



**NACADA**  
THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY  
FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING

# THE “TYPICAL” ADVISING SESSION:

An Exploration of Consistency

## RESEARCH REPORT

*NACADA Center for Research  
at Kansas State University*

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## Preface

Academic advising continues to play a major role in higher education, serving as a critical resource for students. The results of this report were collected during December of 2019, three months prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The modalities of academic advising have changed dramatically, as colleges and universities moved to online and distance instruction quickly. As a result, the context of advising interactions has likely shifted. This report should therefore be used as a baseline; a snapshot of feedback from just under 500 educators with important information about the nature of academic advising interactions.

## Overview

*Driving Toward a Degree* is a data-driven resource that measures the extent and impact of various institutional structures, processes, practices, and technologies related to student success (Tyton Partners, 2020), one of which is academic advising. The [2020 project](#) provides a view of the collaborative nature of student supports, and highlights both promising trends and frustrating inconsistencies in institutional commitment and resource allocation.

The Driving Toward a Degree "Complementary Survey" was designed to collect feedback from academic advisors and advising administrators regarding the *typical* one-on-one advising session, and what is addressed in a *typical* one-on-one advising session with students. See [Appendix A](#) for contact information to receive a copy of the instrument.

What is "typical" depends on dynamic elements of a campus that are, often by design, not typical. Academic advisors work inductively—one student at a time. Each student brings situational context to the moment of interaction, which varies not only by their personal academic and personal goals, successes, and challenges, but also by structural constraints and parameters. Conversations in September with first-year, undeclared students are markedly different than conversations in February with seniors. Interactions with students at an institution that embraces, encourages, and prepares academic advisors to engage in didactic conversations are markedly different than those at institutions where advisors serve primarily to facilitate course scheduling and little else.

Academic advisors may be faculty members, connected to a student's major field of study, or full- or part-time staff members (many of whom have other responsibilities), or graduate students. Some are new at the role, and others have vast experience. Some are provided on-going training and professional development, and others either lack the opportunity or the drive to engage in deeper engagement with the work.

These perceptions of *inconsistency* in how academic advising is operationalized provides the context for this study. While it is important to explore academic advising from an institutional, structural lens, it is also critical and informative to examine the nature of advising interactions from the perspective of those who interact with students every day. These are responses from individuals, not institutions. This study asks the participants to determine what "typical" is in the advising interaction, and to further expand on their perspectives of role and resource.

## INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ADVISING STRUCTURES

Data were collected anonymously, with no identifiable information captured; all demographic information was self-reported.



**Target Sample:** The survey was sent to 1279 faculty and staff who "opted in" through the Tyton Partners 2019 D2D Survey.



**Response Rate:** The project yielded four hundred ninety nine (n=499) completed surveys, for a response rate of 39%.



**Academic Calendar:** The majority (92.2%) of the survey respondents reported their institutions were on a semester academic calendar. Other academic calendar systems listed include trimester, terms, or a combination of semesters and mini courses scheduled over several weeks.



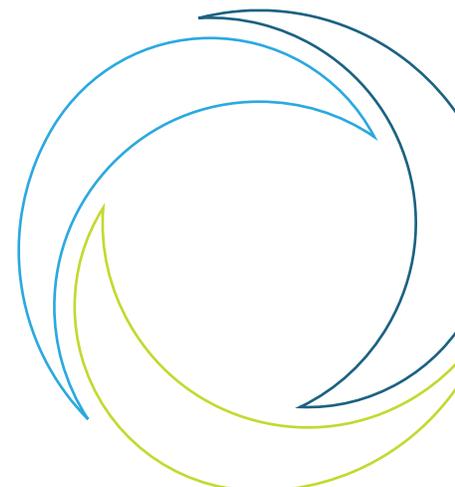
**Mission Statement:** About 63.5% of the survey respondents reported having a mission statement for academic advising for advising at their institution.



**Advising Context:** 276 (57%) described an advising situation with Primary Role Advisors, 193 (40%) described a team approach (faculty advisors and primary role advisors), and 3% described a faculty advisor situation.



**Lens:** Most (75%) attempted to respond from a wide lens (College/Division = 38%; Institution-wide = 37%, respectively). The rest (25%) responded from a department or unit lens.

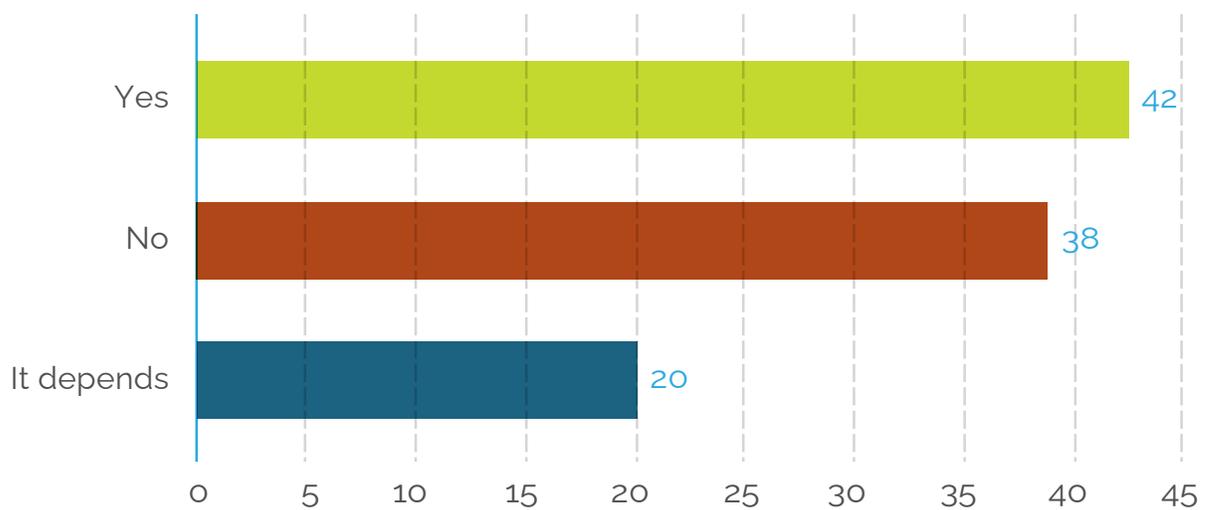


## Findings

### ACADEMIC ADVISING IS NOT CONSISTENTLY REQUIRED FOR STUDENTS

Figure 1.

#### IS ACADEMIC ADVISING MANDATORY?



While it is widely held in the literature that individual contact with academic advisors (either faculty or primary role) positively influences student learning and growth (Allen & Smith, 2008; Lee, 2018), many institutions do not require students to interact with an academic advisor even once (Young, 2019).

Of the 499 respondents, 41.9% indicated that academic advising is mandatory each term for all students (see Figure 1). Respondents who said "it depends" further explained a number of different scenarios, including:

- transactional interactions (such as releasing holds or approving schedules) where a one-on-one interaction is not necessarily mandated
- procedural differences across colleges or majors
- requirements only during the first term
- differential requirements for transfer students, as well as students on probation

The responses to this item suggest that there are still critical inconsistencies across institutions in the United States with regard to the number of advising interactions required of students. Thirty eight percent (38%) of the respondents reported that meeting with an academic advisor is not required at their institution. Conversations about the *nature of the conversations*, therefore, must be explored within this context.

