A. So, I agreed, and I took the class, and it was fine.” Then later, another exchange with an adviser resulted in her questioning her plans. Olivia said, “I have a couple different minors, too, which are a little bit unrelated to my major, but they are things I'm really passionate about...it made me start to question, why do I have all these minors? But it was something I decided a long time ago and I've stuck with it.”

Not all students felt discouraged. Some students specifically mentioned their adviser was supportive. Erin, a third-year student in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, stated, “I just feel in general that they've been very supportive of everything that I choose to do. I

feel like they can't play a mother role in the sense that they're going to cheer you on but at the same time they're going to try and lead you in the right direction.”

Many students described the role and purpose of academic advising as scheduling classes and understanding degree requirements. When asked about the kinds of things she discusses with an academic adviser, Olivia, a first-year student in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications responded, “just a lot of class scheduling. I think literally every time I've come in it's been for scheduling.” Adrienne, a third-year student in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications said, “I brought all of my papers that [the previous adviser] had given me, like different types of plans, different classes, everything that I can take...and [my adviser] sat down with me the first day and looked at everything and said, so what do you need my help with?...you have everything organized.” John, a fourth-year student in the College of Agricultural Sciences, said, “I probably check in with my advisor at least once a semester to look over [my schedule] to make sure I'm on the right track for classes for the next semester.”

Academic advisers, administrators, and college websites also indicated educational planning as a primary focus of academic advising. When asked about expectations of students, Emma, an academic adviser in the College of Agricultural Sciences said, “I think that having them be prepared, or even if they don't know what they need to take, at least prepared with the appropriate questions.” This response implies that students should be thinking about courses to take or ask questions around course planning. The advising administrator in the College of Agricultural Sciences said advisers do “everything from working with NSO, to transfer courses, to helping with scheduling. And then we have faculty advisers in every unit that step sometimes into that role. It depends on how comfortable they are with the new degree audit system.” This response focuses on the mechanics of education planning, orienting students to the systems and

requirements through NSO, understanding how transfer courses meet requirements, and scheduling class. The logistics of navigating academic requirements can be difficult since some faculty advisers are not familiar with the electronic tools used to manage degree requirements. The advising administrator in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications expects students to have, "...informed questions, an awareness of what their academic requirements are, the ability to use technology to identify what they need or what they have questions on, and to not miss appointments." The advising syllabus for the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications states that advisers can help students: build skills for academic success; make course selections; choose majors, minors, and certificates; plan education abroad; and meet requirements for graduation (Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, 2020). The College of Agricultural Sciences "Find an Adviser" website also adds that academic advisers can help students find opportunities for intellectual and personal growth as well as identify and plan an academic program (College of Agricultural Sciences, 2022c). Some students and academic advisers view academic advising as mechanical, focusing on the information and logistical needs of education planning.

Scheduling and understanding degree requirements are only part of the broader university policy on advising. The university policy also includes objectives such as promoting intellectual discovery, articulating the value of higher education, and becoming self-directed learners (University Faculty Senate, 2019a). Policy indicates the role and purpose of advising is more complex than simply scheduling classes and making academic choices. Balancing the details of the institutional system and curricular requirements as well as understanding the nuance of each student's needs and experiences makes the role of academic advising unique from other roles on campus. However, advising systems did not support this goal. If academic advisers and students

see the primary purpose of academic advising to schedule courses, then that is how they will focus time during their meeting. Charlotte said, “I think that's how you have to be successful in this because you are dealing with so many details, the details of the individual student and what makes them who they are, and what they're doing, but then also the details of being accurate with credit counts and courses and substitutions of class numbers.” If other objectives, such as intellectual discovery, are not a focus for students or advisers, they are not likely to take steps to reach this objective.

Differences across Advising Models

After reviewing students’ experiences with academic advising across both models, in this section I highlight differences in students’ experience in each advising model. Two primary differences are noted. First, the decentralized advising model in the College of Agricultural Sciences relies on faculty advisers with disciplinary knowledge of the program in which the student is studying. Faculty advisers’ specialized knowledge has benefits and challenges for students. Second, the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications relies on a smaller and centralized team, which appears to be more affected by high adviser turnover.

Since the relationship between academic adviser and student is central, it is important to note that the average advising roster varies dramatically between the two colleges. At the time of data collection, the average advising roster in the College of Agricultural Sciences was 115 students. In the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, the average advising roster was 373 students. At the time of data collection, the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications had an open academic adviser position. When this position was filled, advising rosters would be lower, but still much higher than in the College of Agricultural Sciences.

Decentralized Model

Academic advisers in the decentralized model were faculty members and those with staff positions. Many department-based advisers were faculty with disciplinary expertise in the program their advisees were studying. This special expertise was helpful for students. In one department, the academic adviser said, “I created a mentor program and now they [faculty members] are their [students’] secondary advisers. That way they come to me for anything academic. Career related, they go to their mentors.” Other departments used a faculty adviser model, while others primarily had staff advisers. Faculty have expertise in discipline-specific career planning and graduate programs, but also in connecting students to a broader network for research opportunities. For example, Stephanie, a low socioeconomic student, said that her faculty adviser was “able to tell me, oh there's this other person...he might have a better idea of who you can talk to. And they actually...got me into the research that I had to do for Schreyer [Honors College] that's related to the industry that I'm going to be going into.”

Advisers and administrators recognized the challenges of having students work directly with faculty members. Some realized that institutional rules and requirements involved too much information for faculty advisers to want to manage. Isabella, an assistant teaching professor who holds the advising responsibilities for one department, said, “I certainly want our students to have contact with other faculty...who were teaching their courses and doing related research...because it's just a great resource for them to get to know those folks. On the other hand, there are certain parts of advising that I think are really a lot to expect everybody to know about, I mean, just all the rules, the policies...” Kate, a staff adviser in a department in the College of Agricultural Sciences said, “Yes, they [faculty members] can advise...students if they want, but typically they’ll leave it to us to be the face of any advising questions.”

Several student participants in the College of Agricultural Sciences selected their major based on long-term graduate school goals. Working with an academic adviser with direct experience in this area was considered valuable by students who were preparing for a specialized graduate program. Allison said, "...making sure that we have all those specific requirements that adhere to all the requirements that are listed on the grad school pages, and then more of a guidance for how to go about looking for grad schools." However, this specialized knowledge left gaps in understanding other programs and goals if students shifted their goals away from a specialized graduate program or wanted to incorporate other components into their education. For example, Laura shared, "I guess the way that I wish he could help a little more is that he only has his background, and he doesn't know a ton of information about the other options..." While Laura is a student from a higher socioeconomic background, my previous findings indicated that some students in lower socioeconomic groups relied on academic advisers to provide direction. For example, Allison, a student from a mid-socioeconomic background, shared, "at one point in my career, I wanted to get a business minor and he gave me one example of this guy that wasn't very successful, so then I was like, Okay, well, I probably shouldn't do that." Guiding students to other disciplines requires knowledge of other programs. If advisers do not know as much about other areas of study, this could disadvantage students from a lower socioeconomic background. Stephanie, from a low socioeconomic background, reported, "there was a point where he was not very supportive, but after they got to know me, they had a better idea of how to help, that I was worth helping." Advisers with more general knowledge may better support students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in gathering information and making decisions around academic choices. In some cases, faculty advisers did not have the breadth of knowledge needed to meet students' changing goals and plans.

Centralized Model

Academic advising in the centralized model relied on a small team of staff. As a result of a small team and a short career ladder, academic advisers were leaving the college frequently. Of the five advisers in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications at the time of data collection, two advisers had one year of experience or less in academic advising. The advising office also had one open academic adviser position that was actively being filled. This implies that three academic advisers had left in the last year. With a target of six advisers, half of the academic advising team was replaced in one year. The high turnover rate of advising staff resulted in higher advising rosters as students were redistributed to other academic advisers.

Many students and academic advisers talked about the challenges around high adviser turnover. Sara, a fourth-year student, shared, “I switched advisers and then she was really great. But then she got pregnant and left. So, I switched advisers again and then she left.” Ashley mentioned she worked with an academic adviser who provided helpful information, “...but then my adviser left the college.” Erin shared, “I’m on my third adviser in three years which is a little crazy.” High turnover of advising staff was felt by all students in the College.

Part of the challenge of high adviser turnover is the limited opportunities for staff positions to advance or gain new experiences. Evelyn, an academic adviser with 20 years of experience, shared that high turnover of academic advising staff is common in other parts of the university. Evelyn claimed, “a lot of advisors get bored or stuck in that same position.” The career ladder for academic advisers is limited. Evelyn continued, “you either go...up to the 4th level and then after that you have to go into administration.” Students reported advisers left for other positions or to take family leave.

