

# Advisor COVID-19 Pandemic Experiences

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## Key Takeaways

The field of academic advising should examine:

- ⇒ The short-term and long-term impact of COVID-19 on academic advising practices and interactions
- ⇒ The short-term and long-term impact of COVID-19 on professional expectations and experiences for academic advising professionals

More research on advising during and after the pandemic is needed.

Advisors should personally reflect on their COVID-19 professional experiences and outcomes to process those experiences and make decisions about their future.

## Overview

This research brief highlights discussions relevant to the experiences of academic advisors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on academic advising is critical because advisors represent “the only opportunity for all students to develop a personal, consistent relationship with someone in the institution who cares about them” (Drake, 2011, p. 10). While research on the social and organizational impact of COVID-19 is still emerging, the resources featured in this brief support advising practitioners in examining:

- ◆ the effect of COVID-19 on academic advising interactions and practices;
- ◆ the impact of the pandemic on academic advisor well-being and professional experiences;
- ◆ how advising has made sustained shifts following the pandemic.

Exploring the experiences of academic advisors during the COVID-19 pandemic is relevant to ongoing research and assessment related to advisor well-being, professional satisfaction, and retention. Developing conversations and research on this topic can provide critical insights into issues in the field of academic advising which may have been aggravated by pandemic stressors but possibly represent ongoing challenges for advising professionals.

Additionally, research and discussion on advisors’ experiences during the pandemic contribute to the important process of assessing the long-term impact of COVID-19 on higher education.

## Discussion

### Challenges from All Dimensions of Life

During the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education professionals experienced challenges from several facets of their lives, including professional, family, mental/physical health, social, and financial, among others (McClure, 2021; Winefield & Paris, 2022). Academic advisors grappled with transitions and stressors in most, if not all, dimensions of their lives and well-being. Simultaneously, changes in the higher education landscape were distinctly notable. The response to COVID-19 facilitated rapid and widespread change in higher education, impacting students and employees (Maller & McGill, 2021). As Winefield and Paris (2022) observed, “the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly and dramatically altered higher education including changes to the workplace” (p.1). For example, most advising interactions pivoted from being in-person to virtual.

### Work Dissatisfaction Issues

Higher education professionals, including advisors, were at risk for compassion fatigue, burnout, and professional discouragement before the pandemic, then COVID-19 exacerbated these issues (McClure, 2021; Velez-Cruz & Holstun, 2022; Winefield & Paris, 2022). Not surprisingly, higher education employees experienced diminished professional satisfaction during the pandemic (Gewin, 2021). Many higher education professionals participated in labor strikes, which some scholars attribute to dissatisfaction with working conditions during the pandemic (Marijolic, 2023; McClure, 2021).

### Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Retention Issues

As the pandemic progressed and lives notably changed, several individuals reconsidered how they wanted to spend their time – including their work. This cultural shift in prioritizing life over work led to what Anthony Klotz, a professor and organizational psychologist at Texas A&M University, coined “The Great Resignation” in 2021 (Smith, 2022). Higher education has not been isolated from this impact as more faculty and staff reach a limit of burnout and feel a lack of appreciation at their institutions (Morales, 2022). Initial conversations indicate that higher education institutions are still experiencing difficulty retaining academic and student affairs staff, including academic advisors, following the COVID-19 pandemic (Rodriguez & Carpenter, 2022; Walton, 2022; Winefield & Paris, 2022). Higher education recognizes the importance of student retention and should also recognize the importance of employee retention (Walton, 2022). Therefore, higher education administrators should identify and implement practices to retain employees, such as opportunities for recognition, input, and flexible work arrangements (FWA).

## Discussion, cont.

### Post-Pandemic Employee Retention Initiatives & Recognition

It is broadly observed that institutions should not solely leverage service-based commitment to retain staff; instead, institutions should find ways to genuinely value and recognize employees and their contributions (Jussel & Topitzes, 2022; Rodriguez & Carpenter, 2022; Walton, 2022). McClure (2021) criticized superficial employee retention initiatives like free swag and discount programs. Instead, McClure (2021) and Jussel and Topitzes (2022) asserted that institutions should find meaningful ways to raise employee morale, such as making higher education professionals feel valued and included in decision-making. McClure (2021) and Walton (2022) noted institutions may be overlooking input from employees who are not researchers and instructors. Despite pandemic challenges, many academic advisors were highly productive at their institutions. Employees want pandemic efforts and accomplishments acknowledged (Walton, 2022). Many higher education professionals report that these contributions have been undervalued and/or taken for granted (Jussel & Topitzes, 2022; Winefield & Paris, 2022).

