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EXPLORING THE CAREERS OF PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC ADVISORS AT

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EXPLORING THE CAREERS OF PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC ADVISORS AT
OKLAHOMA COMMUNITY COLLEGES: A MULTIPLE-CASE STUDY

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Abstract

This qualitative, multiple-case study explored the career choice and development of academic advisors at Oklahoma community colleges Data for this study were derived from participant interviews and information about the community colleges from which the participants were employed. There were nine participants from five Oklahoma community colleges in this study. Data were analyzed using a constructivist approach and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as a theoretical framework. The study found three overarching themes connected to the SCCT framework that explain the career choice of academic advisors at Oklahoma community colleges: 1) helping others is an innate characteristic of their personality and influences their approach to advising students; 2) participants identified positive learning experiences in school or college that influenced their desire to work in higher education; 3) the location of the institution was a salient factor in their career decision. In addition to the analytical themes of SCCT, the data revealed observations from the findings that extend beyond the scope and theoretical framework of this study; yet warrant further exploration: 1) working at a rural community college, and 2) the impact of state and institutional budget cuts on Oklahoma community colleges.

Keywords: Academic advising, community college, career development

Dedication

"But can you brave what you most fear? Can you face what the river knows? Until the river's finally crossed, you'll never feel the solid ground. You have to get a little lost on your way to being found. Where all is lost, then all is found." – All is Found, written by Robert Lopez & Kristen Anderson-Lopez

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom, Helyn Padilla Crain. In the late 1970s, my mom began at a community college as a single mother and first-generation learner. She benefitted greatly from the junior college designed for adult and non-traditional students. In the early 1980s, she completed her associate degree in occupational therapy, a year before I was born.

She died on February 23, 1989, after a short battle with cancer. I was just seven years old. It was not until I became an adult that I found her journals and learned that she graduated from college. I discovered her passion for helping others in her journals, along with her gift for organizing her thoughts into a compelling style of writing. I read about her experiences in college, and her appreciation for the college supports that helped her succeed despite the challenges she faced. She was guided by academic counselors who helped her arrange a practicum experience and connected her to other campus and community resources. Through her journals, I also learned that she had dreams of earning a bachelor's degree and writing a book. I believe she would have achieved her educational goal and likely obtained a graduate degree and maybe even a doctorate. She would have definitely written a book. I am eternally grateful for the time I had with her and for the relationship I developed with her through her journals. Somehow, I always find the advice or perspective that I need from her when I read them.

x

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10.4.2020.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed description of important background and contextual factors that necessitate the need for this exploratory, qualitative, multiple-case study about the career choice for Oklahoma community college academic advisors. I present the problem statement, the purpose of the research, research questions, the significance of the study, including the impact of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic on this research and topic, and the research method. I define common terms and assumptions that guided the study and conclude with an outline for the remainder of the dissertation.

By some estimates, the average American will spend approximately 90,000 hours at work throughout their lifetime (Borg, 1996). For many people, a career is a central part of their identity, and their career affects their overall life satisfaction and well-being, relationships, self-esteem, and self-perception (Blustein, 2008; Carr et al., 2008; Savickas, 2005). According to Hartung and Taber (2008), careers can "energize or exhaust, yield fulfillment or discontent, offer a source of achievement or failure" (p. 75). Many factors shape one's career choices, including personality, abilities, race, gender, socioeconomic background, and the economy (Duffy & Dik, 2007; Holland, 1997; Lent et al., 1994; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996). While "no occupation provides a perfect match between personality characteristics and work tasks…good occupational choices can prevent major mismatches" (Reynolds, 1988, p. 5). Understanding employees ʻ career choices can provide valuable information for organizations because of the centrality of work in many people's lives.

Employees are one of an organization's most valuable resources, and their workplace behaviors can significantly impact an organization's performance and productivity (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Holland, 1997; Kristof, 1996; Silver & Jakeman, 2014). Organizations desire

employees who have energy and dedication and are thoroughly engaged in their work (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Understanding the career decision-making process and how these decisions manifest as workplace behaviors can inform organizational practices for recruiting and retaining employees who align with the organization's mission; this information can also guide an organization's approach to employee training and professional development (Bakker & Leiter, 2017; McHargue, 2003; Shuck & Wollard, 2010).

Career choice research provides a foundation for understanding how employees perceive and experience their work. However, careers occur within complex environments, so while career choice research offers some insight into employee attitudes and behaviors, organizational context is also a salient factor that warrants additional consideration (Gunz et al., 2011). Organizational context affects how employees navigate workplace challenges and situations, including how they interact with coworkers and customers to job satisfaction, performance, and turnover intentions – and these behaviors can have costly repercussions for organizational performance and goals (Blau, 1985; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kanungo, 1982; Lent & Brown, 2019; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Mowday et al., 1979; Young et al., 2002). Career choice research is beneficial for organizations experiencing challenging situations such as pressure for improvement, increased accountability, or financial deficits.

Funding for Oklahoma Public Higher Education

More than 1,600 public colleges and universities in the United States employ approximately 2.5 million faculty and staff (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Due to decreased public funding, many public higher education institutions are navigating volatile conditions marked by financial scarcity and pressure for accountability for student educational outcomes. Across the nation, public higher education institutions in 37 states have experienced

ongoing decreases in financial support, with the most significant cuts occurring in Arizona, Louisiana, and Oklahoma (Hamby, 2021). Deficiencies in state financial support for public higher education have created an environment of scarcity for all of Oklahoma's public higher education institutions. In 1980, public support for the state's higher education system was over 18%; however, today's institutions receive only 10.9% (OSRHE, 2021a).

Oklahoma's failure to invest in public higher education has been labeled "short-sighted and counterintuitive,", particularly for a "state with top 10 aspirations" (Hamby, 2021, para 6). Oklahoma ranks 47th in the nation for bachelor's degrees or higher, followed by Arkansas, Mississippi, and West Virginia (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2020). Some estimates indicate that by 2028 Oklahoma will face a workforce shortage of nearly 20,000 employees due to retirements and a gap in educational attainment levels (Oklahoma Works, 2019). Therefore, one of the state's top educational priorities is increasing the number of Oklahomans who graduate from college (Oklahoma Works, 2019; OSRHE, 2018). Despite declining budgets, Oklahoma state leadership increasingly calls upon the state's public higher education system to address deficits in the population's educational attainment levels (Oklahoma Works, 2019).

There are 25 colleges and universities in the Oklahoma public higher education system: two research universities, ten regional universities, one public liberal arts university, and 12 community colleges. The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE) is the governing body for the state's public higher education system. It maintains constitutional authority for distributing state funds to the 25 institutions (OSRHE, 2021b). In 2021, Oklahoma public institutions received roughly $477 million in state support across all 25 institutions.

Oklahoma Community Colleges

Oklahoma's 12 community colleges received $111 million, or 23%, of the 2021 higher education allocation. The remaining 77% was distributed to the state's 13 universities (OSRHE, 2021). As a standalone data point, it is problematic Oklahoma's 12 community colleges received only 23% of the total state-appropriated funds, despite accounting for *nearly half* of the state's public higher education system. The disproportionate allocation is even more inequitable, given that approximately 40% of the state's higher education enrollments are at community colleges (OSRHE, 2020).

State budget deficits affect an institution's ability to provide services to students, as many institutions have had to eliminate faculty and staff positions, reduce professional development opportunities, impose hiring freezes, and increase reliance on part-time staff (Browne, 2020; Martinez-Keel, 2021). Moreover, budget reductions create issues for recruiting new faculty and staff due to cuts in base salaries, benefits, and future professional development opportunities (Bohn et al., 2013; Dowd & Shieh, 2014; Epps, 2002).

Additionally, state budget cuts have led to rising tuition rates; however, household incomes have not experienced similar increases (College Board, 2019; Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997). According to a study by Georgetown University, college tuition costs increased 169% between 1980 and 2019 (Carnevale et al., 2021). The rising cost of college tuition has created a chasm of inequality that is most evident in community colleges. Community colleges are more likely than four-year institutions to enroll minoritized and socially stigmatized students, including first-generation students, students of color, economically disadvantaged students, undocumented students, and non-traditional learners (Cohen et al., 2014; Doran & Lucht, 2021; Juszkiewicz, 2020; Xu et al., 2016; Wyner, 2014). In the fall 2020 semester, 53% of community

college students nationwide identified as nonwhite, and 29% identified as first-generation (American Association of Community Colleges, 2022a).

Since their inception, community colleges have occupied a marginal position in the educational hierarchy, characterized by underlying issues of power and inequality (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Gramsci, 1971; Wyner, 2014). Educational institutions are not "culturally neutral zones" (Dalal, 2016; p. 237); instead, their policies embody and legitimize the dominant group's culture. Community college students face institutional and structural discrimination through policies of those who control the institutions; these policies reflect the cultural and social competencies of individuals from middle and upper-income families (Pincus, 1996; Valadez, 1996). Symbolic and material power structures uphold the dominant culture. Symbolic power relates to how a group is perceived in society, while material power refers to economic resources available to a group (Hextrum, 2014). Do budget decisions reinforce an underlying perception that community college faculty, staff, and students are inferior, and what does that mean for those who have chosen to work at a community college?

Oklahoma's public higher education system is subject to power and inequality, evidenced by the ongoing cuts to state financial support. Oklahoma community colleges are the hardest hit by parsimonious state funding allocations, and state funding is a substantial portion of the Oklahoma community college budget. In 2021, state support for Oklahoma community colleges ranged from 23% to 44% of the overall institutional budget (OSRHE, 2021). Because they rely on public funding, community colleges must balance "making the numbers" while upholding their open-access mission of providing learning and development opportunities for all students. Unfortunately, community colleges may be driven by financial motives and inclined to

implement revenue-driven policies that prioritize financial and economic goals over student learning, an example of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Budgets and Career Choice

Today's community colleges are "driven by both financial anxiety and by genuine concern for the success of the students they enroll" (Robinson, 2016, p. 4). This tension creates a complicated institutional context that can profoundly impact how faculty and staff experience their jobs, as they must work within the financial constraints and policies of the institution (August & Waltman, 2004; Barnett & Bradley, 2007). Several studies have found that higher education budget cuts negatively impact job satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intentions for faculty and staff (Gillespie et al., 2001; Grunberg et al., 2008; Jiang et al., 2014; Latta & Myers, 2005). However, this research does not explore the role of career choice in these workplace feelings.

Career choice underscores a constellation of individual actions and behaviors that can significantly affect an organization's ability to meet goals or performance objectives. Organizational literature suggests that career choice is an important determinant of career commitment and organizational commitment (Blau, 1985; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Borg, 1996; Gottfredson & Duffy, 2008; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Mowday et al., 1979; Savickas, 2002). Individuals are drawn to occupations that align with their personalities and values. It is common for those in education, counseling, or other helping professions to be driven by an intrinsic or altruistic desire to help others (Bright, 2008; Holland, 1959; Oster, 2006; Parsons, 1909; Ribak-Rosenthal, 1994; & Super, 1953). Intrinsic motives include a passion for teaching and learning, subject knowledge, and expertise, while altruistic motives are the perception that one's profession contributes or makes a difference in society (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999).

Understanding the career choice of community college advisors can provide valuable information for recruiting and retaining advisors and align with an institution's goals of increasing graduation rates. Career choice research offers insight into how employees respond to challenging workplace environments, including how they reconcile situations when (or if) their career and professional values intersect (or collide) with institutional policies (Baston, 2018; Gill & Harrison, 2018; Johnsrud, 1996; Lee & Helm, 2013; Robinson, 2016). Career choice research could add depth to understanding whether budget issues are the source of negative attitudes and feelings of faculty and staff or are these feelings reflective of more profound ideological contradictions created by revenue-driven institutional decisions. Understanding career choice provides insight for institutional strategies such as recruiting and retaining employees who align with the organization's mission; this information can also inform training and professional development strategies (Bakker & Leiter, 2017; McHargue, 2003; Shuck & Wollard, 2010).

Problem Statement

In addition to declining budgets and financial scarcity, today's community colleges also face the challenge of improving student graduation rates (Cohen & Kelly, 2019; Wyner, 2014). Higher education stakeholders have an increased focus on improving community college student educational outcomes (i.e., persistence, retention, and graduation). Community college academic advisors play an important role in promoting community college student educational outcomes (Bahr, 2008; Baston, 2018; CCCSE, 2018; Gill & Harrison, 2018; Orozco et al., 2010; Robinson, 2016; Ryan, 2013). According to the Center for Community College Student Engagement, "advising is the most important student service that [community] colleges offer" (CCCSE, 2018, p. 1). Academic advisors are crucial institutional agents who help students and institutions reach their educational objectives.

Although academic advisors have influenced students' academic and career decisions for over a century, research has indicated that academic advisors enter the profession from various lived experiences and educational and professional backgrounds (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Hirschy et al., 2015; Poe & Almanzar, 2019). There is a lack of formalized standards or competencies for academic advisors to enter the field, creating inconsistencies among institutions related to the educational requirements, academic advisor job duties, institutional classification, responsibilities, and salary levels (McGill, 2018, 2019). There is a need for additional research that explores the career paths of academic advisors (Epps, 2002; Klusmeier, 2017; Myers, 2015; Nelson, 2020; Tuttle, 2000). Tuttle (2000) noted the paradox that while academic advisors frequently help students clarify and explore educational and career paths, they are "less adept at clarifying the varied and often convoluted paths of their own professional careers" (p. 21). Epps (2002) also noted a lack of career research for academic advisors, stating:

> Institutions collect a seemingly inexhaustible supply of data on its student body for student recruitment and retention efforts. Yet the same institution may have little or no information with which to do the same for professional advisors - the very individuals who are, in large part, charged with incorporating those efforts into their work every day (p. 23).

Oklahoma community colleges face challenges due to omnipresent and deleterious structural and systemic issues that affect how advisors experience their jobs, making this study on career choice relevant and necessary. Career choice research provides a foundation for understanding how employees perceive and experience their work and can offer insight into how employees navigate workplace challenges and situations (Blau, 1985; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kanungo, 1982; Lent & Brown, 2019; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Mowday et al., 1979; Young et al.,

2002). Understanding the career choice of community college academic advisors provides insight for institutional strategies such as recruiting and retaining advisors who align with the organization's mission; this information can also inform advisor training and professional development (Bakker & Leiter, 2017; McHargue, 2003; Shuck & Wollard, 2010).

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple-case study was to explore the personal, social, and environmental factors that influenced the career choice of academic advisors at Oklahoma community colleges. The overarching research question for this exploratory, qualitative, multiple-case study was, "what influences someone to become an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?" This study used Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, 2012; Lent et al., 1994) to understand how personal factors, learning experiences, and environmental factors influenced an individual's decision to become an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college. The research questions were:

1. What personal factors influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?

2. What learning experiences influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?

3. What environmental factors influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?

Significance of Study

There is a paucity of research concerning the career choice of academic advisors. The gap in the literature is more pronounced for community college advisors, as much of the existing research has focused on academic advising in the university setting, which is a markedly

different experience. Academic advising has been described as one of the most challenging jobs

in higher education (Baer & Carr, 1985; CCCSE, 2018; Kim & Feldman, 2011; Tuttle, 2000).

Community college advisors often experience demanding and stressful working conditions

characterized by pressure to increase student graduation, rushed advising sessions, high student

to advisor ratios, and policies that undermine best practices (Berwick, 1992; Crookston & Hooks,

2012; Darling, 2015; Donnelly, 2006; Drake, 2015; Nobbe & Manning, 1997; Robinson, 2016).

Community college advisors wear many proverbial hats, and their responsibilities

transcend both student and academic affairs (Drake, 2011; Kirkner & Levinson, 2013). The

constant state of "hat-switching" can be exhausting and lead to frustration, strain, and role

ambiguity for community college advisors (Kirkner & Levinson, 2013; Vallandingham, 2008).

The multiplicity of academic advisor roles and the interdisciplinary nature of academic advising

means that advisors often fall into an institutional grey area – they are neither faculty nor student

affairs (Menke et al., 2018). Although they are highly skilled and credentialed, academic

advisors are generally considered entry-level positions and may not be fully integrated within the

academic community (Johnsrud & Rosser, 2000). Misconceptions about academic advising lead

to advisors being erroneously discounted as a dispensable or clerical process that exists in the

institution's peripheral outskirts (Austin & Gamson, 1983; Bloland, 1994; Floyd, 2018; Habley,

2009; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2000; McGill, 2018). Flawed or inaccurate discernments about

academic advising can affect institutional policies and practices, such as how the institution

organizes, values, and supports academic advising (Floyd, 2018; Habley, 2009; McGill, 2018,

2019). Vallandingham (2008) described the work of community college academic advisors as

simultaneously rewarding and exhausting due to institutional budget issues, pressure to improve

student outcomes, and the "extremely diverse student needs and expectations" (p. 448). Vernon

(2015) referred to community college academic advisors as the "rock stars of higher education" (para. 3) because they must have an "exceptionally high level of compassion, coupled with a whole lot of grit" (para. 10).

Understanding the career choice of advisors could affect how a college makes staffing decisions. Organizations desire employees who have energy and dedication and are thoroughly engaged in their work (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Employee attitudes and behaviors affect an organization's goals and objectives; therefore, understanding why academic advisors choose their careers can inform community college practices and policies, including human resource development practices and professional development (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Borg, 1996; Cascio, 2006; Savickas, 2002; Schneider, 1987; Young et al., 2002).

Community College Challenges

Today's community colleges are "driven by both financial anxiety and by genuine concern for the success of the students they enroll" (Robinson, 2016, p. 4). Community colleges have been commended for their open-access mission and role in providing educational access and developing the nation's human capital (White House, 2010). In 2015, President Barak Obama recognized community colleges as an essential pathway to the middle class for millions of Americans (White House, 2015a). However, community colleges have also been criticized for low student graduation rates (Crookston & Hooks, 2012; Shaw & Rab, 2003; Wyner, 2014). Student graduation rates are a standard benchmark of performance for higher education institutions, and graduation rates of community college students are low compared to university students (Alfonso, 2006; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Wyner, 2014; Zusman, 2005).

The open-access mission of community colleges makes low student graduation rates an inevitable and ongoing challenge (Wyner, 2014). According to Dr. Jill Biden, community

colleges "do not pick and choose their students; [they] work with students to help them become who they aspire to be" (White House, 2015b, para. 16). Nevertheless, community colleges are confronted by an increasingly volatile environment characterized by financial scarcity and pressure to "produce" more graduates or credentials. Therefore, one of the most prevalent and urgent issues today's community colleges face is improving student graduation rates.

A myriad of complex factors affect a college student's retention, persistence, and graduation; therefore, improving graduation rates requires a multifaceted approach. According to Tinto (1993), just as there is "no single cause of a student leaving" (p. 150), there are no "quick or easy solutions" (p. 201). Thomas and McFarlane (2018) challenged institutions to shift from a student deficiency model of asking "where our students are failing?" to an institutional deficiency model of exploring "where we are failing our students" (p. 99). According to Thomas and McFarlane (2018), the best way to do this is by examining the role of those who work in the vital position of guiding and helping students with their educational decisions: academic advisors.

Academic Advising

Research has found that student retention, persistence, and graduation rates are influenced by their interactions with institutional employees (Astin, 1993; Brown, 2008; Farrell, 2009; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Noel et al., 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Tinto asserted that "an institution's capacity to retain students is directly related to its ability to reach out and make contact with students" (Tinto, 1993, p. 204). Academic advisors develop collaborative relationships with students and help them create meaningful educational goals that align with their interests, values, and abilities (Crockett, 1985). Community college academic advisors are often the bridge connecting a student to the institution through a consistent

and meaningful relationship (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2021; Glenn, 2003; Orozco et al., 2010; Wood & Williams, 2013). According to the Center for Community College Student Engagement, "advising is the most important student service that [community] colleges offer" (CCCSE, 2018; p. 1). Students trust their academic advisors to guide them to and through their educational goals.

Academic advisors have been consistently identified for their role in promoting student educational outcomes (Bahr, 2008; Baston, 2018; CCCSE, 2018; Gill & Harrison, 2018; Orozco et al., 2010; Robinson, 2016; Ryan, 2013). Community college academic advisors fulfill many roles that transcend both student and academic affairs (Drake, 2011; Kirkner & Levinson, 2013). Academic advisors offer a wealth of knowledge and connection for community college students, as evidenced by the multiplicity of roles they assume, including teacher, problem-solver, coach, hero, connector, mediator, cheerleader, mentor, counselor, and advocate (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Kuhn, 2008; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). The interdisciplinary nature of academic advising means that advisors often fall into an institutional grey area – they are neither faculty nor student affairs personnel (Menke et al., 2018). Academic advising encompasses a breadth of campus functions, which sometimes causes role ambiguity, complicates the status of academic advising, and leads to misconceptions among administrators, faculty, or students about the role, purpose, and importance of academic advisors (Floyd, 2018; Habley, 2009; Kirkner & Levinson, 2013; McGill, 2018, 2019; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008).

Career Choice and Organizations

Career choice underscores a constellation of individual actions and behaviors that can significantly affect an organization's ability to meet goals or performance objectives. Organizational literature suggests that career choice is an important determinant of career commitment and organizational commitment (Blau, 1985; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Borg, 1996;

Gottfredson & Duffy, 2008; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Mowday et al., 1979; Savickas, 2002). Career commitment refers to how a person identifies or involves themselves within a profession. Career commitment is linked to career identity, career planning, and career resilience (Blau, 1985; Carson & Bedeian, 1994; Colarelli & Bishop, 1990). Organizational commitment refers to an employee's relationship to their workplace; it is how they identify and involve themselves within an organization (Kanungo, 1982; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Mowday et al., 1979). Organizational commitment manifests in employee behaviors such as career resilience, work engagement, job satisfaction, and job turnover (Aryee & Tan, 1992; Carson & Bedeian, 1994; Chang, 1999; Duffy et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2000; London, 1983; Meyer & Allen, 1997).

There is little to no research on the career choice of community college academic advisors. This exploratory study provides insights into the career choice of nine full-time academic advisors at five Oklahoma community colleges. This study's findings have practical implications for advisors, students, and institutions. Furthermore, this study helps ameliorate the dearth of literature and research on community college academic advisors. Previous researchers have noted that academic advisors' career and professional experiences and voices are often left out or missing from the research (Epps, 2002; Klusmeier, 2017; Robinson, 2016). Findings from this study provide a much-needed (and often missing) perspective of community college academic advisors.

COVID-19

I designed this study and collected the data in 2018 and 2019. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused sudden and dramatic changes that affected people worldwide. While my initial data analysis process began before the COVID-19 pandemic, the bulk of the analysis occurred throughout the various phases of the pandemic. Thus, my analysis and findings

were influenced and filtered through the many ways the pandemic affected my personal and professional life.

In March 2020, thousands of academic advisors from colleges and universities across the country experienced "career shock" when campuses closed, and classes and services shifted online (Akkermans et al., 2020; Smalley, 2021). Akkermans et al. (2018) defined career shock as "a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career" (p. 4). The pandemic illuminated the importance of academic advising. Students relied heavily on their advisors to provide guidance and advice in maneuvering the disruptions and the onslaught of new institutional policies (Cicco, 2021; Phillippe, 2020; White, 2020).

Although education is an industry that is traditionally associated with in-person work, COVID-19 forced colleges and universities to implement remote or flexible work policies. As pandemic cases ebbed and flowed and vaccines became more widely available, campuses began implementing return to campus plans. As campuses reopened and in-person activities resumed, faculty and staff disputes over remote work policies emerged at colleges and universities. While employees were understandably cautious about returning to campus due to health concerns and the risk of community spread, many were also hesitant to relinquish the newfound work-life balance that remote or flexible work arrangements afforded them. For example, Burelison et al. (2021) found that academic advisors engaged in more self-care activities while working from home during the pandemic. These included eating more healthfully, taking more breaks, and exercising more frequently. Participants indicated that the extra time they gained from not commuting was beneficial to their energy levels and mood.

Questions about outdated policies and inequitable practices regarding employee work arrangements and reluctance to formalize permanent remote work policies have generated employee unrest, distrust, and widespread tensions across college campuses (DeNeal, 2021; Hals, 2021). The "short term" changes that were implemented out of necessity in March 2020 could spur fundamental changes to the way higher education services are delivered by staff and used by students in the future (Bouchey et al., 2021; D'Amico et al., 2021; Floyd et al., 2022). Higher education institutions must reexamine long-held beliefs that if employees are not seen, they are not working.

The pandemic has shifted our ways of living and working and will have significant short and long-term impacts on policies and organizations across all industries (Akkermans et al., 2020). One effect is already being seen in the record-breaking highs in employee turnover at U.S. organizations since the onset of the pandemic (BLS, 2021). The dramatic spike in employee turnover was dubbed the "Great Resignation" by Anthony Klotz in a May 2021 interview with Bloomberg Businessweek (Cohen, 2021). Klotz identified four factors that may explain the increase in resignations: 1) a backlog of resignations from people who planned to resign in 2020 but did not due to the pandemic, 2) increased levels of burnout, 3) "pandemic epiphany," which posits that the pandemic caused significant shifts in some people's identity, career, or life, and 4) a desire for more flexible work arrangements (Jorgenson, 2021). Flexible and remote work options are vital for recruiting and retaining faculty and staff and could lead to higher employee job satisfaction (Bichsel et al., 2021; Brantley & Shomaker, 2021; Ellis, 2021).

Andy Brantley, President of the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR), strongly encouraged colleges and universities to embrace flexibility and reevaluate when, where, and how employees work. A national survey found that

55% of employees prefer to work remotely at least three days per week (PwC, 2021). Similarly, a research study conducted by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) found that 67% of respondents desired more flexible or remote work opportunities (Bichsel et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to reshape our approach to living and working. Employees' desire for remote work options and greater flexibility will likely impact future career decisions and planning processes. Thus, understanding career choice is perhaps even more relevant for today's employees and organizations due to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from career research conducted and analyzed throughout the pandemic could provide valuable and contemporary insight to guide organizational human resource development policies and strategies for the future and generate new knowledge and understanding of individual career decisions. These studies may also be a catalyst for future research and create additional avenues for studying and understanding career choice and development in light of the workplace changes experienced during a worldwide pandemic.

Research Method

This qualitative multiple-case study explored the career choice of Oklahoma community college academic advisors. The multiple-case study method seeks to understand complex interrelationships within a complex social phenomenon (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Multiple-case study research examines the uniqueness and commonalities among cases by highlighting the "nuance, the sequentiality of happenings, [and] the wholeness of the individual" (Stake, 1995, p. xii).

Research Setting

Oklahoma's public higher education system was the contextual backdrop for this multiple-case study. State leadership has increasingly called upon the Oklahoma public higher education system to help address impending deficits in educational attainment levels. However, state financial support for Oklahoma public higher education has experienced drastic and ongoing reductions, thus contradicting the state's commitment to supporting higher education efforts. The Oklahoma Policy Institute indicated that between 2008 and 2019, Oklahoma had the nation's third-largest percentage decrease in state higher education funding (Hamby, 2021). The state's failure to invest in public higher education has been criticized as "short-sighted and counterintuitive,", particularly for a "state with top 10 aspirations" (Hamby, 2021, para 6).

State budget cuts are most evident for Oklahoma's community colleges. These 12 institutions received only 23% of the total state-appropriated funds for public higher education in 2021 (OSRHE, 2021). However, this is not a new phenomenon. A 2013 study of Oklahoma community colleges revealed that even nearly ten years ago, budget issues were a prevalent topic discussed by community college presidents (Gamez Vargas, 2013). Oklahoma community college presidents were frustrated about competing for funding against more prominent universities, concerned about disparities in the state budget, and worried about how budget issues would affect the future of Oklahoma community colleges (Gamez Vargas, 2013). One participant in Gamez Vargas' study stated, "the [state] funding formula just cannot keep up with the growth we are seeing in community colleges. Community colleges are growing faster than four-year institutions" (p. 483). Another participant stated, "in Oklahoma, community colleges are underfunded given the scope of the mission of community colleges" (p. 483). The disproportionately low funding for community colleges is illustrated by what Trow (1984)

termed the "Matthew Effect," which refers to funding methods that favor more prominent institutions by distributing a substantial allocation of resources.

Oklahoma's community colleges make up nearly half of the state's public higher education system. They enroll approximately 40% of its higher education students. Yet, they received only 23% of the state appropriated funds for higher education. This glaring discrepancy adds contemporary context and reinforces the qualitative perspective provided nearly ten years ago by Gamez Vargas (2013). In addition to casting doubt over state leadership's claims regarding the value or their commitment to supporting public higher education, this dichotomy reveals the need for a more equitable funding process for Oklahoma community colleges.

Theoretical Framework

This study explored the career choice of Oklahoma community college academic advisors using the theoretical framework of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, 2012; Lent et al., 1994). This framework offers a sophisticated approach to understanding the complexities of career interest, choice, performance, and satisfaction through the reciprocal interaction between and among one's learning experiences (direct or vicarious), personal factors, and environmental conditions (Lent, 2012; Lent et al., 1994). SCCT builds upon social learning concepts from Bandura (1978) and Krumboltz et al. (1976), which account for the influence of social contexts on beliefs and behavior. SCCT shows that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals influence career development and choice. SCCT considers how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals are influenced by environmental factors such as culture, economic factors, education, skill development, changes over time, and work satisfaction (Lent, 2012). SCCT "explain[s] individual variability in career interest, choice, and

performance…[and]…it may also offer some useful implications for designing developmental, preventive, and remedial career interventions" (Lent & Brown, 1996, p. 7).

SCCT provides insight into why an individual enters a career field and is a contemporary theory that augments the understanding of career development for a diverse array of individuals and groups. A strength of the SCCT framework is that it enhances the understanding of existing career theories such as personality types (Holland, 1959), role salience (Super, 1953), and ability acquisition (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). For these reasons, Blustein (1999) described SCCT as "one of the most influential theoretical perspectives in career development" (p. 349).

Assumptions

This study explored career choice based on the assumption that people can assert some measure of personal control or agency in their career decisions (Lent & Brown, 2013). This study assumed that participants answered the questions honestly based on their ways of knowing and understanding the world. The study also assumed that the information provided by participants would provide insights that could be analyzed to enhance understanding. The study was guided by philosophical assumptions of constructivism, which assumes that people are active participants in constructing their realities rather than passively accepting a given reality. Constructivism posits that knowledge is constructed, not created, and focuses on multiple perspectives and conceptualizations of reality (Crotty, 1998). A more detailed discussion about the philosophical assumptions and my positionality is presented in Chapter 3 and Appendix E.

Terms and Definitions

This section clarifies the terms used throughout this study to establish clarity and transparency for the reader. Definitions of key terms and concepts used in this study are provided below.

Academic Advisor: a college or university employee who provides insight or direction to

a college student about an educational, social, or personal matter. The nature of

this direction may be to inform, suggest, counsel, discipline, coach, mentor, or

even to teach (Kuhn, 2008). This study focuses on non-faculty, full-time

professional academic advisors, i.e., individuals whose sole responsibility is

advising students on a full-time basis.

Career: a series of occupations one might expect to hold in their working history

(National Career Development Association, 2022).

Career choice: Intentions, plans, or aspirations to engage in a career-related activity to

obtain a career outcome (Lent et al., 1994). In this study, career choice is based on

the assumption that people can assert personal control or agency in their careers

(Lent & Brown, 2013).

Educational outcomes: student persistence, retention, and graduation

First-generation student: a student from a family where neither parent has more than a

high-school education (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Student affairs: departments that help promote and support an institution's academic

mission through institutional programming and activities that foster college

students' intellectual, emotional, and psychosocial development. This includes

academic advising, career services, student organizations, and student counseling

(Magolda & Quaye, 2011; Nuss, 2003).

Chapter Summary and Organization of Dissertation

This chapter provided an introduction and background to the research problem, the

purpose statement, and research questions that were the foundation of this study, which explored the career choice of academic advisors at Oklahoma community colleges. This dissertation consists of seven chapters: introduction, review of literature, theoretical framework, methodology, data analysis and findings, and discussion.

Chapter 2 contains a literature review that addresses community colleges, career research, and academic advising careers. Within the general topics, I address additional aspects relevant to the study. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework and assumptions that guided this study. I describe the constructivist paradigm and Social Cognitive Career (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994).

Chapter 4 begins with my rationale for selecting a qualitative approach and multiple-case study design for this dissertation. The chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the multiple-case study methodology and subsequent research design steps and techniques. I provide a detailed description of the methods used to identify, recruit, and select participants. I discuss the strategies for data collection and analysis. I address ethical considerations, including researcher positionality, the process for protecting participant anonymity, and establishing trustworthiness. Finally, I discuss the limitations of the study.

Chapter 5 provides the contextual setting for the study and an introduction to the study's participants. Chapter 6 analyzes the data and presents findings and themes from the analysis through the SCCT framework. The chapter also describes a few unexpected themes that emerged from the data and offers insights through additional theoretical frames and supporting literature. Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation with a discussion of findings, recommendations for practice, suggestions for further study.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This multiple-case study explored the career choice of academic advisors at Oklahoma community colleges. This literature review synthesizes two broad streams of literature related to this study of the career choice of community college academic advisors: community colleges and the academic advisor career. This comprehensive literature review addresses many sub-topics related to each broad topic. This literature review is divided into two sections to facilitate a more organized and cohesive structure.

Section one is titled Community College. This body of literature contextualizes community colleges within national and state ecosystems. I begin by discussing community colleges within the stratified educational and social hierarchy. I describe longstanding systemic and structural economic, social, and political forces that serve as a backdrop for today's community colleges. Within this context, I explore community college completion agendas and critique the idea of success related to community college student outcomes. Finally, I describe the Voluntary Accountability Framework, an alternative measurement system that the American Association of Community Colleges designed to reflect community college performance metrics.

Section two is titled Careers in Academic Advising. I begin with an overview of career choice and development theories, which establishes the relationship between career choice and organizational behavior. I review the literature regarding careers in academic advising. Next, I provide more in-depth information about the development of academic advising. Academic advising is often categorized within the broader milieu of student affairs; therefore, I include a brief overview of the development and purpose of student affairs. Finally, I identify and discuss the challenges of academic advising within the community college setting.

Community College

This section addresses community colleges within the stratified educational and social hierarchy of the United States. The section also identifies systemic and structural economic, social, and political forces that serve as a backdrop for today's community colleges.