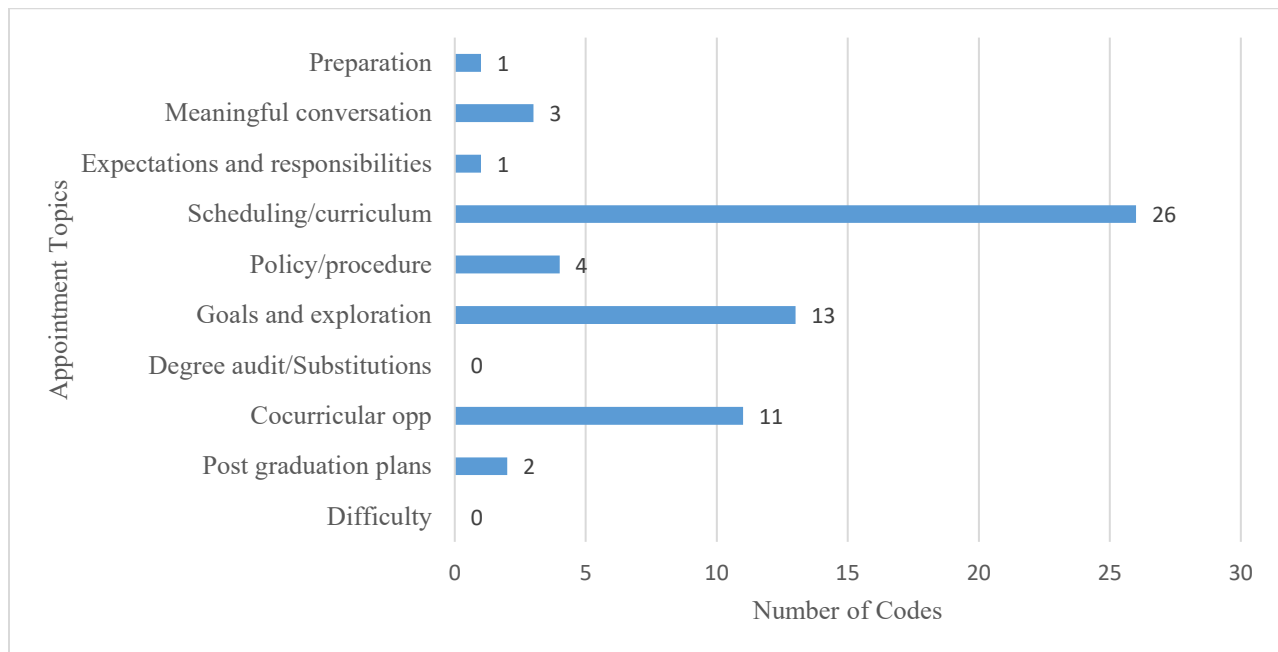
Academic Advising across Socioeconomic Status

Previous research indicates student socioeconomic status leads to differences in the purpose of academic advising, expectations for advisers, the role of families in educational decision-making, and how a student approaches and navigates institutional resources such as academic advising. Therefore, I focus on these topics in this section by discussing socioeconomic status. I grouped student interviews by each student's socioeconomic status: high, mid, and low. Then I examined interview codes in each group to align to topics in previous research. My findings support previous research. One important difference across socioeconomic status is the disparities in academic advising across the multi-campus system. This difference affects students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Purposes of Academic Advising

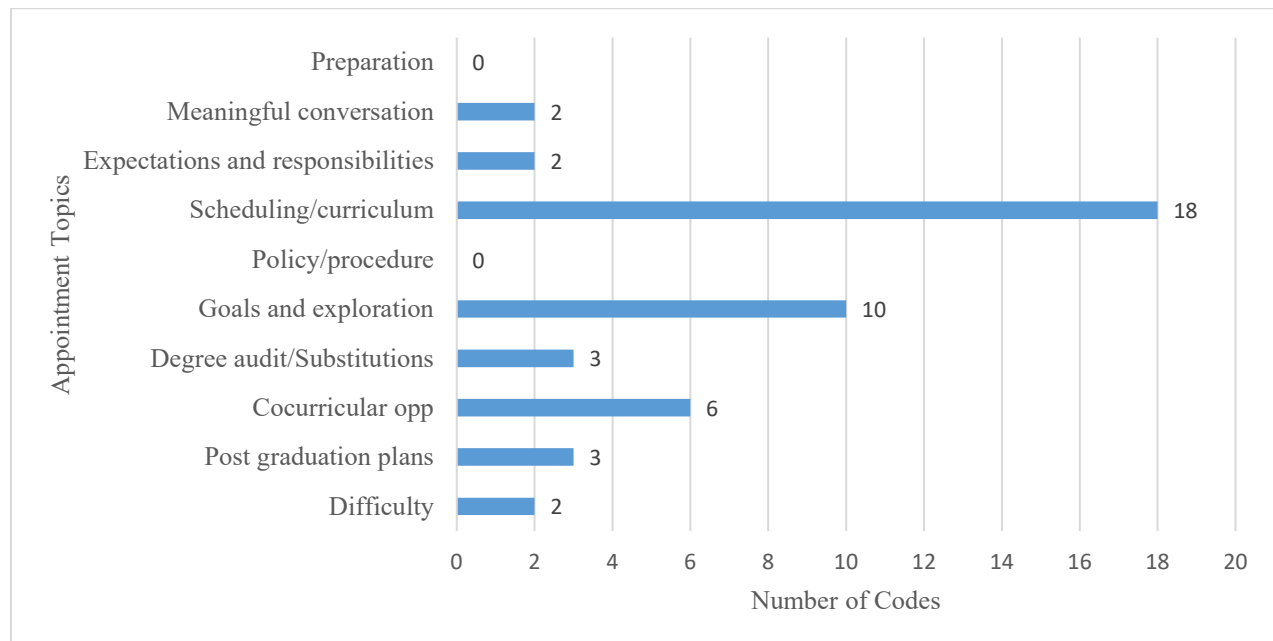
My initial assumption was that students from different socioeconomic backgrounds may meet with academic advisers for different reasons. However, in this study, the reasons for meeting with an academic adviser were similar for all students I interviewed. Each appointment topic was coded during analysis of each interview transcript. The distribution of these codes based on students' socioeconomic status across appointment topics is included in the following figures. Figure 4 shows the number of codes for appointment topics for students in the high socioeconomic group. Figure 5 shows the number of codes for appointment topics for students in the mid-socioeconomic group. Figure 6 shows the number of codes for appointment topics for students in the low socioeconomic group.

Figure 4: *Number of Codes for Appointment Topics for Students in the High Socioeconomic Status Across Both Colleges*



More students from high socioeconomic backgrounds mentioned co-curricular opportunities than the mid-socioeconomic status or low-socioeconomic status students. These co-curricular opportunities include plans for learning outside of the classroom such as research experiences, internships, and study abroad programs. Students in the high socioeconomic group asked advisers for letters of recommendation, assistance in finding jobs and research opportunities, and study abroad programs. Students from mid-socioeconomic backgrounds also shared their experiences with academic advisers on finding researching, exploring study abroad programs, and fraternity/sorority life. Students in the low socioeconomic group mentioned co-curricular opportunities less frequently than did students in the other two groups. One student mentioned their adviser helped them to get a job off campus. Another student reported that their academic adviser shared information on special college career and internship programs and etiquette dinners.

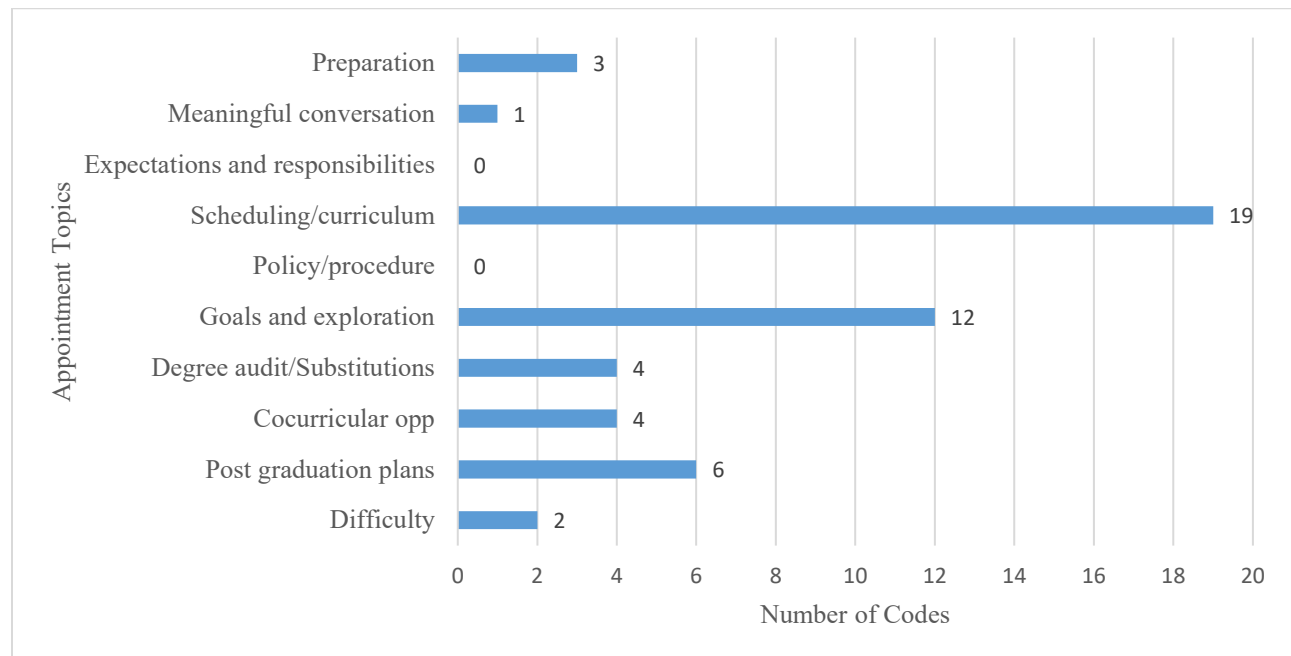
Figure 5: *Number of Codes for Appointment Topics for Students in the Mid-Socioeconomic Group Across Both Colleges*



Other appointment topics included degree audit and course substitutions, discussion of goals and exploration, and expectations and responsibilities.