## ACADEMIC ADVISING STRUCTURES VARY BOTH WITHIN AND ACROSS INSTITUTIONS

Table 1

### ADVISING STRUCTURE TYPES

ADVISING STRUCTURE	N	% PERCENT
<b>Self contained:</b> All advising occurs in a center staffed primarily by professional advisors or counselors; faculty may also advise in the center	201	40.0
<b>Faculty only:</b> All advising is done by a faculty member, usually in the student's academic discipline	22	4.4
<b>Distributed:</b> Students are assigned to a department advisor (usually faculty), but there is a central administrative unit with primary-role advisors to support the department advisors by providing resources and training	61	12.2
<b>Split:</b> Advising is carried out by faculty in their departments, as well as primary-role advisors of an advising center responsible for a particular subset of students (e.g., those who are undecided on a major, freshmen, those on academic probation)	187	37.5
Other	87	17.4

Advising structures are mostly self-contained (40%) or Split (37.5%). Other structures reported include:

- dual advising
- a student being assigned two advisors or more (e.g., a general education curriculum advisor, a professional staff major advisor for academic advising, a career advisor, and a tenured faculty advisor)
- a combination of split and distributed
- advising for special programs (such as TRIO or International Students Office staff)
- advising with a professional staff at the first-year level, moving then to advising at the department/unit level (either faculty advising or a primary role advisor)

The organizational structures of academic advising are determined at the institutional level, and quite often at the departmental and/or unit level. This provides the department or unit the ability to focus advising practice locally, within the context of disciplinary pedagogies, personnel resources, learning missions, and intentional approaches to student interactions and interventions.

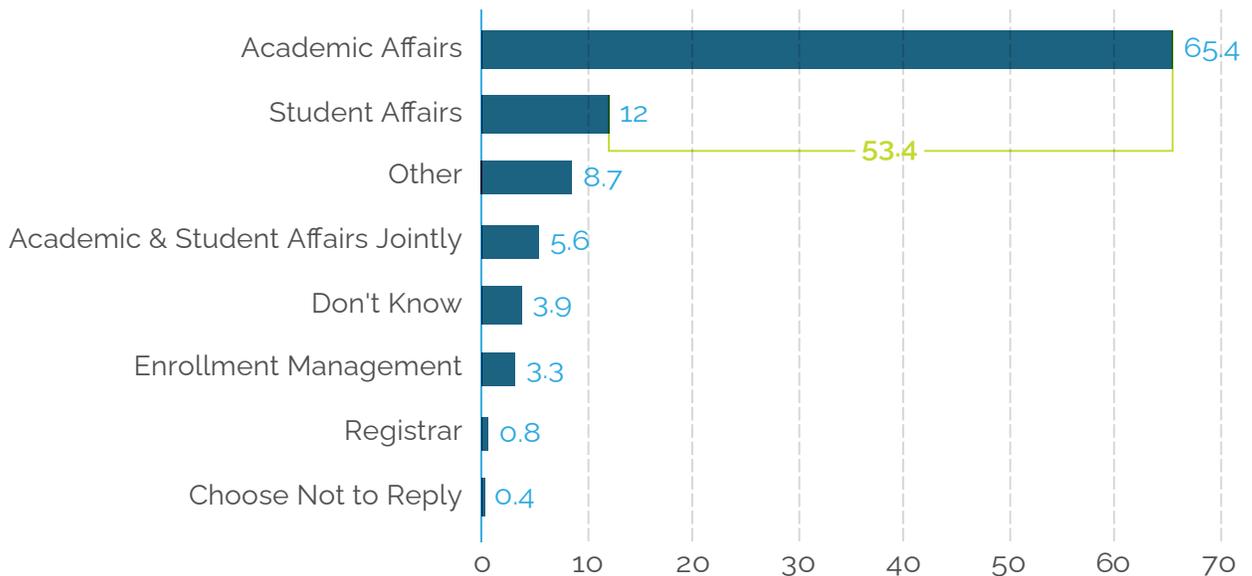
But the variance of structures employed within institutions creates basic inconsistencies with implications for student experiences (especially those that change majors), program assessment, professional development, and accountability.

## ACADEMIC ADVISING MOST OFTEN REPORTS TO ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Academic advising reporting occurs mostly at the Academic Affairs level (65.4%) (see Figure 2). Other levels to which reporting occurs include to the department chair, dean, or the Vice President of Institutional Affairs.

Figure 2.

### ACADEMIC ADVISING REPORTING UNITS



#### PRIMARY FUNCTION OF UNDERGRADUATE ADVISING:

- 43.5% = assisting course enrollment
- 31.4% = facilitating student development
- 12.5% = teaching and facilitating student learning

#### ACADEMIC ADVISING IS PERFORMED BY:

- 57.3% = Primary Role Advisors
- 39.6% = Both Faculty Advisors and Primary Role Advisors
- 3.1% = Faculty Advisors

Consistent with recent studies (Tyton Partners, 2020; Young, 2019) academic advising most often reports through academic affairs, particularly at 4-year institutions. This is not surprising, given the academic nature of the role. The extent to which variance in organization reporting structures causes national level inconsistencies is not clear. But how the institution articulates the *functions* of academic advising, *types* of advisors (faculty and/or staff or both), and the *frequency* students interact with academic advisors often has implications for how connected advising is to curricular issues, academic policies, training, and professional development.

## General Categories/Topics Discussed in a Typical Advising Situation

Participants were asked to respond to a series of items within **3 main categories considered most *typical*** to academic advising:



### Academic Planning 10 items

Students and academic advisors engage in critical discussions related to all aspects of the academic plan. The *informational* aspects of advising provide substance and direction (NACADA, 2017).



### Resources & Referrals 5 items

Students and academic advisors develop *relationships* which allow them to tailor resources to an individual student's needs and to effectively refer them to institutional supports (NACADA, 2017)



### Learning & Development 13 items

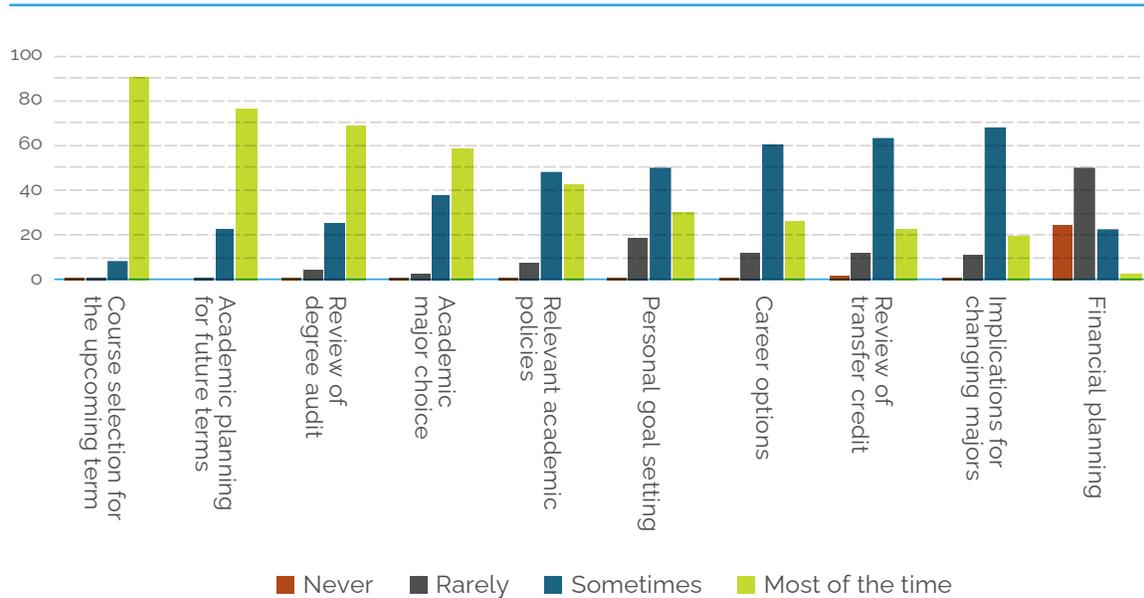
The theoretical underpinnings of academic advising lead to a *conceptual* approach to the role. Scholarly advisors engage with advisees through a lens of learning toward intentional outcomes (NACADA, 2017; Troxel, 2018).

Psychometric analysis revealed acceptable to high levels of internal consistency reliability ([see Appendix A](#)).

ACADEMIC PLANNING TOPICS -  
 "ACADEMIC PLANNING COLORS EVERYTHING"

Figure 3.

**PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO ACADEMIC PLANNING TOPICS**



Academic advisors were asked to respond to 10 items to gauge their perceptions regarding how often specific academic planning topics were addressed with students during the typical advising session. Each of the items had response ratings measured on a four-point Likert-type scale from 1- 'Never' to 4 - 'Most of the time.'

The findings revealed that nine out of the ten topics under academic planning were discussed sometimes to most of the time, with means falling between 3.07 for discussing implications for changing majors and 3.90 for discussing course selection for the upcoming term (see Table 2). The top topics that almost all (99.2% and 99.4%) of the 499 advisors surveyed reported they sometimes or most of the time discussed during the typical advising session were course selection for the upcoming term (M=3.9, SD= 0.34) and planning for the future terms (M=3.76, SD=0.44), respectively. **This finding suggests that while there is widespread inconsistency in how academic advising is structured within and across institutions, there is consistency in the major foci of academic planning discussions.**

About 95% of the advisors noted that they sometimes to most of the time reviewed degree audits with their advisees (M=3.64, 0.60). Ninety seven percent (97%) of the advisors reported that they most of the time or sometimes helped students with a choice of their academic majors (M=3.55, SD=0.58).

**The topic that was never or rarely discussed was financial planning** (M=2.04, SD=0.78). This is consistent with the findings from the Driving Toward a Degree study (2020), which reported the varied concerns related to "clear lines of responsibility" and "communication channels" (p. 35). The specialized nature of financial planning (which includes avenues for aid) provides opportunity for collaborative support across units, but the extent to which students desire discussions of this nature with advisors is unclear.

Table 2

## ACADEMIC PLANNING TOPICS

TOPICS	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	MOST OF THE TIME	M	SD
Academic major choice	0.6	2.8	37.5	59.1	3.55	.58
Review of transfer credit	1.5	11.8	63.4	23.3	3.08	.64
Personal goal setting	1.1	18.6	49.8	30.5	3.10	.73
Career options	0.4	12.5	60.4	26.7	3.13	.63
Financial planning	24.8	49.5	22.3	3.4	2.04	.78
<b>Course selection for the upcoming term</b>	<b>0.2</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>91.1</b>	<b>3.90</b>	<b>.34</b>
<b>Academic planning for future terms</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>7.4</b>	<b>22.5</b>	<b>76.9</b>	<b>3.76</b>	<b>.44</b>
Relevant academic policies	1.3	11.0	48.4	42.9	3.33	.67
Implications for changing majors	0.8	4.2	67.9	20.2	3.07	.58
Review of degree audit	0.6	3.3	25.6	69.6	3.64	.60

Additional topics were indicated by respondents (beyond the ten academic planning topics that were included as items on the survey). The majority (over 70%) of the academic advisors listed additional topics discussed in advising sessions, including:

- academic difficulties
- academic performance (success, progress with study skills, exams, and semester grades)
- selecting a minor
- reviewing extra-curricular/co-curricular opportunities
- study abroad decision-making
- making plans for graduate education
- internship opportunities
- career counseling and development
- discussing issues related to mental health wellness and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accommodations

The number and range of topics presented by the respondents confirms the challenges related to studying academic advising contexts and outcomes. The open-ended comments offer deeper insight related to the approaches they take with students.

## ACADEMIC PLANNING – OPEN-ENDED COMMENTS

When asked to comment on academic planning and the role it plays in the typical academic advising session, the advisors' responses focused mainly on descriptions of the approaches used during the *typical* advising session. One of the advisors summed it up by saying, "academic planning colors everything." Additional context is offered with regard to relational aspects, timing, academic standing, and structure, as described below:

---

"...academic planning colors everything."

### Relationships are Key

The academic advisors noted there were variations in the approaches to academic advising by program and institution. Overall, the advisors indicated they **maintain a relationship** with the students through the degree program, with most of the interaction occurring in the first two years with primary role advisors, followed by advising in the majors in the junior years and onwards with mostly faculty advisors.

While there are inconsistencies in the approaches to advising in general, students use advisors to **help plan their programs from matriculation through graduation**. Academic advisors have a unique, consistent opportunity to follow and support each individual student across their academic journey.

### Timing Determines Topic

Not surprisingly, advisors noted that the type of advising that took place during a *typical* session **depends on the time within the academic year**. In the first two weeks of the term, the advisor holds meetings, in some cases mandatory, with students who may or may not be assigned to them. One advisor noted that these meetings are "highly transactional, short, and meant to be focused on immediate need regarding current term enrollment." Sessions held later offer more opportunity for deeper discussions. Too often, however, the initial, transactional session may be the only meeting between *this* student and *this* academic advisor, setting the tone for expectations and perceptions of advising resources later.

### Standing Triggers Sessions

Additionally, advisors **meet with students on probation** with the meetings focused "solely on academic success/goal setting/action planning," and **with transfer students** "to address petitions and adjustment to the university." After the first two weeks, the *typical* advising appointments cover *registration sessions*, and the advisor meets with students around issues such as **making decisions about dropping classes or changing majors**.

### *Typical* Varies by Focus

Regarding the focus of the sessions, one advisor noted that the *typical* advising session is **highly structured**, and involves course selection and referrals and sharing resources with students. Another reported,

When we meet with students (both faculty advisors and professional advisors), we work with the students to plan out their subsequent terms, including summer sessions and winter sessions. We do this in an effort to help make sure they are on track, but also so they understand the implications of making changes to their courses (withdrawals, drops, etc.).

A few advisors did, however, indicate that they indicate they **approach advising holistically** and discuss every area of the student's life, from academics to wellness, mental health, financial planning, and sustenance. Some advisors described similar approaches to a deeper goal for the interactions, such as "to provide a collaborative team-based approach that is focused on the whole educational experience," and much depends on the reason for which students came in for advising. Another explained that, "We have framed the 'typical' advising situation around scaled, flipped curriculum...every first-year student is required throughout their first-year to engage routinely in meaningful written reflection and engagement to deepen their learning."

Writing on their role in the *typical* advising process, one advisor noted this:

I see my role as very essential to helping students become more self-aware as well as incorporating wellness principles into their daily routines so that they are successful academically. I also see myself as a teacher and resource educator and provide referrals to students in almost every session of advising I have.

Addressing the minimal discussion spent on financial planning, one advisor described the challenge of their boundaries of expertise: "Nearly all of our students need aid, so we discuss really basic information like our existing scholarships but refer them to financial aid for the more complicated components of that." Academic advisors are in a unique position to ascertain the needs of students, in all aspects of their academic journey. Thus, advisors intentionally and individually connect students to critical resources.

## THE QUESTION OF CONSISTENCY

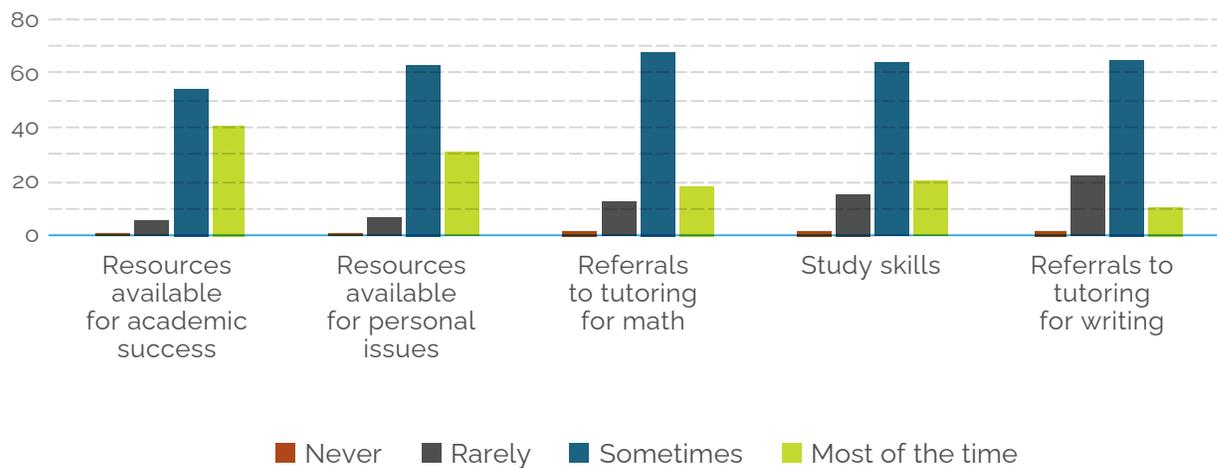
Academic planning is at the core of the advising process, but there appears to be a lack of consistency between individual descriptions of the advising role and the extent to which institutions explicitly define the role. It is difficult to distinguish between personal philosophies of advising and administrative definitions of advising within an institution. The gap between "course selection for the following term" and "personal goal-setting" suggests an interesting area for further exploration. *Academic planning* as a construct assumes a connection between goal-setting (including career exploration) and subsequent decisions about the curricular path to reach those goals. The wide range of topics discussed, not just across advising sessions but in a *typical* advising session causes concern about the extent to which advisors are able to build the kinds of academic relationships many find important to the role. This is consistent with previous studies (Tyton, 2020; Young, 2019; and NACADA, 2011) and remains a critical area for future study and professional development at the local level.