Stratification in Higher Education

"Junior colleges" were developed in the early 1900s due to an elitist movement within the American higher education system (Brint & Karabel, 1989). University leaders believed that providing general education to the masses distracted faculty and institutional resources away from their true purpose, which was research and scholarship. Many university leaders thus believed that the first two years of college were "an unnecessary part of university-level instruction" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 24). The advent of "junior colleges" relieved the university of the burden of teaching freshman- and sophomore-level classes so they could focus on developing into research and training centers for the intellectually elite (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

The historical origins and purpose of community colleges mean that, from their inception, they have occupied the lowest rung of the higher-education hierarchy and have been stigmatized as less important, inferior, or institutions of last resort for both students and staff (Bourke, Major, & Harris, 2009; Dougherty, 1994; Zwerling, 1976). Zwerling (1976) described community colleges as catering to students and faculty with limited goals and aspirations, making them "second best" institutions for the students who attend them and the faculty and staff who work at them. Community colleges face many challenges in fulfilling their mission and improving student outcomes while simultaneously navigating a marginalized position within the stratified world of higher education.

Educational institutions are not "culturally neutral zones" (Dalal, 2016, p. 237); instead, their policies embody and legitimize the dominant group's culture. According to Valadez (1996), "the policies and practices of higher education, and the expectations of faculty concerning the cultural and social competencies of students favor individuals from middle and upper-income families" (p. 398). Higher education stratification means that community colleges face institutional and structural discrimination, which leads to intentional and unintentional discriminatory policies (Pincus, 1996). Institutional and structural discrimination are embedded "policies of the dominant race/ethnic/gender institutions and the behavior of individuals who control these institutions and implement policies that are intended to have a differential and/or harmful effect on minority race/ethnic/gender groups" (Pincus, 1996, p. 186).

Cultural reproduction theory posits that educational systems contribute to cultural production or reproduction due to the "complex nexus" of power, political, and social forces at play (Apple, 2004, p. 4). In this view, the educational system is designed to privilege students in the middle to upper classes by routing them to more prestigious institutions and careers while channeling those with limited resources to less prestigious institutions and vocations (Hextrum, 2014). Cultural reproduction theory explains why wealthy students are overrepresented at prestigious universities while low-income students are overrepresented at community colleges (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014; Mellow & Heelan, 2014). Zwerling (1976) noted that an "unstated function" of community colleges is to:

> channel its students away from the high-status professions while simultaneously helping to reconcile them to middle-level jobs because the limited room at the top of the work hierarchy is to be preserved for the graduates of elite four-year colleges and universities. (p. 71)

From this marginalized position in the educational hierarchy, it is challenging for community colleges to serve a largely marginalized student population. Underlying internal and external issues related to power and inequality further contribute to the marginal status of community colleges within the educational hierarchy (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Wyner, 2014). Gramsci (1971) explained that institutions are driven by the power and politics of those who rule society. Thus, these institutions are conduits that exist to maintain social control and power for the elite. Hextrum (2014) discusses two power structures within the educational system, symbolic and material. Symbolic power relates to how a group is perceived in society, and material power refers to the economic resources available to a group. Public community colleges are affected by a deficiency of both symbolic and material power due to the perception that they are inferior and the distribution and allocation of financial resources contingent upon student outcomes.

The open admissions policies of community colleges have generated discussion regarding their role in perpetuating social inequality by reinforcing neoliberal views and capitalism. Some believe that the community college open admissions policies maintain capitalism by legitimizing the position of the ruling class through the facade of a natural or earned social hierarchy rather than the arbitrary and forced hierarchy that is reality (Marx & Engels, 1970). Gewirtz and Cribbs (2009) postulated that educational institutions actively conceal their nefarious role in the reproduction of inequality "by masquerading as neutral and universal" (p. 144). Meritocracy, disguised by the community college open admissions policy as the "great equalizer," leads people to believe the system is fair and open to all. Hextrum argued that students who do well, as evidenced by their academic performance, are "*allowed* to succeed because of their membership in the dominant group" (p. 90). Community colleges are more likely than four-year institutions to

enroll minoritized and socially stigmatized students such as students of color, economically disadvantaged students, undocumented students, and academically underprepared students (Abrego, 2011; Cohen et al., 2014; Hurtado et al., 2015). For community colleges and their students, navigating educational policies and institutions that are designed to uphold the values of the middle and upper classes is a challenge. Zwerling (1976) pointed out that the community college system was designed to reinforce the idea that students "never had what it takes" (p. xxi). This system encourages students to blame their lack of success on their own incompetence while falsely believing that the institution did all it could to help them succeed (Zwerling, 1976).

As noted earlier, Zwerling (1976) pointed out that community colleges cater to students and faculty with limited goals and aspirations, making them "second best" institutions. Community colleges maintain social inequalities by preventing students from low socioeconomic backgrounds from breaking through class barriers (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Clark, 1960; Dougherty, 1994; Zwerling, 1976). Rather than increasing social mobility, community colleges actively divert the aspirations of students "who are typically destined by the structure of opportunity to occupy more modest positions" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 10).

Clark (1960) described the "cooling out" function of community colleges to maintain social stratification. According to Clark (1960), academic advisors are the most active "coolers" within the institutional structure of the community college. Advisors discuss students' placement scores, help with course selection, and provide information about the requirements and hurdles associated with the student's goals. Throughout these interactions, the advisor is believed to be making a case for deterring students from striving toward overly ambitious goals and guiding them toward more reasonable goals based on the advisor's perception of the student's capabilities (Clark, 1960). Zwerling noted that academic advisors "cool out" the students'

aspirations by reminding them to be realistic about what they can accomplish and ensuring they do not make the "mistake of aspiring too high" (Zwerling, 1976, p. 81). Foucault (1980) noted that individuals do not exist outside of the power and knowledge relations that organize higher education; instead, they themselves are the *effects* of power.

Fortunately, the situation for today's community colleges has become less despondent over the last decade. Increased advocacy for community colleges has started to shift the paradigm, and community colleges are being recognized for their contribution to higher education at national, state, and local levels. Community colleges have received increased advocacy from the American Association of Community Colleges, the Community College Research Center, the Association of Community College Trustees, and The White House. Today's community colleges are shedding the misconception that they are institutions of last resort or "high school[s] with ashtrays" (Twombly, 2005, p. 434). But there is still a long way to go.

Brief History of Community Colleges

William Rainey Harper is considered the "father of the junior college" (Vaughan, 1982, p. 12). When Harper was president of the University of Chicago in the early 1900s, he separated the university into two divisions that came to be known as the "Junior College and the Senior College" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 25). In 1900, Harper introduced the associate degree, awarded to students who completed lower-level courses at the junior college. In 1901, Harper initiated America's first and oldest public community college, Joliet Junior College.

Junior colleges expanded throughout the twentieth century due to industrial and technological advances, which created a need for skilled laborers, and societal factors such as the drive for social equality (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Community colleges catered to their local

populations and the distinct needs of the communities in which they existed. Because of their highly localized focus, early community colleges were "extraordinarily diverse and relatively isolated from one another" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 30). The lack of unity was a concern, particularly as community colleges struggled to establish legitimacy as bona fide higher education institutions within the stratified world of academia (Brint & Karabel, 1989). In 1920, the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC) was established to foster cohesiveness, provide shared leadership, and develop a common vision for the nation's junior colleges.

Today, the organization is known as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and is the leading national advocacy organization for community colleges. The AACC supports initiatives to establish and expand educational and career pathways for community college students. It has been an instrumental voice calling for policy changes in measuring community college performance and accountability. Most notably, the AACC recently introduced the Voluntary Framework for Accountability (VFA), which is a "comprehensive national accountability system created by community colleges, for community colleges" (AACC, 2022b, p. 2). The VFA framework was developed "in light of the inadequacy of existing measures…to provide community colleges with a significantly improved ability to assess their performance, identify areas for improvement, and demonstrate their commitment to their mission" (AACC, 2022b, p. 2).

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, community colleges experienced explosive growth due to the arrival of post-war Baby Boomers on college campuses (Dougherty, 1994). Further contributing to their development was a Carnegie Commission report, *The Open-Door Colleges: Policies for Community Colleges*, which recommended that every potential student in the United States have a two-year college within commuting distance of their home (Brint & Karabel,

1989). During this period of rapid growth, at least one new community college opened every week to accommodate the educational needs of an expanded group of students such as women, middle-aged adults, part-time students, senior citizens, and minorities (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). In the 1970s, the term "community college" began to replace "junior college" to describe their comprehensive nature more accurately. The addition of new institutions started to level off in the mid-1970s when enrollments for the Baby Boomer population peaked and then steadily declined throughout the remainder of the decade and into the 1980s (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, community colleges evolved to meet the nation's workforce and educational needs. Today, there are more than 1,000 public community colleges in the United States, educating nearly half of all undergraduate students in the nation (AACC, 2020). Some maintain that the open-access nature of community colleges has democratized higher education by providing students with an "alternative means of getting ahead" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 5). Others have argued that community colleges are active agents of cultural reproduction and maintaining social inequality, as evidenced by their low graduation and the overrepresentation of low-income, minoritized, or marginalized (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014; Mellow & Heelan, 2014). Nevertheless, community colleges have been described as the "most successful institutional innovation in twentieth-century American higher education" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 6).

Pressure to Improve Student Educational Outcomes

Community colleges have been commended for making higher education accessible and affordable for a diverse student population and for developing the nation's human capital (The White House, 2010). In 2015, President Barak Obama recognized community colleges as an

essential pathway to the middle class for millions of Americans. Although community colleges have made positive strides in establishing their importance to the nation's higher education system, they have faced criticism because student educational outcomes, such as rates of persistence, retention, and graduation, lag behind those of university students (Alfonso, 2006; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Wyner, 2014). While providing access may have been the emphasis for early community colleges, one of the most pressing issues facing today's community colleges is improving student educational outcomes, evidenced by completion of an academic credential (Crookston & Hooks, 2012; Dassance, 2011; Drake, 2011; Wyner, 2014).

Providing access to students who would otherwise be shut out of postsecondary education is no longer enough – today's community colleges must also demonstrate that they are a prudent "strategic investment" (Laanan, 2001, p. 60) and be catalysts of local economic development (Levin, 2005). However, even as funding and resources shrink, the demand for accountability has continued to grow. Community colleges are thwarted in their ability to make rapid or sweeping improvements in student educational outcomes due to underlying structural issues; political, economic, and social forces; and their own mission. The following section provides insight into why.

Neoliberalism, Performance-Based Funding, and Completion Agendas

Student outcomes are a benchmark of performance measures by which post-secondary institutions are evaluated, and these measures often impact institutional funding (Zusman, 2005). Because community colleges rely heavily on public funding, dismal student outcomes have contributed to increased pressure and calls for accountability from internal and external stakeholders (Crookston & Hooks, 2012; Shaw & Rab, 2003). States and institutions have adopted performance-based funding and completion agendas to fix the student completion issue.

However, these superficial attempts often fail to address the crux of the problem — the stratified education system driven by political, social, and economic forces that shape and often contradict the purpose and position of community colleges within the student completion narrative.

Accountability and financial pressures have brought into question the viability of the open-access model that allows students to enroll but does not provide the support they need to succeed (Wood, 2012). In an era of scarcity due to dwindling financial support, unpredictable enrollment trends, completion agendas, and performance-based funding models, community colleges are navigating an increasingly volatile environment (Wyner, 2014). Accountability and financial pressures have brought into question the viability of the open-access model that allows students to enroll but does not provide the support they need to succeed (Wood, 2012). Community colleges find it increasingly difficult to negotiate these competing priorities.

Performance-Based Funding

Performance-based funding models were introduced during the late 1970s and 1980s to encourage institutional accountability for student outcomes (Wood, 2007). Performance-based funding ties funding directly and tightly to institutions' performance; these financial incentives reward institutions for meeting or exceeding pre-defined performance indicators (Burke & Minassians, 2001, 2003; Wood, 2007). Performance-based funding programs often rely on metrics typically associated with residential universities; therefore, the introduction of these programs received "immediate criticism from community college presidents" (Wood, 2007, p. 4). Critics of performance-based funding denounced the illogical and inequitable practice of holding community colleges accountable by the same criteria used for universities. At the same time, proponents argued that the policies provided accountability for fiscal responsibility and an incentive for higher education institutions to pursue continuous improvement (Wood, 2007).

Ortagus et al. (2020) found that 41 states had adopted performance-based funding in 2020. However, they also noted that many studies have failed to show a substantial impact of performance-based funding models on their intended outcomes (Hu, 2019; Kelchen, 2019; Li & Kennedy, 2018; Li & Ortagus, 2019; McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017). Ortagus et al. (2020) cautioned that performance-based funding policies might negatively affect student access and equity due to institutional policies and might encourage institutions to "game the system" by implementing short-term fixes rather than developing long-term, sustainable improvement plans.

Completion Agendas

Many states and institutions have developed and adopted completion agendas "to create coherent academic and career pathways for students that lead to the student's intended goal of pursuing an advanced degree or transitioning into employment" (Baston, 2018, p. 813). One of the largest initiatives is Complete College America (CCA). CCA is a nationwide initiative consisting of 47 states and partner organizations; its goal is to work with states, systems, and institutions to reform policies (CCA, 2022). CCA reported a 10% increase in credentials and degrees since 2015 and has worked with many institutions and states to improve policies related to advising, guided pathways, developmental education, and financial aid (CCA, 2022). Philanthropic foundations such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation for Education provide financial support to the Complete College America organization.

Critics of completion agendas argue that they "generalize the student experience and often oversimplify student intentions" (Gill & Harrison, 2018, p. 806). Moreover, these initiatives prioritize speed and place student development as a secondary goal of education; put

simply, completion agendas have a shortsighted and myopic view of higher education as a means for building the economy and workforce, not developing learners (Gill & Harrison, 2018; Harbour & Smith, 2016).

Nevertheless, completion agendas have been imposed on higher education institutions. Even though all types of institutions have been called upon to support completion agendas, community colleges have shouldered most of the responsibility (Gill & Harrison, 2018). Wyner (2014) contended that challenges with student outcomes are inevitable for community colleges due to their mission. Wyner (2014) noted the injustice of the situation, lamenting, "how can institutions filled with millions of students who have historically succeeded at the lowest rates lead the charge to higher completion rates?" (p. 14). Similarly, Cox (2009) pointed out the juxtaposition between poor graduation rates and community colleges — "the very schools where higher education is most accessible" (Cox, 2009, p. 157). Indeed, Cox and Wyner, among many others, have called attention to the deleterious and unseen structural and systemic issues confronting community colleges.

Neoliberalism

Gill and Harrison (2018) explored community college completion agendas through the lens of neoliberalism. Ferguson (2010) defined neoliberalism as "a valorization of private enterprise…and the deployment of 'enterprise models' that would allow the state itself to 'run like a business'" (p. 170). Proponents of neoliberalism subscribe to the idea that public services, such as education, should operate as businesses. Opponents, on the other hand, argue that education is existentially different from consumer products; higher education institutions do not "produce" graduates; they develop and facilitate knowledge and learning. Therefore, comparing

the business practices and outcomes of private corporations to education is an illogical and inappropriate idea.

Neoliberalism intersects racism and classism and is particularly problematic for community colleges, designed as open-access institutions to provide higher education for students who may not otherwise attend college (Cox, 2009; Gill & Harrison, 2016). Gill and Harrison (2018) warned that a consequence of the neoliberalist approach to education is educational segregation, which ensures "students at elite institutions (disproportionately White, Asian, and/or wealthy) receive the benefits of a liberal education with an emphasis on student development, while students at community colleges (disproportionately African American, Latinx, and/or poor) are tracked toward vocational programs" (p. 801). Gill and Harrison do not dismiss the value of practical skills gained through vocational education; instead, they convey a moral concern about segregation practices that "allow some students college experiences that develop them as whole people while others are trained to be means to corporate leaders' ends" (p. 801).

Althusser (1971) discussed educational segregation as part of a capitalist approach to education. Schools and their agents orchestrate social division by directing some students to become workers and leading others to become managers. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that curricular and reward structures at schools were designed to produce an "amenable and fragmented" labor force (p. 125). This means that students who do well in school are selected and taught to become drivers of the expansion of capitalism, while students who do poorly are exploited by being directed toward vocations that perpetuate capitalism (Hextrum, 2014).

Completion agendas exemplify the role of educational institutions in perpetuating inequality and cultural reproduction. Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theory of cultural

reproduction described how society favors and prioritizes dominant social groups' culture, capital, and values over others. The dominant social group holds power over the non-dominant social group because the dominant group's values are legitimized by society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This imbalance of power manifests into oppression for those outside of the dominant culture (Valadez, 1996). In higher education, cultural reproduction is evidenced through policies and procedures (completion agendas, performance-based funding) that assign value (graduation rates) and power (funding) based on what the dominant social groups perceive to be important (Valadez, 1996).

Robinson (2016) pointed to the present-day dilemmas that completion agendas and performance-based funding create for community colleges. Robinson questioned the feasibility of community colleges maintaining their historical commitment to open access while improving student success, retention, and completion. Robinson (2016) illustrated how this dilemma could inspire antithetical practices undermining the community college mission. Under mounting political and financial pressures, performance-based funding, and completion agendas, will community colleges develop policies or procedures designed to "weed out" students believed to have a lower likelihood of success? (Robinson, 2016). While completion agendas and performance-based funding models may not have been designed with malicious intent, the unfortunate reality is that they sometimes drive policies that prioritize institutional efforts to secure or retain funding — at the expense of access and opportunity for students (Hillman & Corral, 2017).

Are completion agendas another mechanism for maintaining inequality? Are state-sanctioned institutions actively maintaining inequality by creating degrees and programs and granting credentials that cater to (or are driven) by the values, behaviors, dispositions, lifestyles,

and knowledge assigned by the elite? Perhaps an even more weighty question is, are they aware of their role?

The Accountability Quandary

Community colleges are responsible for providing structures and programs that adequately support the "extremely diverse student needs and expectations" (Vallandingham, 2008, p. 448). Measurement and accountability are necessary for higher education because they enable stakeholders, students, and parents to assess, evaluate, and compare an institution's efficiency, effectiveness, and performance through results and outcomes (Kai, 2009; Miller & Morphew, 2017). Accountability measures can be used internally to identify opportunities for institutional improvement. Moreover, these measures help ensure that public institutions are fiscally responsible stewards of public funding

While far from perfect, completion agendas and performance-based funding formulas are one method of measuring accountability. The problem is that standard accountability measures are more aligned with a traditional university college student experience. Therefore, they do not provide a fully representative account of the nature of community colleges or their students. This issue is addressed in the next section.

What is Success?

Defining "student success" is an ambiguous and situational task that often varies based on who is defining it and why. Hagedorn (2005) noted that student success could not be easily defined or calculated due to the various perspectives and approaches of those who are measuring it. Caplan and Nelson (1973) noted, "what is done about a problem depends on how it is defined" (p. 200). While it is beyond the scope of the present study, I feel it is vital to draw attention to the idea of "success" for community colleges.

My conception of success is underscored by the understanding and acknowledgment that it is a complex, multi-layered notion that warrants thoughtful consideration and expanded methods for evaluation. The following section is not intended to dispute the idea that institutions should be held accountable but rather to illustrate the complex and ambiguous nature of educational "success" within the context of political, economic, and social forces that sometimes contradict and often complicate the landscape for community colleges.

IPEDS: Measuring Success

In the United States, the primary system for evaluating college "success" is organized by the National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The IPEDS measures "success" by graduation rate. However, this method has been scrutinized by community college "insiders [who subscribe] to the belief that graduation rate is neither a complete nor a fair picture of success" (McCullar, 2021, p. 173). IPEDS is problematic for community colleges for several reasons. First, while IPEDS provides a standardized way of measuring and reporting institutional and student outcomes, this approach utilizes the same method for all institution types. Community colleges operate very differently and serve different purposes than universities; therefore, evaluating community colleges similarly to universities can lead to distorted inferences. Second, IPEDS only tracks groups of students to determine whether they complete a degree or certificate within 150 percent of "normal" time to completion.

"Normal" reflects "principles and values…that represent particular views of normality" (Apple, 2004, p. 63). Cultural reproduction underscores the idea that it is "normal" for students to attend college full time and graduate within two or four years; however, this does not reflect the reality of the many community college students who cannot attend full time.

The IPEDS student cohort is comprised only of the fall semester, first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students. IPEDS tracks graduation rates only for students who complete a credential at the same institution at which they initially enrolled. This means that IPEDS does not account for students who attend part-time, who need developmental coursework, who transfer to another institution before earning a degree or certificate, or who enroll for learning or enrichment that does not lead to a credential. Many community college students must complete developmental coursework, attend community college after attempting college elsewhere in the past, or attend part-time (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Cox & Watson, 2011; Juszkiewicz, 2020; Xu et al., 2016). Therefore, IPEDS fails to capture or portray the full essence of community college enrollment trends and patterns.

IPEDS defines and measures success based on graduation rates, which are an institutional construct designed to assess an institution's performance. There is a palpable difference between institutional success and student success. Students attend community colleges for many reasons, including completing general education requirements to transfer to a university, completing developmental education, refreshing job skills, enhancing abilities, and achieving personal goals for continuing education, growth, and development. Some may feel a sense of personal accomplishment or success after completing a degree; others may not. Not all students attend a community college to complete a degree or credential; some students consider learning something new or different a success.

I will not belabor the point further, but advocates of community colleges, including myself, argue that graduation rates alone cannot fully represent community college student success, nor do they completely reflect institutional success. Fortunately, the American

Association of Community Colleges (AACC) also recognizes this and has developed an alternative framework for community college accountability, discussed in the following section.

Voluntary Framework for Accountability

The uniqueness of community colleges makes it necessary to develop a different approach to measuring accountability than is used for other higher education institutions, using measurements congruent with the institutions' characteristics and the services provided (Boggs, 2009; Lipka, 2013). In 2012, the American Association of Community Colleges partnered with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation to develop a framework for measuring the performance of community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, AACC, 2012). The Voluntary Framework for Accountability (VFA) was developed because existing measures "address only a fraction of the ways students succeed in community colleges" (AACC, 2012, p. 5). The VFA framework provides a "comprehensive national accountability system created by community colleges, for community colleges" (AACC, 2022, p. 2). In 2012, the American Association of Community Colleges introduced the Voluntary Framework for Accountability (VFA), which is a "comprehensive national accountability system created by community colleges, for community colleges" (AACC, 2022, p. 2). The VFA framework was developed "in light of the inadequacy of existing measures…to provide community colleges with a significantly improved ability to assess their performance, identify areas for improvement, and demonstrate their commitment to their mission" (AACC, 2022, p. 2).

The VFA measures many unique aspects of community colleges beyond first-time, full-time student graduation rates (AACC, 2022, Lipka, 2013). The VFA accounts for all students, regardless of their enrollment status (full-time, part-time) (Dougherty, Bork, & Natow, 2009). The VFA focuses on developmental education, transfer rates, graduation rates, and completion

rates, including completing developmental education, obtaining a licensure or industry credential, employment, transfer, and credit hours earned (Lipka, 2013). The VFA enables community colleges to compare data with similar institutions and gain a more comprehensive perspective of institutional successes, attributes, and weaknesses (AACC, 2013). In 2018, the AACC reported that over 200 community colleges participated in the VFA (AACC, 2019). The VFA is another example of the advocacy work of the American Association of Community Colleges to heighten the status of community colleges and an attempt to level the playing field.

Section One Summary

This section provided a brief history of community colleges and introduced community colleges within the stratified educational and social hierarchy. The chapter revealed the inherent "baggage" of community colleges and challenged some of the policies imposed on community colleges. Next, I discussed current trends and challenges community colleges face, such as performance-based funding, completion agendas, and measurement of student "success." I ended the section with a discussion of the AACC's response to such challenges, the VFA, which attempts to establish a more equitable method for measuring and evaluating community college performance and outcomes.

My goal in this section was to convey the challenges embedded within the structural framework that community colleges have endured and navigated. Many unseen forces swirl and churn beneath the surface of the educational system, acting together or against each other; these forces can manifest as gentle waves, predictable (but still challenging) hurricanes, or rogue waves that impact community colleges. This section speaks to the tenacity and steadfast perseverance of community colleges and those who lead and advocate for them. There are no copper-bottomed boats for community colleges; in today's environment of scarcity and

accountability, community colleges must run a tight ship and be prepared to sink or swim. The next section focuses on academic advisors in higher education – individuals who act as lifeguards at community colleges. Academic advisors help students navigate the tides, learn to swim, and offer a life jacket when needed.

Careers in Academic Advising

I begin this section with an overview of career literature, then establish the relationship between career choice and organizational behavior. Next, I provide more in-depth information about the development of academic advising. Academic advising is often categorized within the broader milieu of student affairs; therefore, I include a brief overview of the development and purpose of student affairs. Then, I review the literature regarding careers in academic advising. Finally, I identify and discuss the challenges of academic advising within the community college setting.

Career Theories

A career is a significant part of the human experience. It is estimated that the average American will spend approximately 90,000 hours at work throughout their career (Borg, 1996). Therefore, choosing a career is one of the most important decisions a person makes in their lifetime. An extensive body of literature, theory, and empirical research is dedicated to understanding how individuals choose and develop careers. While diverse in specifics, career theories are generalizable attempts to explain career phenomena (Arthur et al., 1989). Career theories highlight career choice and implementation with foundations rooted in adult learning and development concepts, organizational development, psychology, and sociology (Gordon, 2006; Holland, 1959; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Parsons, 1909; Super, 1953).

This section discusses several seminal career choice and development theories that form a foundation for the theoretical framework used in this study, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994).

Trait-and-Factor Approach

One of the earliest career researchers was Frank Parsons. Parsons (1909) introduced a trait-and-factor conceptual framework for advancing the study of career decision-making. The trait and factor theory postulated that career choice was an extension of an individual's personal talents and characteristics. Parsons articulated that career satisfaction was achieved when there was a congruence between the career and the individual's talents, skills, and personality. This philosophy provided a foundation that underscores many of today's contemporary career development theories (Brown, 2002).

Like Parsons' theory (1909), Holland's (1959) theory of career choice also integrated personality as an influence on career decisions. Holland's theory suggested that people are attracted to job environments that are compatible with their personality type. Holland developed six personality typologies: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional (RIASEC). Personal career theory (PCT) posits that individuals select work environments that enable them to use their skills and abilities; therefore, high levels of congruence between PCT and work environment lead to increased job satisfaction (Holland, 1997). Holland recognized the influence of life history on career interests and aspirations, including cultural and personal forces, parents, social class, culture, and the physical environment.

It is important to note that there is a difference between job satisfaction and career choice satisfaction. Job satisfaction relates an individual's experiences concerning their current work situation, which is dependent on variables such as work conditions, job location, or co-workers

(Saltzstein, Ting, & Saltzstein, 2001). On the other hand, career choice satisfaction relates to the overall feeling of satisfaction an individual has regarding their career choice (Lounsbury et al., 2003). An individual can be dissatisfied with their job yet satisfied with their career (Turan, Tunç, & Göktepe, 2015).

Developmental Approach

Donald Super's (1953) theory built upon trait-and-factor theories to create a more sophisticated life-span model rooted in adult growth and development theory. Super's developmental self-concept theory drew attention to the complexities of career choice as an unfolding process that occurs in a social context rather than a static, point-in-time decision. Super viewed career development as an ongoing progression through five developmental stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline. In this theory, people naturally grow and mature through different life stages and experiences, which change their self-concept. Individuals cycle through these stages as they experience life transitions; therefore, the stages may or may not correspond with chronological age. Individuals' evolving self-concept influences their occupational preferences, competencies, and goals.

A Social Learning Perspective

Krumboltz, Mitchell, and Jones (1976) proposed a social learning theory of career decision-making. This theory posits that career decisions result from learned experiences from underlying environmental, economic, social, cultural events. Krumboltz et al. (1976) proposed four factors believed to influence learning experiences and career decisions: 1) genetics (physical appearance, innate talents and abilities, gender, and race), 2) environmental conditions (including natural resources and cultural, economic, political, and social forces), 3) task approach skills (personal standards of performance, habits, goal setting, problem-solving, and information-

seeking activities), and 4) instrumental or associative learning experiences (obtained through direct experience by the individual or acquired vicariously through observing others).

Krumboltz (2009) expanded social learning theory to develop the Happenstance Career Theory. Happenstance theory acknowledges that life is influenced by unexplainable or unpredictable factors. This theory states that careers can emerge from unexpected or unanticipated events, and individuals should remain aware of and capitalize on the various opportunities that arise from the unexpected (Krumboltz, 2009).

Grounded by the epistemological tenets of constructivism, Savickas (2005) introduced Career Construction theory. This postmodern approach posits "careers do not unfold; they are constructed" (p. 154). Savickas (2005) asserted that careers evolve in a social context, and work is a social activity that "provides a way of connecting to, cooperating with, and contributing to one's community" (p. 157). The theory explains the what, how, and why of career development, framed by the individual's construction of reality, and provides insight into how individuals choose and make meaning of their work (Savickas, 2002, 2005). Savickas (2005) suggests that career adaptability is necessary to achieve career satisfaction and highlights the individual process of discerning themes related to their life, career, education, relationships, and leisure and using these insights to construct, refine, and take action toward career development (Savickas, 2013).

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), also grounded in constructivist views, was introduced in 1994 by Lent, Brown, and Hackett. While other career development theories focus on "where people end up…rather than on how they get there" (Lent & Brown, 2013, p. 557), SCCT focuses on career development as a dynamic process within a social context. SCCT builds upon Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Model (1978) to explain career development through the

continuous and reciprocal interaction among behavior, personal factors, and environment. SCCT has been praised for its multifaceted approach that honors the complexity of personal and environmental factors in career choice. SCCT was selected as the theoretical framework for this study, and an in-depth description of the theory is presented in Chapter 3.

Career Choice

Though far from comprehensive, the previous section illustrated several theories that comprise a vast body of career research. For many people, a career is a central part of their identity and affects their overall life satisfaction, well-being, relationships, self-esteem, and self-perception (Blustein, 2008; Carr et al., 2008; Savickas, 2005). Careers offer opportunities for an individual to build social relationships, cultivate a sense of identity and meaning, and make a social contribution (Blustein, 2008; Erikson, 1968; Hulin, 2002; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Savickas, 2005). According to Hartung and Taber (2008), careers can "energize or exhaust, yield fulfillment or discontent, offer a source of achievement or failure" (p. 75). Because of the centrality of careers in people's lives, understanding why they choose their careers can help ensure they enter career fields, aligned with their individual and professional growth and development goals.

Understanding career choice can inform practice for individuals, organizations, and professions. Career choice underscores a constellation of individual actions and behaviors that can significantly affect an organization's ability to meet goals or performance objectives. Employee behaviors can affect an organization's goals and objectives (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Cascio, 2006; Savickas, 2002; Young, Valach, & Collin, 2002). Understanding career choice could inform an organization's human resource development strategies, such as recruiting and retaining employees who align with the organization's mission and goals and providing

opportunities for learning, training, and professional development (Bakker & Leiter, 2017; McHargue, 2003; Shuck & Wollard, 2010).

The organizational literature suggests that career choice is an important determinant of career commitment and organizational commitment (Blau, 1985; Borg, 1996; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Gottfredson & Duffy, 2008; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979; Savickas, 2002). Career commitment refers to how a person identifies or involves themselves within a profession. Career commitment is linked to career identity, career planning, and career resilience (Blau, 1985; Carson & Bedeian, 1994; Collarelli & Bishop, 1990). Organizational commitment refers to an employee's relationship to their workplace; it is how they identify and involve themselves within an organization (Kanugo, 1982; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979).

Organizational commitment manifests as employee behaviors such as career resilience, work engagement, job satisfaction, and job turnover (Ayree & Tan, 1992; Carson & Bedeian, 1994; Chang, 1999; Duffy et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2000; London, 1983; Meyer & Allen, 1997). London (1983) defined career resilience as a "person's resistance to career disruption in less than optimal environments" (p. 621). Work engagement relates to an employee's sense of significance and pride regarding their work and willingness to persist when faced with job demands or challenges (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Spector (1997) described job satisfaction as people's attitudes about their jobs. Finally, job turnover is a process whereby an employee voluntarily decides to leave their organization (Porter & Steers, 1973). These employee behaviors can affect their workplace performance, thus impacting an organization's performance and progress toward goals and objectives.

It is important to note that there is a difference between job satisfaction and career choice satisfaction. Job satisfaction relates to an individual's experiences concerning their current work situation, which is dependent on variables such as work conditions, job location, or co-workers (Saltzstein, Ting, & Saltzstein, 2001). On the other hand, career choice satisfaction relates to the overall feeling of satisfaction an individual has regarding their career choice (Lounsbury et al., 2003). Individuals can be dissatisfied with their job yet satisfied with their careers (Turan, Tunç, & Göktepe, 2015). Organizations desire employees who have energy and dedication and are thoroughly engaged in their assigned work. Bakker and Schaufeli (2008) explained that "organizations expect their employees to be proactive and show initiative, collaborate smoothly with others, take responsibility for their own professional development, and to be committed to high-quality performance standards" (p. 147).

This section illustrated the importance of career research for organizational outcomes. This is particularly important within the community college context, as research has found that academic advisors significantly influence student outcomes.

Career Choice in Student Affairs and Academic Advising

A career in student affairs has been labeled a "hidden profession" (Richard & Sherman, 1991, p. 8). Many researchers have found that a career path for student affairs professionals is often unconventional or accidental, emerging without intentional planning (Blimling, 2002; Brown, 1987; Byard, 2016; Clarke, 2016; Hirschy et al., 2015; Klusmeier, 2017). Unlike more widely recognized occupations such as teacher, doctor, or lawyer, there is no academic or career blueprint for student affairs (Hunter, 1992).

Academic advising comprises both student affairs and academic affairs. Student affairs refer to a broad classification of higher education departments that help promote institutional

programming and activities that foster students' intellectual, emotional, and psychosocial development. Student affairs includes student life, student engagement, career services, student organizations, and student counseling (Magolda & Quaye, 2011; Nuss, 2003). While academic advising shares many of the competencies and responsibilities of student affairs professionals, researchers have noted that academic advising requires a more focused understanding and commitment to the academic mission of the institution and the ability to communicate both good and bad news with students (Hughey, 2011; McClellan, 2005; Menke et al., 2018).