Only students in the high socioeconomic status group reported seeking help from an academic adviser on policy and procedural issues. Policy and procedure topics included discussion of withdrawal, adding minors, navigating illness, and Faculty Senate petitions for exceptions to policy. Expectations and responsibilities were only mentioned by students in high and mid-socioeconomic statuses. Included in the appointment topic “expectations and responsibilities” category, students shared the importance of having an adviser help them navigate change and helping students understand what to expect from their future such as in graduate school. All other categories were mentioned by all groups of students. It is important to note that these topics were experienced in very low numbers, so more research into these topics across socioeconomic groups is important.

Figure 6: *The Number of Codes for Appointment Topics for Students in the Lower Socioeconomic Group Across Both Colleges*



Across these appointment topics, students from low and mid-socioeconomic status groups mentioned seeking help from an academic adviser during times of academic difficulty. This was mentioned by one student as a topic that academic advisers could help with, although the student reported had not talked to an adviser about this. Another student shared that past academic difficulty had caused an adjustment to future course scheduling. Megan said, “I went to him a few times about scheduling classes because I had a rough last semester. I dropped a few. I wasn't doing that well. So, I met with him a few times to tweak my schedule.” This student did not necessarily talk to her adviser about resolving the difficulty in a course but more the effect of that difficulty and late dropping on her overall plans.

Expectations for Academic Advisers

When asked about their expectations for academic advisers, students generally expected academic advisers to be nice, organized, and prepared. Several students, across all

socioeconomic status groups, used the term “guide” when talking about the role of academic advisers. When asked about their expectations for academic advisers, students in all socioeconomic status groups reported they expect their adviser to be knowledgeable about degree requirements. For example, Sara said, “I expect them to understand all of the programs that the college offers.” Adrienne said, “I expect that she knows what I have to meet as requirements.” Olivia said, “I expect probably something like a decent knowledge, obviously, on the majors within the college, but maybe some common minors or double majors within other colleges that people tend to take within that college.”

Students in the high socioeconomic status group also mentioned the expectation that academic advisers provide special insight or information. For example, Laura said, “I always ask for his advice on certain electives...to see if he knows anything about them or about specific professors. So, I usually run my intended schedule by him and see if he has any suggestions for classes that might be better...” Sara reported “I felt like they had insight that maybe I wouldn't have.” Monica reported she expects her adviser to “...provide any valuable insights” to her plans.

Students in the mid-socioeconomic status group reported they expected their academic adviser to be knowledgeable about their programs, requirements, and available opportunities. Two students specifically mentioned that academic advisers should open doors. David said, advisers should, “open doors for me instead of like, sticking to the rules and shutting me down.” Allison said, “I would think an adviser should be opening these doors for you for different opportunities.” These two students expect academic advisers to share and make available opportunities and help students to navigate policies and procedures.

Beyond the general statements about knowledge of degree requirements and being prepared to answer questions, students in the low socioeconomic status group reported they expected their adviser to provide direction. When asked about expectations for her academic adviser, Stephanie said, “Direction. I guess an idea of where to look if I haven’t figured it out already.” Similarly, Megan reported, “So they helped sort of guide me to find something that I could study, where I’m not just sitting around waiting for something to fall into my lap.” These students expect active exploration activities from academic advisers.

Role of Families in Educational Decision-Making

According to previous research, families play different roles in academic advising and educational decisions depending on their socioeconomic background. My research supports these previous findings. In this study, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported little involvement of families in educational decision-making. Many students in the mid and high socioeconomic groups reported more family involvement, including by parents and siblings. Students in these groups reported that family members helped to identify resources and opportunities on campus.

Family involvement was limited according to students in the low socioeconomic status. When students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were asked about the role their family has played in their educational decisions, they used phrases such as “none,” “supportive,” and “sounding board.” Ashley said, “they [her family] usually trust me to know the best course for what I want to do.” Stephanie shared, “...they just kind of stand back and let me do my thing here.” Kaitlin articulated the challenge of being first-generation, “I don’t think that she [mother] realizes sometimes just how hard college can be and how much time and effort I have to put into it.”

Within the mid-socioeconomic group, students reported a range of family involvement. Erin reported an older sister who was helpful in decision-making, "...my sister actually went here so...she helped me a lot with that and kind of planned out what I should be doing." Allison reported that her parents took an active role in helping her to stay on track and be aware of resources. "They've always made sure that I'm on track...I keep meeting with my adviser and keeping up with scholarships and with grad school. They are a support system as well. They send me updates. They're on the parents' council for Penn State. For example, my mother did a webinar about the library. So, she was like, oh did you know that the library has a one button studio, and I did know that," Allison said. Some students also reported parents met with advisers and contacted the university on their behalf. For example, Shannon reported that her parents attended her first meeting with her adviser, "I also brought my parents in to meet with them so they can get an idea what to expect when I first transferred here and when I graduate." Although, not all students in the mid-socioeconomic group reported high family involvement. Student also used phrases such as "sit back and support me," "not much," and "it's your responsibility to figure it out."

By contrast, for many of the student participants in the high socioeconomic group, parents and families played an important role in making academic decisions. When explaining the role their family plays in her decisions, Laura said, "they're just kind of there and I run everything by both of my parents before I do anything." Laura reported both parents helped find opportunities and resources, "My mother's a librarian. She'll do a lot of research for me looking into things and then my dad is a professor at Penn State, so he also knows some resources." Monica shared, "I know that I can ask, really any one of my family for advice, too, on anything, and they're happy to provide it as well." Parents were also involved when things did not go well.

Olivia reported that her mother joined the Penn State Parents Council after she shared "...issues that I've had with different parts of Penn State, she kind of wanted to jump in in that way."

Parents and family members in the high socioeconomic group were said to be involved with their students' choices and the institution.

Parents of the high socioeconomic students also encouraged connection with an academic adviser and coached students on the questions or topics to bring up in advising appointments. For example, Jessica shared, "they [her parents] always encouraged me to talk to my advisers. My mother all the time will be like, you should talk to your adviser, go talk to your adviser, go talk to your adviser." Abby reported help from her father in learning about intended majors and in preparing for a conversation with her adviser. "When I told him I was interested in [a major], he asked me to ask my adviser how many students are in [the major]. Does Penn State devote enough resources to it since it's so much smaller than a lot of other majors? That was a good point." Abby went on to say, "they just wanted me to think it all through and ask all the right questions." Jessica shared a similar experience, "since she [my mother] has a science background...she thinks of things I should ask my advisers that I would never have thought of myself." Students also reported important support and encouragement from their families. Olivia reported, "My dad was like you can do better than that...you can push yourself. He encouraged me to really talk to an adviser."

Not all students in the high socioeconomic group reported high family involvement in academic planning. Monica reported that her parents did not play an active role in her decision-making. "My parents, they could care less. As long as I'm doing something, and I'm not living at home until I'm 35. They're like, go ahead, do what you want." So not all students in the high

socioeconomic group experienced high levels of family involvement in connecting with academic advisers or in their educational decisions.

Approaching and Navigating Institutional Resources

One final area of variation across socioeconomic status was in how students of different backgrounds found information. First-generation students, according to previous research, often take an independent approach (Jury et al., 2017). They tended to solve problems on their own instead of seeking resources. The students from low socioeconomic status in this study reported taking an independent approach to an extent, but they also took steps to find information and people resources they needed. When asked how she first knew when and how to meet with an adviser, Ashley reported, “I think I got an email from the college...they usually send out during the first week when their drop-in hours are and then after that they say like after this first week if you want to talk to your adviser for an extended time go to Starfish. I think I ended up just Googling what Starfish was.... I'm not sure if it's too late to ask anyone without looking weird, so it was just a lot of research on my own.” Students from all socioeconomic backgrounds reported using internet searches for information.

Students in the low socioeconomic status reported navigating the system to find people who were most helpful. For example, according to Stephanie, “it doesn't necessarily matter whether or not they have an assigned adviser. They'll go to who they associate would be the most helpful with their [area of study].” This pattern was true for other students as well. Max reports, “I had reached out to advisers to find out what the difference was between direct transfer and just a general education course. It was a very complicated concept that I had to make some phone calls and emails.” Another example of navigating the system comes from Megan. “I looked up

the College of Agricultural Sciences. I was trying to find someone to talk to, so I just looked her up. I saw her email and I just emailed her through outlook,” Megan said.

Students in the higher socioeconomic group reported working to find the information they sought. For example, to find an experiential learning experience for a minor, Abby shared, “I was doing a bunch of random Google searches to be honest...I was just looking, desperately looking for something because I had no plan as to how I was going to go about that.” When trying to connect to her academic adviser, Abby reports, “I know if I call this number, they’ll send me to whoever I’m really supposed to be talking to.”