## RESOURCE AND REFERRAL TOPICS - ACADEMIC ADVISORS AS CONNECTORS

Advising interactions often point students to other institutional resources, depending on the student's situation.

Figure 4.

### PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSE TO RESOURCES AND REFERRAL TOPICS



Using a Likert-type scale of 1 = *never* to 4 = *most of the time*, survey participants were asked to respond to five items regarding resources suggested and referrals made during a “typical” academic advising session. The majority (95%) of the advisors reported suggesting resources available for academic success to their advisees sometimes to most of the time (M=3.35; SD=0.59), followed by suggesting resources for personal use (92.8%; M=3.22, SD= 0.59). Referrals to tutoring for writing was the least selected as addressed sometimes to most of the time. Only 10.9% of the advisors said they discussed this topic most of the time, while 24.3% noted they never to rarely touched on this topic during the typical advising session (M=2.86, SD=0.63).

Table 3

## RESOURCES AND REFERRAL TOPICS

TOPICS	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	MOST OF THE TIME	M	SD
Study skills	1.5	15.4	63.3	19.8	3.01	.64
Referrals to tutoring for math	1.5	12.5	67.3	18.7	3.03	.61
Referrals to tutoring for writing	2.3	22	64.8	10.9	2.84	.63
Resources available for academic success	0.2	5.3	53.8	40.7	3.35	.59
Resources available for personal issues	0.8	6.4	62.4	30.4	3.22	.59

Other topics advisors said they sometimes discuss with their advisees include:

- peer tutoring
- the availability of success coaches
- professor availability and office hours
- study abroad
- student organization resources
- leadership and involvement resources
- campus jobs
- career counseling
- disability resources/services
- diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges
- financial services and aid
- mental health services and referrals
- scholarship opportunities
- student organization referrals
- TRIO and veteran support services

Again, the breadth of topics discussed within academic advising sessions are dependent on each student’s situation and need at the moment. This tends to limit systematic coordination between and across student supports, and has the potential to remain as obstacles to integration of systematic processes (Tyton Partners, 2020).

## RESOURCES AND REFERRALS – OPEN-ENDED COMMENTS

The respondents further explained their approaches to referrals within the open-ended comment sections. Two major themes were revealed: case-by-case referrals and the challenges related to time limitations.

### Case-by-case Referrals

Not surprisingly, the respondents noted that referrals and suggestions related to resources were made on a **case-by-case basis** during the typical advising session. One advisor said, "If a student is doing well and doesn't appear to need any additional resources, we move the conversation to academic and career planning, internships, and goals. If the student is struggling, more of the conversation focuses on the [resources and referral] topics listed above."

The responses provided by the advisors also suggested inconsistencies in the **availability of resources** from institution to institution. While some advisors indicated that both on-campus and off-campus resource links were sent via email to all students at the beginning of the academic year, other advisors reported that at their institutions, the options for tutoring, especially in math and writing, are limited. Advisor comments regarding resources and referrals also suggest that they perceived primary role (professional advisors) as more knowledgeable about resources and referrals compared to faculty advisors. This is an area that needs further study, and relates to professional development and training commitments within institutions, as well as the individual advisor's perception of their role.

### Time Limitations

On the whole, findings from the data gathered from the advisors revealed that often, most of the discussion during the *typical* advising session **focused almost exclusively on academic planning due to time limitations**. One advisor pointed out that "Faculty advisors, particularly for freshmen and sophomores, do academic planning and course enrollment advisement. Rarely, do they get into discussions of current conditions and resources."

Another advisor reported that they had once had a Director tell them that there wasn't "space in the appointment to talk about issues beyond academic planning and social justice." Advisors also lamented that the lack of time spent on referrals and resources might be due to **student perceptions of the role of the advisor**. An advisor said this: "We encourage students to think of us as the front line - if they don't know where to go, they come to us, and we help them find the right department." Others reported that many students view the advisor as an administrator and, therefore, do not think they can discuss issues beyond academic planning with them. And for those who did make referrals, they found that due to their caseload and office schedules, they were unable to have follow-up meetings with their advisees to check whether they found the referral beneficial.

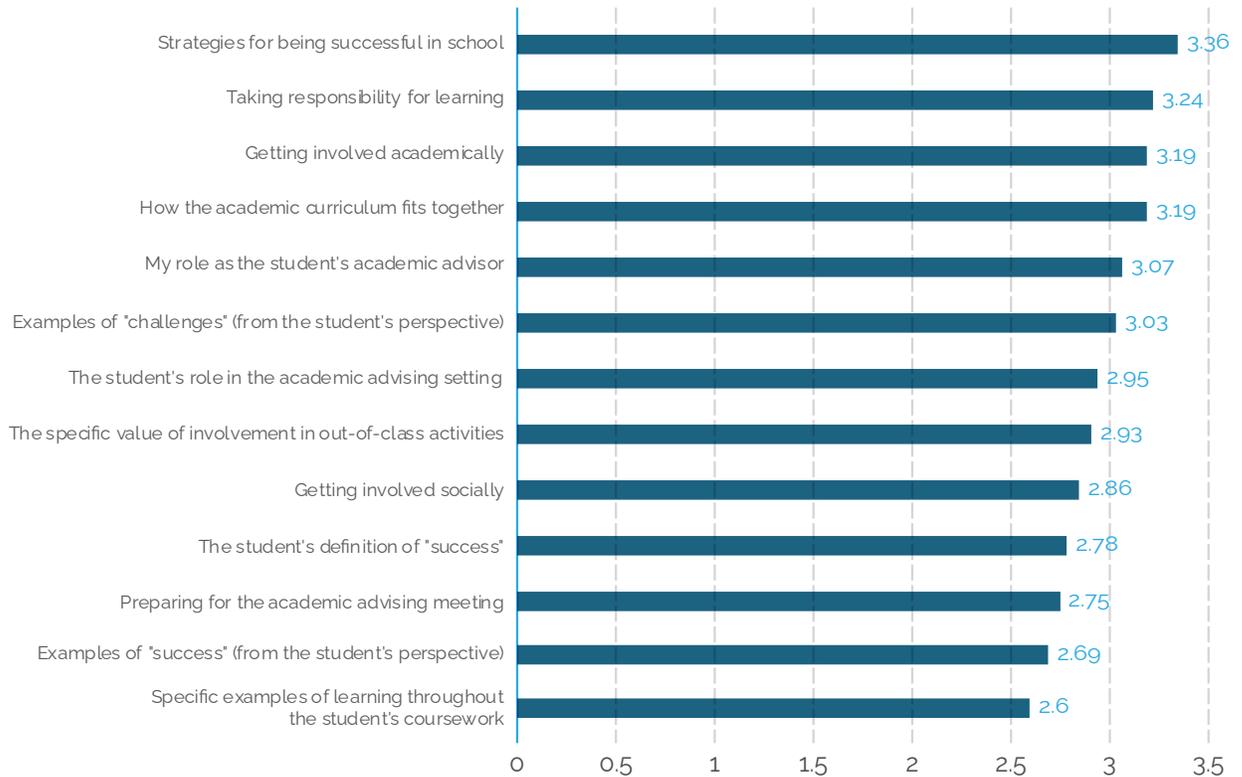
## THE QUESTION OF CONSISTENCY

If given the opportunity to engage in deeper conversations with students, academic advisors can connect students with appropriate, valuable resources. The range of topics and individual needs requires academic advisors to have substantive knowledge of all aspects of the institution. This differentiated approach leads to more effective and impactful work with each student, but challenges the validity and reliability of internal assessments at an institution related to outcomes, as well as broader scholarly inquiry related to the impact, context, and theoretical underpinnings of academic advising.

## LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT TOPICS – STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Figure 5.

### PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSE TO LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT TOPICS



Academic advising has been a formal entity within United States institutions for at least 4 decades. Early opinions of the role was based on the concept that students benefit both academically and personally from interactions with faculty and/or staff who focus on their success, however that is defined (Himes & Schulenberg, 2016). This section of the study asked respondents to further describe that role in practice.

Using 13 Likert-scale items and on a scale of 1 = *never* to 4 = *most of the time*, advisors were asked to indicate how often they addressed learning and development topics in a *typical* meeting with their advisees. Interestingly, the mean values on the learning and development topics were less than those for the items related to academic planning and resources and referrals, indicating that, on the whole, advisors isolated learning-related areas **less frequently during the *typical* advising session than other areas**.

Likely due to the generalized nature of the item, **strategies for being successful in school** was the most frequently discussed topic. Most of the respondents (92.3%) reported this topic as being discussed sometimes to most of the time (M=3.36; SD=.63), followed by **taking responsibility for learning**, which 88% of the advisors said is discussed sometimes to most of the time (see *Table 4*).

Respondents reported that advisors were least likely to discuss **specific examples of learning throughout the student's coursework** (M=2.60, SD=.76). Other learning and development topics advisors said they typically discuss with their students include time management strategies, life goal strategies, professional development, cross-cultural learning activities, and personal responsibility.

Table 4

## DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS REPORT - LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

TOPICS	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	MOST OF THE TIME	M	SD
Strategies for being successful in school	0.4	7.3	48.4	43.9	3.36	.63
Taking responsibility for learning	0.4	11.6	51.3	36.7	3.24	.67
Getting involved academically	1.1	9.0	59.7	30.3	3.19	.63
How the academic curriculum fits together	2.6	14.9	43.2	39.3	3.19	.78
My role as the student's academic advisor	7.6	21.7	48.1	29.6	3.07	.73
Examples of "challenges" (from the student's perspective)	2.6	19.0	51.6	26.8	3.03	.75
The student's role in the academic advising setting	1.7	27.9	44.2	26.2	2.95	.78
The specific value of involvement in out-of-class activities	2.4	24.7	50.8	22.2	2.93	.75
Getting involved socially	3.4	22.7	57.7	16.1	2.86	.71
The student's definition of "success"	4.3	32.3	44.5	18.9	2.78	.80
Preparing for the academic advising meeting	3.9	35.9	41.1	19.1	2.75	.80
Examples of "success" (from the student's perspective)	4.9	35.8	44.8	14.4	2.69	.78
Specific examples of learning throughout the student's coursework	6.0	38.9	44.1	11.0	2.60	.76

## LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT TOPICS – OPEN-ENDED COMMENTS

Respondents again noted how rarely they were able to get into deeper, learning-focused conversations with students. Some reported that **academic success coaches** were also available to students at their institution and that these conversations were "mostly left up to them."

Additionally, conversations concerning learning and development emerged after the advisor and the advisee had built a "more frequent and longer relationship." One advisor explained,

How often these conversations happen depends on how long I have known the student. If it is the beginning of our relationship, we talk much more frequently and explicitly about expectations - *from me as an advisor and of me as an advisor*. After that, we start talking more about their learning experiences - both in and out of the classroom to determine what would be most meaningful for each student.

Respondents noted the challenges associated with moving to this level of conversation. One mentioned again the *time constraints*, noting, "A lot of this comes up as the case dictates. There is far too much to cover in a 20-30 minute advising meeting to [be able to] touch on all of these [topics]." The issues of **high caseloads**, **lack of student preparation prior to meetings**, and **lack of opportunities for follow-up** were also brought up as possible reasons why learning and development topics were not covered as often during the *typical* advising sessions. Some pointed out that their institutions are "just beginning to have discussions with advisors about the benefits of adopting advising as a teaching/developmental model," and others are "working towards doing more of this intentionally."

One advisor discussed this issue more from a social justice and equity perspective, reporting,

I spend a lot of time teaching concepts related to career development, decision making, and how students can become a more active advocate for themselves in a bureaucratic environment. I also try to acknowledge that I'm a privileged white male at a primarily white institution and communicate that I'm open to having discussions with students about how they're experiencing life on a college campus that has not been historically designed for different aspects of their identities in some instances. I want them to feel that they matter and belong in their university home. I acknowledge my own racial and gender privilege as a means of disarming marginalized students and inviting them to relate with me outside of their perception of what an advisor does.

### THE QUESTION OF CONSISTENCY

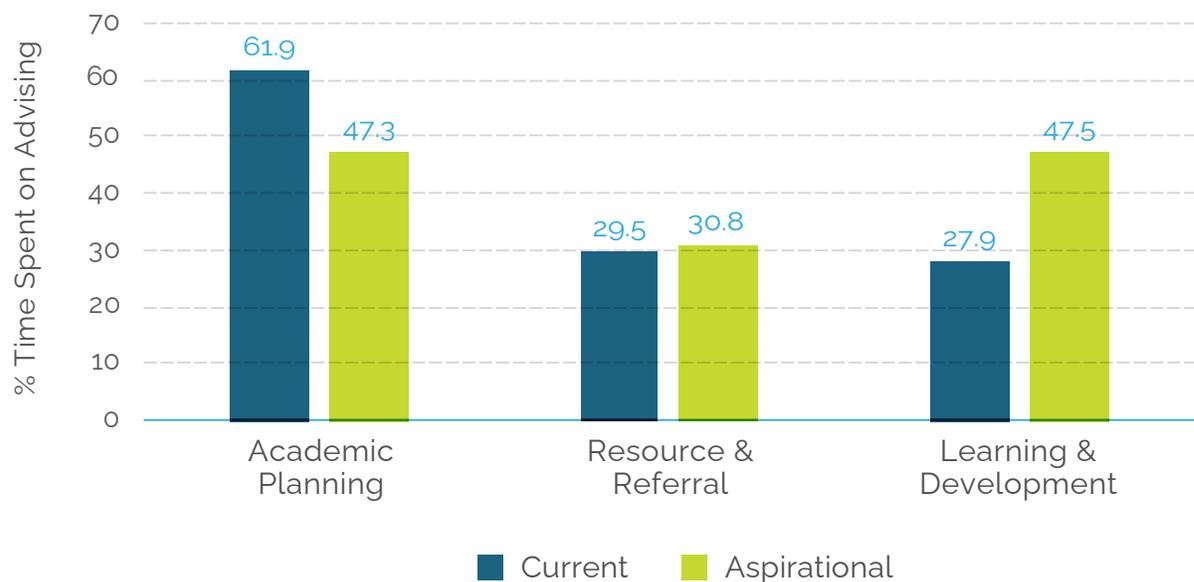
While academic advising is intended to focus on elements of academic success, deeper exploration of the nature of the advising interaction related to learning reveals a frustrating trend. Academic advisors, particularly primary role advisors, express concern that they rarely discuss learning-related issues with students as a result of limited time, high caseloads, and administrative responsibilities. But for academic advisors to become more deeply involved with the learning mission of their institutions they must be involved with the ongoing work of educators, namely engagement with intentional instructional strategies, curricular and disciplinary knowledge, and collaborative approaches to pedagogy and scholarship. Reflective educators working within the organizational constraints and opportunities at their institutions are often challenged in navigating those responsibilities. Academic advisors are highly susceptible to unclear expectations and explicit role assignments.