He et al. (2020) argued "the need to develop the support of professional capital for advisors" (p. 31). To do so, advisors can reflect on their work and recognize what is needed at both a unit and institutional level to improve advising on their campus - which was likely happening before COVID-19, but is happening more intentionally and frequently. Many have advocated for adjusted work policies and remote work options (McMurtrie, 2023; Walton, 2022). Higher education institutions should support employees, including advisors, to practice self-care and work-life boundaries (Jussel & Topitzes, 2022; Rodriguez & Carpenter, 2022; Velez-Cruz & Holstun, 2022). In particular, Velez-Cruz and Holstun (2022) drew a connection between self-care and workplace resilience, finding that stress and burnout decreased with increased self-care. Velez-Cruz and Holstun (2022) claimed that this benefits students as higher education staff, like advisors, have an increased capacity for compassion and positive connections.

## Implications for Academic Advising

COVID changed many things for advisors, especially in terms of their professional relationships and interactions.

### Relationship of Advisors and Students

Before the pandemic, at most residential and commuter campuses advising appointments were primarily in-person with virtual options to meet with online students or adult learners, but the pandemic required a shift to virtual advising for all students. The flexibility of making a virtual appointment and then being able to attend from anywhere helped students connect with their advisors throughout the pandemic. Having that connection was crucial throughout the height of COVID, but especially at the start during the lockdown when there was confusion on policies and the disease itself.

## Implications for Academic Advising, cont.

During the pandemic, it was vital for advisors to share emerging academic information (such as revised grading policies) with students as well as connect with students on a relational level, as many students were isolated from their day-to-day community; advisors providing this scope of support is consistent with the NACADA core competencies (NACADA, 2017).

Institutions have long since returned to campus and in-person advising, but virtual advising should continue to be an option to allow for the flexibility that students appreciate. While more research is needed, it was found that more students made virtual appointments (Venit, 2020) and fewer no-shows occurred (LeDonne-Smith & Keith, 2022). Offering students the option of in-person or virtual allows them to better fit advising into their schedule – which for many may include a part-time job or family responsibilities that require them to be off campus. Many offices continue to offer remote advising options. However, for some advisors, COVID-19 virtual interactions reinforced the belief that in-person is the best form of advising meetings. Post-pandemic research could offer insight into the most effective types of advisor-student interactions.

### Relationship of Advisors and Work

Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) can be defined as any option that allows employees to work outside the standard organizational confines, this may include remote or hybrid work, flexible hours, a compressed work week, and job sharing to name a few (Austin-Egole et al., 2020). Although the adaptation of remote work largely came from a necessity of the time, it has gained momentum as a desired workplace benefit many seek out – and even leave their current jobs to obtain. A survey conducted by McKinsey in 2022 found that FWAs are a top motivator for finding a new job and 65% of the respondents would work remotely full-time (Hughes, 2022).

Like workers in many different industries, advisors also found that the pandemic experience afforded them new options. Flexible work arrangements (such as remote work options), once the purview of advisors who worked only with online students, became necessities for all advisors. As everyone navigated new work-life balances, new etiquette and sensitivity for boundaries started to emerge to address changing expectations for access and email response time, for example. It became more common to see the line "My work hours are not your work hours" (Grant, 2023, para. 11) in email signatures. While a workaholic may once have been celebrated for their productivity, the word "burnout" and worries about burnout became more common during the pandemic (Brown, 2022), raising awareness of the need for self-care and the value of both work and non-work life.

## Implications for Academic Advising, cont.

The pandemic revealed that many roles in academic and student affairs can be done successfully in a remote atmosphere. This is particularly true as academic advising responds to student preferences and needs. McClure (2022) interviewed faculty and staff in student-facing roles from offices that once offered FWA. A university declared that “flexible work is not the new norm” but acknowledged that “employees could take advantage of intermittent flexibility” (para. 2). McClure (2022) stated, “today’s students want virtual options for many services and aren’t phased in the least by the idea of people working remotely or hybrid—some of them may even want it in their future workplace” (para. 15).

### Relationship of Advisors and their Institution

Pre-pandemic, when research showed that advisors were the most-accessed academic staff on campus by students, many institutions insisted advisors maintain a constant in-person presence on campus, including offering evening services in some cases to work with students with jobs or internships. In the post-pandemic world, more vacancies for advising positions seem to be the norm and more institutions are offering at least some work-from-home options to remain competitive (Zahneis, 2023).