Students in the mid-socioeconomic group shared that they also received communication that helped guide their actions. In response to a question of how advising worked in the college, John responded, “I’m not entirely sure. All I know is I have one [adviser] that emails me regularly about different things. And I always just schedule an appointment with her.” Some students also described encouragement from a family member to see an academic adviser. For example, Erin said, “my mother was always like go to your academic adviser, make sure you’re utilizing everything you have on campus.” Allison shared that creating and submitting an academic plan for the Honors College encouraged an early meeting with an academic adviser, “I think because of Schreyer [honors college], honestly, because they really pushed the meeting with your adviser right off the bat with especially the Schreyer plan.”

Students in the mid-socioeconomic status group also reported taking initiative to find information, resources, and opportunities. For example, David contacted a faculty member to inquire about research opportunities, “I emailed him before class ever started. And I just said, I want to do research as a freshman.” In another example, Shannon reported, “I did do research ahead of time to see what the major is, what the classes are like.” When asked if someone

directed her to that research, Shannon replied, “I didn’t really need anyone.” These two students appeared to initiate the action on their own without prompting from others.

Academic Advisers Knowledge of Socioeconomic Background

Academic adviser participants indicated they did not always know or think about pertinent information such as socioeconomic status when preparing and meeting with students. Some scholars (Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Roksa & Kinsley, 2019; Traxler, 2009) have urged that academic advisers be aware of class-based influences on student behavior. Some advisers were aware that students engage with the academic system differently but did not acknowledge the underlying reasons for this disparity. For example, Isabella said, “...some students are naturally figuring out what works for them and really take advantage of everything that's here. And others are either just less familiar with how the whole process works or just by their nature they're kind of more independent. Unless something becomes an issue then we don't hear from them.” When asked about information needed about the student during an advising appointment, many advisers did not include socioeconomic characteristics such as family income, parental education, and parental employment. Demographic characteristics associated with socioeconomic background often only arose during the interview when specifically asked about socioeconomic factors. This pattern was evident for academic advisers in both academic colleges.

When socioeconomic influences were mentioned during interviews with academic advisers, it was most often as it related to financial challenges such as issues with paying the tuition bill, meeting student aid criteria, or buying textbooks. For example, Willow said, “It's usually the money is impacting the academics.” Financial challenges are most likely to directly influence academic actions. For example, nonpayment of the tuition bill results in a hold on a

student's record preventing many academic actions such as late drop or scheduling courses for the future semester. For students on federal student aid, there is a requirement that students complete 67% of credits attempted during an academic year. These financial criteria sometimes drive conversations around late drop. Willow shared that, "they're [students] in that 67% [completion rate required for federal financial aid] ...I say before you decide to do this for the semester, do you know if you get any financial aid. And they're like yes...Then you need to talk to whomever pays your bill and the student aid office before you do any of this."

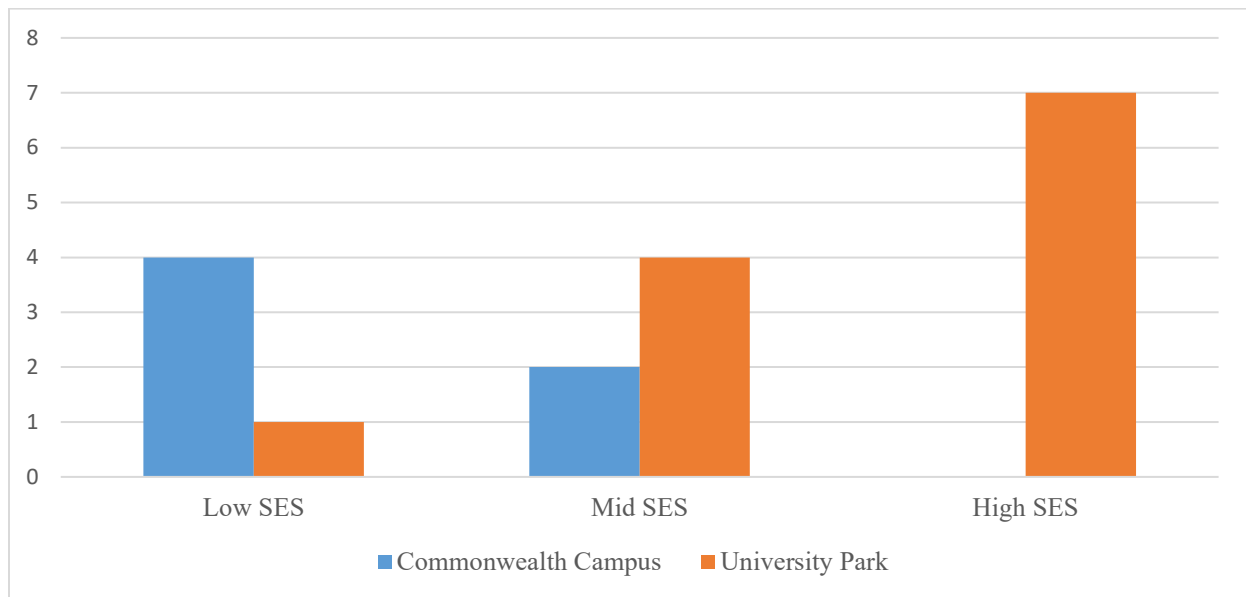
Financial challenges also affected academic success, which sometimes came up during advising meetings. Discussion of missing academic supplies and resources, such as textbooks, often arose during conversations around academic difficulty as students are less likely to be successful in classes when they do not have the required materials. However, information on socioeconomic factors is not readily available or commonly discussed in advising appointments, at least for participants in this study. Charlotte shared, "if the student's really struggling and they have to essentially leave the University or take a break or are looking for scholarships they sometimes provide that information. You know, 'my dad just lost his job and I really need help paying for this' or 'I don't get support from my parents on this,' so that's how I typically find out if there is something along those lines but again it's not very detailed."

Navigating the Multi-Campus System

One important difference in advising for students across socioeconomic statuses was the transition from one campus to another. In this study, students in lower socioeconomic statuses were more likely to have begun at a campus other than University Park when compared to student participants in mid and high socioeconomic groups. Of the five student participants classified as low socioeconomic status, four started college at a campus other than University

Park. Two students classified as mid-socioeconomic status started at a Commonwealth Campus; no students in the high socioeconomic group reported starting at a Commonwealth Campus, see Figure 7.

Figure 7: *Campus of Admission by Student Socioeconomic Status for All Student Participants*



This pattern aligns with information about overall university enrollment. Penn State does not publish enrollment data by socioeconomic status, but does provide enrollment data for first-generation students, defined as students whose parents had not completed college. In fall 2019 (during the same time data was collected for this study), University Park enrolled 8,331 students, 15% of whom are first-generation. At the same time, non-University Park campuses enrolled 7,395 first time undergraduate students, 41% of whom were first-generation students (Office for Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research, 2020). The university-wide data supports the pattern observed in this study, that first-generation students are more likely to begin at a campus other than University Park. It is important to note that not all students who enroll at a non-University Park campus will transition to University Park to complete their degree. Many students begin and complete their degree at a campus other than the University Park campus.

Students primarily in the low socioeconomic group shared challenges around advising when navigating the transition to University Park. All students in the College of Agricultural Sciences voiced challenges with academic advising at another campus. For example, Kaitlin reported, “he knew that I wanted to be [intended major] and [he was] advising me, so I feel like he should have been more aware of what I needed.” Students also reported little communication and cohesion between their initial campus and University Park. David said, “I think [the reason] I started off [with a] very poor experience, unfortunately, in the beginning is because I think there's a disconnect with some of the commonwealth campuses and what... classes are required... when you go into advising, you have a science advisor, and their requirements are much different.” David implied that he received incorrect information on courses required. Stephanie reported, “My adviser at [campus] had no idea what he was doing when it came to the College of Agricultural Sciences because I was the only freshman that was in Ag at Penn State [campus].”

No obstacles related to change of campus and the transition to University Park were mentioned by students in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications. Max was the only student participant in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications who started at another campus and Max’s experience was positive. Max shared, “when I got here, my first experience with an adviser was...the day when branch campus students can come up and meet an adviser and get acquainted with the campus.” Max went on to share, “And then, a very few short weeks later, I got an email from another adviser here at University Park that I had been assigned to...and I've met with her two or three times since I've been here.” Max felt it was easy to get connected with a new adviser at his new campus.