There is a gap in the literature related to the career choice of community college academic advisors. Therefore, the following section discusses research for student affairs and academic advising careers.

Choosing a Career in Student Affairs: A Graduate Student Perspective

Many studies explored career choices by examining graduate students' reasons for pursuing a graduate program in student affairs. Reasons for pursuing this degree and career field were a desire to work with students, participate in personally fulfilling work, contribute to student development, and work in a college atmosphere (Calhoun & Taub, 2014; Forney, 1994; Hunter, 1992; Mertz et al., 2012; Richmond & Sherman, 1991; Taub & McEwen, 2006). Participants became aware of this career field from exposure and experiential learning through student employment in student affairs areas, outside-of-the-classroom involvement on campus, and leadership in clubs or organizations (Calhoun & Taub, 2014; Richmond & Sherman; Taub & McEwen 2006). Participants were encouraged to pursue this career field by mentors such as advisors, faculty, or work supervisors who provided advice, support, or encouragement received by advisors, faculty, or work supervisors (Hunter, 1992; Williams et al., 1990; Richmond & Sherman, 1991). Hunter (1992) identified that "the lives of prospective student affairs

professionals are touched by people and experiences that prompt the decision to join the profession" (p. 187).

While these studies focused on graduate students in student affairs programs, findings support a thematic inference that people are drawn to student affairs work because they desire to help students and work in an educational setting. Experiences such as involvement in student organizations or on-campus employment reinforced their decision to pursue this career field. Through these experiences, individuals identified mentors who encouraged them to pursue a career in the field. The following section provides literature related to the career of academic advising.

Becoming an Academic Advisor

Career theories posit that individuals are typically drawn to occupations that align with their personalities and values (Parsons, 1909; Holland, 1959; Super, 1953). It is common for those in education, counseling, or other helping professions to explain that their reason for entering the field was an intrinsic or altruistic desire to help others (Bright, 2008; Oster, 2006; Ribak-Rosenthal, 1994). Intrinsic motives relate to a passion for teaching and learning, subject knowledge, and expertise; while altruistic motives relate to one's perception that advising is a valuable and important profession that contributes to making a difference in society. In other words, altruism is a "motivation to serve the interests of a community of people, a state, a nation or humankind" (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999, p. 20).

Helping professions aim to nurture growth or address problems related to a person's physical, psychological, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Academic advising is rooted in helping people (Klusmeier, 2017). Academic advisors help students navigate the college experience by supporting them as they explore, clarify, and establish their educational

and career goals (Brown, 2008; Crockett, 1985; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Long, 2012; Kuhn, 2008; Nuss, 2003; O'Banion, 2009; Self, 2008). Advising extends beyond simply dispensing information, scheduling classes, and tracking progress toward their degree and program requirements (Brown, 2008; Kuh, 2008). Academic advising concerns "building relationships with students, locating places where they get disconnected, and helping them get reconnected" (Drake, 2011, p. 8).

Klusmeier (2017) explored the careers of academic advisors by focusing on their upbringing, culture, education, work, environmental, and social interactions. Participants were academic advisors at a university. They indicated that their career choice was influenced by experiences such as involvement in campus organizations, campus leadership positions, and on-campus student employment. These experiences were buttressed by mentors such as faculty, work supervisors, or academic advisors who encouraged them to consider a future career in higher education. Many advisors had an initial interest in becoming a teacher or professor but indicated that academic advising offered an alternative way to educate students.

Encinas' (2019) study, also situated within a university setting, revealed that advisors were intrinsically motivated by a desire to help students. Their desire to help was underscored by their own positive and negative interactions with mentors and academic advisors when they were in college themselves. Participants credited their decision to become advisors to encouragement from previous academic advisors or mentors and a desire to make a difference for students. Some participants described negative experiences with their advisors or college personnel; these participants indicated that they wanted to go into this career field to help ensure future students would not have to deal with negative interactions.

Piskaldo's (2004) narrative highlighted the role of mentors, campus involvement, and work-study jobs in his decision to become an academic advisor. Piskaldo referred to the departmental staff he worked with in his work-study position as a "surrogate family" (p. 17). These mentors encouraged him to pursue a graduate degree in student affairs, which led to a career as an academic advisor at a large university. Epps' (2002) study of career choice for advisors at large universities found that they chose the profession because they desired to work in a college environment based on experiences working in various campus departments when they were students.

The dearth of literature on the career choice of academic advisors reinforces the need and justification for additional research on the career choices of academic advisors. Nevertheless, these studies revealed commonalities among the career development for student affairs and academic advisors. These studies showed that people are drawn to student affairs and academic advising careers because they desire to help students and work in an educational setting. Their experiences while in college, either through involvement in student clubs, activities, organizations, or working on campus, exposed them to the career field. They received encouragement and support from mentors who encouraged them to pursue this field.

These studies offer a more interconnected and constructive approach to understanding the career choice of student affairs and academic advising professionals. Together, these studies contradict Brown's (1987) assertion that "people enter student affairs careers by accident or by quirk, rather than design" (p. 5). These studies also challenge the view that careers in student affairs or academic advising are random, disorganized, unplanned, or fortuitous (Blimling et al., 2002; Brown, 1987).

The following section provides a brief history of the development and purpose of student affairs and academic advising. I include student affairs because academic advising often falls within this broad classification. Next, I review the literature regarding careers in academic advising and specifically community college academic advising. Next, I identify challenges for careers in academic advising, including the professionalization of academic advising, stakeholder misconceptions of academic advising, and educational and professional development programs for academic advisors.

Development and Purpose of Student Affairs

When Harvard College was established in 1636, there was no significant need for student affairs departments because students lived and learned alongside their professors. Faculty acted in *loco parentis*, meaning they were responsible for all aspects of student development; faculty advised, mentored, and counseled students in areas related to extracurricular activities, moral life, and intellectual habits (Cook, 2009; Kuhn, 2008). As higher education became more widely available, the need for student support became evident.

Higher education's role, purpose, and reach expanded due to the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1892. These acts encouraged the sale of federal lands to develop existing state universities and establish additional institutions with an increased focus on vocational offerings (Cook, 2009). As institutions grew and electives became more prevalent, it became apparent that institutions needed departments explicitly dedicated to supporting the increasingly complex needs of students (Kuhn, 2008; Kuhn & Padak, 2008; Rudolph, 1962). Therefore, institutions began to develop departments and offer student support that extended beyond the classroom to address the "ever-widening gap in student-faculty relations" (Cook, 2009, p. 20).

In 1949, the American Council on Education released the Student Personnel Point of View (SPPOV), which stated, "The concept of education is broadened to include attention to the student's well-rounded development – physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually – as well as intellectually" (American Council on Education, 1949, p. 17). The SPPOV brought credibility and formalization to the establishment of student affairs departments. Student affairs departments include academic advising, career services, student organizations, and student counseling. These areas help promote and support an institution's educational mission through institutional programming and activities that foster college students' intellectual, emotional, and psychosocial development (Magolda & Quaye, 2011; Nuss, 2003).

The 1960s and 1970s brought a large population of college enrollments from the Baby Boomer generation and a diverse student body comprised of first-generation students, adult students, minorities, students with disabilities, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Cook, 2009; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). It became apparent that institutions needed academic advisors to provide specialized guidance and support for student educational programs and decisions. In 1972, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education recommended the establishment of academic advising departments staffed with professional advisors to help with students' educational, financial, career, and psychological advising needs (Cook, 2009). According to Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008), the need for academic advisors "grew out of the practical realities of complex modern colleges and universities and the rise of a developmental understanding of college students" (p. 47).

Development of Academic Advising

Academic advisors are institutional representatives who provide students with insight or direction "about an academic, social, or personal matter. The nature of this direction might be to

inform, suggest, counsel, discipline, coach, mentor, or even teach" (Kuhn, 2008, p. 3). Academic advisors develop collaborative relationships with students and help them create meaningful educational goals that align with their personal interests, values, and abilities (Crockett, 1985). Academic advising is a process that teaches and empowers students to become effective agents who explore, clarify, and establish life goals and make sound educational decisions (Chickering, 1969; Crockett, 1985; Crookston, 1972; O'Banion, 1972).

Academic advising has been described as the hub of student and academic affairs because advisors help students "get connected and stay engaged in their college experience and, thus, persist in reaching their academic goals and career and personal aspirations" (Drake, p. 11). In addition to helping students develop and achieve educational goals, they connect them to other campus resources (Begley & Johnson, 2001; Drake, 2015; O'Banion, 1972; White, 2015). Advisors play many roles, including teacher, connector, mediator, cheerleader, mentor, counselor, and advocate (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Kuhn, 2008; Mitchell & Rosiek, 2005; Museus & Ravello, 2010; Schulenberg & Lindhorst 2008).

As academic advising became a more prominent career with specialized functions extending across academic and student affairs, it became necessary to establish a separate association to provide professional support for academic advisors. The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) was created in 1977 to support and enhance the function of academic advising and the profession of academic advisors (NACADA, 2012). Today, NACADA has over 13,000 members and offers professional development, best practices, academic advising policy, and research.

NACADA has a community college group that supports and promotes networking among community college members (NACADA, 2021). In 2021, the NACADA two-year college

committee identified three areas within the overall NACADA strategic plan, focused on advising at two-year colleges. These activities indicate NACADA's awareness of the differences in advising at community colleges compared to universities and signal NACADA's intention to expand support for community college advisors.

Community College Academic Advising

Community colleges are responsible for providing structures and programs that promote student retention and graduation while adequately supporting the "extremely diverse student needs and expectations" (Vallandingham, 2008, p. 448). Community college academic advisors are important for students because community colleges were designed to "maximize course enrollment" but "not well designed to maximize completion" (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 2). Academic advisors develop collaborative relationships with students and help them create meaningful educational goals that align with their interests, values, and abilities (Crockett, 1985).

Community college academic advisors have been consistently identified for their role in promoting student educational outcomes (Bahr, 2008; Erlich & Russ-Eft, 2013; Orozco et al., 2010; Tovar, 2015). They are often the bridge connecting a student to the institution through a consistent and meaningful relationship (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2021; Glen, 2003; Orozco et al., 2010; Wood & Williams, 2013). Studies have shown that developmental advising is effective for community college students (Donaldson et al., 2016; Price & Tovar, 2014; Ryan, 2013). Developmental advising supports students' cognitive, behavioral, and psychosocial development along with their educational and personal goals (Creamer, 2000; DeLaRosby, 2017; Frost, 2000; Himes, 2014). According to the Center for Community College Student Engagement, "advising is the most important student service that [community] colleges offer" (CCCSE, 2018, p. 1).

Community college advisors help some students complete technical degrees geared toward jobs while helping others on their path to a four-year institution; therefore, they must be knowledgeable about both workforce needs and university transfer. Community college advisors must have vast amounts of knowledge plus the skill and ability to seamlessly and frequently change roles to support and address the diverse needs of students (Kirkner & Levinson, 2013).

Challenges for Community College Academic Advisors

Institutional structures and conditions of community colleges shape the community college as a workplace. As discussed in part one of this literature review, community colleges face many challenges navigating political, economic, social, and structural issues within the stratified world of higher education while simultaneously striving to fulfill their mission and improve student outcomes. Academic advisors must work within the constraints of the policies and procedures of the institution, and these factors affect the way community college advisors experience their jobs.

In an era of scarcity and budget cuts, the challenges for community college academic advisors becomes even more pronounced due to limited resources or decreased financial support (Bailey et al., 2015; Grubb, 2006). Vallandingham (2008) described the work of community college academic advisors as simultaneously rewarding and exhausting due to institutional budget issues, pressure to improve student outcomes, and the "extremely diverse student needs and expectations" (p. 448). Vernon (2015) referred to community college academic advisors as the "rock stars of higher education" (para. 3) because they must have an "exceptionally high level of compassion, coupled with a whole lot of grit" (para. 10).

Community college academic advisors' responsibilities transcend both student affairs and academic affairs (Drake, 2011; Kirkner & Levinson, 2013; Robinson, 2016). Kirkner and

Levinson (2013) postulated that constant role changes could provoke frustration, stress, and role confusion for community college advisors. In addition, community college advisors often experience demanding, complex, and stressful working conditions due to budget and staff shortages, contradictory institutional policies, rushed advising sessions, and high student-to-advisor ratios (Berwick, 1992; Crookston & Hooks, 2012; Darling, 2015; Donnelly, 2006; Drake, 2015; Nobbe & Manning, 1997).

The multiplicity of academic advisor roles and the interdisciplinary nature of academic advising means that advisors often fall into an institutional grey area – they are neither faculty nor student affairs (Menke et al., 2018). Because of this, academic advisors face many challenges in their positions. In the following section, I discuss the following challenges: student-to-advisor ratios, completion agendas, late enrollment policies, budget constraints, and a general misunderstanding about academic advisors.

Student-to-Advisor Ratio

Research has identified that meaningful relationships are vital for improving student educational outcomes (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2021; Glen, 2003; Orozco et al., 2010; Wood & Williams, 2013). However, high student-to-advisor ratios mean that advisors have little time to develop a relationship with students. A NACADA national survey of academic advisors revealed that community college advisors have the largest number of advisees of any institutional type (NACADA, 2011). Academic advisors at four-year institutions typically have a student caseload of around 150 students, while the community college student to advisor ratio frequently exceeds 1,000:1 (Jaggars & Fletcher, 2014; Tuttle, 2000).

High student caseloads make it difficult for advisors to provide quality academic advising and develop meaningful relationships with students, thus undermining institutional efforts to

improve student educational outcomes. High student-to-advisor ratios lead to long lines, rushed

advising sessions, and a prescriptive approach to advising (Jaggars & Fletcher, 2014; Orozco et

al., 2010). Prescriptive advising is a transactional approach to advising students motivated by

moving as many students through the advising office as possible. While this approach is less

time-consuming and labor-intensive, it also limits the ability of advisors to develop meaningful

relationships with students (Donaldson et al., 2016; Price & Tovar, 2014; Ryan, 2013).

Prescriptive advising prioritizes efficiency and quantity over development and is often adopted

out of necessity due to staff shortages and high student ratios. Unfortunately, this reactive

approach to advising, which requires students to initiate advising conversations, is problematic

because by the time a student reaches out for help, it is usually "too late to salvage the student's

semester" (Baston, 2018, p. 815).

　　A more meaningful approach to advising is the developmental approach. This advising

approach supports students' cognitive, behavioral, and psychosocial development along with

their educational and personal goals (Creamer, 2000; DeLaRosby, 2017; Frost, 2000; Himes,

2014). One style of development advising is proactive advising, which is an intervention-based

approach where advisors intervene when necessary to prevent academic challenges and provide

pertinent information to students before they request or realize the need for it (He & Hutson,

2016; Varney, 2013). Baston (2018) noted that proactive or developmental advising "has not

always been the community college approach to student support" (p. 815). Colleges and

universities have a responsibility to help students explore life and vocational goals, and academic

advising is critical to this responsibility. According to O'Banion (2012), colleges must organize

resources to "ensure that every student has the greatest possible opportunity to navigate the

student success pathway to completion" (p. 47). High student to advisor ratios undermines the

critical importance of academic advising and create a problematic workplace reality for advisors due to burnout, stress, and a conflict between institutional practices and professional values of academic advising.

Completion Agendas

Community colleges are driven by national, state, and/or institutional completion agendas and a push for increasing student completion. The goals of completion agendas are largely economic, and community colleges are focused on speed rather than the quality of the student experience. Completion agendas prioritize degree completion over the academic advising process, and, "although student degree completion is not an unimportant goal for an institution to have for students, it is a byproduct of the educational experience and should not be the primary goal of academic advisors" (Menke, Duslak, & McGill, 2020, p. 93). Academic advisors may experience tension between their professional values and institutional pressure to move students quickly through their programs (Baston, 2018; Gill & Harrison, 2018; Johnsrud, 1996; Robinson, 2016).

Gill and Harrison's (2018) qualitative study examined the impact of completion agenda practices for 12 community college student affairs professionals. Participants expressed diverse views on the completion agenda, including its definition and why and when it was implemented on campus. The authors articulated surprise when their findings revealed that participants seemed to accept the completion agenda. The researchers acknowledged that completion agendas result in institutional policies and practices that compromise key aspects of academic advising and contradict the community college mission. The researchers acknowledged that community college student affairs professionals must respond to external demands such as completion

agendas; however, they implored them to remain committed to upholding the professional values of academic advising.

Robinson's (2016) study found that open access and student completion agendas create tension for community college academic advisors and contribute to advisors' feelings of fear and mistrust of administrators. The advisors in this study described complex feelings about their work, the students they serve, and the institutions that employ them. They felt overworked and unable to provide high-quality advising due to institutional policies prioritizing speed and completion over students and advising. Nearly 75% of the advisors in the study believed that financial motives were the chief driver of institutional decision making, which contributed to their feelings of skepticism about "how sincere community college administrators are about creating policies that are designed to benefit students and improve graduation rates" (p. 119). The advisors pointed out a significant disconnect between the college's desire to improve graduation rates contrasted by a lack of willingness to change policies and procedures to achieve those goals. Finally, advisors viewed the institution's propensity to measure "success" by the number of credentials awarded as a betrayal of the community college's mission. Robinson concluded that community colleges are at a crossroads, torn between upholding their open-access mission while also accepting the reality that "far too many students are leaving with debt but no degree" (p. 130). Institutional staff, particularly academic advisors, experience frustration and cynicism because institutions prioritize "the pursuit of improved graduation rates without a willingness to consider some limitations to traditional open access policies" (p. 125).

Late Enrollment Practices

Community colleges are notorious for offering extremely lenient policies for late enrollment, often allowing as many students as possible to enroll in courses throughout the

middle or end of the first, second, and even third week of classes (Belcher & Patterson, 1990;

Bolt, 2013). Late enrollment policies are driven by financial priorities, not what is best for

students, because a portion of community college funding is dependent on student enrollment

numbers (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Shannon & Smith, 2006). Late enrollment practices are

another instance of institutional policies driven by financial considerations that undermine

student outcomes (Angelo, 1990; Belcher & Patterson, 1990).

Students who apply or register late have lower levels of persistence and retention

(Roueche & Roueche, 1993; Street et al., 2001; Summers, 2003). Students who enroll late tend to

be Black, enrolled part-time, need financial assistance, male, and slightly older than recent high

school graduates (Belcher & Patterson, 1990; Maalouf, 2012; Tompkins, 2013). O'Banion and

Wilson (2013) noted, "the most at-risk students tend to register late at a time when the system is

most overloaded and least capable of meeting their needs" (p. 3). Late enrollees are more likely

to have a lower GPA and complete fewer credits than were those who enroll earlier; up to one-

quarter of students who register late do not earn credits for the term in which they enrolled

(Summers, 2003). According to Freer-Weiss (2004), "44.6% of those [who] registered within the

last three weeks had less than a 2.0 GPA by the end of the first quarter" (p. 148). Late

registration "wreaks havoc on the ability of colleges to achieve the goals of the emerging

completion agenda" (O'Banion, 2012, p. 26).

While community colleges try to provide many options and exceptions to allow students

to enroll, these practices are also driven by financial motives, not by what is best for the

student's likelihood of a positive outcome. According to Bolt (2013), "the practice of allowing

students to register after classes begin is one that is detrimental to academic success; it sets

students up for failure by teaching them that missing class is okay. Clearly, this erroneous

message is not beneficial to students" (p. 611). Bolt's (2013) study revealed that the average

GPA for students who enrolled late was lower than that for students who enrolled on time.

Further, the study found that students who registered earlier were more likely to persist into the

next semester compared to those who registered late.

O'Banion (2012) noted many benefits of eliminating late registration policies, such as

improved persistence and retention rates for students, a reinforced message to students and

faculty that learning and instruction are important, established expectations for students to meet

deadlines and live with the consequences of their decisions, which may translate into improved

workforce habits, further, faculty could begin instruction the first day of class without

interruption. Despite many studies on the negative effect of late enrollment on community

college student outcomes, it is a widely adopted practice for many community colleges because

late registration enables institutions to increase enrollments and attract students who have been

turned away at other institutions and allows community colleges to remain competitive with

other rolling admissions institutions, such as for-profit institutions (Fain, 2014; O'Banion, 2012).

Budget Issues

Resource dependence theory suggests that institutional behaviors are strongly associated

with the extent to which institutions depend on resources from external resource providers

(Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Community colleges are more reliant on local and state

appropriations than four-year institutions (Hendrick et al., 2006). Resource dependency theory

suggests that community colleges will likely engage in entrepreneurial behaviors designed to

attract more students due to decreased state budgets instead of focusing on their core mission of

serving the public good (Ehrenberg, 2006; Morphew & Eckel, 2009). Community colleges

facing fiscal challenges may also cut expenditures by increasing tuition rates, increasing class

sizes, replacing full-time faculty and staff with part-time faculty and staff, and reducing student support services (Collins et al., 1994; Romano & Palmer, 2016). These cost-cutting strategies may be harmful to students' academic outcomes and the quality of educational offerings (Bound et al., 2010; Eagan & Jaeger, 2009; Ehrenberg & Zhang, 2005; Jacoby, 2006).

Community college student affairs departments receive little priority at institutional, state, or national levels and are often the first to be affected by institutional budget cuts (Gill & Harrison, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2019; Tuliao et al., 2021). Karp (2013) noted that community college advising activities are "almost always poorly funded and minimally staffed" (p. 8). When faced with budget cuts, it is typical for advising offices to shorten advising sessions and reduce staff, which leads to high student-to-advisor ratios and can lead to insufficient student engagement and undermine student success (Bailey et al., 2015; Grubb, 2006). These decisions create increased job demands, stress, heavy workload, and emotional exhaustion for advisors who must shoulder the burden of additional responsibilities. Institutional budget issues create scarcity among campus resources and increased job demands for employees, which can harm organizational culture and affect advisors' performance, organizational commitment, burnout, and absenteeism (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001).

Tinto (2012) argued that the ability of academic advisors to support any population of students depends on how much institutional support an advising program receives as well as the training and professional development opportunities for advising staff. Habley and Morales (1998) noted that "many institutions are providing only minimum of training to those involved in advising" (p. 4). Koring (2005) suggested that lack of time and money are to blame for lack of professional development. Academic advisors are valuable members of an institution, and investing in their professional development is worthwhile and necessary because of their

significant contribution to its goals. Smith (2014) noted that institutions should be deliberate

about the professional development of advisors because "having well-developed personnel,

particularly those who are on the frontlines of student engagement, retention, and success, have

broad implications for students and it enhances the institution's ability to reach its stated goals"

(p. 180).

Investing in the continuing education and professional development of employees is a

critical factor in engaging and retaining staff and increasing the organization's human capital

(Becker, 2009; Jackson et al., 2009). Unfortunately, budget issues stifle the community college's

ability to prioritize employee professional development - lack of professional development

opportunities have been linked to lower employee job satisfaction, disengagement, and higher

turnover. Santovec (2010) underscored the importance of employee professional development,

arguing that instead of institutions worrying about "what if we train them and they leave?" (p. 6),

they should be more concerned with "what if we don't train them and they stay?" (p. 6).

Academic Advisors are Misunderstood

Academic advisors fulfill many roles and occupy an ambiguous position between faculty

and student affairs (Drake, 2011; Kirkner & Levinson, 2013; Robinson, 2016). The multiplicity

of academic advisor roles and the interdisciplinary nature of academic advising means that

advisors often fall into an institutional grey area – they are neither faculty nor student affairs

(Menke et al., 2018). Because of their many roles, academic advisors are often underestimated.

Moreover, the campus community often misunderstands their function, purpose, and professional

status (Floyd, 2018; Habley, 2009; Kirkner & Levinson, 2013; McGill, 2018, 2019; Reed, 2020;

Schulenberg & Lindhorst). Misconceptions about academic advising could lead to advisors being

erroneously discounted as dispensable or clerical staff and affect policies, practices, or

institutional structures, such as how the institution organizes, values, and supports academic advising (Floyd, 2018; Habley, 2009; McGill, 2018, 2019). Although highly skilled and credentialed, academic advisors are generally considered entry-level positions (Austin & Gamson, 1983; Bloland, 1994; Floyd, 2018; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2000). Flawed or misguided discernments about academic advisors could provoke frustration, job stress, and role confusion for advisors.

Advisors bring a unique set of skills, knowledge, and personalized approaches to working with students (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Hirschy et al., 2015; Menke et al., 2018; Poe & Almanzar, 2019). However, one of the main reasons advisors are misunderstood is that there is no academic or career blueprint for becoming an academic advisor (Epps, 2002; Justyna, 2014; Kluesmeier, 2017; Nelson, 2020; Smith, 2014). Although the importance of academic advising has been recognized in the literature, a career in academic advising or student affairs has been branded hidden, accidental, unintentional, or unplanned (Blimling et al., 2002; Brown, 1987; Clarke, 2016; Epps, 2002; Hirschy et al., 2015; Klusmeier, 2017; Richmond & Sherman, 1991).

Academic advisors enter the profession from various lived experiences and educational or professional backgrounds; some enter the occupation after completing a university program designed to prepare for a career in higher education or student affairs, others do not. As Hirschy et al. (2015) noted, there is no "single agreed-on standard for entering the field…. diverse pathways exist" (p. 777). Freitag (2011) observed that without a consistent educational or career path, the advising profession would suffer due to a lack of awareness or commitment to the professional values of academic advising. Similarly, others have noted that the lack of professional standards contributes to the misunderstanding of advising and is a detriment to its

professional status (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Lee & Helm, 2013; McGill, 2018; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008).

McGill et al. (2020) explored the skills, dispositions, and academic preparation needed for professional academic advisors; however, findings revealed wide variations in stakeholder beliefs regarding the skills, dispositions, and preparation necessary for academic advisors. Thus, academic advising remains subject to stakeholders' perceptions and further contributes to ongoing misperceptions, including educational requirements of advisors, discrepancies among advisor job descriptions and responsibilities, institutional classification, and salary ranges for advising staff. Introducing professional standards for academic advisors is further complicated because academic advising is implemented differently at different institutional types.

Menke et al. (2018) noted that standardized competencies or educational requirements for advisors could limit advisor autonomy and create hiring challenges for institutions. Further, White (2020) observed that, while a degree demonstrates a body of knowledge deemed appropriate for a profession, a degree alone should not be the criteria for determining whether advising is a profession. Brower et al. (2021) noted the lived experience of advisors who work directly with students is a valuable form of expertise that should not be discounted in exchange for someone with a credential who may not be able to relate to the students served.

The question of whether academic advising constitutes a "profession" has generated much debate (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Habley, 2009; Kuhn & Padak, 2008; McGill & Nutt, 2016; Shaffer et al., 2010; White, 2020). The issue cannot be addressed by simply creating a degree program. Moreover, any attempts to establish professional standards or degree programs must consider the unique role of community colleges and include this in the curriculum. Several researchers have drawn attention to the absence of a formal curriculum

related to community colleges in student affairs master's programs (Hornak, 2014; Latz & Royer, 2014). As Herdlein (2004) noted, "higher education includes a great diversity of institutions including community colleges, private liberal arts colleges, state colleges, and research universities. Each sector has specific needs that should be analyzed in terms of appropriate course work" (p. 68). Latz et al. (2017) argued that failing to address community colleges as part of graduate student affairs preparation programs runs the risk of underprepared student affairs professionals who could unknowingly reinforce the oppression of marginalized students.

Community college academic advisors face challenges caused by high student-to-advisor ratios, pressures from completion agendas, late enrollment policies, budget constraints, and a general misunderstanding about their work by the campus community. These challenges could have a negative impact on their job satisfaction or turnover intentions, which could impact an organization's performance and progress toward goals and objectives (Aryee & Tan, 1992; Carson & Bedeian, 1994; Chang, 1999; Duffy et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2000; London, 1983; Meyer & Allen, 1997).

Advisor Job Satisfaction

Cuccia (2009), Epps (2002), and Donnelly (2006) researched academic advisor job satisfaction, and while participants in these studies were mainly university (rather than community college) academic advisors, their findings still offer insight into academic advisor job satisfaction. Donnelly's study found that 79% of advisors were satisfied with their jobs. Cuccia (2009) also found that most ad Cuccia (2009), Epps (2002), and Donnelly (2006) researched academic advisor job satisfaction, and while participants in these studies were mainly university (not community college) academic advisors, their findings still offer insight into academic

advisor job satisfaction. Donnelly's study found that 79% of advisors were satisfied with their jobs. Cuccia (2009) also found that most advisors surveyed were happy with their jobs. Findings from all three studies indicated that academic advisors derive job satisfaction from working with students, relationships with colleagues, autonomy, task variety, a positive campus environment, and a consistent work schedule. Sources of job dissatisfaction were perceived lack of recognition, reward, or respect on campus, inconsistencies in advising practices among departments, high student caseloads, frustration due to lack of student responsibility, lack of involvement in institutional decisions, compensation issues, lack of professional development opportunities, and institutional budget constraints. A limitation is that these studies relied on data retrieved from members of NACADA. Membership in this professional association may signal institutional or individual support for professional development, meaning that respondents may have higher-than-average job satisfaction.

It is important to note that there is a difference between job satisfaction and career choice satisfaction. Job satisfaction relates to an individual's experiences concerning their current work situation and depends on work conditions, job location, or co-workers (Saltzstein, Ting, & Saltzstein, 2001). On the other hand, career choice satisfaction relates to the overall feeling of satisfaction an individual has regarding their career choice (Lounsbury et al., 2003). Individuals can be dissatisfied with their job yet satisfied with their careers (Turan, Tunç, & Göktepe, 2015).

Turnover

Approximately 50-60% of student affairs professionals leave the profession within the first five years (Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006). Attrition in student affairs has garnered the attention of many researchers seeking to understand or explain the causes of turnover. Research on turnover has revealed reasons that include burnout, salary issues, career alternatives, work/family

conflict, limited opportunities for advancement, supervisor issues, job stress, lack of institutional fit, and loss of passion (Allbee, 2019; Buchanan & Shupp, 2016; Frank, 2013; Jo, 2008; Lorden, 1998; Marshall, Moore Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016; Mullen, Malone, Denney, & Dietz, 2018; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Silver & Jakeman, 2014; Tull, 2006).

One of an organization's most significant assets is the knowledge that resides within individual members of the organization (Grant, 1996). Employee turnover depreciates an organization's knowledge stock (Boone, Ganeshan, & Hicks, 2008). Employee turnover is disruptive and costly for organizations due to the time and money needed to replace and train new employees and the loss of institutional memory, organizational knowledge, skills, and abilities that employees acquired through experience and training (Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010; Boehman, 2007; Hancock, Allen, Bosco, McDaniel, & Pierce, 2013; Lorden, 1998; Ployhart, Nyberg, Reilly, & Maltarich, 2014).

Section Summary

This section provided in-depth information about the development of academic advising. I provided an overview of the development and purpose of student affairs. I provided a literature review regarding careers in academic advising, followed by an in-depth discussion about community college academic advising and the challenges of academic advising within the community college setting. The section discussed the many contextual details and intricacies that affect the careers and workplace experiences of community college academic advisors and provided additional rationale to support the need for additional study on the career choice of community college academic advisors.

Chapter Summary

This literature review frames the study of the career choice of community college academic advisors. The first section began with a discussion of community colleges within the stratified educational and social hierarchy. I identified longstanding systemic issues that form the foundation for many of the issues faced by today's community colleges. Then, I discussed community college completion agendas and provided a critique regarding the idea of success related to community college student outcomes.

The second section began with an overview of career choice and development theories and established the relationship between career choice and organizational behavior. I reviewed the literature regarding careers in academic advising. Next, I provided more in-depth information about the development of academic advising. Academic advising is often categorized within the broader milieu of student affairs; therefore, I included a brief overview of the development and purpose of student affairs. Finally, I identified and discussed the challenges of academic advising within the community college setting.

This literature review illustrated many factors related to community college academic advising and established the need for additional research that explores the career choice of community college academic advisors. In the next chapter, I discuss the theoretical framework that guided the study.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

This qualitative multiple-case study explored the personal, social, and environmental factors that influenced the career choice of academic advisors at Oklahoma community colleges. The theoretical framework that guided the study was Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994). This study was grounded in the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism parallels SCCT in that it recognizes that individuals make meaning of their experiences and perceptions within the context of their personal and environmental norms and influences.

While quantitative analysis seeks explanation and control, qualitative inquiry seeks to understand and honor the intricate relationships and nuances involved in a complex social phenomenon (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Qualitative research provides space to discover how people interpret and understand their experiences within their real-world settings. The vastness of possibilities for qualitative research means there are many directions the research can go; therefore, qualitative research utilizes a theoretical framework to bring order and structure to a study (Given, 2008).

A theoretical framework enables the researcher to situate their study within a paradigm that is congruent with their beliefs about the nature of reality because "who we are as people encompasses our beliefs about the nature of reality, truth, and knowledge" (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p. 14). The theoretical framework defines the research problem, informs the study by drawing upon previous research and related concepts, and links the research questions to existing scholarly literature within the larger theoretical construct (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam, 1998). A theoretical framework keeps a qualitative study focused and rigorous by facilitating data collection and guiding the analysis of findings. Therefore, one of the most critical decisions the qualitative researcher must make is determining an appropriate theoretical framework that

will enable the researcher to apply a particular lens to understand what is being explored. This chapter explains the rationale and theoretical propositions underpinning this study — constructivism and SCCT (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent, 2012).

Constructivism

Constructivism underscores my epistemology, which explains that we make meaning from our lived experiences. The constructivist researcher recognizes that "neither observer nor observed come to a scene untouched by the world" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 15). Instead, we make meaning and perceive experiences against a "backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 38).

Qualitative research is concerned with understanding "how [people] make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Constructivism honors the complexity of a situation by acknowledging that an individual's unique experiences contribute to new knowledge and understanding (Beck & Kosnik, 2012; Creswell, 2013). The constructivist philosophy views individuals as active participants in constructing their reality by creating multiple meanings based on previous experiences (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998).