## CURRENT VS. ASPIRATION IN ACADEMIC ADVISING

Responding to survey items asking them to rate how often they currently discuss topics on academic planning, resources and referrals, and learning and development during the typical advising session, the respondents noted that, on average, they spent the most time (61.9%) discussing issues related to academic planning. The data displayed in *Figure 6* shows that only 29.5% and 27.9% of the time was used to cover topics related to resources and referrals and learning and development, respectively.

Figure 6.

### CURRENT VS. ASPIRATIONAL TIME SPENT ON ACADEMIC PLANNING, RESOURCES & REFERRAL, AND LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT TOPICS



It should be noted that these clusters are not mutually exclusive. Academic planning involves elements of learning and development, and referrals are generated in response to individual discussions related to academic progress and goal-setting, for example. But for the purpose of this study respondents were asked to focus on specific items within each broad area.

When asked to note how much time they would have liked to spend on the same three areas during the typical advising session, the ratings showed that they aspired to spend the most time (47.5%) on deeper issues related to learning and development. The time spent on academic planning was a close second (47.3%), followed by covering resources and referrals, on average, 30.8% of the time. Upon comparing current and aspirational goals for topics discussed during the typical advising session, it was observed that the sharpest difference (19.6%) was between current practice and aspirations for learning and development topics, following by academic planning (14.6% difference), and then resources and referral (1.3% difference).

The discrepancy between the more complex role many would like to have with students and the logistical realities of their immediate responsibilities reveal a critically important area for internal institutional discussions and further scholarly inquiry.

## ADVISORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE TYPICAL ACADEMIC ADVISING – OPEN-ENDED COMMENTS

Advisors' perceptions regarding the typical academic advising session were explored using a series of open-ended items at the end of the survey. The text data gathered from the open-ended questions were coded and categorized into two major themes: Role Relevancy within Academic Advising and Relational Aspects of Academic Advising. They provided strategic recommendations for improvement in their final responses.

### Roles Relevancy within Academic Advising

#### MOST RELEVANT ROLES

Commenting on the role of academic advising, respondents presented in-depth feedback related to the areas they view as most important to their role in academic planning, suggesting resources and making referrals, and learning and development. There was general agreement that students must understand the curriculum and the policies behind course offerings, prerequisites, and transitioning, in order to meet academic goals. Academic advising must play a central role during this process. One respondent wrote, "It is important to make sure the student is **on track** for graduation and making sure that their major aligns with their career goals." Another said, "The most important role of the advisor is **helping the student navigate their path** from initial enrollment to the next step beyond graduation."

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"The most important role of the advisor is helping the student navigate their path from initial enrollment to the next step beyond graduation."

Regarding resources and referrals, specifically, most noted that the role of academic advising is to **lead students to resources** for such things as health, psychological, academic, professional (career), and disability services. These resources need to be made available to students to enable them "to be academically successful toward their education, and to ensure that they are enjoying the learning atmosphere of the institution."

#### LEAST RELEVANT ROLES

While discussing the important roles within academic advising, the respondents also shared that the responsibility of **admission and recruitment** was least relevant to advising. One advisor said, "I don't think advisors should feel pressured to help sell a school to students by either leaving out details or spinning the truth. We should be involved in making sure admissions counselors are up to date on programs, but we shouldn't have any further involvement in recruitment."

There was significant comment on the many administrative duties academic advisors must do, such as data input and writing letters of recommendation. Many commented on the need to leave administrative duties and information retrieval to student peer advisors, while acknowledging the privacy issues involved. When asked to note what was least important to advising, one said, "retrieving information on students (who took what math when in their high school years, for example) for other people's research."

A major frustration involves the **inefficiencies of advising-related technologies** used by the institution. To detail how cumbersome this role can be, one respondent said: "I have a minimum of 4 enterprise systems open at all times in order to coordinate information and check the necessary 'boxes.' It probably takes 15% of my day just dealing with all the systems that do not directly benefit students."

Also, spending time on unautomated "paperwork," "explaining information that could easily be retrieved in the student catalog or from the college website," and "articulating the college's common learning objectives to students" were noted as the areas with the most opportunity for improvement in advising technologies.

While course selection and registration are often connected with advising functions, some respondents noted that these activities are not critical to the role of academic advising. One reported: "I think too many advisors focus too much on this. Students need to know the requirements for their academic goals and how to identify courses that fulfill the requirements - but **they can pick the specific courses on their own.**" Another argued, "Academic advising is not prescriptive...It's not just selecting class choices but helping them [students] understand why there are those choices."

The respondents also consistently brought up issues related to the philosophical approaches to advising, particularly *developmental (holistic) approaches to advising*. They noted that while a major portion of advising involves academic planning, other areas are also necessary for student development and success. As pointed out by one advisor, "a more holistic approach to working with students is most needed to make a connection between the student and the college, advising center, and the university." Advisors aim to help students develop overarching goals for their educational experience by reflecting on their strengths, preferences, values, and the environment. Advisors indicated that this deeper approach to advising, described as "students fitting in, enjoying their major, challenging themselves in and out of class, and getting resources like health, psychological, disability services, etc.," is crucial.

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Advisors aim to help students develop overarching goals for their educational experience by reflecting on their strengths, preferences, values, and the environment.

The faculty role is to help students understand career options related to a chosen degree, mentor them through their academic and career planning, connect them to necessary resources, and teach them to independently use available academic and career resources. The goal is to **help students grow into self-advisement** while supporting them through the process.

As part of the advising process, helping new students transition to the university academically, personally, and socially, and facilitating understanding of the university's structures and procedures so that students can navigate it to **meet their own goals** is essential. Guiding students, getting them involved in the process of advising and engage them in the whole of the university or college experience is important. Additionally, career-readiness, assisting students in understanding, and deriving meaning from their academic journeys and making intentional decisions about their goals is essential to help them **gain independence**.

According to the information gleaned from the open-ended comments on the survey, **concern for the “whole student” focuses on intentional connections and resources to offer the best chance at success, as defined by the student.** It is essential to give students the guidance and support they need to be successful by taking an individualized approach.

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Concern for the “whole student” focuses on intentional connections and resources to offer the best chance at success, as defined by the student.

One advisor, however, noted that while it is important to help the student develop a more engaged collegiate experience, advisors “often have to focus on reactive and prescriptive practices due to the lack of time and high student-to-advisor ratios.” Another advisor added that the “30 minutes [for an advising session] is not a lot of time to do that, and advising caseloads do not allow for longer appointment times.” Yet another noted, advising needs to be about “helping students understand the curriculum and how it supports their development as well-rounded, life-long learners, and contributing members of society. Sometimes the advising experience [however] feels transactional rather than the intended holistic approach.” This desire to *help students* leads to deeper exploration of the relational aspects of academic advising.

## RELATIONAL ASPECTS OF ACADEMIC ADVISING

The relational aspects of academic advising provide a critical framework for praxis. Indeed, the NACADA Core Competencies Model (2017) identifies the “Relational Component” as a critical area within academic advising practice and scholarship. The respondents of this study articulate examples of both intentional approaches and action-oriented behavior to demonstrate this unique, all-encompassing role.

### Supportive Advisor

For academic advising to be successful, these respondents stress the importance of collaborative relationships that are built with students. It is important to build a strong rapport with students while guiding them through their complex college experience. Respondents suggested that advisors need to develop personal relationships with students and listen attentively to “use the knowledge gained through listening to guide the student toward their success.” What students need most from an advisor is a **trustworthy, supportive relationship**. One advisor noted that “support and encouragement, with some “tough love” to make them [students] take responsibility for themselves...and to know that they have someone in their corner to help them navigate the college experience” is most needed.

Effective academic advisors **have empathy and are engaged; ready to support and guide students**. Advisors often play the role of a **caring adult**; one who will empathize, listen, and engage, and be available as “someone to talk through options.” In addition to building empathy, advisors help **empower students** “to take ownership of their education by knowing their curriculum and the resources available for their success; and part of taking ownership is understanding one’s self.”