Campus of admission did have an impact on initial academic advising experiences and, in some cases, negatively impacted academic progress. Initial campus seemed to negatively impact students enrolled in the College of Agricultural Sciences more than the student in the Bellisario College of Communications. This may be due to other factors such as the sample of student participants in this study or the different curricula across these two colleges. In this study, there were more student participants who had changed their campus in the College of Agricultural Science than in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications. Of the student participants in this study, five change of campus participants were enrolled in the College of Agricultural Sciences and one student was enrolled in the Bellisario College of Communications. This disparity in experiences may be based on this imbalance of change of campus participants across academic colleges used in this study. These colleges also had very different academic requirements, which could exacerbate advising challenges for students in majors with more rigid requirements and less flexibility. These majors often require linear sequencing of courses that could require more careful planning. Students who transition to University Park may be out of sequence for required courses and so require catching up on class work in the summer. Taking extra courses leads to additional financial expense and potentially more time to degree completion. Some students mentioned either taking courses they did not need or not taking courses important to the required course sequencing. For example, Kaitlin reported, “he just kind of advised me to take classes that I didn't actually need. I was supposed to be coming down here [University Park] last spring. My adviser when I got into my [major], she was like, no, you had to have taken these three classes in order to be able to come down last spring.” Kaitlin was missing a course that delayed her change of campus to University Park. Kaitlin said, “so I was supposed to be able to do early change of campus.... but I was missing one course.” Course

sequencing issues and taking extra courses is less likely to be an issue for students in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications as these majors are more flexible and rely less on linear course sequences. The advising administrator in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications said, “we have a more simple curriculum than a lot of academic colleges because the prereqs [prerequisites] we have are not an overwhelming amount and are not complicated for a student to understand.”

While students from low and mid-socioeconomic backgrounds experienced challenges with advising at another campus, these were not challenges for students in the high socioeconomic status group. All participants from high socioeconomic backgrounds started at the University Park campus. Given that most students in this study from a low socioeconomic background were initially admitted and attended another campus, these challenges disproportionately affected their academic progress. This is an important difference across socioeconomic status and academic advising structure. Academic advising at non-University Park campuses is undoubtedly important to the overall education experience and for timely degree completion, but advising at other campuses was not part of my dissertation research. Future research should investigate academic advising across campuses further.

Students’ reports about their experiences across the academic advising models used by the two colleges suggest both benefits and challenges of either model. The decentralized model in the College of Agricultural Sciences included faculty advisers with specialized knowledge in their respective disciplines. However, this was a challenge for students whose goals changed. Students in the centralized advising model in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications were able to access any academic adviser, but they reported challenges in building ongoing relationships with advisers due to high adviser turnover.

My research confirmed previous research on socioeconomic status and academic advising on purposes for meeting with an adviser, the role of academic advising, and the role of families in educational decision-making. While the primary reason for meeting with an academic adviser was for scheduling of courses and understanding degree requirements, there is some nuance in the topics discussed with academic advisers across socioeconomic status. Moreover, students viewed the role of an academic adviser differently across socioeconomic status. Students from a higher socioeconomic status reported that advisers held special information and insight. Students from the mid-socioeconomic group reported that academic advisers should provide access to opportunities. Students from the low socioeconomic group reported that academic advisers should provide direction. Finally, the role of parents and families is consistent with previous research, indicating parents and families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more involved with students' decision-making when compared to parents and families of lower socioeconomic standing.

Two important themes related to students' socioeconomic status were the lack of recognition of students' background characteristics by academic advisers, and challenges around change of campus for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Most academic advisers in this study did not always inquire into or incorporate background information as a routine part of their meetings with students. Clues about socioeconomic status most often came into the advising conversation when students had challenges around paying their bill, scheduling courses, and academic difficulty. Differences in students' experiences in different advising models were apparent in changes of campus. It is not clear if this difference is based on the number of students in this sample who change their campus in each academic college or if the challenges

around advising at separate campuses pertain more to the curricular differences between these colleges. Implications of these findings will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Informed by the perspectives of three conceptual frameworks, this research examined student characteristics and structures in academic advising. First, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and habitus can be useful to illuminate the role of socioeconomic status on students' experiences in higher education. Second, Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome model can be useful in connecting student background to the higher education environment and educational objectives. Third, structuration theory provides a framework to understand how structures within institutions constrain adviser and student behaviors.

After considering the insights of each perspective, my thesis has used a case study approach to examine two different academic advising models at one institution. I interviewed students, academic advisers, and administrators within each advising model to understand students' experiences with academic advising. I also examined student experience across socioeconomic status. In addition to interviews, I undertook a document analysis of publicly available information on academic advising in each academic college. My research sought to illuminate how students' expectations and needs for academic advising vary across the two advising models of two different units. My research further investigated how student engagement varies by socioeconomic status within each of these two advising models.

In this chapter, I summarize key findings on each of these topics and I highlight two findings that emerged from the data. The first finding is that systemic barriers prevent implementation of the institution's academic advising policy. As a result of these systemic limitations, students reported challenges with academic advising. A second finding is that advising models limited relationship building between students and advisers. Once I discuss these findings, I address the difficulties around changing advising structures. Then I provide recommendations for academic advising practice and future research.

Key findings

The students whom I interviewed reported that their academic advisers were knowledgeable, welcoming, and supportive. For example, Kate said, "... the advisers were the only people who were helping me [enter a major], so I am forever grateful to them." Students value the knowledge and welcoming environment when working with an academic adviser as it often leads to a trusting relationship. Erin said, "I feel that anytime I've told her what's going on in my mind, she's always been there to support me and tell me everything's going to be okay..." Monica said, "I've only ever felt very supported by my advising staff, and that includes my minor advisers, too. They're always happy to answer my emails or any questions that I have."

Most students, advisers, administrators, and available documents described the role and purpose of academic advising as scheduling classes and communicating about degree requirements. However, scheduling and communicating degree requirements are only parts of the university policy on advising. The policy also includes other objectives such as promoting intellectual discovery, articulating the value of higher education, and becoming self-directed learners (University Faculty Senate, 2019a). By primarily describing academic advising as scheduling, it is not clear that academic advising practice is implemented in a way that meets all of the goals identified by the Faculty Senate.

Some students I interviewed reported that they felt discouraged by their academic adviser. In some cases, my interviewees wanted to add on a minor only to hear reasons why they should not add the minor. In other cases, students wanted to take a course for a particular program or take a more challenging course, only to be discouraged or dissuaded against it. Students who shared these reports were enrolled in both colleges and from diverse backgrounds, so no clear patterns were observed.

Examining student experiences across advising models can highlight the benefits and challenges of each model. The Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications has one centralized office with staff academic advisers. The College of Agricultural Sciences' advising model is decentralized, with academic advising responsibilities assigned to faculty and staff within individual departments. Specialized disciplinary knowledge of faculty advisers in the College of Agricultural Sciences was a benefit for students as they planned to meet future goals. However, this specialized knowledge was a challenge for students who were exploring other goals and plans. In the centralized advising model in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, students could meet with any academic adviser, but they reported challenges in building relationships due to the apparently high turnover of advising staff. Advisers noted large advising rosters as a barrier to remembering students.

This study was motivated by previous research showing that academic advising was not meeting the needs of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The results of this study support previous findings, but they also challenge some previous findings. Students across all socioeconomic statuses met with advisers for generally the same reasons. However, some differences across socioeconomic statuses were also evident. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds reported seeking special insight from advisers to implement their academic plans. Students in the mid-socioeconomic group expected academic advisers to “open doors” to opportunities and act as advocates for students. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported needing help in identifying plans.

The kinds of topics discussed in an advising meeting, as reported by students, were similar across all socioeconomic groups. The most common appointment topics (scheduling courses and understanding the curriculum, goals and exploration, and co-curricular

opportunities) were consistently important across all three socioeconomic groups. However, only students in the high socioeconomic group mentioned working with an academic adviser on policy and procedural issues. The only students to mention working with an academic adviser on difficulty in a course were in the mid and low socioeconomic groups. The topics students reported discussing during meetings with advisers are similar.

Student participants in this study reported patterns of family involvement found in previous research. The role families played in educational decision-making also varied by socioeconomic status, but this was not always the case. Students from high socioeconomic groups reported more family involvement in decision making and in using academic resources, such as academic advising. Students in the low socioeconomic group often described their family's role as supportive but passive. Students in the mid-socioeconomic group described very active family involvement in their decision making as well as a more hands-off approach, a mix of the experiences described by students in the other two socioeconomic groups.

Students in each socioeconomic group described learning about academic advising differently. Students in the high socioeconomic group often reported that their parents encouraged meeting with an adviser. Higher socioeconomic parents sometimes made recommendations on topics to discuss and questions to ask. Students in the low socioeconomic group referred to email communication that directed them to information on how to access academic advising. Students from the mid-socioeconomic group had parents and family members encouraging meetings with an academic adviser, but also described using general communication for an academic adviser to inform their connection with academic advising.

Beyond previous research, two important findings related to student socioeconomic status and academic advising emerged from my observations. First, academic advisers reported that

they did not always incorporate background information about students into their advising practices. Information about socioeconomic status usually came up during the advising meeting around the effect of financial challenges on scheduling courses or when academic difficulty led to discussions around late drop and repeating courses. Second, there were disparities between the advising models in how students experienced changing campuses. Students in the low socioeconomic group in the College of Agricultural Sciences noted challenges in academic advising received at their previous campus of enrollment. These students reported challenges getting accurate information at their previous campus or missing important curricular information needed to make normal degree progress. This disparity adds challenge to timely completion of a degree. Challenges were only cited by students in the College of Agricultural Sciences. This experience was unique even when compared to students in the low socioeconomic group in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications.