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Researchers have been studying and developing career theories for over 100 years (Holland, 1959; Krumboltz et al., 1976; Parsons, 1909; Savickas, 2005). While many career theories exist, I selected SCCT (Lent et al.,1994; Lent 2012) as the theoretical framework for this study. SCCT considers how individual and environmental factors influence the career development process through self-appraisal, cultural context, economic situation, education, individual agency, changes over time, outside influences and circumstances, skill development,

and work satisfaction. Furthermore, this contemporary theory was intended to enhance career development understanding for a diverse array of individuals and groups (Lent, 2012).

SCCT offers a sophisticated approach to understanding the complexities of career interest, choice, performance, and satisfaction through the reciprocal interaction between and among one's learning experiences (direct or vicarious), personal factors, and environmental conditions (Lent, 2012). SCCT builds upon social learning concepts from Bandura (1971) and Krumboltz (1979). By blending concepts from earlier career theories, SCCT creates a unifying framework that enables a greater breadth and depth of understanding to the complex phenomenon. The SCCT framework enhances aspects of existing career theories such as personality types (Holland, 1959), role salience (Super, 1953), and ability acquisition (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). SCCT was praised for its integration with other theories and described as "one of the most influential theoretical perspectives in career development" (Blustein, 1999, p. 349).

SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) builds upon Bandura's (1978) social learning theory, which emphasizes how people, behavior, and environments mutually influence each other. The SCCT model (Figure 3.1) explains career choice through the triadic causality pattern between three cognitive factors: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Lent et al., 1994).
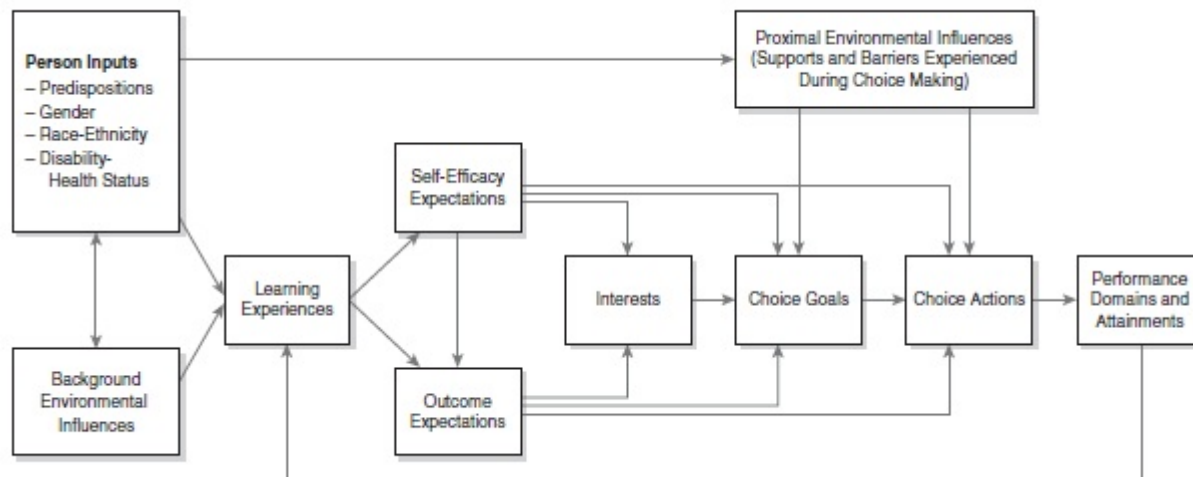
Figure 3.1 Social Cognitive Career Theory Model (Lent et al., 1994)

The SCCT model represents the reciprocal nature of how personal influences and contextual factors affect career interests, choices, and goals (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2013). Self-efficacy refers to a person's beliefs about their skills and abilities for a specific task or outcome (Bandura, 1986; Lent, 2012). Self-efficacy beliefs are influenced by past performance accomplishments, vicarious learning experiences, emotional or physiological reactions, or social persuasion from mentors, family, and social groups (Bandura, 1978). Like self-efficacy beliefs, past experiences influence outcome expectations. Outcome expectations are one's perceived consequences for actions (Bandura, 1986; Lent, 2012). Self-efficacy and outcome expectations influence one's career choice and performance goals (Lent, 2012). High self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations will encourage individuals to engage in goal-setting behaviors, while those with low self-efficacy or negative outcome expectations will exhibit avoidance behaviors (Lent, 2012).

Contextual influences refer to social, cultural, and economic opportunities or barriers, such as exposure to career-relevant activities or role models. Contextual influences impact learning experiences, beliefs, interest formation, goals, performance, and attainment and can

enhance or impede career development due to their influence on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals (Chartrand & Rose, 1996; Lent et al., 1994). Contextual influences are classified as either proximal or distal.

Proximal influences are current individual, social, or economic resources, such as family support, financial support, job availability, and socio-structural opportunities or barriers (Lent et al., 1994; Martin & Martin, 2002). Distal influences are past experiences, exposure, or achievements and include cultural and gender-role socialization, availability and types of career role models, academic ability, and opportunities to develop interests and skills (Brown & Anderson, 1991; Martin & Martin, 2002).

Gender stereotypes are "commonly accepted beliefs about the activities, roles, physical attributes, and personality traits that distinguish girls and women from boys and men" (Berndt & Heller, 1986, p. 889). Gender stereotypes place socially constructed ideations on what type of work is appropriate for men and women (Francis, 2002). Francis (2002) found gender to be predominant over ability in career choice. A study of primary and secondary school children showed a dichotomy for their career aspirations, as girls opted for creating or helping roles while boys chose science, technology, or business (Francis, 2002). The theory of circumspection (Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997) explains that young people judge the desirability of occupations based on their concept of gender. Academic advising is a predominately female profession – in 2019, 67% of advisors identified as female (NACADA, 2019).

The SCCT framework has four separate but overlapping models that address career interest, career choice, performance, and satisfaction (Lent, 2012). Each model identifies the role of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals concerning career choice and development. The models are described in the section below.

Interest Model

The Model of Interest Development (Figure 3.2) posits that career interests are developed

and cultivated through individual interests and values, exposure to learning and social

environments, and interactions with teachers, family, and peers. Throughout childhood and into

adulthood, people experience an ongoing cycle of exposure to different people, activities, and

environments, which influence their self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. As people

gain more experiences, their values could become more refined, and their interests will likely

evolve (Lent, 2012). The SCCT theory postulates that "shifts in interest are largely due to

changing self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations" (Lent, 2012, p. 121).

Figure 3.2 Model of How Basic Career Interests Develop Over Time (Lent, 2012)
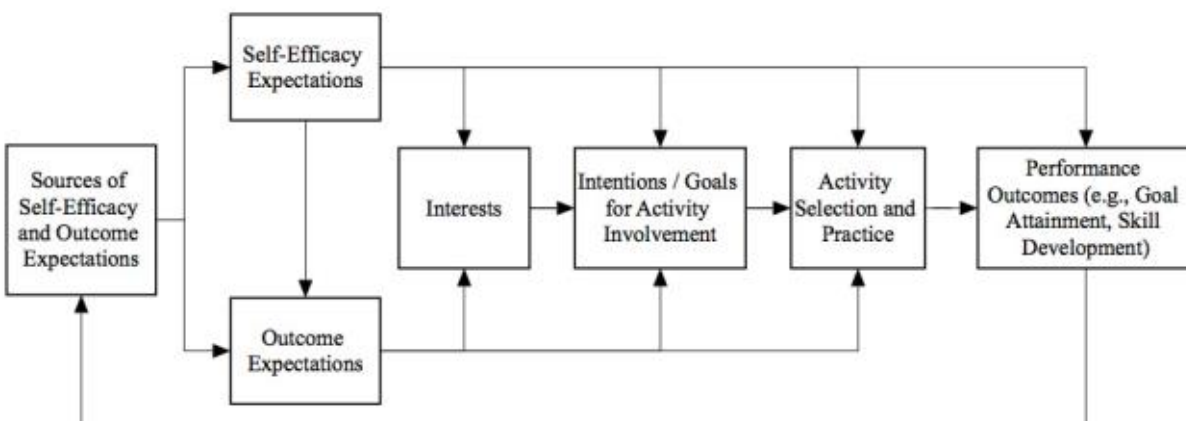
The SCCT model recognizes that personal and contextual factors influence career

interests. Personal and contextual factors can present as either opportunity structures or barriers

(Lent, 2012). Personal and contextual factors include cultural or gender-role socialization,

economic need, emotional support, availability of jobs, structural factors, geographic location,

socioeconomic factors, range and availability of academic or career role models, and current or

expected life roles or familial obligations (Brown, 2002; Duffy & Dik, 2007; Gottfredson, 2004;

Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). The SCCT model reminds us that people do not have unlimited

agency or control. Some people will experience personal or contextual affordances that give them an advantage, while others may face barriers that cause them to compromise their career choice.

Choice Model

Career choice refers to the plans and actions a person implements to obtain a career outcome, including pursuing the necessary education or training to enter the field and an individual's job search strategies and application process. The model of career choice (Figure 3.3) explains career choice as an "unfolding process with multiple influences and choice points" (Lent, 2012, p. 123). A key assumption of this model is that individuals will make career choices if they believe their preference will have minimal barriers and ample support (Lent, 2012).

Figure 3.3 Model of Person, Contextual, and Experiential Factors Affecting Career-Related Choice Behavior (Lent, 2012)
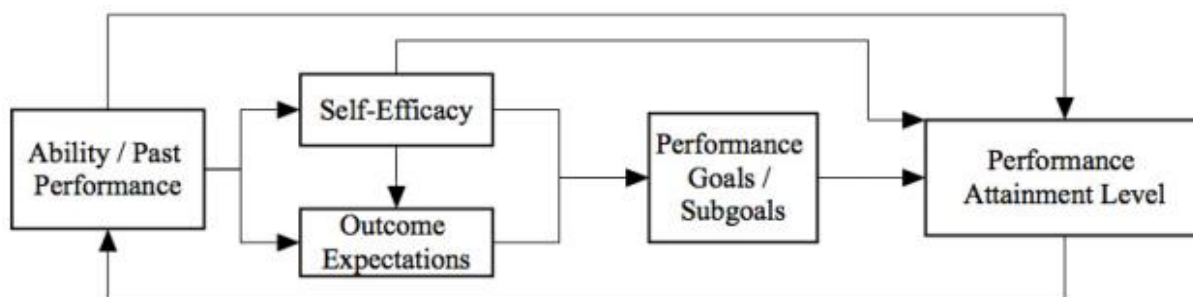
As in the career interest model, personal and contextual factors could facilitate or impede career choices. Environmental support will likely cultivate the development and pursuit of career goals. However, environmental barriers may limit career behaviors, and "decisions may be influenced less by interests than by pragmatic contextual, self-efficacy, and outcome expectation considerations" (Lent, 2012, p. 126).

Performance Model

The performance model (Figure 3.4) is not an indicator of job performance or skills; instead, the model shows how self-efficacy and outcome expectations inform goals and persistence (Lent, 2012). Persistence is categorized by choice stability, meaning staying with a course of action, and performance adequacy, which relates to voluntary and involuntary turnover. Higher levels of self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations encourage more ambitious goals, and this feedback loop continues as employees gain more skills, experiences, and interests (Lent, 2012). Choice stability and performance adequacy are not suitable indicators of job performance. Employees may do just enough not to be terminated. Employees may also leave on good terms due to relocation, career change, better opportunities.

Figure 3.4 Model of Task Performance (Lent, 2012)
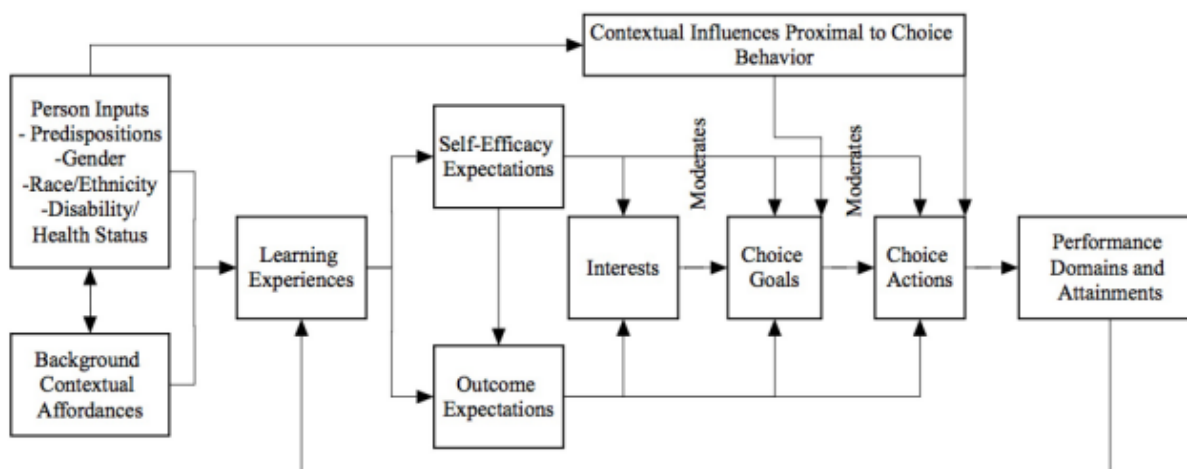
Satisfaction Model

The satisfaction model, or well-being model (Figure 3.5), was added to the SCCT framework in 2006 (Lent & Brown, 2019). This model posits that self-efficacy, outcome expectation, and goals influence work satisfaction, which is the "degree to which one likes or is happy with one's educational or work experiences" (Lent & Brown, 2019, p. 565). Satisfaction is

a function of making progress toward goals. In this model, self-efficacy refers to one's belief

about performing the activities needed to fulfill their goal or meet the requirement; outcome

expectations are the anticipated consequences of attaining the goal, such as recognition or

organizational fairness (Lent & Brown, 2019). Satisfaction is influenced by contextual factors

such as work conditions and the availability of resources. Satisfaction is influenced by personal

characteristics such as personality traits, conscientiousness, positive affectivity/extraversion, and

negative affectivity/neuroticism (Lent & Brown, 2019).

Figure 3.5 Social Cognitive Model of Work Satisfaction (Lent, 2012
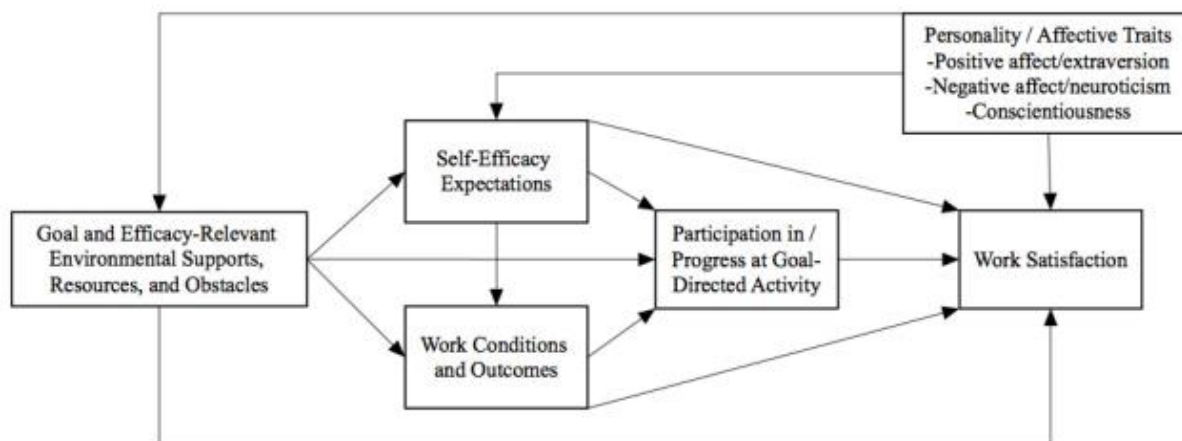
SCCT considers varied individual circumstances and decisions that determine career

choices. It offers a sophisticated approach to understanding the complexities of career interest,

choice, performance, and satisfaction through the reciprocal interaction between and among

one's learning experiences (direct or vicarious), personal factors, and environmental conditions

(Lent, 2012). SCCT builds upon social learning concepts from Bandura (1978) and Krumboltz et

al. (1976). The SCCT framework enhances the understanding of existing career theories such as

personality types (Holland, 1959), role salience (Super, 1953), and ability acquisition (Dawis &

Lofquist, 1984).

Chapter Summary

SCCT offers a sophisticated approach to understanding the complexities of career interest, choice, performance, and satisfaction through the reciprocal interaction between and among one's learning experiences (direct or vicarious), personal factors, and environmental conditions (Lent, 2012; Lent et al., 1994). This contemporary theory has been identified as a highly influential theory in career development (Blustein, 1999). SCCT enhances career development understanding for a diverse array of individuals and groups and considers multiple individual and environmental factors that shape and influence the career development process, including self-appraisal, cultural context, economic situation, education, individual agency, changes over time, outside influences and circumstances, skill development, and work satisfaction (Lent, 2012).

Chapter 4: Research Design

This qualitative multiple-case study explored the career choice of Oklahoma community college academic advisors. This chapter describes the rationale for selecting a qualitative approach and multiple-case study design for this dissertation. I provide a discussion of the multiple-case study methodology and subsequent research design steps and techniques. I discuss steps used to identify, recruit, and select participants. I address ethical considerations and the limitations of the study. Finally, I discuss the strategies for data analysis.

Methodology

Qualitative research is concerned with understanding "how [people] make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Qualitative research emphasizes exploration, discovery, and description to gain insight into a specific phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Jones et al., 2014; Yin, 2009). In qualitative research, the researcher is considered an instrument of analysis; qualitative research is embedded within the researcher's philosophical assumptions, values, and ways of knowing. Qualitative research was an appropriate method for this study because it aligns with my ontological and epistemological worldview of constructivism. Fundamental to the constructivist worldview is the belief that meaning is constructed, not created, and reality is built and shared by people within a particular context (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998).

The constructivist researcher recognizes that "neither observer nor observed come to a scene untouched by the world" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 15). Instead, we make meaning and perceive experiences against a "backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 38). My ontological viewpoint is that there is no single reality; instead, multiple realities exist and are unique to each individual. Reality is temporal and fluid, with new

interactions and experiences contributing to new and unique ways of knowing. Therefore, truth is understood from the individual's perspective (Jones et al., 2014).

The qualitative research approach honored the complexity of this study by acknowledging that individuals make multiple meanings based on previous experiences (Creswell, 2013).   In addition, qualitative research is congruent with the study's theoretical framework of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, 2012; Lent et al., 1994). SCCT recognizes that individuals make meaning of their experiences based on historical and cultural norms in their lives. Participant narratives were used to describe the cognitive considerations related to their career paths and goals. SCCT offers a sophisticated approach to understanding the complexities of career interest, choice, performance, and satisfaction through the reciprocal interaction between and among one's learning experiences (direct or vicarious), personal factors, and environmental conditions (Lent, 2012).

Multiple-Case Study

The multiple-case study method seeks to shed light on complex interrelationships within a complex social phenomenon (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). This study explored the career choice of Oklahoma community college academic advisors within the multidimensional and highly contextual real-world setting (Yin, 2014). Case study is an appropriate method for research that asks "how" and "why" questions because it allows for an in-depth and multifaceted exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2003, 2014). A hallmark characteristic and strength of multiple-case study research is the assumption that each case offers something significant to be learned about the phenomenon under investigation (Stake, 1995).

Multiple cases were selected for this study because they enabled me to intensively investigate and identify similarities or differences among many individual cases while also

focusing on the specific details of each case and contextual setting (Neuman, 2011). This method "emphasizes episodes of nuance, the sequentiality of happenings, [and] the wholeness of the individual" (Stake, 1995, p. xii). Multiple cases are beneficial for researchers interested in cases "for both their uniqueness and commonality. We seek to understand them. We would like to hear their stories" (Stake, 1995, p. 1). Multiple cases illuminated a more holistic picture and diverse understanding of different perspectives and enabled me to gain deep insight into the career choice of each participant (Merriam, 1998). Multiple cases also helped me develop a more robust understanding and knowledge of the career choice of academic advisors in general (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Case study research is considered one of the most flexible yet complex qualitative research methods because there is no blueprint for the process. There are no concrete steps or data analysis methods in case study research; therefore, designing and conducting a case study is as much about learning the technique as it is about the actual research and data.

Case Study Research Methods

Case study research is defined by a clear focus on a bounded system, intensive details, in-depth information, and an understanding of the relationship between the phenomenon and its environment or context (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Cases are the units of analysis in a case study. Cases are established by bounding the case, setting parameters, and distinguishing the study's scope or focus (Merriam, 1998). This qualitative, multiple-case study explored the career choice of academic advisors at Oklahoma community colleges. It provides a rationale for the study by addressing the questions: "Why these people, this event, this organization?" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 270). The study was bound by the topic, participants, and setting – career choice, academic advisor, and Oklahoma community college.

Participants

There were nine participants, or cases, in this study. Each case was an Oklahoma community college academic advisor. This study operationalized the definition of an academic advisor as someone who has been "hired to focus primarily on academic advising activities that promote the academic success of students" (Self, 2008, p. 267). Further, this study sought the perspectives of full-time, rather than part-time, advisors. The phenomenon being studied was career choice. While the institutional affiliation of participants was possibly relevant to an individual's decision-making process, it was not a factor in participant selection. In other words, as long as the participants self-identified within the study's definition of an academic advisor and were employed full-time at an Oklahoma community college, they were eligible to participate.

This qualitative multiple-case study aimed to develop a deeper understanding of the participant's career choice. Therefore, I used a purposeful selection strategy to identify potential participants. I searched the online personnel directory of 11[1] Oklahoma community colleges to identify potential participants. I used terms such as "academic advisor," "senior academic advisor," "academic counselor," and "advisor." I created a spreadsheet with each participant's name, email address, job title, and institution. The strategy yielded 103 potential participants.

Next, I developed a recruiting strategy for participants. The first decision was how many participants, or cases, did I want this study to have? While there are no specific "rules" regarding the number of cases in a multiple-case study, a hallmark characteristic and strength of multiple-case study research is the assumption that additional cases offer something significant to be learned (Stake, 2000). Three or fewer cases do not show enough variety, and more than ten cases could provide more uniqueness than the researcher can comprehend (Stake, 2000). My

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[1] Rationale for this research design decision is discussed in the researcher positionality section that appears later in this chapter.

initial recruitment strategy was to obtain at least one participant from each of the 11 institutions. The number of advisors varied by institution, so I developed a list of at least two advisors from each institution. However, I anticipated that not all 22 individuals would respond or want to participate in the study, so I added additional names from the list of potentials. My final list had 47 individuals and contained at least two advisors from each institution.

In April 2019, I sent an email to 47 individuals using their college email addresses, which I obtained from their institution's online directories. In the email, I introduced myself, provided a brief description of the purpose of the study, and invited them to email me back if they were interested in being a participant in the study. A copy of the email is included in Appendix A.

Within two weeks of my email invitation to 47 individuals, I received four email responses. Two individuals from the same "Large/Urban" institution declined to participate in the study, citing time or other constraints. Two individuals from the same "Distant/Remote" institution agreed to participate. Three weeks after sending the initial email, I sent a follow-up email to the 43 individuals I had not received a response from. I received responses from seven individuals from four institutions who agreed to participate in the study. I sent emails to 47 advisors at 11 institutions. I received 11 responses. Two advisors declined to participate, nine agreed to participate, and 36 did not respond at all. The participants were from five community colleges, four were rural, and one was urban.

Data Collection

Data was gathered from qualitative interviews with the participants. Interviews are the most commonly used data source for case study research because interviews allow the researcher to access participant perceptions and ideas to investigate phenomena and experiences (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2009). Interviews are "guided conversations" (Yin, 2014, p. 110) that enable the

researcher to explore a topic while also gaining insight into the participant's interpretation of their experience (Charmaz, 2006; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Interviews allowed me to "gain focused insight into individuals' lived experiences; understand how participants make sense of and construct reality in relation to the phenomenon, events, engagement, or experiences in focus: and explore how individuals' experiences and perspectives relate to other study participants and perhaps prior research on similar topics" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 146).

Following Yin's (2014) recommendations for case study research, I adopted a semi-structured interview format to collect the data for this study. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility and enable the researcher to "respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher develops an interview protocol that contains several open-ended questions and probes that offer participants leeway in responding. I developed interview questions based on career development literature, the SCCT framework, and my experiences as an Oklahoma community college academic advisor. The interview questions were designed to elicit insight into each participant's career choice and background that led them to their current position. The semi-structured format enabled participants to discuss their experiences and decisions and allowed me to ask for clarification or ask follow-up questions.

I emailed each advisor who agreed to participate in the study to arrange a one-on-one, face-to-face interview. The participants and I communicated via email to schedule their interview at a mutually agreeable date, time, and location. I estimated that the interviews would last approximately 60 to 75 minutes. Interviews were scheduled to occur after the conclusion of the spring 2019 semester. I did not want the interviews to be disruptive to the advisors' workload or interfere with peak enrollment times. This was an intentional decision based on my previous

experiences as an academic advisor and my understanding of academic advising and enrollment patterns.

Seven participants arranged their interviews during the workday and invited me to interview them in their office on their campus. Two participants requested that their interview occurs after their workday and at a location other than their campus. For the participants I interviewed off-campus, I asked them to suggest a time and place to meet. One recommended a coffee shop and the other a fast-food restaurant.

Two days before each scheduled interview, I emailed the participant to confirm the interview's date, time, and location. All nine participants confirmed that they were still available to participate at the scheduled time and place. Before each interview, I introduced myself to the participants and engaged in a brief conversation, and asked them if they had any questions before we got started. I provided them with a printed copy of the Consent to Participate in Research form, which explained the scope and purpose of the research, addressed confidentiality issues, and requested permission to digitally record the audio of the interview. All participants signed the form without hesitation or modification. I provided participants with a copy of the signed document. A copy of the Consent to Participate in Research form, which also contains the interview protocol, is located in Appendix C.

The in-person semi-structured interviews took place in May and June 2019. Interviews lasted between 24 and 78 minutes. I followed the interview protocol and asked follow-up questions to clarify or encourage further explanation when necessary. After the interviews, I thanked the participants. I informed them that I would transcribe the digital recording of our discussion and email them a copy to review for accuracy and make changes if necessary. Following each interview, I spent time writing memos with thoughts, ideas, and observations

from the interactions with participants and the study (Patton, 2015). According to Yin (2014), the researcher needs to record their thoughts, summaries, and observations following the interview to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and help establish the study's trustworthiness. These memos and reflections were a valuable resource that guided my interpretation and analysis.

In addition to interview data from the nine participants, I also used institutional data for the five community colleges where the participants worked. Institutional and state higher education data provides additional context for the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ensuring quality in qualitative research involves addressing ethical considerations (Merriam, 1998). Before beginning this study, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Oklahoma (See Appendix B). The approval affirmed that the study met the University's guidelines and state and federal laws for researching human participants. My recruitment strategy included an explicit explanation of the purpose of the study. Once participants were identified, they received a copy of the IRB approval and signed a consent to participate form. I explained how all documents pertaining to participants would be kept under lock and key with only the researcher having access (Creswell, 2013). I assigned pseudonyms to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. Additionally, each institution was given a letter name rather than the official name.

Establishing Quality

Qualitative research can be approached from various philosophical paradigms. Thus, establishing quality in qualitative studies involves varying conceptualizations for establishing quality (Merriam, 1998). Applying traditional quantitative criteria such as generalizability,

objectivity, and reliability to qualitative research is illegitimate (Tracy, 2010). For constructivist studies, establishing quality involves evaluating the relationship between the knower and the known (Lincoln, 1995). Merriam (1998) provided strategies for enhancing and establishing internal validity in qualitative case studies such as triangulation, member checks, and acknowledging the researcher's biases, worldview, and theoretical assumptions. Merriam (1998) posited that dependability is established by clearly explaining the theoretical framework and its application to the study, discussing researcher positionality, describing the social context for where the data was collected, and the process and basis for participant selection. Finally, qualitative research is not meant to be generalizable; however, findings should enable readers to recognize "similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural covariations of happenings (Stake, 1978, p. 6). Generalizability can be enhanced by using multiple cases and providing a thick, rich description of the cases and their contexts. The following steps were taken to "promote respect from power keepers who often misunderstand and misevaluate qualitative work" (Tracy, 2010, p. 839).

Multiple Data Sources and Triangulation

In experimental research, reliability assumes that there is a single reality and multiple tests will yield the same results. However, the idea of reliability is problematic to constructivist qualitative research, which seeks to describe and explain the world as those in the world experience it. Human behavior is not static; therefore, what is being studied is "assumed to be in flux, multifaceted, and highly contextual…information gathered is a function of who gives it and how skilled the researcher is at getting it, and because the emergent design of a qualitative case study precludes a priori controls, achieving reliability in the traditional sense is not only fanciful but impossible" (Merriam, 1998, p. 206).

Yin (2014) approached the idea of reliability in qualitative research to minimize errors and biases in the study; therefore, reliability can be addressed by developing explicit and detailed documentation of the procedures for data collection, analysis, and decision making. Following Yin's approach, I addressed reliability by providing an explanation of my positionality regarding the topic and groups being studied, the basis for selecting participants, the social contexts from which data were collected, the theories and ideas that informed the research, and all aspects of the methods used.

Triangulation is another method of establishing reliability in qualitative research. Triangulation is "a means of confirming findings through several data collection methods" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 38). Multiple sources of evidence enable triangulation and allow for a more coherent understanding of the phenomenon being studied, thus making the study's findings more convincing (Yin, 2009). The use of multiple sources strengthens the external validity of the findings (Merriam, 1998).

This study incorporated triangulation by using multiple sources of evidence and member checking (Yin, 2014). I collected participant data through in-person interviews. In addition, I utilized data from state and national reports to develop a detailed profile for each of the five community colleges in this study. Institutional data was obtained from the institution's websites, college catalogs, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. State and institutional data illustrated the contextual backdrop for the participants in the study, and these details add depth to the analysis and findings.

Member Checking

Member checking is critical to ensuring trustworthiness and authenticity in a qualitative study. Member checking involves soliciting feedback from respondents to corroborate or verify the researcher's interpretations and provides participants the opportunity to clarify any interpretations made by the researcher, correct any errors, elaborate on topics, or provide additional information (Schwandt, 2007). According to Merriam (1998), "the key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives, not the researcher's" (p. 6). Member checking ensures that the study has accurately rendered the participant's perspective. However, even the process of member checking has power implications, as the process is dictated by the researcher's timeline more than the participants. Further, even after member checking, the researcher is the one who makes decisions about what is included in the final narrative or write-up.

I encountered a major limitation in the way I designed the study during the transcription process. I did not collect participant information such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, marital status, or familial status. As I transcribed each interview, it became apparent that a gender pronoun would facilitate a more readable document instead of continuously using the pseudonym. Nevertheless, I used the transcript data to generate a career narrative based on each participant's chronological events and experiences without gender pronouns. This strategy made the reports cumbersome to write and read. I emailed the career narratives to each participant, inviting them to review my construction of their story to authenticate accuracy and ensure it captured the essence of their career journey. Two participants emailed me back, commenting on the lack of pronouns, and offered me their gender pronouns if I wanted to reconstruct their narrative in a more readable format. Based on this feedback, I emailed the other participants and

asked them if they would provide their preferred gender pronoun. One participant corrected the order of events, and one participant clarified their degree type. All of the participants sent me their preferred pronoun.

As I revised the narratives with the updated information and pronouns, I began to reconsider the pseudonyms that I assigned to the participants. I initially assigned pseudonyms that I consider gender-neutral. However, when I integrated pronouns, I changed their pseudonyms. Although I did not ask the participants for their age, I estimated their decade of birth based on their interview data. Then, I used the Social Security Administration's website for popular baby names during the decade I assumed the participants were born. I also searched for popular names for the state of Oklahoma because the participants told me they were born and raised in the state. I emailed the narrative revisions to participants, asking them to review the changes and provide any corrections or modifications. All participants emailed me to confirm their narrative accounts and offered no additional edits or changes.

Researcher Positionality

Subjectivity has long been considered a weakness of qualitative research; however, acknowledgment and transparency from the researcher can help address concerns. Understanding the researcher's position allows the reader to assess the study by seeing the "angle and view from which the findings arose" (Salzman, 2002, p. 808). Researcher self-reflexivity is one of the core elements of qualitative research. Self-reflexivity is "honesty and authenticity with one's self, one's research, and one's audience" (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). A researcher's task is to acknowledge and reflect upon how their standpoint influences and guides their entire approach to a study and make their positionality as explicit as possible to the reader.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is underscored by the notion that reality is "holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing" (Merriam, 1998, p. 202). From the constructivist perspective, reality is a subjective creation developed through human interaction; it is "a multiple set of mental constructions…made by humans; their constructions are on their minds, and they are, in the main, accessible to the humans who make them" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.295). While quantitative research often aims to depersonalize the role of the researcher, qualitative research acknowledges and encourages the researcher's active role in the knowledge construction process (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative researchers are "interpreters of reality" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 4). According to Merriam (1998), "because the primary instrument in qualitative research is human, all observations and analyses are filtered through that human being's worldview, values, and perspective" (p. 22). Qualitative researchers must consider which types of knowledge are readily available and acknowledge that some information may be shielded or hidden (Tracy, 2010).

One decision was not to recruit participants from Rose State College, as I am professionally affiliated with this institution and maintain professional relationships with many of the academic advisors who work there. According to Creswell (2013), it is not advisable to study one's own "backyard" (p. 151). In other words, researching one's workplace raises power issues and could jeopardize the researcher's job, especially if findings are unfavorable or negative. Similarly, Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggested that findings from one's workplace create potentially "dangerous knowledge" for an "inside" investigator (p. 21).

Jones et al. (2014) defined positionality as "the relationship between the researcher and his or her participants and the researcher and his or her topic" (p. 26). Researcher positionality must be evaluated and made explicit to ensure that findings and interpretation represent the

participants, not the researcher's own thoughts and experiences. Gerring (2007) stated that "what one finds is contingent upon what one looks for, and what one looks for is to some extent contingent upon what one expects to find" (p. 53). Charmaz (2006) emphasized the obligation of researchers to be reflexive about what they bring to the setting, what they see, and how they interpret it, noting "what we bring to the study also influences what we can see" (p. 15).