## Didactic Teacher

Students need to know and trust that their advisor is helping them **make decisions in their best interest**. One respondent noted that the advising sessions should support students "academically, mentally and personally, and providing them opportunities for asking questions and seeking responses/answers and obtaining resources." This strategy is important because, as noted by another, "recently, we have seen a growth of students with higher levels of stress and anxiety, and we have been doing more encouragement and reassurance with students that they can overcome academic challenges as they grow." Yet another advisor noted that what is needed most is "someone who can **listen without judgment** (as much as humanly possible, anyway) and have a **sincere empathy** for student concerns."

## Authentic Advocate

The need for advisors to be **advocates for students** was also mentioned. The advisor should be "someone to help students navigate higher education, especially those that are minority/LGBTQ/first-generation students. Students need **someone who has an understanding for where they are** developmentally and what they are dealing with at the moment (and soon in the future), and who can **give them practical support** on how to make the transition through this difficult period." Also, advisors are available to help students figure out resources to help them, especially when they find themselves struggling through their major. Advisors need to build welcoming relationships with students so they (students) can feel that they **have someone they can rely on and to** talk to about issues they are faced with on- and off-campus.

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## Professional Educator

As reported by one advisor, students need "a central person who supports them, can offer resources, provide accurate information that is relevant to their needs, and can help students to make meaning of their experience." Another advisor pointed out their role to help students in "navigating university policies and curricula." Advisors **serve as mentors** who can "provide clarification about the purposes and uses of higher education" and help students as needed and having someone as "a sounding board - someone to hear all their concerns, dreams, and worries. Someone who can help them figure out how to make the best of their time in college - even if that means having the tough conversations about unrealistic goals. They need someone to be honest with them about their decisions." One advisor wrote: "students need someone **caring and knowledgeable** to help them navigate their college experience - classes, involvement, meaningful experiential learning experiences, career planning."

## Critical Friend

Again, students need **advocates and referral agents** for academic and career planning, and as one advisor noted, "someone who will make sure that they are on track for graduation and are on the right track to their future goals. Someone to help students become empowered to make their own decisions."

Finally, students benefit from advisors who would invest their time in them. Students need, as an advisor put it, "an advisor who has time to reach out to them and interact with them beyond simply a 30-minute appointment each semester. **They need someone who knows who they are so they can help them get there.**" However, one advisor noted this: "If my university has its way, they won't get it [time], since our administration's stated goal is to ensure that every advisor serves between 250 to 350 students in order to cost-cut."

The administrators, faculty, and staff at each institution must determine, explicitly, what academic advising is at that college or university. Those that embrace the relational aspects of the role recognize and commit to the human and fiscal resources necessary for effectiveness. **Academic advisors who develop real relationships with individual students do so not only because they believe that their work makes a difference, but because they are provided the time, energy, and space to engage in it.**

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## Recommendations: Academic Advising Improvement Strategies

When asked to share improvement strategies, many discussed the need to explore context-relevant caseloads, move professional advising to academic departments, employ and value talented advisors, make advising mandatory every semester for every student, and have a mission and vision for academic advising. This can be subsumed under intentional **change in campus culture** toward academic advising, followed by more specific areas for strategic redesign.

### Change in Campus Culture Toward Academic Advising

Advisors brought up a desire for change in their campus' culture towards advising. One advisor stated that faculty must "fully embrace advising as part of their responsibility for student learning (as well as) appropriate staffing in the central advising office to work with and support faculty in advisement work. Everyone must fully understand that academic advising includes more than just picking out classes." One advisor described it succinctly: "We need to establish what advising means and what the expected outcomes from advising should be for students."

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"We need to establish what advising means and what the expected outcomes from advising should be for students."

As a way to change the culture, one advisor offered this suggestion: "Retire old advisors who are set in the old ways, switch students to professional advisors from beginning to end of their academic career, and hire advisors who take more time to actually get to know their students, to ask more questions and not just prescribe classes." Another advisor said: "We need to let administrators know about the scholarship and research behind our work and get more people involved in things like NACADA." Changing the campus culture would also involve a change in the way administration operates. Administration should be invested in **professional development for advisors**, and advisors need "to **act professionally**," as indicated by one advisor. The advising culture needs to "shift from prescriptive to developmental advising," according to another respondent.

### The Team Approach to Educating Students

Respondents recognize the collaborative nature of academic advising. One advisor wrote, "Connecting the advising staff to faculty, and having **advisement emphasized as learning and development** at the institution is of utmost importance to expand further and improve the work we do." Another strategy offered was the need to have leadership that has greater support for academic advising, and that "cares about the students and not the bottom line." As one advisor put it, the campus community needs "an academic dean who has a stronger understanding of the role of advisement in student development and retention and a commitment to redesigning the advisement model." Also, there was support for the dual-advising model whereby a professional advisor is assigned to each student from admission through graduation. At the same time, a faculty advisor is assigned to each student, depending on their major or program. This strategy is based on the idea of developing or building a *student advising team*.

A focus on **coordinated collaboration** across in institution is necessary for “administrative reductions and more cooperative departments and services (like admissions, registrar, and financial aid),” as suggested by one advisor. **Explicit mission statements** should make clear that the institution “is more student-centered and is built around the needs and wants of students.” Another advisor said, “We need more advisors (in order) to lighten caseloads so we can focus on providing better service to our students, and higher salaries to keep those advisors. Advisor turnover is not helpful to students.”

## Improved Advising-related Technology

The area of *technology* was also suggested as an area for improvement. Advisors noted the need for **better technology systems that support advising functions**. One advisor said,

We need technology that works for degree checking and degree audit, including for exploratory students. We need consistency across our advising on campus because some units are much more holistic and welcoming than others - giving students an *inconsistent experience* **emphasis added**.

Better technology tools would help advisors be *better connected* to students. Also, the technology would help advisors be *more efficient*. One advisor wrote: “I don’t understand how the systems can’t talk with each other so that students can be signaled if they are registered for a class that s/he has already successfully completed. Also, the systems don’t update effectively, and students on probation are able to register for 15 or 18 hours when they are supposed to be limited to 13 (or 7 in the summer).” Yet another advisor noted that “We need *technology that works* for degree checking and degree audit, including for exploratory students. Advisors need **appropriate physical space and improved technology** to support our roles, as well as more centralized or consistent advising structures/policies across campus.”

## Strategic Resource Allocation (human/fiscal/physical)

Another strategy for improvement suggested by advisors concerned *increasing resources* (staff, office space, and private tutoring spaces, for example) and providing more **equitable salaries** to encourage the retention of good advisors.

The advisors also mentioned the need for “**a well-defined career ladder.**” One advisor said, “I think advisors leave because they don’t see a future here, and there’s no reward for doing the same job better and better every year. You have to climb if you want to advance your title/pay/career.” Another advisor also noted the need for more advisors, “so we can spend more time with each student, but I think more important than that is pay that shows **we are valued at the institution.**”

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## Focused Professional Development and Accountability

Improvement in *professional development* starts with appropriate on-boarding and continues with systematic programming to help advisors continue to learn and grow within their careers. Advisors need an increased understanding of the role of academic advisors and the impact of policies, procedures, pedagogy, and technology on the ability of advisors to respond to the needs of students effectively. And as good professional development is provided, advisors need to be *evaluated for accountability* using valid and reliable tools. One person said, "advisors need to be held responsible for misadvising."

## Collaborative Communication

Finally, the need for *better communication* between faculty and staff was suggested for improvement. Advisors noted the lack of communication between faculty and staff at their institutions. Timely knowledge about updates to curriculum or programs is critical for advisors who help students navigate their academic goals and plans. One advisor said, "We don't know to plan for changes if they are coming, and the student is the one who suffers. Then, because the student knows us best, the blame is placed on us." There is, therefore, the need to promote interaction and communication between primary role advisors and academic departments and colleges.