Systemic Constraints on Academic Advising

Institutional systems and structures created challenges for students. Students and academic advisers identified organizational barriers that limited effective academic advising. These barriers include high adviser turnover, large advising rosters, other professional responsibilities, and the multi-campus system. Both colleges had evidence of some of these barriers. Institutional systems may replicate differences in cultural capital while purporting to improve equity. These systems should be examined carefully.

High adviser turnover in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications was cited as a challenge by academic advisers and students. Evelyn said, “Advisers are supposed to be their [students’] support. When it’s a new person it’s like, do I trust this person.” In another case, Abby described the challenge in working with a new academic adviser, “I’d already had this

established relationship with an adviser. And I knew I wanted to do maybe economics or sociology. And then my second adviser [said], you have to go back to the reflection state of why are you in college. It was more treating me like I was back at my first semester...and that was really frustrating.” Despite research (Yenney, 2020) that recommends retaining advisers to maintain consistency for students, it is not clear that a concerted effort to retain academic advisers was happening in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications. Factors across the institution, such as inconsistencies in advising positions and competition for higher level positions, likely contribute to these challenges.

High staff turnover is a complex problem, but it was not directly studied as part of this research. As Evelyn shared, frequent openings in academic advising positions are common in other parts of the university even though it only appeared as a challenge in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications in this study. Academic advisers move across the institution because there is variation in the level at which academic advisers are hired. One college or campus might hire an applicant for an academic advising position at a level 2 while another college might hire that same applicant at a level 4. This results in the movement of staff from one unit to another within the institution. Some colleges and campuses are constantly hiring and training staff. Adviser turnover has likely changed since this data was collected because of the COVID pandemic.

Large advising rosters also constrain the extent to which an academic adviser can get to know students. Sophia recounted, “You try to connect them to resources, to other faculty, to try to get that resume built but when they leave here...you have to...let it go--you must because there's another student coming through the door.” Willow said, “I just can't know all 400 [students on her roster]. I just can't.” Students shared similar challenges. When talking about the

experience of a friend, Stephanie shared, “She [said] I go to see my adviser probably twice a semester to make sure that my schedule is set up and okay except he doesn't remember me because he has so many advisees.”

Other professional responsibilities also impact time and knowledge needed to build relationships with students. Mike shared, “I do have scheduled appointments because of the number of responsibilities I wield. I wish I could have set office hours, but it’s really contingent on what I do that week.” Beyond time, other professional responsibilities take away from learning the strategies or information necessary to be a successful academic adviser. Megan shared, “I’ve had some people at my branch campus. They were biology majors, and their adviser was a math professor. There were odd things like that.”

One instance where this study shows socioeconomic differences in advising experience is for students who started at another campus. This discrepancy may not be a result of the advising structure at the University Park campus, which was the focus of this study. However, this difference is certainly affected by the advising structure at the student’s original campus and exacerbated by the distance between academic advising from one campus to another. Primary-role advisers may have difficulty helping students navigate complex curricular requirements (such as course sequencing and prerequisites) for less common or less popular programs. They also experience high adviser to student ratios and manage other professional responsibilities. At some Penn State campuses, for example, academic advisers also serve as career counselors, retention coordinators, and instructors. Clear and realistic expectations for those who serve as academic advisers should apply at all campuses.

Academic advisers should be aware of the impact of socioeconomic status on students’ knowledge of and interactions with the institution. The fact that more first-generation students

begin at campuses other than University Park indicates a greater need for academic advisers who are informed of the characteristics of these students. Responsibilities and high student enrollment at University Park make outreach and connection to academic advisers and students at each campus challenging. Special programming or resources for academic advisers and students at each campus may be helpful, but this may be unrealistic given already heavy advising responsibilities at University Park.

Barriers to Relationship Building

Advisers and students noted the importance of creating a relationship for building trust. However, advising models and expectations inhibit building and maintaining trusting relationships between students and academic advisers. Academic advisers did not always learn about students' backgrounds during advising meetings. In some cases, students reported feeling discouraged by their academic adviser. Despite availability, not all students met with an academic adviser. Advisers framed this lack of engagement on student deficiencies, such as fear or lack of help-seeking behaviors. Students explained this lack of engagement of their peers as a result of adviser behavior, such as a perception of lack of adviser knowledge.

Previous research (Yenney, 2020) suggested that the advising relationship was important to building trust and confidence in the adviser's recommendations. Students need to trust that the academic adviser is knowledgeable, open-minded, and that there is value in creating and maintaining that relationship. Erin said, "my freshman year [adviser]...she didn't seem like she really knew what she was doing, so when I got my second one...she knew exactly what to say. She was like this is when you're going to do this and it was really helpful to know that I can trust what she's saying is real?" Trusting that an academic adviser can be helpful is also important to future and continued engagement. Students need to trust that there is value in making the

connection with an adviser. For example, Sara did not feel there was value in meeting with her adviser. Sara said, “Now I don't even want to go to my adviser because I'm a senior... I feel like I don't need to go...because what could he offer me new?” In another example, Allison shared that, “I've heard from some of my friends that...sometimes when an opportunity arises that they think you'd be a good fit for, they contact you. I have never had that experience.” Allison may be questioning how continuing to engage and share information about herself will be helpful if her academic adviser does not reach out with relevant opportunities as happens for other students.

Academic advisers did not always take steps to get to know students in ways that were helpful. In this study, academic advisers reported important student characteristics were not always considered in advising interactions. However, getting to know a student is important for humanizing the advising experience and showing care and commitment to the student (Museus & Ravello, 2010). Not asking about a student's background may have resulted from the limited time to meet with a student (due to high advising rosters and other responsibilities). Some academic advisers may not have recognized the importance of a student's background on their academic decisions. Some academic advisers did not always feel comfortable asking personal questions of students. While academic advisers were interested in getting to know students, some advisers spoke of their unease with asking students too many personal questions. For example, Charlotte said, “it's just respecting those boundaries of what they want to share, not to force myself in that. I also understand that some students are more introverted and just like to get straight to the point and they don't want to have that get to know you back and forth or they are on a time crunch. It's really gauging based on the student's reaction of where they want to take it. But again, at least trying and putting it out there like I'm open to a relationship, are you?”

In my understanding of some students' experiences, academic advisers were not always supportive of incorporating students' goals and interests into academic planning. Academic plans were designed to suggest how students might complete all degree requirements in four years. However, some student participants reported that academic advisers were not always open to talking about goals that deviated from the suggested plan. Some students reported their adviser followed these plans too closely, not allowing space to build in their own interests and goals, such as adding a minor or graduating early. For example, David shared, "I wish...more academic advisers were like mine and took the ability to...let their students succeed...let them blaze their own trail. And I think some academic advisers only...stick to your academic plan..." Academic plans provide a clear path for completing a degree but may limit advisers' ability to account for individual students' goals and interests that require deviating from the plan. It is not clear why advisers discouraged students from deviating from the plan. It could have been the result of limited time due to other professional responsibilities or due to high advising rosters. It could have been a result of a lack of knowledge by the adviser that getting to know a student and creating an individualized plan is important.

Reports of discouraging responses are important to note as a finding. Academic advisers can be an essential institutional representative in support of a student's sense of belonging, especially for underrepresented students. By contrast, feelings of discouragement from advisers can inhibit the development of building trusting relationships. As Vincent Tinto (2017) said, every interaction matters. Experiences where an academic adviser is not seen as trustworthy in their knowledge or in their sincerity to humanize the advising relationship (Museus & Ravello, 2010) risk disengaging the student.

Availability was not a barrier to building trust and forming a relationship in academic advising. Advisers in both colleges are available to students. In the College of Agricultural Sciences, Emma, an adviser in a small program, stated, "...they can either call me or email me to schedule an appointment, but if I'm here, they can just drop in and if I'm available I would be happy to meet with them, so I think that I have a fairly open-door policy." Sophia took a similar approach, saying "if my door's cracked, students can tap and come on in." In the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, Evelyn shared, "we can literally see every student that we have...if they participate." The advising administrator in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications shared, "I think the amount of contact hours we have available to students is a huge plus." However, not all students take advantage of the time made available to meet with an academic adviser.

Academic advisers and administrators across both advising models acknowledged that, while many students do meet with academic advisers, not all students access academic advising. Emma states, "sometimes students will self-advise or they have this...I don't know if it's fear, reluctance to come and see their adviser." Yet, the reason the student does not engage may be more about what the academic adviser did or how the adviser interacted with a student. Understanding the complexity of student characteristics and how these intersect with higher education in different ways is important to effectively working with students.

The implicit assumption of policy and advising structures is that students will engage with academic advisers. This assumption reflects the "hidden curriculum" described in previous research (Rosenbaum et al., 2006). The models of academic advising, including implicit assumptions about students, do not necessarily support the success of students from non-majority backgrounds. In fact, the academic advising environment may replicate the disparities in cultural

capital that students bring to higher education. For example, academic advisers often spoke to the importance of student-initiated outreach when they experience challenges or have questions. This implies that students who are more likely to reach out for help will be more likely to use academic advising. Previous research (Yee, 2014; Payne et al., 2021) indicates first-generation students are less likely to reach out to institutional resources for help and may be unfamiliar with the value of academic advising (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). It is expected that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to meet with an academic adviser. My own research neither supports nor refutes this assertion because all student participants in my study engaged with academic advisers. However, this research reinforces the importance of relationships with academic advisers to the success of students. Establishing a climate of support and adviser-initiated approaches better supports first-generation students' sense of belonging (Museus & Ravello, 2010; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016).