While Creswell (2013) stated that researchers should include their personal experiences in the writing process to add depth and a thick description, Tracy (2010) reminds us that the researcher's personal experiences should not overshadow the findings. Tracy noted that "qualitative researchers do not put words in members' mouths, but rather attend to viewpoints that diverge with those of the majority or with the author" (p. 844). My personal and professional investment in this topic is both a strength and potential threat. It is a strength because of my interest and commitment to the subject, but it is a threat because I see much of my own career narrative woven within the findings. I am inclined to view the community college career through my personal lens as someone who has experienced a positive and supportive career within an urban community college environment. This may not be the case for my participants. I have had to step aside and evaluate my meaning-making and analysis of the topic to ensure I attend to the career choice process for participants, not myself.

I identify as a female, first-generation student. I am a doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma in the Adult and Higher Education Program. I am from a small rural community in southeastern Oklahoma. The loss of my mother as a child, followed by the neglectful behavior of my father due to his parental shortcomings and addictions, led to my experiences of a childhood characterized by poverty and dysfunction. These factors underscored how I experienced attending a small rural public school and how I organized my thoughts and ideas about what

obtaining a college degree could mean for my life trajectory. For me, the rural town I grew up in was a place to escape, and a college degree was my ticket out. I had no intentions of returning to the area after graduating from college.

I attended (and dropped out of) a rural Oklahoma community college as a first-generation student. After dropping out of college, I left the rural town. I lived in a few different places but ended up in the Oklahoma City area, where I got a job as an administrative assistant at Rose State College. There, I completed an associate degree, and I went on to complete a bachelor's degree at the University of Central Oklahoma, followed by an MBA from Oklahoma City University, an M.Ed. from the University of Oklahoma, and soon, this doctoral degree.

As my education progressed, so did my career. My first professional role at Rose State College was as an academic advisor. The job description required a bachelor's degree, and I was working on my MBA when I started the position. My sense of what an academic advisor did was limited to my own experience as a student. It was not until I began my graduate program in education that I became familiar with student affairs as an examined activity and acquainted with seminal theories in the field. I believe my desire to help students made up for my lack of theoretical foundation, and I think I was a "successful" advisor. However, my experience was also marked by a heavy student advisement load, a lack of resources and support, and my perceived lack of agency. After five years in the position, I was burned out and ready for a change.

It was during this time that I began my doctoral program in education. During this time, the college advertised a full-time faculty position to redesign and launch an educational strategies course for students on academic probation and/or taking developmental coursework. Along with numerous other candidates, I went through a rigorous formal interview process, and I

was thrilled when offered the position. I was in this role for about four years when the college

president asked me to lead a new project under the workforce development and external affairs

division. A few years later, I moved into a new position in the academic affairs division that

involved academic outreach and coordination. I realize that my experiences may not be common

for others. While I cannot change my experiences, it is my responsibility to disclose them, as

they have shaped my perceptions about being a community college student and employee.

My career experiences and opportunities at Rose State College have been a combination

of hard work and happenstance. Further, my entire professional career has been at Rose State

College; therefore, my perspective filtered through this institution's place in the Oklahoma

higher education system as a whole and in relation to the state's other community colleges. Even

within the institution, different contextual forces have influenced the various positions and job

roles I have held. For example, in my perception, my role as an academic advisor and faculty

member had a much different purpose than my role in workforce development and external

affairs, and I have had to decide how to reconcile my beliefs and values within the roles I have

held. Admittedly, some of my experiences created conflicting feelings and disenchantment as I

became exposed to the "behind the curtain" workings of the college. I felt that some of the

institutional policies and decisions were driven by external pressures and motives that

contradicted my altruistic reasons for working at a community college. I have since realized the

naivety of my perceptions and acknowledged that reality is much more complicated; however,

that is not the main idea of this study.

My previous experiences and identities informed my approach to this study from the

purpose and research questions, theoretical framework, interview questions, interview technique,

what I found, and how I interpreted those findings. However, as I analyzed the data and

participants in this study, I came face to face with my own bias. I recognized that my view and perceptions of rural communities were through a deficit lens. In my view, rural towns do not symbolize a "home" to return to but a place to flee. However, this was not the case for my participants. Therefore, I had to recognize how my negative experiences and perceptions limited my ability to appreciate and understand the rural backgrounds of my participants. While I cannot separate myself from my experiences, the research topic, or the participants, being aware of this bias was necessary for me to ensure that my analysis was intentional and reflected the participants' experiences, not my own.

Researchers must attend to the differences between themselves and their participants in areas such as culture, race, class, gender, age, or sexuality, as these factors can be the foundation for very different meanings for different individuals (Tracy, 2010). I consider my relationship to this study and participants as that of insider and outsider. As an insider, I share the experience of being an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college with my participants. As an insider, I share the experience of growing up in a rural Oklahoma community. Yet, I am an outsider because my ideas about living in a rural Oklahoma community carry a different meaning than my participants. I am an outsider because I no longer professionally identify as an academic advisor as my primary career role. I am an outsider because of my different life experiences and educational experiences. I am also an outsider because my experience as an academic advisor is from a large urban community college. None of the participants shared the experience of being an advisor at this specific institution.

Multiple-Cases

External validity refers to generalizability or the extent to which a study's findings can be applied to other studies (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). Multiple-case studies illuminate different

perspectives to shed light on a general condition, phenomenon, or population within the real-world context (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2014). While the objective of qualitative multiple-case studies is not a generalization, a natural outcome of multiple-case study findings is a potential for generalization, which could enhance the external validity of a qualitative study (Merriam, 1998). Because multiple-case studies illuminate multiple perspectives, findings are deemed more compelling (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2014).   This study explored the career stories of nine academic advisors at Oklahoma community colleges. Each advisor was bound as an individual case, and each case was influenced by various real-world contextual factors of the institution and the personal characteristics of the individual.

Limitations

All research has limitations. For this study, the first limitation is the use of qualitative inquiry. A critique of qualitative inquiry is subjectivity; however, steps were taken to address issues of ethics, validity, trustworthiness, and researcher positionality. The current study focused on the experiences of nine academic advisors from five Oklahoma community colleges. There are thousands of academic advisors working in community colleges across the country, so findings from this study are in no way generalizable to the population as a whole. The study is limited to the advisors and institutions included in the study.

Given that my study focused on the meaning that individuals make about their experiences and decisions, interviews were appropriate. However, a limitation of interviews is that researchers must rely on participants' recollections to learn about past events (Thomsen & Brinkmann, 2009). Honoring the constructivist paradigm, I had to assume that the information provided by the participants was true and accurate because it was based on the meaning they have made from their lived experiences. Researchers must acknowledge that participants may

feel compelled to provide socially acceptable responses or describe their career choices based on factors present at the time of their interview. These explanations may not describe their entry to the field. For example, now that they are in their roles, they could retrospectively speak about their commitment to the field of academic advising; however, it could be the case that they took this position because they could not find something more lucrative or aligned with their interests. I had to analyze the cases based on the data provided by the participants.

Another limitation relates to my personal and professional connection to this study and setting. I have been an employee at an Oklahoma community college for nearly 16 years. While I intentionally did not interview advisors from Rose State College, my professional affiliation could have influenced individuals to take part in this study; conversely, my position might also have been a reason some individuals declined to participate in the study. I did not use my Rose State College email address to communicate with participants, but I disclosed my professional affiliation with Rose State College to the participants. I informed them that the purpose of the study was for my doctoral dissertation and had no relationship with my professional role at Rose State College. I assured them of the confidentiality measures that would be taken to protect their anonymity and institutional workplace details. However, I must recognize that my affiliation with Rose State College could have affected the way participants responded to the interview questions.

One of the most glaring limitations of this study is that I did not collect demographic data from participants regarding race, gender identity, age, marital status, socioeconomic information, or familial status. My original conception of this study was developed in 2017. At that point in my education and life experience, I believed that the study could be conducted from a power- and gender-neutral position. Now, after five years and additional learning and experience, my

perspective has shifted and I know that influences of race, gender identity, age, marital status, socioeconomic information, and familial status are significant influences on how people experience the world and make decisions. These factors deserve further consideration because of their prominence in our lives. Particularly because this study was approached from a constructivist worldview, the absence of these factors is a significant limitation that restricted analysis of the influence of personal factors on career choice within the Social Cognitive Career Theory framework.

Data Analysis

I engaged in the analytic process using the following methods: transcribing the interviews, memoing, coding, categorizing data according to themes, connecting data by creating narratives, and using the narrative to help me understand interrelationships both within and between cases. Data analysis in case study research can be a challenging undertaking because it is "one of the least developed aspects of doing case studies" (Yin, 2009, p. 133). Yin (2009) acknowledged that in case study research, there are "few fixed formulas or cookbook recipes to guide the novice" (p. 133). Moreover, data analysis is a "highly intuitive" (Merriam, 1998, p. 156) process that involves searching for patterns, insights, or concepts that might help answer the research questions. Data analysis is an emergent and dynamic technique of "making sense out of the data" (Merriam, 1998, 178).

Data analysis involves developing case descriptions, writing memos, following theoretical propositions, and developing patterns or relationships (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). Data analysis begins with data collection, and they should be viewed as simultaneous activities (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam, 1998). Both deductive and inductive processes were used in the analysis of the data. Deductive methods were used to relate the themes identified in the research

literature to the data gathered through this study. Inductive processes were used to uncover themes and findings beyond those found in the literature (Patton, 2015).

Memos and coding techniques are often used for qualitative data analysis. Charmaz (2006) described memo writing as an ongoing and spontaneous process that "prompts you to analyze your data and codes early in the research process" (p. 72). Memos are an ongoing dialogue between the researcher and the data. They help the researcher identify gaps or emerging themes and encourage the researcher to grapple with the data to flesh out new insights and advance their thinking throughout the data collection and analysis process. Coding involves "naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). Coding enables the researcher to discover meanings, develop insights, and gain a deeper understanding of the data and "generates the bones" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 45) of analysis. According to Charmaz (2006), "coding is the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytical interpretations" (p. 43).

Analyzing data involves reading and rereading the data and memoing observations and impressions. Yin (2014) suggests that the researcher continuously "'play' with the data…searching for patterns, insights, or concepts that seem promising" (p. 135). While case study research does not "claim any particular methods" (Merriam, 1998, p. 28) for collecting and analyzing data, the constant comparative method is an appropriate strategy for analyzing case study data. The constant comparative method involves comparing data from one interview, field notes, or memos with data from another interview, field notes, or memos (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). This ongoing process allows the researcher to

identify patterns and relationships in the data and develop a deeper understanding of the data and information.

Data analysis began with my transcribing each interview word for word. This process enabled me to revisit the conversations and refamiliarize myself with each participant and their rich career experiences. After I transcribed the interviews, I studied the data by reading and rereading participant interview transcripts and my memos from after the interviews. I developed initial codes for emerging themes and categories. I used these codes to develop a career narrative for each participant. Because the semi-structured interviews were conversational, the raw data that I collected lacked a clean chronological timeline. Therefore, I developed a career narrative for each participant based on the chronological events and experiences they discussed. This process enabled me to develop a more coherent career narrative for the participants and start noticing patterns and themes in a more organized fashion.

Writing the career narratives was an analytic process that involved constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing the data. I developed multiple versions of their career narratives and noted emerging themes from each iteration. Developing the career narratives for each participant enabled me to become more familiar with each participant's story. I used thick descriptions in the narratives to capture the rich details and unique nuances of each participant's career story. This brought their stories to life and highlighted experiences and influences from their early life, college experience, other work experience, and personal traits or characteristics that influenced their decision to get into this career field. The career narratives for each participant are included in Appendix D.

The SCCT framework considers environmental factors as well as personal factors that influenced one's career decisions. It was therefore necessary to develop institutional profiles for

each of the five colleges to further contextualize the participant data. I obtained data from multiple online sources and websites to illustrate institutional contexts. Because four of the five institutions were rural and the participants were from those rural areas, the institutional profiles included what percentage of the town's population held bachelor's degree or higher, the median salary for the area, the number of employees at the college, and the other large employers from the area. These institutional details were used to develop a second round of refined codes and enabled me look for patterns and similarities among the data regarding the contextual setting and participant career choices. The contextual data along with the participant interviews provided a more nuanced illustration of the career study and enabled additional opportunities for analysis within the SCCT framework.

Chapter Summary

This qualitative multiple-case study explored the career choice of Oklahoma community college academic advisors. This chapter described the rationale for selecting a qualitative approach and multiple-case study design for this dissertation. I described the multiple-case study methodology and discussed the research design steps and techniques used to develop the study, including the steps to identify, recruit, and select participants. I addressed ethical considerations and the limitations of the study. Finally, I discussed the strategies used to analyze the data. Chapter 5 contains the data for the study. It begins with a description of the five community colleges, which were the contextual setting for the study, followed by a brief introduction to each of the nine participants in the study.

Chapter 5: Introduction to Participants and Setting

This qualitative multiple-case study explored the career choice of nine academic advisors from five Oklahoma community colleges. Multiple sources of data were collected for this study – contextual data about each institutional setting and interviews with participants. The chapter begins with an introduction to the context for the study. I describe each of the five institutions. Next, I introduce and describe the career choices of the nine participants. The contextual data along with participant interviews provided a nuanced illustration of the career study and enabled additional opportunities for analysis within the SCCT framework.

The theoretical framework that guided this study was SCCT (Lent et al. 1994; Lent, 2012). The research questions for this study were:

1. What personal factors influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?

2. What learning experiences influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?

3. What environmental factors influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?

The Setting

This qualitative multiple-case study explored the career choice of nine academic advisors who worked at five Oklahoma community colleges. The existing literature reviewed in previous chapters revealed how environmental and institutional structures and conditions such as state budgets, town population, salary, and graduation rates shape an institution's approach to academic advising and, thus, how advisors experience their careers. To contextualize and frame

the findings from this study, I begin this chapter by reviewing the landscape of higher education in Oklahoma.

Oklahoma Public Higher Education

Since 1941, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE) has been the governing body for public higher education institutions. It is responsible for allocating state funds to individual institutions from the lump-sum appropriation made to the Oklahoma State System of Higher Education by the state legislature (OSRHE, 2012). The Oklahoma public higher education system comprises 25 colleges and universities: two research universities, 10 regional universities, one public liberal arts university, and 12 community colleges. Oklahoma also has 29 public career-technical education centers that provide post-secondary education. These institutions do not fall within the governance of OSRHE; in fact, Oklahoma is one of few states with separate state agencies that govern career technology centers and higher education institutions (Vargas, 2013). The separation of these institutions complicates the educational landscape for Oklahoma community colleges; therefore, a brief discussion about the technology centers is included because of their relevance to the Oklahoma community college system.

Oklahoma Technology Centers

Technical education centers were established by the Vocational Education Act of 1963 to offer public, post-secondary, vocational education for students across various school districts and regions. However, community colleges also offered vocational education, along with university transfer education. The similarities between the two types of institutions created public confusion about their distinct differences (Alexander, 1978). The public "accused [technology centers and community colleges] of duplicating educational efforts and programs to the citizens of the state" (Alexander, 1978, p. 91). While the public viewed them as "mutually exclusive parts of the

educational effort" (Alexander, 1978, p. 5), the reality was that technology centers were organizationally and administratively different from community colleges. Technology centers were also governed by a separate agency — the Oklahoma State Board of Vocational and Technical Education — not OSRHE (Alexander, 1978, p. 91). Tensions arose between the two institution types due to their overlapping educational purposes, oversight structures, and governance (Alexander, 1978).

In 1975, OSRHE filed a cease-and-desist order with the Oklahoma Supreme Court, directing the Oklahoma State Board of Vocational and Technical Education to discontinue offering educational programs beyond the high school level (Alexander, 1978). Under their constitutional authority, OSRHE argued that the sole responsibility for providing education beyond high school was theirs. Further, the distinction was made that vocational education was a *type* of education, not a *level* of education (Alexander, 1978). In 1976, the Oklahoma Supreme Court announced a unanimous decision that clearly defined the roles of the two types of institutions. Under this decision, OSRHE was granted full responsibility and oversight for vocational education taught for college credit at community colleges, and the State Board of Vocational and Technical Education was granted full responsibility and oversight for non-credit vocational instruction offered by technology centers (Alexander, 1978).

Oklahoma is one of few states with separate state agencies that govern career technology centers and higher education institutions; most states have integrated systems (Gamez Vargas, 2013). This unique arrangement brings challenges for the institutions. For example, the high level of segmentation between the two systems sometimes creates duplication of programs and competition for students. Further, the lack of cohesiveness between the entities can lead to a disjointed plan for a state's comprehensive postsecondary education goals (Advance CTE,

2021a; Townsend & Twombly, 2000). In Oklahoma, the entities have worked together to expand opportunities for technology center students through contractual agreement partnerships and the use of prior learning assessments (OSRHE, 2022).

The unique relationship between Oklahoma technology centers and community colleges highlights another facet of the complex nature of community college academic advisors. Community college advisors must know about workforce trends and occupations for students pursuing Associate in Applied Science degrees or certificates designed for careers. They must also be aware of the academic general education standards necessary for university transfer for students pursuing Associate in Arts or Associate in Science degrees. Oklahoma community college academic advisors must stay abreast of workforce trends and changes and modifications to university transfer requirements.

Increasing Educational Attainment in Oklahoma

Higher education attainment levels for the residents of Oklahoma lag behind those of other states in the nation. Some estimates indicate that, by 2028, Oklahoma will face a workforce shortage of nearly 20,000 employees due to retirements and a gap in educational attainment levels (GCWED, 2019). Therefore, one of the state's top educational priorities is increasing the number of Oklahomans who graduate from college (GCWED, 2019; OSRHE, 2020b).

Oklahoma adopted the Complete College America completion initiative in 2011, which is described as the most comprehensive and ambitious higher education initiative ever undertaken by the state. Its goal is to increase the number of degrees and certificates earned in Oklahoma by 67% by 2023 (OSRHE, 2020). In addition, Oklahoma joined the National Governors' Association's Complete to Compete action plan, which focuses on improving developmental education and developing accelerated degree completion options (OSRHE, 2020). The state also

implemented Reach Higher, an adult degree completion program designed to provide specialized advising and support to help adult students complete degrees in high-demand fields.

Despite receiving the most negligible state allocations, community colleges have attained the most significant improvement in graduation rates based on percentage points. According to the OSRHE, graduation rates across all public higher education institutions have improved over the last decade - despite budget cuts exceeding 26%. Community college graduation rates increased from 16.3% in 2009 to 22.2% in 2019. The graduation rates for Oklahoma's research universities changed from 64.6% in 2009 to 69.7% in 2019; regional universities' graduation rates changed from 35.4% in 2009 to 39.2% in 2019 (OSRHE, 2021a). Based on this data, community colleges have seen a 5.9 percentage point gain, research universities have a 5.1 percentage point gain, and regional institutions have had a 3.8 percentage point gain in graduation rates.

Oklahoma community colleges have continued to make improvements in student graduation rates, and despite receiving the lowest allocation of state funding, graduation rates at community colleges have made higher strides than the state's universities. This data provides additional evidence of the significant contributions of the state's community college system in the state's higher education goals. This data should be highlighted to justify additional financial allocations to support these institutions.

Performance-Based Funding in Oklahoma Higher Education

OSRHE identified performance-based funding of state-funded colleges and universities as a key initiative for accomplishing Oklahoma's college degree completion goals (OSRHE, 2013). Oklahoma public institutions are subject to performance-based funding formulas in order to receive new funds. However, Tandberg et al. (2014) noted that performance-based funding

serves the self-interests of the institution, not the students; further, Oklahoma's performance-based funding program is operating without any evidence that it has resulted in positive completions. Nevertheless, Oklahoma's performance-based funding formula measures institutional improvement based on nine performance measures to determine the percentage allocation of new funds. Performance-based funding is calculated based on nine criteria:

1. Increases in non-cohort total of degrees and certificates conferred by an institution in an academic year.

2. Increases in the first-time, full-time graduation rate.

3. Increases in progression rate (calculated by the successful transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution).

4. Increases in retention from freshman to sophomore year of first-time, full-time students.

5. Increased retention from freshman to sophomore year of first-time, full-time students receiving Pell grants.

6. Increases in the number of students earning 24 hours of college-level credit in the first academic year.

7. Percent of the Complete College America target goal for a campus reached each year (not to exceed 100 percent).

8. Submission of a college completion plan as a component of the institutional academic plan.

9. Program accreditation. (OSRHE, 2021b, p. 6).

My study did not specifically address academic advisors' perceptions of performance-based funding or the effect of these institutional decisions on their careers. However, Reaves

(2015) explored performance-based funding for three Oklahoma community colleges from the perspective of mid-level administrators at Oklahoma community colleges. Participants described performance-based funding as leading to pervasive institutional changes designed to increase the number of credentials "produced" by the college. Some of the strategies were positive and proactive, including granting reverse transfer degrees for students who began at the community college and then transferred to a university, undertaking outreach to non-completers, and developing certificate programs. In addition, participants reported an increased emphasis on identifying and intervening with students who were having problems and enhanced efforts to build relationships between students and college personnel.

However, some of the strategies the institutions pursued were viewed by Reaves' participants as threats to the mission of the community college. One administrator reported that their institution had adopted an increased emphasis on recruiting students who were more academically prepared and more likely to complete a degree. Further, administrators noted that their institutions revised their mission, reflecting an institutional priority shift from access to completion. This study revealed that performance-based funding for Oklahoma community colleges had created policies that prioritize an institution's graduate rates rather than recognizing the student's accomplishment of their goals. As data from this study will show in chapter six, institutional decisions driven by financial motives have created some workplace challenges for the participants in this study.

State Funding for Higher Education

State leadership has increasingly called upon the Oklahoma public higher education system to help address impending deficits in educational attainment levels. However, state financial support for Oklahoma public higher education has experienced drastic and ongoing

reductions, thus contradicting the state's commitment to supporting higher education. The

Oklahoma Policy Institute indicated that between 2008 and 2019, Oklahoma had the nation's

third-largest percentage decrease in state higher education funding (Hamby, 2021). According to

Korth (2020), "between 2015 and 2020, higher education funding from states rose by on average

18.8%, which represents $15.3 billion total. In Oklahoma, funding fell 18.6% or $195 million"

(p. 1). The state's failure to invest in public higher education has been criticized as "short-sighted

and counterintuitive," particularly for a "state with top 10 aspirations" (Hamby, 2021, para. 6).

Oklahoma Community College Budgets

Table 5.1 represents the 2020 total state-appropriated operating budget for each

community college. The table was created using data from the 2020 OSRHE budget report

(OSRHE, 2020). The table also shows the percentage of the overall institutional budget

dedicated to student services such as academic advising, counseling and career guidance, student

services, student records, student health services, intramural athletics, and other student

activities.

Table 5.1 FY 2020 State-Appropriated Funds

The Oklahoma State System of Higher Education FY2021 State Appropriated Funds Operations (OSRHE, 2021)		
INSTITUTION	**FY 2021** (p. 60)	**% for student services** (p. 64)
Carl Albert State College	$4,880,959	10%
Connors State College	$5,140,925	9%
Eastern Oklahoma State College	$4,881,761	12.5%
Murray State College	$4,406,970	13.3%
Northeastern A&M	$6,670,531	6.4%
Northern Oklahoma College	$7,820,726	11.4%
Oklahoma City Community College	$19,685,294	11%
Redlands Community College	$4,811,010	7.9%
Rose State College	$15,671,690	7.3%
Seminole State College	$4,513,429	10%
Tulsa Community College	$27,890,623	9.9%

Western Oklahoma State	$4,354,688	16.3%
Total for all 12 public community colleges		$110,728,606
Total for all 25 public higher education institutions		$477,128,729

As Table 5.1 shows, Oklahoma's 12 community colleges received approximately 23% of the state-appropriated funds for public higher education in 2021. A 2013 study of Oklahoma community colleges revealed that even nearly ten years ago, budget issues were a prevalent topic discussed by community college presidents (Gamez Vargas, 2013). Oklahoma community college presidents were frustrated about competing for funding against more prominent universities, concerned about disparities in the state budget, and worried about how budget issues would affect the future of Oklahoma community colleges (Gamez Vargas, 2013). One participant in Gamez Vargas' study stated, "the [state] funding formula just cannot keep up with the growth we are seeing in community colleges. Community colleges are growing faster than four-year institutions" (p. 483). Another participant stated, "in Oklahoma, community colleges are underfunded given the scope of the mission of community colleges" (p. 483). The disproportionate funding in higher education was described by Trow (1984) using Merton's (1968) sociological concept of the "Matthew Effect." Trow (1984) applied Merton's theory to higher education, stating:

> The advantages of elite institutions are so overwhelming that they create what is for them a kind of virtuous circle in which advantage begets advantage. The resources and activities that mark high-status institutions gravitate toward those same institutions, which already have the most of them. The tendency of like to beget like seems to be strong enough, with a few exceptions, to sustain elite higher education against the strains of rapid growth, democratization, bureaucratization, and governmental regulation (p. 149).

Community colleges are affected by the "Matthew Effect" because the more prominent institutions are more likely to bring in additional resources. Therefore, these institutions receive a substantial allocation of resources, thus increasing stratification in higher education.

As a standalone data point, it is problematic that despite accounting for nearly half of the state's public higher education system, Oklahoma's 12 community colleges received 23% of the total state-appropriated funds. However, the disproportionate allocation becomes even more inequitable, given that approximately 40% of all higher education enrollments are at one of the state's public community colleges (OSRHE, 2020). This glaring discrepancy adds contemporary context and reinforces the qualitative perspective provided nearly ten years ago by Gamez Vargas (2013). In addition to casting doubt over state leadership's claims regarding the value or their commitment to supporting public higher education, this dichotomy reveals the need for a more equitable funding process for Oklahoma community colleges.

Five Community Colleges in this Study

Environmental and institutional structures and conditions such as state budgets, town population, salary, and graduation rates shape an institution's approach to academic advising and, thus, how advisors experience their careers. Participants in this study were from five Oklahoma community colleges. Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the OSRHE, the U.S. Census Bureau, Open Payrolls website, and each institution's official website, I created profiles for each college represented. Table 5.2 shows the institutional profiles for the colleges represented in this study.

Table 5.2 Institutional Profile

Institution	Institution NCES classification	Number of Full-Time Employees	Average Employee Salary 2018	Median Household Income 2019	% population with bachelor's degree or higher	IPEDS student graduation rate (2020)
B	Distant/Rural	150	$44,000	$33,000	27.1%	29%
E	Distant/Rural	130	$35,000	$39,000	14.3%	29%
F	Distant/Rural	160	$37,000	$37,000	14.9%	22%
H	Remote/Rural	170	$35,000	$33,000	16.4%	31%
J	Large/Urban	400	$40,000	$55,000	31.1%	15%

Nationally, it is estimated that 34% of community college students attend rural colleges (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) classifies institutions using the U.S. Census Bureau data. The NCES groups institutions into four geographical types: rural, town, suburban, and city. These types are further defined by subtypes based on population size or proximity to populated areas: fringe, distant, remote, small, midsize, and large (NCES, 2018). Participants in this study were from five Oklahoma community colleges. Definitions of the NCES types and subtypes for the five institutions represented in this study are below.

Rural/Distant: more than five miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area. Also includes rural territories that are more than two-and-a-half miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.

Rural/Remote: more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

Urban/Large: located inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more.

Rural Institutions

Four of the five colleges represented in this study are classified as rural. As such, the perspectives of rural community college advisors were overrepresented in this study's sample, while perspectives of urban community college advisors were underrepresented. A strong sense of community characterizes rural communities, often centered around the school system, which provides a supportive environment for students (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). The Rural Community College Alliance (RCCA) is a national organization designed to advocate for the rural community and tribal colleges. The RCCA describes rural institutions as the "neighborhood schools of higher education" because they are close to home and representative and inclusive of their communities (RCCA, 2022). Rural community colleges provide learning opportunities to the communities through formal higher education and degree programs and non-credit lifestyle enrichment programs for the community, including art, technical training, workforce development, and personal enrichment programs such as wellness, exercise, short term training, and children's programming. According to the RCCA (2022), rural colleges are the leading regional centers for cultural and fine arts in rural America.

Rural community colleges contribute to community efficacy by revitalizing communities and regions, developing human capital, and shaping the identities of rural communities and individuals (Boone, 1992; Miller & Tuttle, 2007; Rephann, 2007; Schuyler, 1997). Further, rural community colleges contribute to local economies by creating jobs for staff and faculty who consume goods and services (Siegfried et al., 2007). Rural colleges contribute to the local job

economy and create jobs for residents. Partridge and Rickman (2005) found that rural poverty rates decline significantly as the population with an associate degree or higher rises.

Institution B

Institution B is classified as distant/rural. Census data from 2019 indicate that the town's population is approximately 5,100, and about 27% (1,300) have a bachelor's degree or higher. About 10% of the people with a bachelor's degree or higher work at the college. In fall 2019, the institution had around 150 full-time employees. The median annual household income for 2019 was approximately $33,000, and the average employee salary was roughly $44,000. Employees at the college earn approximately 33% more than average for the area. The institution's 2020 IPEDS graduation rate is 29%, and about 85% of the student population are classified "in-state," meaning their home state is Oklahoma. Academic advising is part of the organization's student affairs/student services division. Three participants, Kimberly, Rebecca, and Sandra, worked at institution B.

Institution E

Institution E is classified as distant/rural. Census data from 2019 indicate that the town's population is approximately 6,900 and about 14% (966) of the population holds a bachelor's degree or higher. About 13% of the people with a bachelor's degree or higher work at the college, as institutional data from fall 2019 indicated that the institution had around 130 full-time employees. The median annual household income for 2019 was roughly $39,000, and the average employee salary was approximately $35,000. Employees at the college earn approximately 10% less than average for the area. The institution's 2020 IPEDS graduation rate is 29%, and about 95% of the student population are classified "in-state," meaning their home

state is Oklahoma. Academic advising is part of the student affairs area of the organization's structure. One participant, Michelle, worked at Institution E.

Institution F

Institution F is classified as distant/rural. Census data from 2019 indicate that the population of the town where the college is located is approximately 13,000, and approximately 15% of the population holds a bachelor's degree or higher. The 2019 median annual household income for the town was approximately $37,000. Institutional data from fall 2019 indicated that there were approximately 160 full time employees, and the average employee salary was approximately $37,000. The website zippia.com lists the institution as the eighth largest employer for the town. Two participants, Kasey and Dani, worked at Institution F. Academic advising is part of the student affairs area of the organization's structure.

Institution H

Institution H is classified as remote/rural. Census data from 2019 indicate that the town's population is approximately 5,300 and approximately 16% (848) of the population holds a bachelor's degree or higher. About 20% of the people with a bachelor's degree or higher work at the college, as institutional data from fall 2019 indicated that the institution had around 170 full-time employees. The median annual household income for 2019 was roughly $33,000, and the average employee salary was approximately $35,000. Employees at the college earn around 8% more than average for the area. The institution's 2020 IPEDS graduation rate is 31%, and about 85% of the student population are classified "in-state," meaning their home state is Oklahoma. Academic advising is part of the student affairs area of the organization's structure. Two participants, Christina and Tammy, worked at Institution H.

Institution J

Institution J is classified as large/urban. Census data from 2019 indicate that the city's population is approximately 650,000 and approximately 31% (201,500) of the population holds a bachelor's degree or higher. Less than 1% of the people with a bachelor's degree or higher work at the college, as institutional data from fall 2019 indicated that the institution had around 400 full-time employees. The median annual household income for 2019 was roughly $55,000, and the average employee salary was approximately $40,000. Academic advising is part of the student affairs area of the organization's structure. The institution's 2020 IPEDS graduation rate is 15%, and about 90% of the student population are classified "in-state," meaning their home state is Oklahoma. Employees at the college earn around 27% less than average for the area. One participant, Jillian, worked at Institution J.

These institutional details bring additional insight and enhanced understanding of the contextual influences that may frame the career choices of academic advisors at Oklahoma community colleges. Interestingly, the rural colleges' IPEDS student graduation rates were nearly double the rate for the single urban institution in this study.

The Cases

This multiple-case study comprised nine cases, or academic advisors, from five Oklahoma community colleges. Data were collected through in-person interviews with each participant. I transcribed each interview and then developed a career narrative based on each participant's interview data. I emailed the career narratives to each participant, inviting them to review my construction of their story to authenticate accuracy and ensure it captured the essence of their career journey. One participant corrected the order of events, and one participant clarified their degree type. The other seven participants confirmed their accounts.

I revised the two narratives that needed corrections and sent them back to the participants, asking them to review the changes and provide any revisions or modifications. The participants emailed me to confirm their narrative accounts and offered no additional edits or changes. The data presented in this chapter was checked by the participants for accuracy.

Table 5.3 summarizes participant characteristics based on the data that was collected. During the interviews, I asked participants to describe their educational histories, such as where they attended college, their college major, their college experience, and their career goals when they attended college. Many participants indicated that they went to college because they wanted to become teachers or counselors, so they pursued degrees in education or psychology. Some participants were undecided about their college major until they began college. Four participants attended a community college in the past, and two participants earned associate degrees from a community college. Three participants self-identified as first-generation. Two of the participants who self-identified as first-generation also completed an associate degree from a community college before completing a bachelor's degree and master's degree. Participants had been in their positions from seven weeks to 23 years.

A noted flaw in this study's design was the lack of participants' demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race, and marital status. These details would have provided additional opportunities for analysis with the Social Cognitive Career Theory framework and offered further insight into the influence of demographic information on the career choice process. Future studies using the SCCT theoretical framework and constructivist approach should integrate participant personal characteristics due to their noted influence on career decisions.