Strategic, consistent institutional design of and for academic advising requires a systemic approach to the critical elements of the role, from explicit vision and mission statements to the practical aspects of resource allocation and foci. Recommendations for improvement cover areas consistently addressed in the literature; there are few surprises proposed by those who work most closely with students. Why, then, are there still vast inconsistencies in the ways in which academic advising is organized, delivered, and assessed? The final section of this report explores the implications for institutional culture, context, and outcomes.

## Conclusions and Implications

This study, a follow-up to the 2020 Driving Toward a Degree (D2D) report, documents the perceptions and descriptions of 499 educators with first-hand knowledge of academic advising in higher education in the United States. Having responded to the D2D survey, these participants agreed to address questions that asked them to consider the nature and elements of a *typical* advising session, within their personal and professional contexts.

While the timing of the project pre-dated the changes forced by the COVID-19 pandemic, the issues addressed by respondents likely survive adjustments in advising modalities, and may even serve to illuminate critical areas for both institutionally-based assessment and profession-focused inquiry. *Consistency* in approaches to support for an institution's students, now scattered throughout the world, requires systemic focus and strategic intentionality. **But the *practice of academic advising seems consistently inconsistent.***

The evidence contained in this study reveals variance in:

- Individual philosophies and perceptions of the role
- Institutional definitions of the role
- Policies related to mandatory advising
- Depth and complexity of topics discussed in advising interactions
- Advising structures and organizational reporting lines
- Quantity and quality of advising interactions
- Gaps between common areas discussed and areas advisors would *like* to be able to discuss

Further exploration into the symptoms and cures of inconsistencies require both inductive and deductive lenses. Academic advisors may hold faculty rank or may serve in a primary advising role. While the majority of respondents of this study responded from the lens of full-time advising and/or administration, the interactions between individuals (advisors and students) and institutions (policies and practices) are inextricably linked.

- ***Academic advisors work inconsistently with students because students are individually complex.*** They are appropriately diverse in their goals, their preparedness, their engagement, their confidence, their responsiveness, their trust, and their talents. Academic advisors who approach each student with focused care, respect, and curiosity will appropriately differentiate their interactions if given the opportunity to develop meaningful academic relationships with them.

Academic advisors who, by disposition or design, view students through deficit lenses (skills or behaviors that need to be *fixed*) perpetuate inequitable relationships and privileged supports, whether intentional or not. Institutions that continue to use labels such as "at risk," which bring to question assumptions related to privileged characteristics of background, preparedness, and motivation, further perpetuate predictable and critical inconsistencies.

- **Academic advisors work inconsistently with students because institutions are intentionally complex.** They often allow autonomy at the academic department level, and structural autonomy at the division level. Appropriate differences in curricula, academic requirements, experiential programming, and assessment (direct and indirect measures of learning) provide opportunities for a diverse range of disciplinary offerings.

When left to individuals, however, normative structures, behaviors, and decisions often vary (Wilson, et al., 2020). Academic advisors hold significant power to influence students' academic choices, and the complexities of institutional policies and requirements require diligent, focused, and *consistent* training and professional development. The consequences of both wrong information (poorly informed advisors) and incomplete information (no interaction with informed advisors) can affect student persistence, time-to-degree, and financial obligations.

Why is it important or desirable for "consistency" in academic advising? The question requires an exploration of the elements in focus, as well as a discussion of strategic reflection and prioritization. Policies and practices that are *consistently* developed and applied bring qualities of agreement, "harmony, regularity, or steady continuity [which are] free from variation or contradiction" (Merriam-Webster, 2021, para. 1). While appropriate variation is necessary and desirable in a dynamic educational environment, contradictions in support and systemic policy lead to inequitable outcomes and discriminatory treatment.

Academic decision-makers seeking to prioritize academic advising as integral to learning and development do so intentionally. A number of resources and strategies are available to move toward intentional consistency both within and across institutions:

- Explicitly articulating the role and purpose of academic advising within the institution's mission statements and strategic plans
- Identifying academic advising for special focus in accreditation and reaffirmation of accreditation
- Participating in structured self-study processes focused on academic advising, such as the Excellence in Academic Advising (EAA) program: a comprehensive, evidence-based, self-study process which focuses on an institution-wide commitment to academic advising redesign (NACADA, 2021); or the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 2021).
- Participating in professional associations devoted exclusively to the competencies, core values, scholarship, and practice of academic advising, such as NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising
- Consuming and contributing to the Scholarship of Advising, and supporting the curiosity of scholar-practitioners (including collaborative inquiry across disciplinary and institutional contexts)
- Promoting institution-level professional development and training, as well as engaging in critical discussions and policies related to individual accountability and promotion opportunities, and program assessment.

## FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

### **How can assessment and research be done on student learning outcomes related to academic advising when the structures, approaches, and pedagogy are so varied, even within an institution?**

Well-designed inquiry, whatever the topic, starts with clearly defined purpose, goals, scope, and methodological lenses. Advising-related inquiry encompasses the full range of paradigms, including the humanities (historical, philosophical, critical, theoretical, etc.), the social sciences (qualitative and quantitative, descriptive and inferential, etc.), the natural sciences (quantitative and quasi-experimental, etc.), and the arts (creative, visual, literary, performance, etc.). Mixed method designs also allow the complexities of education to be illuminated and interrogated.

The context of academic advising within an institution, and across higher education, requires intentional logic, fairness, and accuracy. The elements of the advising relationship are evidenced in the nature and scope of advising-related interactions, whether prompted and experienced by humans or through the technological tools advisors use to support their work. Focused inquiry should take into account the complexities inherent in the academic journey, with specific identification of concepts, constructs, and practices, such as:

- **Students** – individual goals and engagement, and recognition of their diverse experiences, access, and strengths
- **Practices** – individual interactions
- **Policies** – institutional parameters
- **Curricula** – frameworks for decisions that guide the academic plan
- **Philosophy** – individual (dispositions as a professional educator or a clerical staff member)
- **Philosophy** – institutional (explicit and implicit determinations of the role of academic advisors)
- **Access to resources** – students and academic advisors, including collaborative student supports
- **Structures and analysis of student-level data** – critical approaches toward equity and away from bias
- **Prioritization of the Advising Function and Voice** – organizational structures and involvement in administrative and academic policies and decisions
- **Professional Development** – on-going, purposeful commitment to praxis
- **Training** – on-going, purposeful commitment to the competencies, skills, and knowledge required for consistent support for students
- **Technology** – institutional commitment to the tools that provide integrated, consistent support to the advising role
- **Identity and positionality** – institutional commitment to the value of academic advisors as partners in teaching and learning

Institutions that intentionally situate academic advising within the teaching and learning mission of the institution provide a *consistently* supportive educational environment for students. Academic advisors who approach their role as educators, and who are given the charge and resources to develop meaningful relationships with students, provide an invaluable role in success. Students who experience *consistent* care and attention are better positioned to succeed and to persist.

The responsibilities are shared across the institution, and across higher education. The stakes are too high to ignore, and *unintentional inconsistencies* lead to frustration and inequities at all levels. The voices and expertise of educators committed to the role of academic advising can refine, redefine, and improve the student experience.

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# Appendix A – Psychometric Analysis

## PSYCHOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF ITEMS

Reliability indices were generated for items under the three categories of advising: Academic Planning, Resources and Referrals, and Learning and Development (See Table 2). Cronbach alpha values or internal consistency reliability indices for the total of 28 Likert-scale items were .893; .689 for the ten items under the topic of Academic Planning, .793 for the five items under the topic of Resources and Referral, and .880 for the 13 items under the topic of Learning and Development. All measures of reliability met the acceptable level of 0.70 or higher, providing evidence of the consistency of the scales of measurement (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). The survey was checked for content validity.

Table 4

### CRONBACH'S ALPHA INDICES

SCALE	CRONBACH ALPHA	NUMBER OF ITEMS
Academic Planning Topics	.689	10
Resources & Referral Topics	.793	5
Learning & Development Topics	.880	13
All Items	.893	28

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