If students do not find value in that relationship, they may not continue to use academic advisers as a resource. For example, as Abby commented, "several kids [said], don't talk to your adviser, your advisers know nothing...and so I feel like some people have been burned once and now all the advisers have a bad rap." Megan shared that, "they [students] didn't think [the adviser] really would know what he was talking about. So, they didn't really go. They just would Google their academic plan and just follow it." Some students chose to make educational decisions without the assistance of an academic adviser. Many students shared challenges that required additional effort to overcome, such as finding the right person or navigating information (sometimes conflicting information) from multiple sources. When students felt their assigned academic adviser was not knowledgeable on a particular topic, students sought information elsewhere. Some student participants used people resources outside of their formal academic

advising network to help make decisions around current and future educational plans. The network of trusted information included other faculty members, research mentors, academic advisers not assigned to the student, and family members.

Changing Advising Structures

Given the systemic constraints and barriers to relationship building, advising is inconsistent. Reflecting on academic advising earlier in the history of Penn State, Dr. Harvey Wall, the first director of DUS at Penn State, said, “advising tended to be fragmented, inequitable, and inconsistent” (1987, p.62). This statement is still true today. Academic advising is still fragmented, inequitable, and inconsistent. While central statements about the role and purpose of academic advising exist, implementation occurs at the college, campus, and department level. How policy is translated into practice is a result of local leadership, local priorities, and available resources. Without accountability to the institution or to Faculty Senate, academic advising practice is uneven.

Structuration theory holds that structures inhibit action. This inhibition is evident for academic advising. Little change has occurred to improve the conditions over time. This may be due to the decentralized structure of academic advising across the institution. Each college and campus has a separate system with varying priorities and expectations. Therefore, consistent, and cohesive change is difficult. Moreover, those who serve as academic advisers, either as a faculty member or a staff member, often have other responsibilities that compete with academic advising practice. Academic advisers sometimes default to a view of advising as administrative tasks simply because of demands on their time. Large advising rosters and a full appointment calendar leave little time for more conversation about a student’s hopes and dreams, let alone broad institutional change. When academic advisers hold staff positions, they have no direct power to

change the institution. The self-study of academic advising is not written into regular academic advising positions contracts, and so understanding academic advising becomes an extra part of any one person's job that is not acknowledged or rewarded. Academic advisers must advocate and inform those who can influence change, often beyond normal job responsibilities.

Despite these challenges, Faculty Senate has tried to broaden academic advising policy. The goals of academic advising according to the Faculty Senate are 1) to help students identify and achieve their academic goals, 2) to promote intellectual discovery, and 3) to encourage students to take advantage of in and out of class opportunities to develop as self-directed learners and decision-makers (University Faculty Senate, 2019a). However, in practice, academic advisers as well as students see academic advising primarily as a means for scheduling classes and meeting degree requirements. And yet, academic advising demands more than scheduling classes and following a plan. Academic advisers should use the Faculty Senate policy to inform their approach to advising practice.

Approaching academic advising practice from a broader perspective will help to conform to the stated policy. However, the institutional structures must be examined and improved to create lasting change. "Individual actions alone do not change the structures and environment in which advisors and students interact and can often result in inconsistency of students' experiences. Greater impact often comes from systemic actions that demand institutional examination of the differential impact of their structure, policies, and processes on the students they serve" (Lawton, 2018, p. 35). The 2020 Faculty Senate report, "Enhancing Academic Advising Across Penn State" advocated for a consistent funding model to support student to adviser ratios that support relationship building, and a careful review of current advising

practices to further develop academic advising. Implementing these recommendations would contribute to resolving the challenges identified during this study. However, more is needed.

What would an ideal academic advising system look like if it were not limited by historical structures, restricted by financial resources, or constrained by other goals of the institution? It is possible a different system could achieve the goals articulated by the university Faculty Senate policy. This system would value the work of academic advisers as central to teaching and research. As a result, the university would develop an Institute for Excellence in Academic Advising. This institute would support academic advisers in scholarship and in practice. The Institute for Excellence in Academic Advising would also collect and support assessment and reporting functions across the university.

In practice, an ideal advising system would value the relationship between student and adviser. Individual advisers would be able to get to know each student. This would require manageable advising rosters. Academic advisers, both faculty positions and staff, would be rewarded for this important work. Academic advising positions would be sought after and coveted. Academic advising responsibilities would be considered as part of the teaching load for faculty advisers. Academic advisers would engage in and contribute to current literature on academic advising.

As a result of this idealized advising system, students would have a knowledgeable and proactive academic adviser, regardless of their field of study, background, and future goals. Students would feel supported and encouraged, which would only support their overall learning. Students' sense of belonging would increase. These actions would help all students, especially students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Recommendations for Practice

Unfortunately, institutions are limited by historical structures, financial challenges, and other institutional objectives. Based on this research, I offer four recommendations for practice. First, academic advisers must be aware of scholarship on student characteristics in higher education. This includes reframing views on systemic barriers for engaging with advisers instead of using a student deficit model. Secondly, more advisers are needed. This would allow for more time for advisers to build relationships with individual students, especially at other campuses. Third, a consistent and centralized assessment of advising programs is needed to evaluate how advising models are meeting policy and the needs of students. Finally, academic advising systems should support adviser-initiated outreach instead of relying on student-initiated contact. My research only included students who had engaged with their academic adviser. Data on experiences of students who did not engage with academic advisers is missing.

All academic advisers should engage with research and scholarship on student development, higher education, and issues in K-12 education. Data in this study has shown that academic advisers are not always aware of a student's background and how their previous experiences or family life can impact their needs in academic advising. In practice, this means that advisers will preserve time to read, write, and discuss important topics in relevant research. Academic advisers will also reflect on their own strategies and techniques for working with students. Advisers will incorporate research into their daily work. For example, advisers will use research on the importance of student characteristics to incorporate relevant questioning into interactions with students. Sometimes academic advisers did not want to pry or perhaps students did not want to share this information. Often, these characteristics or behaviors are seen as a deficit of the student. For example, some advisers perceive the reasons students do not engage with academic advisers is because of deficits in student characteristics or behaviors. However,

we understand from students that it is sometimes perceived deficits of the adviser that leads to disengagement from students.

A larger budget is needed for more people to serve as academic advisers. Academic advising models should accommodate advising rosters that allow for the opportunity for academic advisers to meet the institutional policy and enable relationship building. This will require clear expectations for academic advisers to engage in relationship building, understand the relevant research and literature, and have time and space to do so. Academic advisers must recognize the importance of trusting relationships, be open to building a relationship, and accommodate this relationship building into the advising meeting. The importance of a trusting relationship does not always find its way into practice. However, even when the advising rosters were low, advisers still left the initial contact up to the student. For example, Emma said, “I kind of have an open-door policy. We are a smaller major...they can either call me or email me to schedule an appointment, but if I’m here, they can just drop in and if I’m available I would be happy to meet with them.” Access to advisers, however, was inconsistent.

As found in this thesis research, there has been little overall assessment of how academic advising is meeting institutional and student needs at Penn State. Structures and policies should be examined for how they affect students. While there is local assessment and evaluation of advising practice, this work is inconsistent in data collected and in frequency. Moreover, these assessments are not consistently reviewed by any central office. To evaluate the current academic advising structure, the institution must understand who is accessing academic advising, how those students are using academic advisers, and how advising practice influences students’ overall learning.

Regular and consistent assessment of academic advising is crucial to determine the effectiveness of advising in meeting institutional and student goals. The institution can collect consistent and regular information about academic advising practice by using existing university-wide surveys. Including regular survey questions related to academic advising experiences on common and recurring student surveys can be one easy way to begin gathering consistent input from students on their experiences. These surveys could include surveys already administered at the institution. For example, the PULSE survey is administered through Student Affairs Research and Assessment (SARA) two to four times each academic year (Research & Assessment, 2022). There are several versions of PULSE surveys, such as the Arts PULSE survey, the PULSE Sustainability Survey, and the PULSE Diversity & Inclusions Survey (Research & Assessment, 2022). Relevant PULSE surveys include a new student survey and a change of campus survey. These two surveys include limited questions around academic advising and academic planning, but do not help to understand the student's experience with academic advisers. While questions could easily be added to these existing surveys to better address academic advising, a stand-alone PULSE survey on academic advising is necessary. Another example of an existing institutional-wide survey is the graduation survey administered to all graduating students (Career Resource Center, 2023). Adding questions about the ways in which students have engaged with academic advising would provide a better understanding of who is using academic advising and how this contributes to student learning. Gathering data from students throughout their undergraduate experience would provide a comprehensive view of patterns of activity to help inform disparities and areas for improvement. As a result of this assessment, recommendations on changes to academic advising practice can be made.

Finally, advisers should engage in adviser-initiated action instead of waiting for students to initiate contact. An adviser-initiated, proactive approach takes more time, but ensures a more consistent experience. This change requires manageable advising rosters and limited responsibilities in other areas. Adviser-initiated outreach would not require students to understand and value academic advising relationships. Proactive advising would show advisers as caring people (humanizing the advising experience), and support students from minoritized backgrounds.