Table 5.3 Participant Characteristics

Participant Pseudonym Pronoun	Degree(s) Earned	College Major	Time as Advisor	Type of Community College
Christina She/her	Bachelor's Masters	Undergraduate: Psychology Graduate: Education Administration	6 years	Remote/Rural
Dani She/her	Associate Bachelor's 2 Masters	*Community College: Associate degree Undergraduate: Education Graduate: Education *first generation	2 years	Distant/Rural
Jillian She/her	Bachelor's Masters (in progress)	Undergraduate: Psychology Graduate: Education/School Counseling	7 weeks	Large/Urban
Kasey She/her	Bachelor's Masters	Attended community college Undergraduate: Psychology Graduate: Psychology	4 years	Distant/Rural
Kimberly She/her	Bachelor's	Undergraduate: Early Childhood Education *first generation	3 years	Distant/Rural
Michelle She/her	Bachelor's Masters	Undergraduate: Graduate: Human Relations	23 years	Distant/Rural
Rebecca She/her	Bachelor's	*Attended community college Undergraduate: English	2.5 years	Distant/Rural
Sandra She/her	Bachelor's Masters	Undergraduate: Counseling and Human Services Graduate: Adult Education & Administration	5 years	Distant/Rural
Tammy She/her	Associate Bachelor's Masters	*Community College: Associate degree Undergraduate: Business Graduate: Human Resources Administration *first generation	20 years	Remote/Rural

The individual career stories offer deep insights into each person's career; however,

presenting each participant's complete account would have made it challenging to concisely

identify and explain patterns or themes from the data. Therefore, the following vignettes provide

a succinct but sufficient description of each participant's career history. The purpose of these

vignettes is to introduce the reader to each participant and distinguish participants so that readers

can refer back to these descriptions and recall who is being referenced in later chapters. Each participant's extensive career narrative is located in Appendix D.

Christina

Christina has been an advisor at a rural community college for six years. Her father was in the military, so they moved to another state shortly after she was born. After retiring, her parents relocated to this area when Christina was an adult. After high school, Christina attended a state university. She spoke fondly of her time in college, although she admitted that she enjoyed the social aspects of college more than the academics. She said, "I was having the time of my life…and my GPA showed it." She changed her major several times and "just picked classes my friends were in or that sounded interesting." Her approach to college changed during her junior year when her advisor told her, "you HAVE to choose a major so you can graduate on time." Christina said, "I thought her [the advisor] job was cool, so I asked her what she majored in. She said psychology so that's when I changed my major to psychology – I had done well in my intro to psyc class but hadn't taken any other psyc classes." Christina enjoyed the psychology classes and said, "that's when I became interested and purposeful in my approach to college."

She completed her bachelor's degree but said, "I didn't want to leave college, so I decided to get my master's." She was interested in academic advising due to her relationship with her advisor, so she applied to a graduate program in higher education administration at a university in another state. She relocated to attend graduate school.

After completing her master's degree, she had difficulty finding a full-time position. She said, "Yeah, I had a master's degree, but I didn't have any experience, so it was really tough." Christina's job search was not bound by any particular geographic location. She said, "I applied

anywhere and everywhere I knew people…it was probably around 600 applications over the course of about nine months. My job was applying for jobs." She decided to move to rural Oklahoma to be near her parents while continuing her job search.

The community college was not far from her parents' home, so she "ended up applying for 10 or 12 different positions I thought I'd qualify for." She was offered a temporary position in student housing. Even though this was not her "dream job" she said, "I knew I needed to get my foot in the door and position myself so that I could eventually move into another role." Over the next several months, she worked in various temporary positions. She said, "I wasn't aspiring for any particular role," so she continued to "job hop" – gaining more experience and responsibilities. When a full-time academic advisor position became available, she was "ecstatic; it was exactly the right time and place for me. I am perfectly content…I can see myself being here until I retire."

Dani

Dani has been an advisor at a rural college for two years. Dani is not from the area, but her family relocated here after she was an adult. In high school, Dani took concurrent classes at a community college. She received a full academic scholarship at a university a few hours away from her home. However, her plans changed shortly before her first semester when she found out that her father had "wiped out my savings account." Determined to go to college, Dani enrolled at a local community college, saying, "the community college wasn't my first choice, but it was where I could get enrolled quickly, given the situation." She lived at home with her mother while attending community college full time as a first-generation student. She was involved in a student organization and developed a mentor relationship with one of her professors, who encouraged her to pursue an education degree. She finished her associate degree and then earned

a bachelor's degree in elementary education. She continued with a master's degree in reading education and a second master's degree in international education. As a graduate assistant, she learned about opportunities for teaching abroad. Dani pursued this opportunity and spent ten years living overseas teaching elementary students and adult literacy programs.

A financial situation necessitated her return to the states. Her family had relocated to Oklahoma, so she came to Oklahoma. She began searching for jobs. She knew she wanted to be in education, but "didn't want to be in the classroom anymore. It was difficult for me to see how my skills could be applied to other areas besides the classroom." She saw an opening for an academic advising position at the community college but was unsure how her teaching experiences would translate to advising. She said, "teaching is all I knew, but there were so many different things about the job that appealed to me, so I applied. Honestly, I didn't think I would get it, but I was at the point where I was going to have to start applying to Wal-Mart or anywhere that would hire me because I needed to be able to afford to live."

In addition to advising, Dani is also an adjunct instructor at the community college. She said, "I could see myself being full-time faculty someday." She has also considered pursuing a doctorate. She said, "my grandpa always used to call me 'the smart one' – saying I should be a doctor when I grew up. I didn't want to be a medical doctor, but when I learned that I could get a Ph.D. or Ed.D. I thought, yeah, I can be a doctor. I just need to make up my mind to do it." She said, "I love higher education; I love my job and working with students. I think I have found a really good profession."

Jillian

Jillian has been an advisor at a large/urban community college for seven weeks. Jillian grew up in a suburban area and attended a private high school in the city. After graduating from

high school, she attended college in another state. She originally wanted to become a teacher, but a negative student teaching experience caused her to change her major to psychology. Before becoming an advisor, Jillian worked for a large oil and gas company for several years. She was laid off when the company downsized, and she recently enrolled in a master's degree program for education and school counseling. She believes her experience as an academic advisor will prepare her for a future role of working as an elementary school counselor.

The idea of working at a college appealed to her because she has been taking her teenage son on college campus visits. She said, "I've always loved the college environment, so working at a college seemed like a good option." She applied for jobs at several local universities without much luck. She was not necessarily looking for a job at a community college, but she applied when she saw the position posted online. She received a call for an interview and was hired a few weeks later. Jillian said, "getting out of the corporate world and becoming an academic advisor has definitely de-stressed my life." After just seven weeks in this role, Jillian acknowledges, "I have so much to learn. There is a lot that goes into it. And who knows what might happen…this is a great job. Maybe I'll stay in higher education."

Kasey

Kasey has been an advisor at a rural college for four years. She is from a nearby town. During high school, Kasey participated in concurrent enrollment at a community college. She received a scholarship to attend a state university. However, during her senior year of high school, her father died. She said, "I knew I couldn't leave my mom – I'm an only child – so I enrolled at a closer university so I could stay home. It was a 30-minute commute each way." Kasey's college major was psychology, and her career goal was to become a counselor. She said, "growing up, my parents expected that I be involved in the community and with volunteering. I

really enjoy being involved and helping others." She completed a bachelor's degree in psychology then started graduate school for counseling but changed her major. She said, "I really wanted to work on a college campus." However, she believed that many positions at a university required a doctorate, and she was not interested in pursuing anything further than a master's degree. Additionally, she said, "I knew I was not going to leave this area – my family is here, my husband's family is here."

She was familiar with the community college because her mother and uncle had graduated from the institution. She also knew that the community college often hired people with "just a bachelor's or masters." After several months of volunteering and working part-time and as a substitute teacher, she obtained a full-time position at the college as an academic advisor. She loves working with students and enjoys her work environment because she gets to be involved with several different activities. Kasey's husband also works at the community college, and they share the goal of "becoming full-time faculty someday." She said, "even if I don't get a faculty position, I'm still going to be here. This institution has been good to my family. I wouldn't want to work anywhere else. We are both here for the long haul."

Kimberly

Kimberly has been an advisor at a rural college for almost three years, but she has worked at the community college for 19 years. She is from the area, and after graduating from high school, she left home to attend a state university. She was a first-generation student and completed her bachelor's degree in early childhood education. She worked in that field for a few years after college, then began working at the community college, where she facilitated a grant program. In this role, she provided specialized advising and coaching assistance to students in the program. Her position ended when the grant was discontinued. This unplanned event caused

her uncertainty about her career plan; however, moving to a new area was not an option since her whole family was there. She took a job in another department on campus but was unhappy in the position. A few months later, an advising role became available, and she was able to switch.

She believes academic advising is a good fit for her personality, plus she had some experience with advising from her previous job. She gains satisfaction from helping students define and explore their educational and career pursuits. She said, " I love my job and feel like this is what I was born to do; it just feels right and comes naturally to me. I am really happy where I am and would be totally content retiring from this job."

Michelle

Michelle has been advising at a rural college for 23 years. She is from a metropolitan area in the state. After high school, she attended a private university in Oklahoma. While in college, she worked in the admissions office and enjoyed this job. She relished her time as a college student, saying, "I never wanted to leave college." She completed a bachelor's degree in English communications and a master's degree in human relations. After college, she spent a short time working in another field but said, "it was not my calling – I was not invested, so I got out." She recalled how much she enjoyed working in the admissions office as a student, so she spent the next nine months looking for a job in higher education.

She saw a newspaper advertisement for an advising position at a community college located in a rural community about an hour and a half from where she lived, so she applied. She said, "I didn't intend to stay this long; I didn't think I'd still be here 23 years later, still at the same place. But now, I can't see myself being anywhere else." Since moving to the rural community 23 years ago, Michelle has gotten married, raised a child, and built her life as a community member; however, she plans to leave the area after she retires.

Michelle said academic advising is an excellent job that aligns with her personality because "I just like people – I like helping them and being social." She compared being an advisor to being an ambassador or tour guide; she said, "my job is to help students learn how to navigate college and to teach them to advocate for themselves." She recognizes the student as a "whole person" whose academic and personal lives overlap. She has an open-door policy to "lend a listening ear to students…and a lot of times, that's what they need – someone to listen to them, even if I can't solve their problem."

Rebecca

Rebecca has been an advisor at a rural college for two and a half years. Rebecca is not from this area but relocated here when her husband took a faculty position at the community college. Rebecca took classes at a community college as a concurrent high school student. After graduating from high school, she left home and attended a university. She described her experience as a "traditional college student." While in college, she worked on campus part-time. She said, "I loved my job and enjoyed getting to know the campus and the people who worked there." She completed an English degree and then worked as an insurance analyst for about five years. She took a leave of absence from the workforce when her first child was born.

Academic advising is her first job since her leave of absence. In what she described as a "serendipitous turn of events," she was ready to work when they moved, and the college happened to have an opening for an academic advisor position. She and her husband both began working at the college around the same time. She considers academic advising to be "more than just a job" and intends to continue working in higher education for the foreseeable future. She gains satisfaction by helping students explore academic and career possibilities. She finds the

work very gratifying because "I get to work with students who want to be here and who are excited about being here; it's a very positive environment."

Sandra

Sandra has been an advisor at a rural college for five years, but her career in higher education spans over 15 years. Before this position, she worked in the financial aid office at a university. She is from this area and left home to attend college after high school. Sandra's career goal was to help people with special needs, so she pursued a degree in human services and counseling. After completing her bachelor's degree, she began a full-time job at a regional university as an educational opportunities counselor. She later moved into the role of associate director of the financial aid department. After a divorce, Sandra returned to this town and looked for a job. She heard about an academic advising position at the community college from some colleagues but was unsure if she had the requisite experience. A trusted colleague "reminded me of all the ways my financial aid background overlapped with advising." She applied and was offered the position. She is happy that she pursued this career, saying, "this has been my favorite position so far!"

She views advising as an "opportunity to get to know the whole student, to show them that someone cares about them, and open their eyes to different possibilities." She said, "students face so many barriers, so advisors need be positive, supportive, and caring role models for them." She considers the community college her "home" and plans to continue as an academic advisor indefinitely, saying, "I need to be with the students. They are the ones I care about."

Tammy

Tammy has been an advisor at a rural college for 20 years. In fact, this community college has been her only place of employment since she graduated from college. The eldest of five children, Tammy was raised in the area and was the first in her family to attend college. After graduating from high school, she completed an associate degree at the community college. After completing her associate degree, Tammy began working at the community college as an administrative assistant in the academic advisement office while continuing her education for a bachelor's degree.

She learned about academic advising by helping the advisors during busy times. She said she "really enjoyed working with the advisors and learned a lot from observing them and listening to them help students." Due to this experience, Tammy developed a career goal to become an academic advisor. She shared this with her supervisor, who encouraged her to go to graduate school to better position herself for her career. She followed her supervisor's advice and completed a master's degree in human resources administration while working as an administrative assistant. She continued working in this role until an academic advising position became available.

After 20 years in this role, she is particularly proud to have helped multiple generations of families within the rural community. Her children attended this college, and she envisions her future grandchildren attending as well. For Tammy, "this is my home. I am happy here. I enjoy my work. I'll be here until they tell me to leave."

Chapter Summary

A strength of the multiple-case study method is the ability to examine the uniqueness and commonalities between different cases and highlight the "nuance, the sequentiality of happenings, [and] the wholeness of the individual" (Stake, 1995, p. xii). This study sought to

understand the complex interrelationships of career choice and development within the Oklahoma public higher education system, which is the complex contextual backdrop for the study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Nine academic advisors participated in this study, and each participant offered a unique career and educational background that preceded their career as an academic advisor. This chapter provided rich information about the five Oklahoma community colleges that were the contextual setting for the participants and introduced each participant's career narrative.

Chapter 6 explores the patterns and themes surrounding the career choice of academic advisors in this study. SCCT was the theoretical framework for analyzing the data because it posits that various personal and contextual factors "help shape the learning experiences that fuel personal interests and choices" (Lent et al., 1994, p. 107). SCCT highlights salient considerations and variables influencing career interest and choice. The themes that emerged from the data are presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 6: Becoming an Academic Advisor

This qualitative multiple-case study explored the career choice of nine academic advisors from five Oklahoma community colleges. The research questions for this study were:

1. What personal factors influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?

2. What learning experiences influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?

3. What environmental factors influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?

Yin (1994) stated that the objective of a multiple-case study is to "build a general explanation that fits each of the individual cases, even though the cases will vary in their details" (p. 112). Participant data was analyzed using both deductive and inductive processes and the SCCT framework (Lent, 2012; Lent et al., 1994). The analysis generated themes that were organized into three groups related to SCCT: personal factors, learning experiences, and environmental factors. The participants found their way to this career because they wanted to help others (personal factor). Their learning experiences while in college influenced their desire for a career in higher education (learning experience). Finally, the location of the institution was a salient factor in their career decisions (environmental factor).

Social Cognitive Career Theory Themes

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, 2012; Lent et al., 1994) explains how career interests, choices, goals, and satisfaction are influenced by continuous and reciprocal interaction between and among personal factors, learning experiences, and environmental factors (Lent et al., 1994). In the SCCT model, career development is influenced by self-efficacy and

outcome expectations. Self-efficacy refers to a person's beliefs about their skills and abilities for a specific task or outcome (Bandura, 1986; Lent, 2012). Outcome expectations are a person's perceived consequences for actions (Bandura, 1986; Lent, 2012). Together, self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations influence a person's career goals.

Self-efficacy and outcome expectations are acquired and influenced by contextual barriers or opportunities. Contextual factors are categorized as distal and proximal, and include personal factors, learning experiences, and environment (Lent et al., 1994). Proximal influences include current individual resources or barriers, current or anticipated life roles or family obligations, finances, job availability, the economy, geographic location, socioeconomic factors, and human or social capital (Lent et al., 1994, 2000; Martin & Martin, 2002). Distal influences are inherent characteristics of an individual, such as personality; social, cultural, and gender-role socialization; availability and type of academic or career role models; academic ability; family of origin; human or social capital; geographic location; and opportunities to develop interests and skills (Brown, 2002; Duffy & Dik, 2007; Gottfredson, 2004; Lent et al., 1994). The model recognizes that distal and proximal contextual factors can present as either opportunity structures or barriers to career development (Lent, 2012).

SCCT explains career development as a dynamic process within a social context. Instead of focusing on "where people end up," SCCT is interested in explaining "how they get there" (Lent & Brown, 2013, p. 557). The SCCT model posits that career development is influenced by self-efficacy, which affects outcome expectations. Positive experiences reinforce self-efficacy beliefs, which heighten outcome expectations and encourage career goal-setting behaviors. Conversely, negative experiences contribute to low self-efficacy beliefs or negative outcome expectations and cause career avoidance behaviors (Lent, 2012).

I interviewed nine academic advisors from five Oklahoma community colleges. I asked them to explain why and how they came to be in their current position. While their responses were quite diverse and the specifics of their career journeys were unique, participant narratives indicated some common patterns. Rather than emphasize the uniqueness of each participant, the multiple-case study approach enabled me to identify themes that cut across participants through theoretical thematic analysis (Stake, 2006). This study found that participants became academic advisors because they wanted to help others. Their desire for a career in higher education was influenced by their learning experiences while in college. The location of the institution was an important factor in their career decisions.

Career Choice

In the SCCT model, career choice refers to the plans and actions a person implements to obtain a career outcome, including pursuing the necessary education or training to enter the field and the individual's job search strategies and application process. The model of career choice (Figure 3.3) explains career choice as an "unfolding process with multiple influences and choice points" (Lent, 2012, p. 123). A key assumption of this model is that individuals will make career choices if they believe their preference will have minimal barriers and ample support (Lent, 2012). Personal and contextual factors could facilitate or impede career choices. Environmental support will likely cultivate the development of career goals and the pursuit of those goals. However, environmental barriers may limit career behaviors, and "decisions may be influenced less by interests than by pragmatic contextual, self-efficacy, and outcome expectation considerations" (Lent, 2012, p. 126).

I asked participants to tell me the story of how and why they became an academic advisor at this institution. Five participants, Kasey, Sandra, Kimberly, Jillian, Dani, described clearly

knowing from a young age that they wanted to help others by becoming teachers or counselors, so they attended college and earned degrees in education or psychology. These participants provided examples of mentors or learning experiences in school or college that shaped their career interests.

The other four participants—Christina, Michelle, Tammy, and Rebecca—did not discuss having a specific career goal when they went to college. Instead, these participants described experiences during and after college that influenced their career paths. Christina was undecided about her major and career goal until her junior year of college when her academic advisor told her she needed to select a major. Christina chose a psychology major and became more focused on her future. Michelle and Rebecca have English degrees, although they did not discuss their rationale or reasons for their college major or intended career or profession. Tammy's associate's and bachelor's degrees are in business administration, and her master's degree is in human relations. Still, she did not discuss specifics about her decision-making process for her college major.

Helping Others

Although participants did not set out to have careers as academic advisors, they did want a career that involved helping others. Despite their different college experiences and career intentions, a recurring theme was helping others. Participants described themselves as "helpful," "compassionate," "caring," and "nurturing." They said they gain personal satisfaction in advising because this role enables them to help others. Many described their approach to advising students using words such as "guiding," "connecting," "supporting," and "being a resource." These terms reflect how their personal values and personalities guided their interest in a career that involved helping others. In the following section, I provide examples using participant data regarding how and why they became academic advisors.

An orientation toward helping others was a fundamental element of childhood for Kasey and Sandra, who described growing up in families that were community-focused and service-oriented. Kasey, who has been an advisor at a rural college for four years, shared fond memories of growing up in this area. Kasey said her parents were always doing things out in the community and helping others, so she became interested in a career as a counselor. Kasey said, "growing up my parents expected that I be involved in the community and with volunteering. Now, I really enjoy being involved and helping others."

Sandra has been an advisor at a rural college for five years. She described growing up in this area in a close-knit family that spent time volunteering at the church and community. Her mother was a nurse who worked at a summer camp for disabled children, and as Sandra became old enough, her mom brought her to the camp to volunteer. Even as a young child, Sandra felt compassion toward the children at the camp. For this reason, she decided to pursue a degree in human services with the career goal of helping individuals with disabilities.

Academic advising and helping others is related to the advisors' personality or natural talents. Some participants identified and described inherent personality traits or natural skills that make academic advising a natural career fit. Kimberly, an advisor at a rural college, identified as an introvert, saying, "with a career like this, I probably don't come across like that, since I'm always interacting with others." She said, "I've always been told I'm a good listener. It just comes naturally to me." I asked her what qualities she thinks make a "good advisor." She replied, "We all bring different things to advising based on our personalities. And even though we are different, we all care about our students." Kimberly enjoys helping students define and explore their educational and career pursuits. Dani, an advisor at a rural institution, noted that her natural ability to recall information benefits her as an advisor. She said:

I have a very good memory…it's kinda scary the things I can remember. Well, that

makes me a really good advisor because I can remember random details about my

students and connect with them in that way, but I can also remember official

information from the catalog that helps me advise them efficiently and accurately.

Michelle has been an advisor at a rural college for 23 years. She said, "I just like people –

I like helping people and being social." The majority of students Michelle works with are first-

generation students. She said:

I'm like their ambassador or tour guide, you know, kinda like one of those people you see

carrying the flags to guide the tour groups around in a foreign country? College is kinda

like a foreign country to some students. My job is helping them navigate the land and

learn the language.

Rebecca, also an advisor at a rural college, described herself as "introspective" and a

"creative problem solver." She commented that her educational background in English is

nontraditional for advisors. However, she said her English background enables her to consolidate

large amounts of data into meaningful information that students can understand. Rebecca

described staying busy with "side projects" during slower advising times. She researches

university transfer requirements, develops guides and manuals, and compiles helpful resource

handouts for students and colleagues.

Another way advisors help students is by connecting them with on and off-campus

resources. As part of the larger educational community on campus, community college advisors

work closely with departments across campus (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). They guide

students with academic-related decisions and help connect them to additional academic,

financial, and other resources. Relationship building was an important element in the

participants' approach to helping students. By developing relationships with students, advisors provide help and support outside of academic advising, such as helping them address personal issues that impact their academic and personal lives.

Community college advisors are often the only connection students have to the institution. Students rely on their advisors for a wealth of information, some of which is not related to academic advising. After 23 years as an advisor at a rural institution, Michelle is well aware of how students depend on their advisors. She said, "I recognize the student as a whole person – their academic and personal lives overlap. I have an open-door policy to lend a listening ear to students, which can be challenging because I can't be Dr. Phil or Judge Judy. But I can still listen to them. And a lot of times, that's what they need." Michelle also noted how she often helps connect rural students to resources such as housing, transportation, food, and childcare. She said that the rural location had limited public transportation options, making it difficult for some students to even *get* to the college campus for their classes. However, online classes are not a feasible option either, as some students do not have access to home computers or the internet where they live. She said, "it's heartbreaking when they don't have networks to help support them." Michelle admitted that these factors weigh on her and sometimes make her feel "helpless" in being able to do her job and support students.

Kasey's original career goal was to become a counselor. While in graduate school, she had an experience that made her realize that she "wasn't the right person for the mental health field." Kasey said, "being an advisor, I still get to help people, just in a different way." Kasey said her educational background helps her "recognize when students are struggling with issues outside of academics." Kasey's efforts to help make students feel welcome and part of the campus is an example of Astin's (1993) theory of student involvement. Kasey remembers her

own adjustment to college and makes a point to try to connect with students she sees on campus to help them feel seen and valued. She said:

> college can be a huge adjustment period. A lot of students are the first in their families to go to college, some live on campus and have never been away from home before, and others are coming back to school at 40 years old. I strive to make all students feel welcome and appreciated. I build rapport with them by asking them about their personal lives and interests outside of just school.

The concept of advising as *teaching* was introduced by Crookston (1972). Academic advisors teach students analytical, organizational, and research skills needed to navigate college; advising is an interactive activity that results in a student's intellectual growth and development (Koring et al., 2004). Dani was a teacher for several years before becoming an advisor at a rural college. She said, "I have always been involved in teaching and helping others learn. Even as a kid, I was a tutor and a children's church leader." She believes advisors are teachers, just not in the traditional classroom setting.

Participants indicated that academic advising aligns with their personal values of helping others. They enjoy helping students solve academic problems, connecting with resources, learning how to "do" college, and ultimately, making a positive difference in the lives of students. Helping professions aim to nurture growth or address problems related to a person's physical, psychological, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Academic advising is rooted in teaching, connecting, and helping others (Klusmeier, 2017). Despite having different educational and career backgrounds, the advisors in this study were all drawn to becoming an advisor because of its relationship to helping and teaching others. Academic advisors help students navigate the college experience by supporting them as they explore, clarify, and

establish educational and career goals (Brown, 2008; Crockett, 1985; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Kuhn, 2008; Long, 2012; Nuss, 2003; O'Banion, 2009; Self, 2008).

Some career theories posit that individuals are drawn to occupations that align with their personalities and values (Holland, 1959; Parsons, 1909; Super, 1953). Career research has shown that those in education, counseling, and other helping professions to explain that they were led to the field by an intrinsic or altruistic desire to help others (Bright, 2008; Oster, 2006; Ribak-Rosenthal, 1994). Intrinsic motives relate to a passion for teaching and learning, subject knowledge, and expertise, while altruistic motives relate to one's perception that advising is a valuable and important profession that contributes to making a difference in society. In other words, altruism is a "motivation to serve the interests of a community of people, a state, a nation or humankind" (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999, p. 20).

Gender Roles and Career Choices

Academic advising is a predominantly female profession—in 2019, 67% of advisors identified as female (NACADA, 2019). All nine participants in this study identified as female. Participants did not explicitly describe the role of gender in their academic or career decisions; however, as previously mentioned, a significant limitation of this study was a lack of participant demographic information. Gender affects a wide range of career-related attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes. Gender role socialization influences the type of learning experiences and environmental factors an individual is exposed to by parents, teachers, counselors, other adult role models, and even the media (Lent, 2012). Gender is a socially constructed aspect of a person's identity and experience that shapes their learning opportunities, interpersonal relationships, and career choices (Francis, 2002; Lent & Brown, 1996). Gender stereotypes are

"commonly accepted beliefs about the activities, roles, physical attributes, and personality traits that distinguish girls and women from boys and men" (Berndt & Heller, 1986, p. 889).

Women's career trajectories are influenced by family and significant others (Heins et al., 1982). Francis (2002) found gender to be a predominant factor in career choice, even superseding ability. A study of primary and secondary school children showed a dichotomy in career aspirations, as girls opted for creating or helping roles while boys chose science, technology, or business (Francis, 2002). The theory of circumspection (Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997) explains that young people judge the desirability of occupations based on their concept of gender, which is developed through gender role socialization.

Ting and Watt (1999) found that common sources of support for women were their parents, especially their mothers. Sandra's mother was a nurse who exposed her to community service and volunteering. Sandra observed her mother as a caretaker both at their home and in the workplace, and these experiences contributed to her decision to pursue a career in human services. Sandra did not discuss "tagging along" to work with her father or his role in her career ideas.

Gender was an influence on some participants' adult career decisions. For example, when Kimberly's grant position ended, she said moving was not an option due to her family roots in the area. She said, "my husband's job is here; our family is here. I would not uproot our family for my job." Instead, she accepted that she might have to consider the possibility of a "long commute." Rebecca became an advisor after taking a leave of absence to raise a family, followed by a relocation to a rural area for her husband's job. According to Belenky et al. (1986), "women typically approach adulthood with the understanding that the care and empowerment of others is central to their life's work" (p. 48).

Previous research has found that family variables can strongly influence career-related decisions and plans (Whiston & Keller, 2004). Spitze and Logan (1991) found that females were significantly more involved with visiting and helping their parents than men. Women may feel forced to choose between their personal and family responsibilities and their professional lives; consequently, their professional identity development is influenced by connections with others (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003). While both Kimberly and Rebecca expressed how much they enjoy being academic advisors, how much did their family situations limit their career possibilities? A future study on gender roles in rural areas and dual-income households could provide additional insight into the role of gender on career decisions. A future study should include a more in-depth consideration of how gender influences career decisions.

Family of Origin and Career Choices

Family of origin was found to be a significant influence on the careers of women in higher education (Crawford & Smith, 2005). Tammy and Dani mentioned being the eldest children in the family who were often responsible for taking care of younger siblings and helping around the house. It is possible that these caregiver roles were assigned to them because of their age within the family, but could also be attributed to their gender. Kimberly's career ideas were traced to observing her teachers at school and "playing school" with her friends. Kimberly said:

> we grow up in the school environment, five days a week, watching the teachers act out that role as their career. You don't really get to do that with other types of professions or jobs so you really don't know what they do at work. It's just vague. I think that's why I chose education – because it seemed familiar.

Both Kasey and Sandra described growing up as only children, living with both parents in the home throughout their childhood. They also described themselves as "outgoing" and

"extroverted." These participants described a strong bond with their parents and expressed a fondness and appreciation for their idyllic childhood experiences. For example, Sandra recalled going on quintessential family road trips. As she grew older, road trips often included stops at college or university campuses because her parents insisted on her attending college after high school. Kasey shared that while her family was not wealthy, her parents "did everything they could" to make sure she could try out different sports and activities in school. Her parents took her to cultural events at the rural community college and another local university for art displays, music or dance recitals, and performances. Kasey and Sandra both described positive childhood experiences that included parental support and attention, exposure to volunteering activities, and visits to college campuses. These family of origin learning experiences cultivated their desire to help others and fostered their self-efficacy beliefs about attending college.

Bradley (1982) indicated that a child's place with a family plays a significant role in their personality and career choices. The resource dilution model suggests that only children receive undivided parental and household resources than families with multiple children; these additional resources enhance the child's social skills and self-efficacy because they receive more parental attention, time, energy, and financial support (Blake, 1989; Falbo & Polit, 1986; Franco & Levitt, 1998; Stewart et al., 2001). Some studies have shown that only children have more advanced cognitive development, social skills, and academic achievement than children with siblings (Doh & Falbo, 1999; Falbo, 1992). Blake (1989) reported that only children were more outgoing, participated in more extracurricular activities, and were more socially popular among peers than those with siblings. Claudy et al. (1979) reported that only children were more likely to engage in intellectual and solitary pursuits such as reading, clubs, hobbies, raising animals, acting, singing, dancing, music, and photography.

As adults, only children play a unique role in the lives of their aging parents, and because they have fewer family members, they may allocate more time to their parents (Trent & Spitze, 2011). This could explain Kasey's decision to change her plans for college and stay home with her mother after her father's death. Similarly, Sandra indicated that her father passed away after she was an adult. After her divorce, she moved in with her mother and plans to live with her indefinitely.

Learning Experiences

Participants made it very clear that helping others is part of the fabric of who they are. Still, they also identified learning experiences that fostered and supported their inclinations to help others and exposed them to the idea of working at a college. Some gained learning experiences during their college years by working on campus or being involved in college organizations. Some came to academic advising after working in other industries. Participants' self-efficacy beliefs were shaped by their experiences in school and college, which influenced their career interests and goals. SCCT (Lent, 2012) states that past experiences dictate future decisions and that individuals expect specific outcomes based on experiences, reflection, and feedback. This seemed to be the case for the participants in this study, who discussed the role of previous learning experiences in relation to their career goals and current position as an academic advisor.

School and college. Many participants reported enjoying their experiences in school and college. Participants emphasized how much they loved being in college, so being able to work on a college campus was a way for them to remain in this environment. This is fairly common, according to a June 2020 article in Inside Higher Ed by O'Meara, Renn, and Stewart (2020):

the common joke about those who join higher education as a field of study and practice is

that we are the people who had very good college experiences and never wanted to leave.

Not having anything else to do, we kept going to college to stay in the place we loved.

(para 7)

Elementary school was an important influence on Kimberly's career goal of becoming a

teacher. Kimberly, a first-generation graduate, said she had wanted to be a teacher for as long as

she could remember and talked about always "playing school" when she was a little girl. She

believes she developed this interest by observing her teachers while in school. She said:

we grow up in the school environment, five days a week, watching the teachers act out

that role as their career. You don't really get to do that with other types of professions or

jobs so you really don't know what they do at work. It's just vague. I think that's why I

chose education – because it seemed familiar.

Kimberly described going to college with complete confidence about her major in early

childhood education. As she reflected on her experience through her current lens of being an

advisor, she commented on how unusual it was for her, a first-generation student, to "go off" to a

large four-year university, commit to a major, and never change it. After graduating from

college, Kimberly and her husband moved to another state for her husband's job. There, she

worked in the early education field for a few years but left the job when they returned to

Oklahoma to be closer to family and start a family of their own. The community college was

near their home, and Kimberly began working in a position related to her college major. This

position enabled her to remain close to home to care for their family while still working in an

educational setting.

Dani, also a first-generation graduate, decided during her first year of college that she wanted to be a teacher. She attributed her decision to one of her professors. She said, "he had only been a professor for a few years. He went to college later in life after the factory he'd worked at his whole life closed down. He had no skills besides working in the factory. He went back to school and became a professor." This story resonated with Dani; who said:

for him, education was salvation. He told us what education did for him, not what he was doing for education. It made me think about what education could mean for my life, and that's when I thought, maybe I should become a teacher.

Dani recalled growing up in an unstable home environment. Her upbringing forced her to become responsible at a young age for her younger siblings and even her parents at times. After watching her parents struggle, Dani knew she wanted a different life, and she believed that being a teacher would offer stability, a reliable income, and benefits. She completed her bachelor's degree in education and went on to earn two master's degrees. Her career as a teacher began shortly after completing her second master's degree, and she learned about opportunities for teaching overseas. Dani explained, "my home life had settled down, and my family members' lives were stable, so I was *finally* in a position where I felt that I could leave and everyone would be ok, so I jumped at the opportunity." She was a teacher overseas for ten years, but a financial situation caused her to return to the States.

Upon her return to the States, she moved to the rural area because her family had relocated to the area and began looking for jobs. She said, "I knew I wanted to be in education but also knew I didn't want to be in the classroom anymore. It was difficult for me to see how my skills could be applied to other areas besides the classroom." She found an opening for an academic advising position at the community college. Despite feeling unsure about how or if her

previous teaching experiences would translate to advising, she applied for the position, saying, "I honestly didn't think I would get it, but the job description sounded appealing, so I applied. And now, here I am." As she reflected on her advising career, she compared academic advising to teaching, saying, "we have to be good at making quick decisions, good at reading people, understanding the nature of the learner, and recognizing how an individual's interests and abilities can influence their success." In addition to advising, Dani also teaches as an adjunct instructor at the institution. She said, "I could see myself being full-time faculty someday."

Christina reported that she "loved being a college student." She completed her bachelor's degree in psychology but "didn't want to leave college." Hence, she applied for a graduate program at a university in another state. When she was accepted into the program, she moved to attend graduate school. After completing her master's degree, she struggled to find a full-time job because she lacked experienced. She said, "Yeah, I had a master's degree, but I didn't have any work experience, so it was really tough." Christina described an extensive job search, saying, "I applied anywhere and everywhere I knew people…it was probably around 600 applications over the course of about nine months. My job was applying for jobs."