### Relationship of Advisors, Professional Organizations, and Professional Development

Traveling to state/province, regional, national, or international conferences was often the main pre-pandemic way for advisors to connect with colleagues outside their home institution. During the pandemic, many conferences were delivered online and some found tremendous success in attracting new people to their offerings by being virtually accessible. As tools to record and disseminate content became less expensive (or free) and easier to use, many more people and groups were able to become content creators—and provide live or recorded webinars to reach wider audiences.

Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs theory, describing levels of needs from basic to self-actualization, explains what motivates human behaviors. In the realm of Academic Advising, Oakland University created a “hierarchy of advising responsibilities” based on these needs (Rea & Webb, 2019, para. 3). As advisors move through the levels of helping students, maintaining records, and responding to policy changes, Maslow (1943) and Rea & Webb’s (2019) hierarchy models show that individuals should be working toward the upper level for motivation in life and their careers. The final stage includes professional development, assessment, and research. This should be what advisors aspire to be doing once the lower levels are met. Unfortunately, many advisors never reach the final stage because they are constantly trying to maintain the lower levels in the hierarchy. Always balancing the lower levels and never reaching the final stage can lead to frustration and a lack of motivation and direction. Rea and Webb (2019) state, “the hierarchy has opened the doors for meaningful dialogue about what is needed to achieve the ideal state of advising, including staff sizes, space allocation, and technology needs” (para. 9). Advisors and advising administrators should continue to explore the accessibility of advisor professional development, including leveraging the virtual opportunities that emerged as a result of the pandemic.

## Reflective Opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic wrought changes on college campuses, but many changes were made for expediency's sake rather than through a thoughtful, reasoned process. Take the time to think about how your unit/department (or college/school) might consider moving forward with your advising practice with the following activities:

- ◆ Process how the pandemic affected your department: As an advising unit, use a reflective model like the Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988) to think about, discuss, and make an action plan given post-COVID realities (Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, 2020). Specifically, think about the following four areas:
  1. **Your advising group's mission statement**, which likely addresses institutional goals and student success but may overlook advisor success and well-being.
  2. **Policies and procedures for how your office interacts with students** (e.g., appointments, drop-ins, emails/social media, flipped advising, group advising, webinars),
  3. **Policies about how advisors work best** (e.g., remotely vs. in person, hours of work, flex time, vacation). These will be affected by Human Resources (and possibly union) policies and questions of equity, but take a fresh look anyway.
  4. **Policies about how your office interacts with campus partners** (e.g., response times, how/when meetings happen, how notices are distributed, etc.). Then,
- ◆ Take immediate steps: Some of the changes you will seek to make require much discussion and possibly many levels of approvals, but don't wait to start. Some small-scale ideas for improving wellness include organizing a well-being group (volunteers can help plan well-being activities) or scheduling time with a colleague (time for connection and building a community for support and collaboration).

## Recommendations for Future Study

Opportunities for future research on this topic are extensive; therefore, the list below is not exhaustive. As a result of our findings, the authors of this brief suggest the following topics for further study:

- ◆ Advisor-specific studies – much of the literature cited encompassed higher-education or student-affairs staff as a whole, which we acknowledge includes a wide variety of roles and experiences. To better understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic advising and academic advisors, more specific research is needed as each campus role is unique.
- ◆ The quality, differences, and preferences of both advisors and students for in-person versus virtual advising.
- ◆ How the pandemic impacted data, surveys, and assessments on advising services as well as what continued impact that might have on student perceptions of advising following post-pandemic changes in advising practices.

## Final Thoughts

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about short-term and long-term changes in academic advising practices and interactions, such as virtual advising. The pandemic also altered academic advisors' work experiences, like the prevalence of remote work. More research on advising during and after the pandemic is needed to assess changes in the field and their impact on advising professionals.

## Cite as:

Cumbia, M., Green, H., Helms, R., Marcusse, M., Miller, O., Nakamoto, M., & Pfeiffer, J. (2024). Advisor COVID-19 Pandemic Experiences (Research Brief No. 2401). NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising.

## About Us

NACADA is an association of professional advisors, counselors, faculty, administrators, and students working to enhance the educational development of students. NACADA promotes and supports quality advising in institutions of higher education to enhance the educational development of students. NACADA provides a forum for discussion, debate, and the exchange of ideas pertaining to academic advising through numerous activities and publications.

## Authors

The authors of this brief served on the 2023 steering committee for the NACADA Well-Being and Advisor Retention Advising Community. The Well-Being & Advisor Retention Advising Community exists to encourage advising professionals to value, model, and discuss well-being and self-care.

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