Implications for Future Research

While this study has begun to fill a gap in research in understanding students' experiences with diverse advising structures across diverse student demographics, intentional and careful study of academic advising structures and their influence on groups of students is needed. This is important to continue to improve and adjust these structures to better meet the needs of all students. It is important to study academic advising as its own phenomenon, as in this study, and not as part of a larger study of student socioeconomic status and institutional structures. More research focusing on academic advising structures and student experiences is needed across more institutions.

There is more to learn about advising across the multi-campus university structure. Students from lower socioeconomic statuses were more likely to be admitted to a different campus and required to transition to another campus to complete their degree. Does changing campuses add challenge for students in particular colleges or from specific backgrounds? Only two advising models were included in this study yet there are other models, institutional types, and advising policies to examine. How do these different structures support or inhibit students' engagement with academic advisers?

Students reported experiences feeling discouraged or not supported by their adviser. This was an unexpected finding, and one to be further investigated. How often do students feel this way? Under what circumstances did this discouragement occur? Are there other student characteristics that should be considered in understanding the presence of discouragement or lack of support? My findings highlight areas that are worthy of more research.

A limitation of my study is that all student informants had engaged with their academic advisers. My research design did not offer insight into the experiences of students who did not engage with academic advising. Student participants in this study almost always shared that they had friends who have not met with their academic adviser regularly. Students reported that others did not engage with an academic adviser because they did not know who their academic adviser was or perceived the academic adviser was not knowledgeable or not interested in helping them. Understanding why some students do not meet with an academic adviser is an important gap in the research that must be examined.

Future research must also gather more academic adviser participants. Most of the academic advisers interviewed during this study served in a primary role advising position. Future research should also include more advisers with full-time teaching and research responsibilities. This would provide more information on how faculty academic advisers approach their role in advising undergraduate students.

Finally, high advising turnover was cited as a challenge by academic advisers and students in the centralized advising model. More information about hiring practices and the effect of turnover on students across different advising models is needed. For example, is a centralized advising office more likely to experience higher turnover? Is a centralized advising office better able to accommodate higher staff turnover? Understanding academic advising hiring

practices, career ladders, and incentives is important to effective advising practice and student success.

Conclusion

Academic advisers are an important resource for students as they navigate complex systems of higher education. In the words of one of my informants, David, “Academic advisers...are the biggest driver to student success... the academic adviser, the person there when you first schedule your classes, and you theoretically don't know what you're doing at all. The academic adviser, the person that helps you cross the finish line...” While this role is filled by different academic advisers throughout the student’s time at the institution, advisers hold an important role in the student’s success. This critical role must be examined carefully in structure and practice as well as in research. Moreover, academic advisers must understand the individual nature of each student’s academic planning. Yet, the current advising system requires academic advisers to see high numbers of students. As a result, individuality and relationships get left behind. Academic advising is a critical practice to the undergraduate students’ experience. It deserves attention and resources to maximize student success.

For the success of students, institutions must be prepared to invest in academic advising. This recognition, in the form of time, space, and other resources, will raise the prestige of these positions, provide consistency across units for those serving as academic advisers, and support students navigating a large and complex institution. Max, a student from a lower socioeconomic background, said, “obviously no student can do it alone.” However, some students try. How do students manage to successfully navigate a complex institution and degree requirements without meeting regularly with their academic adviser? Some students are not successful, and the advising system must evolve to meet their needs.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured interview questions for students

Provide consent statement, get verbal student consent to participate.

Student Demographic Information

1. What is your college (Communications or Agricultural Sciences) and major?
2. What is your academic standing (i.e. first year, sophomore, junior, senior)?
3. What is your parents' level of education? (less than high school, high school degree, Associate's degree, some college, Bachelor's degree, Graduate degree or professional degree)
4. What do your parent(s) do?
5. What is your parents' annual income? (Provide income ranges)
6. What was your high school experience like? Did you work with a guidance counselor or teachers on your academic plans?

Academic Advising Experiences

7. What role do academic advisers play for students at Penn State?
8. Can you tell me about your experiences with advisers at Penn State?
9. How does advising work in your college?
10. Do you know who your assigned adviser is? Please do not say your adviser's name.
11. How many times have you met with your assigned adviser?
12. What do you expect from your adviser?
13. How often do you meet with your adviser?
14. If you have met with your adviser, what kinds of things do you discuss during your advising appointments?

15. If you haven't met with advisers, why not?
16. Have you met with advisers in other colleges?
 - a. If so, what were those meetings like?
17. What other sources of information you have used to guide your educational decisions?
18. What role do your parents/family play in your education decisions?

Student's perceived outcomes of advising

19. How has your academic adviser helped you or not?
20. How has your adviser/have advisers supported your educational journey and decision-making processes?
21. Are there other things you would like to share about your advising experiences?

Possible follow up

22. When is your next advising appointment?
23. Would you be open to scheduling another interview with me after that appointment?

Appendix B: Annual Household Income Ranges

Appendix B: Annual Household Income Ranges

Annual Household Income
Under \$5,000
\$5,000 - \$29,999
\$30,000 - \$69,999
\$70,000 - \$99,999
\$100,000 - \$249,999
Over \$250,000

Appendix C: Semi-Structure Interview Questions for Second Student Interview

Provide consent statement, get verbal student consent to participate.

1. What were your goals for your appointment? Why did you schedule this appointment?
2. What did you say to your adviser?
3. What did your adviser say to you?
4. How did you feel during the meeting?
5. Did you accomplish your goals for the meeting?
6. How did you feel after the meeting?

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Academic Advisers

Provide consent statement, get adviser consent to participate

Adviser Demographic Information

1. How long have you been advising?
2. Approximately, how many advisees do you have on your advising roster?

College Culture of Advising

3. Can you describe the academic advising structure in the college?
4. What kinds of advising meetings do you have; appointments with assigned advisees or any student (exploring or assigned to another adviser)?
5. What professional development opportunities are available to you in your advising role?
6. What ways can advising improve in the college?

Academic Advising Experiences and Perceptions

7. What are your expectations for advisees (assigned and other students)?
8. What are your perceptions of how students respond to advising expectations? Are they prepared to talk about the things you expect to address in your meetings?
9. When working with a student, what do you need to know about the student? What kinds of questions do you use to get to know a student?
10. Do you have experience working with students from low-income backgrounds?
11. Are you aware of a students' socioeconomic status during your advising appointments?
 - a. If so, in what ways does socioeconomic status impact your work with students?
 - b. If not, is this something you've considered as part of your advising preparation?

12. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience as an adviser in this college?

Appendix E: Semi-structured Interview with College Administrators

Provide consent statement, get administrator consent to participate.

Academic Advising Structure

1. Can you describe the academic advising structure in the college?
2. What kinds of meetings do advisers have with students; appointments with assigned advisees or any student (exploring or assigned to another adviser)?
3. What professional development opportunities are available for advisers in your college?

Advising Expectations

4. What are your expectations for advisers?
5. What are your expectations for students when working with an adviser?
 - a. How are these expectations shared with students?

Perceptions of Advising

6. What are your perceptions of how students respond to advising expectations? Are they prepared to talk about the things you expect to address in your meetings?
7. What ways can advising improve in the college?

Hilleary Himes
Curriculum Vitae

EDUCATION

PhD, The Pennsylvania State University, Educational Theory and Policy, August 2023

M.A., University of Montana, Anthropology, May 2007

B.A., The Pennsylvania State University, Anthropology, December 2002

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Schulenberg, J. & Himes, H. (2022). Academic Advising Scholarship: Historical and structural influences. In C.M. McGill, S. Gizerian, and P.Hagen (eds.), *Scholarly Inquiry in Academic Advising* (2nd ed) (pp. 11-31). Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.

Himes, H. (2022). A Philosophy of Advising and the Challenges of Implementation. *NACADA Review*, 2(1).

Himes, H. & Schulenberg, J. (2016). The Evolution of Academic Advising as a Practice and as a Profession. In T.J. Grites, M. Miller, and J. Givens Voller (eds.), *Beyond Foundations: Developing as a Master Advisor* (pp. 1-17). Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.

Himes, H. (2014). Strengthening Academic Advising by Developing a Normative Theory. *NACADA Journal*, 43(1).

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS

Schulenberg, J. & Himes, H. (October 2015). *History of Higher Education and Academic Advising: An illustrated journey*. Poster presented at the NACADA Annual Conference in Las Vegas, NV.

Schulenberg, J. & Himes, H. (October 2014). *Looking Back to Move Forward: How history can shed light on the professionalization of Academic Advising*. Presented at the NACADA Annual Conference in Minneapolis, MN.

McGill, C., Burton, S., Duslak, M., & Himes, H. (October 2014). *Advising Theory and Philosophy in the Quest for Professionalization*. Presented at the NACADA Annual Conference in Minneapolis, MN.

RECENT EMPLOYMENT

Director of Advising/DUS Programs Coordinator, College of Earth and Mineral Sciences, August 2014- present

Senior Undergraduate Studies Adviser, Division of Undergraduate Studies, August 2008-July 2014