During her job search, she decided to move in with her parents in this rural Oklahoma town. She applied for several positions at the community college and accepted a part time position in student housing. She said, "I knew I needed to get my foot in the door and position myself so that I could eventually move into another role." She worked in a few temporary positions at the community college before getting a full-time position. She said, "I wasn't aspiring for any particular role," so she continued to "job hop," gaining more experience and responsibilities along the way.

SCCT looks at the role of learning and socialization experiences in career decision-making (Lent, 2012). Kimberly, Dani, and Christina all described learning experiences in school or college that shaped their career trajectory that ultimately led to their current role as academic advisors. For Kimberly, observing teachers while in elementary school helped her decide to pursue an education degree. Dani's desire to become a teacher was influenced by a professor's career story and the possibility of a better life. Christina loved being in college so much that she did not want to leave, so she pursued a graduate degree. After finishing her graduate program, she started applying for jobs at colleges and universities and worked in various positions before becoming an advisor.

Working on campus as a student. Working on campus was a meaningful experience for some participants, and these experiences provided a foundation for their job search. As a student, Michelle lived on campus. Her parents encouraged her to get a part-time job, so Michelle applied for a part-time job in the college admissions and recruitment office. In this job, she helped with student outreach, campus tours, and data entry. Working on campus exposed Michelle to the different types of jobs on a college campus and helped her see that working at a college was not synonymous with teaching. As Michelle reflected on her experience, she commented on how lucky she was to have had this type of job instead of working off-campus. Her part-time job experience shaped her future career decisions.

After graduating, she spent a short time working in a fundraising role but said, "it was not my calling – I was not invested, so I got out." As she began searching for jobs, her thoughts returned to how much she enjoyed working on campus as a student, so she searched for jobs at colleges and universities throughout the state. She applied for a position at the rural community college, which was located about an hour and a half from where she lived. Michelle said, "I was

young and single," so accepting the position did not present significant obstacles. She took the job and moved to the rural community.

While in college pursuing a degree in human services counseling, one of Sandra's professors encouraged her to apply for a part-time job in the university's department of disability services. Sandra did so and found the job to be "very rewarding and confirmed that this was the type of career I wanted." She developed a strong bond with the students she helped as well as her supervisor. She said, "I really respected and connected with my supervisor. I admired her leadership and wanted to become a leader like her someday." After graduating from college, Sandra moved into a full-time position in the department and later moved into the financial aid department. Sandra's higher education career involved ten years in financial aid at two different universities before her current advising role at the community college.

Rebecca also worked on campus when she was in college; her job was in the college print shop and mailroom, which enabled her to connect and get to know people all across the campus. Rebecca described her approach to college, remarking on how organized she was and using the college catalog to make sure she followed the degree requirements. When she went to her advisor, she already knew what classes she needed in her schedule. Rebecca said, "I was probably one of the easiest students my advisor had." After college, she worked as an insurance analyst for five years, but this position and the work environment were not a good fit for her personality and interests. After starting a family, she took an extended leave of absence from the workforce.

Rebecca's husband was offered a faculty position at the community college, so the family relocated to the area. After the relocation, she was ready to return to the workforce. In what she described as a "serendipitous turn of events," the college had an opening for an academic advisor

position. She and her husband both began working at the community college around the same time. Rebecca's familiarity with working in higher education was informed by her experiences as a student but also by the vicarious learning experiences from observing her husband's career.

Like Christina, Kasey described a positive college experience that involved participating in several student clubs and organizations. She said, "I loved college. I love the atmosphere and I love learning. If someone told me they would pay me to be a professional student, I would go to college for the rest of my life." Kasey worked as a graduate assistant, where she had the opportunity to teach an introductory class. Through this experience, she discovered that she enjoyed teaching and decided that she "really wanted to work on a college campus."

While Michelle, Kasey, and Rebecca worked on campus during college, they worked in other areas after graduating from college. Michelle worked in fundraising but did not enjoy it; similarly, Rebecca reported the hostile work environment of her job as an insurance analyst. After graduate school, Kasey was a substitute teacher for a while and said she "really did not enjoy it." These participants experienced other work settings that lacked passion or purpose. For these participants, the learning experiences they gained while working on campus as students were the foundation for their current career decisions and trajectories in higher education. Their experiences are reflected in the existing literature on careers in higher education, which indicates that people choose careers in student affairs based on exposure and experiential learning through student employment and being involved in campus activities (Calhoun & Taub, 2014; Forney, 1994; Hunter, 1992; Mertz et al., 2012; Richmond & Sherman, 1991; Taub & McEwen, 2006).

Working on campus after college. Tammy is a first-generation student from the rural area. She graduated from a rural high school then attended the rural community college. She went on to earn her bachelor's degree at a nearby university. Like the other participants in the

study, Tammy attended college after graduating from high school. However, unlike the other participants, Tammy's college experience differed because she got married shortly after high school. She and her husband attended college together and started a family while in college.

After finishing her bachelor's degree, Tammy began working at the rural college as an administrative assistant. She worked in the academic advising department and often assisted the advisors during busy times. Through this experience, Tammy developed a career goal to become an academic advisor. She spoke with her supervisor about her career goal. Her supervisor encouraged her to earn a master's degree to better position herself for an academic advising career in the future. Following this advice, Tammy enrolled in a master's degree program in human resources administration. She completed the degree while working as an administrative assistant and continued in this role until an academic advising position became available.

Social Cognitive Career Theory posits that learning and socialization experiences shape one's career interests and choices (Lent, 2012). Michelle, Sandra, Kasey, and Rebecca all described their learning experiences working on campus while in college. These experiences shaped their desire to work on a college campus as their future career. Tammy's career path was also influenced by learning experiences from working on campus; however, her experience working on campus was not as a student employee but in a full-time position as an administrative assistant. Nevertheless, the experience influenced Tammy's decision to pursue additional education to prepare for a future career as an advisor.

These findings reinforce the notion that careers are unique to each individual; nevertheless, there were commonalities among the majority of participants that led to their careers as advisors, such as a desire to help others and their learning experiences while in school or college. Even though becoming an academic advisor was not the primary or original career

goal for most participants, it was not an accident. As participants reflected on their careers, they identified intentional decisions and actions that led to their current positions. Indeed, the SCCT model shows that career paths are unique for each person, based on a complex interaction of personal factors, environmental factors, and learning experiences. Adding to the complexity, these factors are affected by how each person perceives and processes their experiences – the constructivist worldview honors the unique meaning and value that each person assigns to their experiences. This means that what one person perceives as a positive could be perceived as a negative by someone else.

A "traditional" college experience. All nine participants began college in the fall after graduating from high school. Eight participants had a "traditional" college experience. Six participants, Christina, Kimberly, Jillian, Michelle, Sandra, Rebecca, left their parents' homes, attended a four-year institution, and lived on campus. Kasey lived at home and commuted to a four-year institution. Dani also lived at home, but she began at a community college. Tammy started at a community college, but her experience was different because she was married and living on her own with her husband when she began college.

A "traditional" student is a full-time, age 18 to 24, and enrolls immediately after high school with a traditional high school diploma (Butler & Markley, 1993). "Traditional" students are not married, nor do they have dependents; they do not hold full-time jobs, and many are financially dependent on their parents (Macari et al., 2005). Deil-Amen (2011) argued that the conception of a "traditional" college student is an idealized social construct that does not represent the diverse experiences of most of today's college students. Social norms surrounding a traditional college student result in policies and practices that marginalize the majority. As Deil-Amen (2011) explained, "those who do not conform to that norm tend to be marginalized despite

their existence as the collective majority. Conceptually, they become, in essence, a *marginalized majority*" (p. 1). Fall 2019 enrollment data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2021) showed that 63% of community college students attend part-time, and 37% of part-time students were age 25 or older. Additionally, 10% of full-time community college students work full time, and 39% of part-time community college students work full time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Research has shown that people enter careers in higher education, in part, due to their positive experiences in school or college (Calhoun & Taub, 2014; Forney, 1994; Hunter, 1992; Mertz et al., 2012; O'Meara et al., 2020; Taub & McEwen, 2006). As Doyle (2020) noted, the personal experiences and backgrounds of advisors influence their relationships with students. How does a community college advisor's "traditional" college experience manifest in their work with students who have different life experiences? I did not ask this question; however, four participants identified and discussed how their college experiences differed from many of the students they advise. They shared their strategies for navigating these situations. By acknowledging their differences, advisors seem to have intentionally decided not to approach advising students based strictly on their own experiences. Instead, they try to connect with the students they advise and offer guidance based on the students' life situations.

Both of Rebecca's parents have master's degrees. She said, "I was a traditional college student, I went away to college right after high school and my parents financially supported me. I realize now that I was very privileged to be able to focus on being a student." However, she feels that she can relate with students because she experienced uncertainty about her major and future career. She said, "I think that experience helps me now because I can relate to students when they say they don't know what they want to do." Rebecca uses her experiences to relate with

students and help lower undecided students' anxiety. She guides them toward career resources and interest inventories and encourages students to explore the college course offerings to see if "anything stands out."

Both of Jillian's parents are medical professionals. She attended an affluent private high school and then went to a university in another state. Prior to working at the urban community college, she said she had always considered her college experience "pretty standard." However, she now realizes the privilege of her upbringing and how her definition of "pretty standard" is not an all-encompassing description. She said,

> working here has made me realize how different my life was compared to the students I see. They look at my degree on the wall and ask me about my college experience. I'm almost embarrassed to tell them about my college experience. Yeah, I graduated in the traditional four years. I was in a sorority. I didn't have to worry about anything other than school.

Jillian feels that sharing the details about her college experience could create an unintended divide between her and her students. This self-awareness has made her sensitive to the diverse life experiences of her students, and she looks for ways to connect with all students. One way she does this is by sharing her experiences as a working adult with a family who recently returned to graduate school. She feels that through this experience, she can authentically relate to how difficult it is to be a student while also managing a busy life. She said this experience has given her an appreciation for finding balance and taking time to rest, even when life seems too busy. She encourages students to carve out time for themselves because self-care is necessary for sustained effort and motivation.

Kasey's mother completed an associate degree and has a highly regarded job within their small community. Kasey shared that she sometimes feels guilty about her background; she said, "overall, I had a great childhood and great college experience. Sometimes I wish I had a few more stories of struggles or difficulties that I could pull from to show them that I understand what they're going through." She said, "I can relate in some ways, though, because I was a commuter student, and my college was thirty minutes from my house. I also had a job with quite a bit of responsibility throughout high school and college." Because of her education and background in counseling and teaching, she realizes how important it is for students to feel seen. For this reason, she makes a point of saying hi to students on campus and asking how they are doing because "you never know what people are going through." These small interactions are part of her personality, and Kasey believes they can make a difference in a person's day.

Christina spoke fondly of her time in college, although she admitted that she enjoyed the social aspects of college more than the academics. She said, "I was having the time of my life…and my GPA showed it." She changed her major several times and "just picked classes my friends were in or that sounded interesting." Christina uses her experience of being undecided about her major and career to inform her approach to advising students. She shares her experiences with students so "they know they don't have to have it all figured out." She said many students "get here and are just getting started. They don't know what they want to do or even what their options are. Our job is to help them explore options and expose them to opportunities." She recalled how her college major and career path were born out of a conversation with her advisor. She said, "I tell my students to talk to people whose work interests them and ask them about their career path and what their degree was."

By acknowledging their different experiences, these advisors discussed intentionality in their approach to advising students based on the students' life situations, not their own. They do not seem to view students from a deficit perspective; instead, they are sensitive to the needs of students and discussed ways they try to relate with students by adapting their advising approach based on the student's individual needs. For some, this includes how they organize and decorate their office or how they dress for work. While I did not visit Jillian's office, she described her office environment as welcoming and peaceful, with warm lighting and family photos on display. Sandra did not discuss how her college experience differed from students; however, she seems to value the different life experiences of her students, as her office has many framed motivational sayings and is equipped with a coffee and snack station. Kimberly's office has children's books and a play station for students who bring their children with them to advising appointments. Christina's office was arranged so that she does not sit across the desk from students but rather to the side so students can view her computer screen as she pulls their information. She has it set up this way so they can go through the enrollment screens together. She shows students the process so they learn how to navigate the enrollment program and become empowered as active participants in the enrollment and advising process instead of being completely dependent on an advisor. Finally, Michelle shared that her clothing style helps her relate to students. Instead of wearing "stuffy, business-ey" clothes, she maintains a more casual style. She believes this makes her more approachable to students.

The details participants offered as part of their approach to advising provides insight into how they view their roles and students. These advisors seem to appreciate the diversity on their campuses and make a concentrated effort to make all students feel welcome. Based on what they shared, they seem to understand the needs of the students and communities they serve and

appreciate the mission of their institutions' open access enrollment policy. Observing them working with students could reveal more profound insight into their approach to advising, as could data from the students' perspective to see how students perceive their interactions with their advisors.

Viewing the participants' experiences through Social Cognitive Career Theory has shown that their career interests, academic decisions, and career trajectories were influenced by personal factors such as personality and gender, and learning experiences while in school or college. While none of the participants indicated that becoming an academic advisor was an intentional or planned career, several discussed how their personality and personal values drew them toward a career that involved helping people. They indicated that their desire to work in an education setting was influenced by their learning experiences while in school or college.

These findings are similar to what has been found in previous studies, which is that people choose careers in student affairs and academic advising because they have a desire to participate in personally fulfilling work, a desire to contribute to student development, and a desire to work in a college atmosphere based on their own exposure and experiential learning through student employment and involvement on campus (Calhoun & Taub, 2014; Forney, 1994; Hunter, 1992; Mertz et al., 2012; O'Meara, 2020; Richmond & Sherman, 1991; Taub & McEwen, 2006). Several participants acknowledged and discussed how their college experiences differed from the experiences of many of the students they advised. Many also discussed intentionality and thoughtfulness in advising so that their experiences do not overshadow the reality of their student's life situations.

What is not as evident in the existing literature is the role of institution type or location in career decisions. Careers are embedded in geographic areas, and career research has established

the link between career decisions and geography (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996; Gunz et al., 2011; Lawrence, 2011). For the majority of participants in this study, career choice was a pragmatic decision based on the institution's location in relation to "home" and the availability of a job.

Location of Institution

The location of the institution was a salient factor in the career choices of all participants. Eight of the nine participants worked at a rural community college. Jillian was the only participant who worked at an urban institution, and she did not discuss the location of the institution as a factor in her career choice. Michelle was the only participant who reported relocating to the rural area specifically for her job. The other participants considered the area "home" or had family connections to the regions that precipitated them becoming academic advisors.

A family connection. For three participants, Rebecca, Dani, and Christina, the rural area was not their childhood home. Instead, their connection to the rural area was established when they were adults through family connections to the area. Christina's parents retired in the area, and Christina lived with them after finishing her master's degree. She described applying for jobs all around the country but took a part-time job at the community college to get her foot in the door. She has now been at the institution for over ten years and said, "I am perfectly content…I can see myself being here until I retire."

For Dani, this rural town was just where she "landed" after returning to the United States because her family is here. Dani spoke about the importance of travel, culture, and new experiences in her life, and in her view, this small rural town does not offer a plethora of opportunities. It was unclear what her long-term intentions were, and while she may not remain in the rural area long-term, she may remain professionally affiliated with academic advising. She

said, "I love higher education; I love my job and working with students. I think I have found a really good profession." Both Dani and Christina moved to the rural areas as adults to be near family while searching for jobs. They were not committed to remaining in the area but have stayed since obtaining employment at the local community college.

Rebecca relocated to the rural area due to her husband's job at the community college, and an advisor position was available. She and her husband work at the community college and are both very happy with the location and environment and do not plan on leaving. She described her path to becoming an academic advisor as "serendipitous," because a position happened to be available at the same institution where her husband recently accepted a faculty position. However, she considers academic advising to be "more than just a job" and intends to continue working in higher education for the foreseeable future.

Returning "Home." For four participants, Kimberly, Sandra, Kasey, and Tammy, the college was located near their "home" and was a significant factor in their career decision. Kimberly and Sandra "went away" for college but eventually returned "home" after graduating college. Kasey and Tammy are also from the area, but they lived at home during college and have not lived anywhere else.

After college, Kimberly got married and moved to another state for her husband's job. After a few years, they wanted to return "home" to be closer to the family as they started their own family. Sandra also moved away after getting married. She worked at a university for a while but resigned when she got divorced and moved back "home." Another common experience for Kimberly and Sandra was that they had been in different careers in higher education for many years before becoming advisors. Kimberly facilitated a grant program at the community college; however, the position was eliminated when the grant funding was discontinued. Kimberly

worked in another department at the college before moving to advising. Sandra worked in financial aid at the university level. After her divorce, she returned to "home." A trusted colleague encouraged her to apply for the advisor position at the community college due to her caring personality and desire to help students.

Kasey and Tammy grew up in rural areas and lived at home while in college. They have not lived anywhere other than this rural town. They have extensive family connections to the area and plan to live here indefinitely. Tammy said, "this is my home. I am happy here. I enjoy my work. I'll be here until they tell me to leave." Likewise, both Kasey and her husband work at the community college and plan to continue working there because the area is their "home." She said, "this institution has been good to my family. I wouldn't want to work anywhere else. We are both here for the long haul."

Participants seemed to have strong community ties due to their family connections and upbringing. They conveyed the importance of family and community, and many returned to the area after graduating from college. The decision to return to a rural community involves an individual's social identity, neighborhood attachment, community and higher education contexts, and economic opportunities. Individuals who feel are satisfied with their environment, family and social connections, and involvement within their community have stronger emotional bonds or attachment to place, which influences whether they leave or return (Clark, 2017; Spring et al., 2017).

Gender has been found to influence the intent to return to a rural location. Sowl et al. (2021) found that gender and socioeconomic status influenced the return to rural communities of those who went away to college and obtained a bachelor's degree. Sowl et al. (2021) postulated that those who return to rural areas are drawn to the appeal of small-town life and could have

more opportunities to volunteer or be a leader within the community. Sowl et al. also found that women are more likely than men to return to their rural homes, suggesting that women fulfill caretaking roles for older family members. Petrin et al. (2011) found that rural females who received positive feedback from teachers about their academic competence were more likely to perceive their rural environment as positive and were more likely to return to their rural hometowns after college. Similarly, Haley (2018) found that women with degrees in education were more likely to return to their rural communities due to the local labor market, where job opportunities in these fields were readily available.

Rural Communities and Social Capital

The role of social capital among rural residents may offer additional insight into the advisors' decisions to return to their rural communities. Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of social capital focused on benefits that are afforded to people due to their connections to others. Social capital is "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). Coleman (1988) explained that social capital is reproduced through relationships between people where trust is built between parties stemming from shared values. Social capital is a resource that includes an individual's skills along with the financial and human capital around them (Coleman, 1988). Granovetter (1973) described the power of social networks within the structure of society — who we know and how we know them impacts our networks. For these participants, family, community, and school were sources of social capital that shaped their educational, career, and residential pathways.

Social capital is "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of social capital focused on benefits that are afforded to people due to their connections to others. Coleman (1988) explained that social capital is reproduced through relationships between people where trust is built between parties stemming from shared values. Social capital is a resource that includes an individual's skills and the financial and human capital around them (Coleman, 1988). Granovetter (1973) described the power of social networks within the structure of society – who we know and how we know them impact our networks.

Social capital provides sources of information, connections to others and allows individuals to know about opportunities and choices they might not otherwise know about (Lin et al., 2001). Doyle (2020) found that Oklahoma rural community college advisors are more likely to be from the community where they work and have a connection to the college or community; thus, they have a better understanding of the community and students they advise. As such, academic advisors can facilitate the development of student social capital because of their relationships and access to community connections (Yosso, 2005).

Research has found that positive family, community, and social ties, feeling valued, and a sense of belonging in the community impact an individual's decision to return to their home communities after college (Barcus & Brunn, 2009; Carr, & Kefalas, 2009; McLaughlin et al., 2014; Ulrich-Schad et al., 2013; Wolfe et al., 2020). Gibbs (1995) indicated that home ties and community are important factors in one's decision to return to a rural area after graduating from college. Gibbs (1995) found that approximately one-third of rural students who left home to go

to college returned to their rural community by age 25. This means that over half of the college-educated population of rural areas are natives of the area. Noneconomic factors such as social identity, place, and education provide insight into the sociocultural dynamics that influence a person's decision to return to a rural area (Carr, & Kefalas, 2009; Clark, 2017; Groen, 2004; Ishitani, 2011; Spring et al., 2017; Von Reichert et al., 2014).

Gouldner's (1958) Cosmopolitans and Locals construct can also explain the influence of location on careers. In this theory, locals are people who are geographically bound or committed to a local community. Locals are loyal to the area or organization due to family, friends, and community connections. They often possess a unique tie to the organization (for example, they might have attended the school). On the other hand, cosmopolitans are committed to their profession over a location. Cosmopolitans are more likely to relocate for career opportunities (Anderson, 2014). Kimberly, Tammy, Sandra, Christina, Michelle, and Kasey have strong community connections - they would be classified as locals because they all described extensive family ties and connections to the area that will keep them there.

Michelle is considered a local, even though she was the only participant to relocate to the rural area. However, this was 23 years ago. Since living in the rural area, she has married, raised a family, and made the community her home. Nevertheless, she was adamant that she would leave the rural area in favor of a more metropolitan lifestyle as soon as she retired. Dani is likely a cosmopolitan, as she does not have a strong connection with the community but seems to identify with the profession. It is possible that Dani could leave the rural area but remain in academic advising. Jillian's career or organizational orientations were not distinguishable, as she only had seven weeks as an advisor when I interviewed her.

Kasey and Rebecca are employed at the same rural institutions as their spouses. The social capital of family connections to the institution could have facilitated their employment. Social capital was also inferred by Murray (2007), who suggested that a strategy for recruiting and retaining rural community college faculty and staff was employing members of the same household. Murray (2007) also recommended keeping track of local community college and high school graduates who transfer and graduate from universities. These individuals may be a pipeline for the institution's future faculty and staff who want to work and teach in the rural communities they grew up in. Interestingly, Tammy was the only participant who attended the community college where she currently worked. All of the other participants' college education was at other institutions.

Contextual Barriers

In the SCCT model, contextual barriers are factors that impede or stifle career choices and development (Lent, 2012). Participants in this study were academic advisors from five Oklahoma community colleges. As they described their career development, some participants discussed challenges and barriers related to environmental and institutional structures and conditions, such as state budgets and the availability of jobs. These conditions shape an institution's approach to academic advising and, thus, how advisors experience their careers.

State Budgets

Despite accounting for *nearly half* of the state's public higher education system, Oklahoma's 12 community colleges received only 23% of the 2021 higher education allocation - the remaining 77% was distributed to the state's 13 universities (OSRHE, 2021). State budget deficits affect an institution's ability to provide services to students, as many institutions have had to eliminate faculty and staff positions, reduce professional development opportunities,

impose hiring freezes, and increase reliance on part-time staff (Browne, 2020; Martinez-Keel, 2021). Moreover, budget reductions create issues for recruiting new faculty and staff due to cuts in base salaries, benefits, and future professional development opportunities (Bohn et al., 2013; Dowd & Shieh, 2014; Epps, 2002).

Oklahoma community colleges have continued to improve student graduation rates despite receiving the lowest allocation of state funding. In fact, community college graduation rates have made higher strides than the state's universities. This data provides additional evidence of the significant contributions of the state's community college system and academic advisors to the state's higher education goals. This data should be highlighted to justify additional financial allocations to support these institutions and professionals.

Two participants, Christina and Michelle, discussed ongoing budget issues at their campuses which have created reduced staff across campus, increased responsibilities for current employees, hiring freezes, and decreased morale. Michelle's perception was that the ongoing budget cuts have created uncertainty about funding for programs, increased responsibilities, and delayed implementation of much-needed updates to campus technology and physical infrastructure. Michelle said, "the budget for higher education in Oklahoma is terrible…people wear many hats and are stretched thin". She feels that the campus administration values the contributions of the advising and other student support staff. However, budget cuts "make it difficult for us to be able to help the students as quickly or as efficiently as I'd like because we are all doing all kinds of things on top of our primary responsibilities." Beyond the institutional financial deficits, Michelle also discussed how the low socioeconomic status of some of the rural institution's students create barriers. For example, the rural location had limited public transportation, making it difficult for some students to even *get* to the college campus for their

classes. However, online classes are not a feasible option either, as some students do not have access to home computers or the internet where they live. Michelle said, "it's heartbreaking when they don't have networks to help support them." Michelle admitted that these factors weigh on her and sometimes make her feel "helpless" in being able to do her job and help students.

Christina discussed morale issues on her campus due to well-known discrepancies in salaries despite similar job duties and titles. She said, "we are state employees; our salary information is posted online. Of course we're going to look." She shared how salary discrepancies create a chasm among employees, some of whom feel they are being financially slighted when compared to others. She believes budget cuts have also led to limited opportunities for advancement and "nonexistent" funding for professional development activities such as attending conferences or maintaining professional memberships. Christina believes staff feels overworked and underappreciated, and with little room for advancement, employees may not be overly inclined to go above and beyond their job descriptions. She sees this as a problem for staff, mainly because of how her own career progressed. She had opportunities to cross-train and learn new skills. The administration recognized these activities and her work enabled her to move into different positions. Now, the institution is cutting jobs and adding more responsibilities to the remaining staff with little recognition or acknowledgment of the additional work people are doing.

While Christina and Michelle expressed broad concern about how budget cuts have affected the overall campus climate and environment, they did not offer specific details about how these challenges affected their individual careers. Although Christina indicated that she was

"perfectly content…I can see myself being here until I retire." Likewise, Michelle said she plans to retire from the college.

Finding a Job

Christina described her job search process as "tough" because even though she had a master's degree, she lacked experience, which she believed hindered her ability to find a job. She said she applied for over 600 positions across the country because she was not geographically "tied to" any particular location. However, she moved to rural Oklahoma to be close to her parents while she searched for a job. The community college is the only institution of higher education within 100 miles of where she lives, so the availability of jobs in the area is limited. Dani became an advisor after a financial crisis caused her to quit her overseas teaching career. She moved to the unfamiliar rural Oklahoma town because that was where her family lived. Career options are limited due to the rural location and lack of alternative educational options.

Jillian applied for academic advising positions at many different types of four-year institutions but was unable to secure employment. She believes that lack of experience and lack of a master's degree were barriers to her obtaining a position at a four-year institution. Her initial job search did not include community colleges, and she admitted being surprised when she was selected for an advising position at the community college because she does not yet possess a graduate degree, whereas all of her colleagues do.

When funding for her previous position was discontinued, Kimberly faced the reality that she would have to start over in a new career role after 16 years. Relocating was not an option; she knew that she would either have to find a job outside of higher education or have a long commute, because the community college is the only higher education institution in the area. She accepted a different position at the community college, despite knowing it was not a good fit for

her personality. This caused her to spend "three very long months" in a job that she did not enjoy. However, she persisted; eventually an advising position became available, and she was able to change careers.

Organizational literature posits that employee workplace perceptions could affect their organizational commitment, such as career resilience, work engagement, job satisfaction, and job turnover (Aryee & Tan, 1992; Carson & Bedeian, 1994; Chang, 1999; Duffy et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2000; London, 1983; Meyer & Allen, 1997). London (1983) defined career resilience as a "person's resistance to career disruption in less than optimal environments" (p. 621). Work engagement relates to an employee's sense of significance and pride regarding their work and their willingness to persist when faced with job demands or challenges (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Spector (1997) described job satisfaction as people's attitudes about their jobs. Finally, job turnover refers to the decision process whereby an employee voluntarily leaves their organization (Porter & Steers, 1973).

The general "tone" of the advisors was positive; many participants described commitment to their institutions. Christina, Sandra, Kimberly, Rebecca, Michelle, and Tammy are content with their current position as academic advisors and shared that their long-term plans are to continue working at their institutions. Kasey and Dani indicated that they would like to become faculty "someday" but also enjoy being academic advisors. Jillian views advising as a good experience for her future career goal of being an elementary school counselor; however, she also enjoys the higher education environment so she could see herself staying in higher education. These responses reflect an overall feeling of contentment and job satisfaction with their current roles. Based on these responses, job satisfaction and turnover do not appear to be major issues for this group. Nevertheless, this is not to say that these issues do not exist. A future

study with more pointed questions regarding the specific contextual factors or challenges of the institution could reveal or identify underlying feelings or issues about job satisfaction and workplace attitudes that were not directly addressed by this study.

Planned Happenstance

Some participants experienced unexpected or unplanned events that can be explained by a social learning theory, such as Krumboltz (2009) concept of planned happenstance. Planned happenstance describes situations where unexplainable or unpredictable factors influence decisions. The theory states that careers emerge from unexpected or unanticipated events as long as individuals remain aware of and capitalize on the various opportunities that arise from the unexpected. Planned happenstance offers insight into the career trajectories of Kimberly, Dani, Sandra, Rebecca, and Jillian. For example, Kimberly worked at the community college for 16 years when she found herself "out of a job" because grant funding for her position was discontinued. Jillian worked for many years in the oil and gas industry but was laid off when the company downsized. Dani had been a teacher overseas for ten years but returned to the states due to a financial situation. She was not from the area but happened to move to the rural area because that is where her family was. Sandra had worked in the university setting for many years before her current role. After getting divorced, she resigned from the university, returned to the area, and began working as an advisor. Rebecca used the term "serendipity" to describe her path to becoming an academic advisor. Her husband's job brought her to the area, and she was ready to return to the workforce after a leave of absence due to family responsibilities. For these participants, becoming an academic advisor was not a planned choice. Instead, becoming an advisor was initiated by unplanned factors; however, these participants still forged a career in an area that aligned with their interests, skills, experiences, and preferences.

Chapter Summary

I interviewed nine academic advisors from five Oklahoma community colleges. I asked them to explain why and how they came to be in their current position. I analyzed the data using Social Cognitive Career Theory. The specific details of each participant's career were quite unique and diverse; however, common patterns and themes emerged related to SCCT. First, personal factors influenced their career interests. Participants possess an intrinsic desire to help others that was cultivated by childhood experiences, gender role socialization, and family of origin factors. The advisors have found meaning and purpose in their work that is congruent with their personal values of helping others. Second, their positive learning experiences while in school or college, such as exposure to mentors, working on campus or being involved in student clubs or organizations, influenced their desire to work in higher education. Finally, the majority of participants worked at rural institutions. The institution's location was a salient factor in their decision to work at the community college as an advisor. Many considered the rural area "home" while others had family ties to the area that brought them to the area.

While academic advising may not have been their intended career goal, their path to advising was not accidental, thus, contradicting Brown's (1987) assertion that "people enter student affairs careers by accident or by quirk, rather than design" (p. 5). These findings challenge the view that careers in student affairs or academic advising are random, disorganized, unplanned, or fortuitous (Blimling et al., 2002; Brown, 1987). Participants in this study made intentional academic and career decisions based on their personal characteristics, informed by previous learning experiences, and with consideration of their preferred geographic location. Together, these factors led them to a career as an academic advisor.

Chapter 7: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

This qualitative, multiple-case study explored the personal, social, and environmental factors that influenced the career choice of academic advisors at Oklahoma community colleges. The overarching research question was, "what influences someone to become an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?" This study used Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, 2012; Lent et al., 1994) to understand how personal factors, learning experiences, and environmental factors influenced an individual's decision to become an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college. The research questions were:

1. What personal factors influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?

2. What learning experiences influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?

3. What environmental factors influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?

The data for this study was derived from interviews with nine academic advisors from five Oklahoma community colleges. The findings were analyzed using Social Cognitive Career Theory. While their specific career journeys were unique to each individual, three themes emerged from the data and provide insight into the career experiences of community college academic advisors. First, while academic advising may not have been their intended career goal, the participants have found meaning and purpose in their work that is congruent with their personal values of helping others. Second, their desire for a career in education was shaped by their learning experiences while in school or college, including mentors, work experiences, and overall positive experiences and attitudes about college. Finally, the majority of participants were

from rural areas and worked at rural colleges. Participants were connected to the rural area through family or upbringing, so the institution's location was an important factor in their career decisions. These themes are discussed in the following section.

Helping Others

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, 2012; Lent et al., 1994) explains how career interests, choices, goals, and satisfaction are influenced by continuous and reciprocal interaction between and among personal factors, learning experiences, and environmental factors (Lent et al., 1994). Personal factors include interests, abilities, values, and personality; these characteristics predispose one to "fit" better in certain work environments, resulting in satisfying choices for individuals (Lent, 2012). Despite having different educational and career backgrounds, the advisors in this study were all drawn to a career that involves helping and teaching others. They said that advising is a good fit for their career interests, natural talents, and skills. Participants prioritized their personal values of helping and educating others when developing academic and career plans. They structured their activities and experiences to prepare for a career that involved meaningful work that aligns with their passion for helping others.

All of the participants were women. They described how their personality is naturally oriented toward helping or educating others. Their career interests were developed from childhood experiences, socialization based on gender, and family of origin experiences. Volunteer activities, community service, family responsibilities, and school experiences influenced their desire for a helping career. They gain personal and professional satisfaction in advising because this role enables them to help students solve academic problems, connect to resources, teach students how to "do" college, and ultimately, make a positive difference in the lives of their students. Many participants spoke of the sense of pride they derive from their

careers. They described themselves as "helpful," "compassionate," "caring," and "nurturing." Many described their approach to advising students using words such as "guiding," "connecting," "supporting," and "being a resource." These terms reflect how their personal values and personalities guided their interest in a career that involved helping others.

Academic advisors help students navigate the college experience by assisting them to explore, clarify, and establish their educational and career goals (Brown, 2008; Crockett, 1985; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Kuhn, 2008; Long, 2012; Nuss, 2003; O'Banion, 2009; Self, 2008). Academic advising also requires a focused understanding and commitment to the academic mission of the institution and the ability to communicate both good and bad news with students (Hughey, 2011; McClellan, 2005; Menke et al., 2018). Academic advising is rooted in teaching, connecting, and helping others (Klusmeier, 2017). Helping professions aim to nurture growth or address problems related to a person's physical, psychological, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

Career research has shown that those in education, counseling, and other helping professions explain that their reason for entering this field was driven by an intrinsic or altruistic desire to help others (Bright, 2008; Oster, 2006; Ribak-Rosenthal, 1994). Intrinsic motives relate to a passion for teaching and learning, subject knowledge, and expertise, while altruistic motives relate to one's perception that advising is a valuable and important profession that contributes to making a difference in society. Altruism is a "motivation to serve the interests of a community of people, a state, a nation or humankind" (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999, p. 20). Participants possess an intrinsic desire to help others that was cultivated by childhood experiences, gender role socialization, and family of origin factors. The advisors have found meaning and purpose in their work that is congruent with their personal values of helping others.

Learning Experiences

Participants described positive learning experiences while in school or college, such as exposure to mentors, working on campus as a student, or being involved in student clubs or organizations. These positive learning experiences contributed to their desire to work in a higher education setting. Social Cognitive Career Theory posits that various experiences "help shape the learning experiences that fuel personal interests and choices" (Lent et al., 1994, p. 107). The SCCT framework considers the role of direct or vicarious learning experiences on career interests and choices. Various learning experiences provided a significant influence on the career and academic choices of participants in this study.

As described by the SCCT model, exposure to mentoring and learning experiences can increase self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals (Lent, 2012). Participants described "loving" their college experience for different reasons. Kasey and Dani loved the learning aspect of college, while Christina loved the social aspect, and Jillian loved the collegiate environment. Rebecca, Sandra, and Michelle loved their experience working on campus as students, and their experiences influenced their later career plans and decisions. Dani was drawn to a career in education after learning about how education dramatically changed the life of a respected mentor and professor. These positive learning experiences increased their self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career goals.

An unexpected theme related to their learning experiences was that all of the participants shared the experience of attending college right after high school. Eight of the participants experienced a "traditional" college experience (attended full time, worked part-time or not at all, not married, no dependents). Their college experiences were not the "typical" community college student experience, and many participants noted how their college experiences differed from the

students they advise. Several discussed how they approach advising, not from their own college experience lens, but with an appreciation and acknowledgment of the life situations of the students they advise. These advisors are aware of the differences and are intentional about ensuring their own privilege or experiences do not overshadow or overly influence their approach to helping students with different backgrounds and experiences.

Strategies they use to connect with students included sharing stories about their own struggles about uncertainly regarding their career or major while in college or talking about how they work and family responsibilities. Some advisors were even intentional with the way they dress for work, how their offices are decorated, providing snacks, or even setting up a "children's area" in their office for students who bring their children to advising meetings. Indeed, these participants consider the individual contexts of students, including recognition of their own privilege and the power structures and privileges that exist in their communities (Kuhtmann, 2005). However, a future study should explicitly explore how the college experiences of advisors shape and influence their approach to advising students, particularly those from different backgrounds and cultures.

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Location of Institution

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The location of the institution was a salient factor in the participants' decision to work at the community college as an advisor. Many considered the rural area "home" while others had family ties to the area that brought them to the area. Family ties to the rural areas, coupled with their desire to remain close to family, conveyed the importance of family and community in their career decisions. Moreover, all of the participants have at least a bachelor's degree, and many have graduate degrees. The community college was an appealing employment option for them, as the opportunities for jobs that require a college degree are limited in rural areas.

factors in one's decision to return to a rural area after graduating from college.

Individuals who feel are satisfied with their environment, family and social connections, and involvement within their community have stronger emotional bonds or attachment to place, which influences whether   Rural communities typically have strong connections between the residents and educational systems because students who attend rural schools have smaller class or school size, perceptions of a caring community and increased feelings of belonging (Byun et al., 2012; Demi et al., 2010; Hardre et al., 2009). The decision to return to a rural community involves an individual's social identity, neighborhood attachment, community and higher education contexts, and economic opportunities. Gibbs (1995) indicated that home ties and community are important

they leave or return (Clark, 2017; Spring et al., 2017). Sowl et al. (2021) found that gender was a salient factor among those who return to rural areas after college, suggesting that women fulfill caretaking roles for family members. Additionally, they are drawn to the appeal of small-town life. They could have more opportunities to volunteer or be a leader within the community, thus experiencing higher levels of social capital due to their status within the community.

Social capital is "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). Coleman (1988) explained that social capital is reproduced through relationships between people where trust is built between parties stemming from shared values. Social capital is a resource that includes an individual's skills along with the financial and human capital around them (Coleman, 1988). Granovetter (1973) described the power of social networks within the structure of society – who we know and how we know them impact our social networks.

Social capital provides sources of information, connections to others and allows individuals to know about opportunities and choices they might not otherwise know about (Lin et al., 2001).

Doyle (2020) found that Oklahoma rural community college advisors are more likely to be from the community where they work and have a connection to the college or community; thus, they have a better understanding of the community and students they advise. As such, academic advisors can facilitate the development of student social capital because of their relationships and access to community connections (Yosso, 2005).

SCCT considers the role of environmental influences in career decisions. The model recognizes that distal and proximal contextual factors can present as either opportunity structures or barriers to career development (Lent, 2012). Proximal influences include life roles or family obligations, finances, job availability, the economy, geographic location, socioeconomic factors, and human or social capital (Lent et al., 1994; Martin & Martin, 2002). Distal influences are inherent characteristics of an individual such as personality, social, cultural, and gender-role socialization, availability and type of academic or career role models, academic ability, family of origin, human or social capital, geographic location, and opportunities to develop interests and skills (Brown, 2002; Duffy & Dik, 2007; Gottfredson, 2005; Lent et al., 1994).

Contextual Factors

Two participants, Christina and Michelle, discussed ongoing budget issues at their campuses which have created reduced staff across campus, increased responsibilities for current employees, hiring freezes, and decreased morale. Michelle's perception was that the ongoing budget cuts have created uncertainty about funding for programs, increased responsibilities, and delayed implementation of much-needed updates to campus technology and physical infrastructure. Michelle said, "the budget for higher education in Oklahoma is terrible…people

wear many hats and are stretched thin". She feels that the campus administration values the contributions of the advising and other student support staff; however, budget cuts "make it difficult for us to be able to help the students as quickly or as efficiently as I'd like because we are all doing all kinds of things on top of our primary responsibilities." Michelle admitted that these factors weigh on her and sometimes make her feel "helpless" in being able to do her job and help students.

Christina discussed issues related to employee morale due to well-known discrepancies in salaries despite similar job duties and titles. She said, "we are state employees; our salary information is posted online. Of course we're going to look." Budget cuts also have limited professional development opportunities for staff, such as attending conferences or maintaining professional memberships. Moreover, Christina believes the staff feels overworked and underappreciated, especially when campus conversations center around budget cuts and staff reductions.

How to Become an Academic Advisor?

Tangential research related to other aspects of community college academic advising has shown that there is no career blueprint for *becoming* an academic advisor (Epps, 2002; Justyna, 2014; Klusmeier, 2017; Nelson, 2020; Smith, 2014). As this study found, the participants had various educational experiences, types of academic degrees, and levels of degrees completed, meaning that the requirements for academic advisors must vary amongst the community colleges.

Advisors enter the field with various ideas and conceptions about their roles, professional values, professional orientation, or commitment to the profession (Freitag, 2011). Some researchers argue that the lack of a consistent or unified educational or career path is a problem

that contributes to the misunderstanding of academic advising and is a detriment to the professional status and administration of academic advising on college campuses (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; McGill, 2018; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). Further, a lack of formalized standards creates discrepancies among advisors concerning their educational experiences, job duties, institutional classification, responsibilities, and salary. However, this study has shown that individual experiences, perceptions, personalities, and backgrounds play a significant role in career interests and how someone approaches advising students.

Advising is a helping profession; advisors are intrinsically motivated to help or teach others based on their personality or previous experiences. If they do not possess intrinsic motivation, will a standardized curriculum, preparation program, degree, or certificate in advising make up for it? Conversely, if someone has a strong orientation toward helping others, can it be enhanced by a standardized curriculum, preparation program, degree, or certificate?

Standardized competencies and educational requirements for academic advisors could present challenges for community colleges, which typically hire staff from the local area; this is especially true for rural institutions (Reed, 2020). Given the financial deficits experienced by community colleges, adopting standardized competencies may not be feasible to the financial limitations of community colleges due to the need for ongoing professional development. Moreover, Brower et al. (2021) argued that the lived experience of advisors who work directly with students is a valuable form of expertise that should not be discounted in exchange for someone with a credential who may not be able to relate to the students served. Having a degree in the area does not help if advisors are unable to connect with students.

Although community colleges are often considered some of the most desirable places to work in rural areas, they can struggle to attract employees with the credentials the college wants

(Reed, 2020). Hornak, Ozaki, and Lunceford (2016) noted that community college student affairs professionals are not "intentionally prepared or socialized into these roles. Much of this formal preparation and intentional practice occurs during graduate work, which is largely hosted at research universities" (p. 118). Experiential learning opportunities are more influential than classroom learning for helping new professionals understand and navigate the political, cultural, and performance expectations for their workplace (Hornak et al., 2016; Liddell et al., 2014).

The Council for the Study of Community Colleges (CCCSE) provides an online directory of institutions offering degree and non-degree community college-relevant programs, courses, and training. A February 2022 search of this directory identified 39 institutions offering programs, classes, and training related to community colleges (CCCSE, 2022). The current listing of 39 institutions shows a decline in programs for community colleges, as Gamez Vargas (2013) identified 50 institutions offering community college programs, three of which were in Oklahoma. A future study should explore the history of these programs, including when and why they were established, and importantly, when and why they were discontinued?

Today, only Oklahoma State University (OSU) is the only Oklahoma institution that offers ONE community college course – and it is an elective option. The single course offered is called "The Community Junior College" (OSU, 2021). The title of this course is problematic, as the "junior college" designation was replaced with "community college" beginning in the 1970s! Does the outdated course title signify an outdated curriculum being taught? Does the outdated title indicate a lack of care or attention to contemporary nomenclature? Does the outdated course title reveal a course that has been retained in the college catalog but has not been updated or taught in several years? Or, could it be that this course title is intentionally designed to raise

these questions from community college advocates, such as myself? Given that the course is "only" an elective option for the entire degree program, I suspect it is not the latter.

Policy & Practice Recommendations

There is a noted void in the research literature about community colleges, which creates a disconnect between community college research and practice (Doran & Lucht, 2021). Identifying and analyzing participants' decisions to become academic advisors provides an initial framework for understanding career choices. An enhanced understanding can be used to develop institutional practices of community colleges and could also inform education programs designed to prepare future community college advising professionals. Based on organizational and career literature, I conducted this study with the idea that budget cuts and pressures to increase student graduation rates affect how advisors experience their jobs. Moreover, I approached the study with data from student affairs literature, which indicates that advising is one of the most challenging jobs in higher education, advisors are misunderstood, and turnover and burnout rates are high (Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006).

Academic advising is often misunderstood by community college stakeholders who write job descriptions and make hiring decisions. Understanding why someone chooses their profession can offer insight into how they approach or think about their careers and manage stressful work conditions. This research can also help demystify the role of academic advisors and bring attention to the vital contribution they make at community colleges. This information can be used to develop more robust human resources practices for recruiting, retaining, and developing community college advisors. This includes how they are trained, the professional development they receive, the job descriptions, salary, and status within the organizational hierarchy.

Research exploring the workplace attitudes of academic advisors in relation to budget issues and institutional policies could shed additional insight into how advisors experience their jobs. These advisors seem to have chosen a career field that meets and fulfills their personal values and seem to enjoy their jobs. Turnover did not appear to be a threat, as many participants had been in their positions for quite some time and indicated intentions of staying in their roles. However, what is not clear is, how long can these personal values sustain a person's commitment to a career or organization in light of ongoing budget issues and pressures?

These participants value learning and education, a lack of professional development investment by the organization could be perceived as a lack of organizational recognition or support, and "a supportive organizational culture was found to play a key role in facilitating employee engagement" (Hoon Song, Hun Lim, & Kim, 2014, p. 302). At a minimum, institutions must provide advising staff with appropriate professional development opportunities and resources to facilitate individual professional development goals and improve competence and skills. According to Smith (2014), "providing opportunities to grow encourages advisors to commit to the institution and fortifies the quality of service to the students" (p. 183). Professional development for academic advising staff is critical, particularly because there are not professional standards or educational background requirements for becoming an academic advisor. This study's findings revealed that the advisors in this study had a variety of educational backcgrounds, career aspirations, and most importantly, an intrinsic desire to help others. They have found fulfillment in a career as an academic advisor. However, their intrinsic desire to help can be supplemented and enhanced through professional growth and development opportunities that provide a foundation for student learning and development theories, which could provide additional tools beyond "helping". These experiences could provide additional tools to their

ability to constructively support students by implementing strategies that have been shown to foster student learning and development.

A review of the Oklahoma community college websites found that many community colleges offer employees an educational benefit, which is a waiver or reduction of tuition and/or fees for employees taking classes at that institution. If the minimum requirement for academic advisors is a bachelor's degree, how many advisors or professional staff actually utilize (or view this as) a "benefit"? It would be a far more valuable benefit if a waiver or cost reduction were extended to include any public state university, thus, enabling staff to pursue a graduate degree. The Oklahoma Association of Community Colleges could spearhead this initiative with the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education. This could be a valuable tool for recruiting and retaining a highly educated community college workforce.

The Oklahoma Academic Advising Association (OACADA) is the state association for academic advising. The organization supports the development and professional growth of academic advisors in higher education in Oklahoma.   In 2021-22, the total membership of OACADA was approximately 120 members from 14 public institutions. There were only 13 members from four community colleges (Personal communication, 2022). Why are community college advisors underrepresented in this association? Is it because of institutional budget constraints? Is it because the advisors do not see value in membership? Do the advisors know the organization exists? A future study should explore the professional membership and participation in associations among community college advisors – perhaps the content in these associations is not applicable to community college advisors?

Academic Advisor Positions at Oklahoma Community Colleges

In February 2022, I conducted a search on websites such as indeed.com, higheredjobs.com, and communitycollegejobs.com for full-time academic advisor job postings at Oklahoma public community colleges. My search resulted in a total of four postings. Next, I searched job postings located on each institution's website. This search resulted in one opening for a full-time academic advisor. Table 7.1 below lists the qualifications and salaries for the five academic advisor job postings that were found.

*Table 7.1 Oklahoma Community College Advisor Job*s

Type of Posting	Type of Institution	Qualifications	Salary/Pay
National website	Urban	Requires bachelor's degree (with seven years' related experience) or Master's degree in Applied Behavioral Studies, Psychology, Sociology, Child Development, Human Relations, Education, or a related field. One year of experience advising community college students.	$19.98 - $22.86/hour
National website	Urban	Master's degree with an emphasis in Higher Education Disability Services, Secondary Special Education, Vocational Rehabilitation or related from a regionally accredited institution. Three years of demonstrated experience in higher education	$19.98 - $22.86/hour
National website	Rural	Bachelor's degree required. Previous experience developing students in success skills areas (time management, study skills, using Campus resources, working with faculty, prioritization, etc.) at the two-year community college level preferred	$33,479.00 - $36,000.00 per year
National website	Rural	Bachelor's degree from a regionally accredited institution; community college experience preferred.	$14.00 - $15.38 per hour
Institutional website	Rural	Minimum requirements include a Bachelor's Degree, preferably in Psychology, Education, Social Work, or a related field; Preferred requirements include a Master's Degree in Education, Counseling, Psychology, or Social Work. Preferred one to three years experience	$26,700 (entry-level w/bachelor's degree

These postings show the variations in credential requirements and salary ranges within the state's community college system. Assuming all of these positions are considered full-time, the salary range of community college advisors with a bachelor's degree (minimum) ranges between $26,000 to around $40,000 per year. The 2022 United States poverty threshold for a family of four is $27,500 (ASPE, 2022). The salary range is starkly contrasted with the average salary of Oklahoma community college presidents, which the OSRHE reported for the 2019-2020 academic year was nearly $191,000 (OSRHE, 2019). Indeed, the caliber of work of academic advisors is not the same as college presidents; however, given the substantial amount of research that shows the importance of advisors on community college student outcomes, these low salaries in relation to their responsibilities and educational requirements present a glaring need for further evaluation.

Funding structures and sources for Oklahoma higher education are inequitable for community colleges, which account for nearly half of the state's higher education system and enroll approximately 40% of the state's public higher education students. Community colleges are important to the state's educational landscape for many reasons, including their open admissions policies, lower tuition costs, proximity to rural students, and locally guided programs that contribute to the unique needs of the communities they serve. In addition, these institutions provide cultural enrichment and opportunities for lifelong learning through programs for adults and children, as well as short-term training customized for local workforce needs. Increased advocacy, supported by empirical evidence, for the impact of community colleges is critical to elevating the role of community colleges and justifying additional financial support for state leadership. Community college presidents and the Oklahoma Association of Community Colleges advocate for community colleges, and this advocacy should be expanded to include

alumni, community members, businesses, and citizens who have been impacted by their local community college. The story of the community college is one that deserves to be told because of the lives that have been changed by community colleges.

Changes in Oklahoma

Since this study was conducted, Tulsa Community College (TCC), the largest community college in Oklahoma, made a significant change to its advising process. In 2018, TCC added over 20 new academic advisor positions. This was a substantial increase in advising staff that decreased the student-to-advisor ratio from over 1,000:1 to around 300:1. The college attributed the increase in advising staff to a notable increase in student retention rates and reported that the additional advising staff has resulted in a significant reduction in student waiting times (KJRH, 2018). This institutional decision signifies an awareness of the value of academic advisors and institutional outcomes.

Recommendations for Future Research

An in-depth case study exploring the changes at Tulsa Community College could serve as a model of best practices for Oklahoma community colleges. This study could address the rationale for this change, the campus stakeholders involved in implementing this approach, funding the new positions, campus perceptions from leadership, advising staff, and students. Moreover, a future comparison study could evaluate the impact of the increased advising staff on student outcomes. These findings could provide empirical evidence to model and support the expansion of academic advising staff at other institutions.

Beyond pragmatic research that guides institutional policies and processes, community colleges deserve more attention from the scholarly community. Floyd (2018) noted that community college practitioners have little time to document and publish their work; however,

this is an "essential part of scholarly learning and legacy building" (p .757). There are many opportunities (and a need) for additional research on community colleges. Community colleges serve an important role in the higher education system, yet, they are not as researched as other types of institutions. Is this because they are viewed as less important than other types of institutions? Is it related to the stratification of community colleges or the perception that they are less prestigious or important, therefore, not worth researching? In addition to existing and often deficit-based research on community college policies and students, there is a need for additional research that explores the community college as a workplace for faculty and staff. Exploring the careers and lived experiences of community college faculty and staff will provide insight into this career field and expose future faculty and staff to the career opportunities available at community colleges.

Concerning future academic advising research, studies could explore the influence of an advisor's educational experience on their approach to advising. For example, does attending a community college influence how an advisor advises community college students? Similarly, is there a difference in the advising approach for advisors who identify as first-generation and those who do not? A future study on how advisors with non-traditional educational backgrounds approach advising could provide insight. How do institutional policies such as, or related to, completion agendas or performance-based funding affect community college advisors and other staff? How do budget cuts affect the job satisfaction and/or turnover intentions of advisors? What are the professional values of community college academic advisors? What are the socialization experiences of community college advisors? What is the job search process like for community college advisors? What types of professional development opportunities are provided for advisors? How do community colleges recruit advisors, especially rural colleges – do they

advertise locally or nationally? How does gender influence one's decision to become an advisor? The constructivist worldview posits that our experiences shape our actions and perceptions; research on the careers of student affairs professionals indicates that, often, those who choose this career field do so because of their own positive experiences in school or college. However, not all students will share this perception or have an idyllic or positive. What role do their personal and educational experiences play in their interactions with students who do not share these perceptions or attitudes about school or college or non-traditional learners? Finally, how have the careers of advisors and their perceptions changed or evolved in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic? Finally, while this study addresses the career choice of advisors, future studies should explore job satisfaction, work engagement, turnover intentions, and the notion of burnout among community college academic advisors.

Conclusion

This study found that becoming an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college was not an accident. The participants in this study sought careers that enabled them to help others and have found academic advising to be a fulfilling career. Advisors have an intrinsic motivation to make a difference in students' lives and care about their institutions. The advisors are embedded members of their communities and have a strong sense of connection to the rural areas and colleges they serve. Academic advisors have vast and expansive institutional knowledge and provide essential support for community college students. Advisors care about their students and their institutions. Yet, there is a need for increased institutional attention concerning recognition, professional development, career ladder and growth opportunities, and the salary of advising staff. Academic advisors are a unique blend of academic and student

affairs. Their work and perspectives should be considered part of an institution's overall strategy for improving student educational outcomes.

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Appendix A. Email Invitation to Participate in Doctoral Study

Greetings,

I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Oklahoma and am conducting my dissertation study on the career choice and development of academic advisors at Oklahoma community colleges.

I am requesting your participation in an interview. I reviewed the online staff directory at your institution and have identified you as a potential participant in this qualitative multiple-case study. If you choose to participate in this study, I would like to interview you to learn about your career choice and development. We will arrange an in-person interview at a time and location suitable for your schedule. The interview will last approximately two hours.

In this study, I define an academic advisor as someone who has "been hired to focus primarily on academic advising activities that promote the academic success of students" (Self, 2008, p. 267) and "whose primary responsibilities are advising-related and require direct student contact" (Epps, 2002, p. 11). If this definition describes your work and if you are willing to participate in this study, please respond to this email.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. The research findings may be published, but your real name will not be used. There are no known risks to participants. The potential benefit of the study is the learning that could occur through you sharing your career experiences in becoming an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college. I appreciate your time and consideration.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact me by email at ████████████████████ or by phone at ██████████. You may also contact my Faculty Supervisor at the University of Oklahoma, Dr. Junghwan Kim, at ████████.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Misty Crain Engelbrecht, M.Ed. & Ph.D. Candidate
The University of Oklahoma
Graduate School of Education
Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

Appendix B. Institutional Review Board Approval

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: March 29, 2019   **IRB#:** 10571

Principal Investigator: Misty Crain Engelbrecht   **Approval Date:** 03/29/2019

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: CAREER CHOICE AND DEVELOPMENT OF OKLAHOMA COMMUNITY COLLEGEACADEMIC ADVISORS: A MULTIPLE-CASE STUDY

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approvedfor this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:
- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Ioana Cionea, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix C. Consent to Participate in Research

Consent to Participate in Research at the University of Oklahoma

You are invited to participate in research about the career choice and development of academic advisors at Oklahoma community colleges.

If you agree to participate, you will participate in a face to face interview, lasting approximately 60-75 minutes with the Principal Investigator at a mutually agreed upon location.

There are no risks or benefits to participating in this study.

You will not be compensated for your time and participation in this research.

Your participation is voluntary and your responses will be anonymous. Confidentiality will occur at two levels. First, institutions in this study will be assigned a pseudonym that will provide institutional anonymity. Second, you will not be identified by name instead you will be referred to only by a pseudonym that you will provide to me at the time of the meeting. I may use direct quotations from the interview to illustrate a point or illuminate findings; these quotes will only be attributed to your pseudonym.

Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason.

To assist with accurate recording of your responses, interviews will be recorded on an audio recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty.

I consent to audio recording.   ___Yes   ___ No

Your name will not be retained or linked with your responses unless you specifically agree to be identified. Please check all of the options that you agree to:

I agree for data records to include my identifiable information. ___Yes ___ No

I agree to being quoted directly.   ___ Yes ___   No

I agree to have my name reported with quoted material.   ___Yes ___   No

We will not share your data or use it in future research projects.

If you have questions about this research, please contact:
Misty Engelbrecht, Principal Investigator, at ███████████████ or ██████████ or
Dr. Junghwan Kim, Faculty advisor, at ████████
You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to the researcher.

Are you 18 years of age or older?   ___ Yes   ___ No (If no- cannot participate)

Are you an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college? ___ Yes   ___ No (If no– cannot participate)

You will be given a copy of this document for your records. I agree to participate in this research.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Researcher Obtaining Consent   Date

IRB NUMBER: 10571
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 03/2

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Interview Questions

No	Categories	Questions
1	Introduction (Position, Career Path, Education)	Tell me about your current position, previous career, educational background. • Educational Background (School, Major, etc) • Previous career history (e.g., field experience or other universities/colleges) • How long have you been in this position?
2	Personal/Cultural	• What attracted you to pursuing a career as an academic advisor? • How is it that you came to work at a community college? • How did your cultural background influence your career?

No	Categories	Questions
3	Environmental	Did particular incident(s), people or experiences influence your decision to become an advisor? • Supports from family, friends, other personal relationships/networks • Supports from faculty, mentors, professional organizations (e.g., NACADA/OACADA)/networks • What kind of support is the most important for your transition?
4	Current/Ongoing Career Development	Who or what influences you to continue in this career? Who or what influences you to continue working at a community college? What kinds of career development activities do you participate in? What reasons do you (or don't you) participate in these activities?
5	Challenges	What are the unique challenges that you faced during your career and how did you overcome them? • Personal, cultural, or other contextual factors • How did you overcome the challenges?

No	Categories	Questions
6	Future Career Development/Goals	How does academic advising fit into your future career plans? How does community college fit into your future career plans?
7	Suggestions	Do you have any advice or suggestions for students who want to get a position as an academic advisor at an Oklahoma community college?
8	Concluding Remarks	Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not covered in this interview and that might contribute to this research?

Appendix D. Participant Narratives

Christina

Christina has been employed at a remote/rural community college for approximately ten years and has been an advisor for six years. Christina's mother was a student at the community college when she met her father, who was in the military and stationed at a nearby installation. Her parents got married and then received military orders to move to another state, where Christina and her brother were raised. When Christina was in college, her parents returned to this community after her father retired from the military.

After graduating from high school, Christina attended a state university where she participated in a sorority and "loved being a college student." However, she said, "I didn't know what I wanted to do," so she changed her major quite a few times. During her junior year, her advisor told her she had to choose a major. She said, "I had always liked my advisor and thought her job seemed cool, so I asked her what she majored in. She said psychology, so that's when I changed my major to psychology. Once I started taking those classes, I became interested and purposeful in my approach to college."

She completed her bachelor's degree in psychology but "didn't want to leave college." Hence, she applied for a graduate program in Adult Education and Administration at a university in another state. When she was accepted into the program, she moved to attend graduate school. After finishing her master's degree, she began looking for a job in higher education. This proved to be a challenge. She said, "Yeah, I had a master's degree, but I didn't have any experience, so it was really tough." Christina's job search was not bound by any particular geographic location, so "I applied anywhere and everywhere I knew people…it was probably around 600 applications

over the course of about nine months. My job was applying for jobs." She decided to move to

rural Oklahoma to be near her parents while she searched for a job.

The community college was located in a nearby town, and she "ended up applying for 10

or 12 different positions I thought I'd qualify for." She was offered a temporary position in

student housing. Even though this was not her "dream job," she accepted the position because "I

knew I needed to get my foot in the door and position myself so that I could eventually move

into another role." When the temporary position ended, she moved into an administrative

assistant position, knowing that it was another opportunity to position herself for future

opportunities. She said, "I wasn't aspiring for any particular role," so she continued to "job hop"

– gaining more experience and responsibilities along the way. When an advisor position became

available, she was "ecstatic; it was definitely the right time and place for me." She has been an

advisor for six years and is "perfectly content…I can see myself being here until I retire."

Christina expressed disdain and frustration about budget cuts that her community college

has experienced over the last several years. She has noticed that employees are increasingly

asked to take on more without being compensated and wonders when this will change. She also

feels that the institution could invest more money into training programs and professional

development opportunities for advisors because they are so connected to the students, and

"advising errors can really hurt the student."

Dani

Dani has been an advisor at a distant/rural college for two years. She did not grow up in

the area, but her family relocated to the area after Dani was an adult. Before becoming an

advisor, Dani was a teacher and spent the previous ten years living overseas teaching elementary

students and adult literacy programs. Dani grew up in an unstable household that involved

multiple relocations. As the eldest child in the family, she was often responsible for caring for her younger siblings.

Dani was a motivated student and participated in concurrent enrollment at a community college while still in high school. She received a full academic scholarship at a university a few hours away from her home. However, her plans changed shortly before the semester when she found out that her father had "wiped out my savings account." Determined to go to college, Dani enrolled at a community college, saying, "I wanted to go to the university - the community college wasn't my first choice, but it was where I could get enrolled quickly given the situation." She lived at home with her mother while she attended community college full time.

When she started college, she wanted to be an anthropologist but changed her major after taking an education class as an elective. She realized she "had always been a teacher. I was a tutor, helped my younger siblings with their school work, and was the children's church leader. I had always been involved in teaching and educating others." Dani found a mentor in one of her professors whose story inspired her academic and career goals and "think about what education could mean for me." Her professor came to teaching later in life and had only been a teacher for a few years. Before this, he worked in a factory but when the factory closed down he went back to school to become a teacher. Dani began to see a degree in education as an opportunity to change her life circumstances so she changed her major to education, where she excelled academically.

Dani participated in Phi Theta Kappa, an honor society for academically high-achieving community college students. Through Phi Theta Kappa, she participated in a summer abroad program that involved teaching adult literacy in Europe. Dani had never traveled as a child; hence, this experience fundamentally changed her worldview and caused her to develop a strong

passion for traveling and exploring the world, which would come to influence her future career and lifestyle decisions and actions.

She completed her associate degree then went on to earn a bachelor's degree in elementary education. She continued with a master's degree in reading education followed by a second master's degree in international education. As a graduate assistant, she was involved with a summer camp for international education programs. Through this camp, she met an elementary school principal from South America and learned about teaching opportunities in South America. She said, "I thought it was a joke but then they wanted to know how quickly I could be there – basically offering me a job on the spot! My home life had settled down and my family members' lives were stable so I was finally in a position where I felt that I could leave and everyone would be ok, so I jumped at the opportunity."

Two weeks after graduating with her second master's, she moved to South America to begin teaching. She lived abroad over the next ten years, teaching both children and adults in various countries. She experienced some financial difficulties due to international exchange rates and taxes, so she decided to move back to the States. Her family had relocated to the rural Oklahoma community and Dani moved there to be close to family. She said, "I moved back blind; it was the first time I've ever moved without already having a job lined up."

Upon her return, Dani immediately began searching for jobs. She said, "I knew I wanted to be in education but also knew I didn't want to be in the classroom anymore. It was difficult for me to see how my skills could be applied to other areas besides the classroom." She saw an opening for an academic advising position at the community college but was unsure how her teaching experiences would translate to advising. She said "teaching is all I knew, but there were so many different things about the job that appealed to me, so I applied. Honestly, I didn't think I

would get it, but I was at the point where I was going to have to start applying to Wal-Mart or anywhere that would hire me because I needed to be able to afford to live."

Several weeks went by then Dani received a call for an interview. A few hours after the interview, she received another call – this time with a job offer. She said, "it was surreal to be offered a job the same day I interviewed." Now that she has been an advisor for a couple of years, she sees how her teaching experiences, skills, and abilities relate to academic advising. She compared academic advising to teaching because, like teachers, academic advisors have to "be good at making quick decisions, good at reading people, understanding the nature of the learner, and recognizing how an individual's interests and abilities can influence their success."

Being a community college academic advisor has enabled Dani to establish stability in her life, which was missing during her childhood. She appreciates the health insurance and retirement benefits that the college offers employees but lamented the uncertainties that accompany budget cuts at the institution. In addition to advising, Dani teaches as an adjunct instructor at the institution and "could see myself being full-time faculty someday." She is also considering pursuing a doctorate degree in the future. She said, "my grandpa always used to call me 'the smart one' - saying I should be a doctor when I grew up. I didn't want to be a medical doctor, but when I learned that I could get a Ph.D. or Ed.D. I thought, yeah, I can be a doctor. I just need to make up my mind to do it." She said, "I love higher education; I love my job and working with students. I think I have found a really good profession."

Jillian

At the time of the interview, Jillian had been an academic advisor at a large/urban community college for approximately seven weeks. Before becoming an advisor, she worked for a large oil and gas company for twelve years. After being laid-off, she decided to return to

graduate school to earn a master's degree in education and school counseling with the goal of working in an elementary school. After starting her graduate program, she began searching for a job in higher education. Working at a college appealed to her because she had been taking her high school son on college campus visits and "I've always loved the college environment, so working at a college seemed like a good option. I also think having experience as an academic advisor might help prepare me for working in a counseling capacity at an elementary school someday."

Jillian grew up in a suburban area and attended a private high school in the city. Both of her parents work in the medical field, as do many of her other family members. Jillian was not interested in a medical career; she wanted to become a special education teacher. After graduating from high school, she attended a small liberal arts college in another state. She participated in a sorority and enjoyed her time in college. She decided to change her major and career path after her student teaching experience caused her to question if that was the best career path for her. The following semester, she changed her major to psychology. She completed her bachelor's degree and returned to Oklahoma, where she worked in the insurance industry for a few years before transitioning into her job at the oil and gas company.

During her job search, she "constantly checked online looking for new job postings" and applied for jobs at several local universities without much luck. She said she was not necessarily looking for a job at a community college but applied when she saw the position posted online. She received a call for an interview and was hired a few weeks later. Jillian was surprised that she was hired as an advisor at the community college because she "didn't know anyone who worked at the institution. I thought I would have to wait until I finished my master's degree –

almost everyone I work with already has their master's, even though the job only requires a bachelor's."

Being an academic advisor enables Jillian to pursue her "passion for working with students." Further, "getting out of the corporate world and becoming an academic advisor has definitely de-stressed my life." Jillian said, "working here has made me realize how different my upbringing was compared to the students I see; they see my degree on the wall and ask me about my experience. I don't want to tell them, yes, I graduated in the traditional four years, I was in a sorority, and you should do that too. Everybody has a different path." Despite having had a different educational experience, she believes it is vital to be authentic and try to connect with students on a personal level. She said, "every situation is different. We see so many students each day. The more students you see, the more you learn how to interact with them, but it really depends on the individual." After just seven weeks in this role, Jillian acknowledges, "I have so much to learn. There is a lot that goes into it. And who knows what might happen? This is a great job. Maybe I'll stay in higher education."

Kasey

Kasey has been an advisor at a distant/rural community college for four years. She was born and raised in a small, rural community not far from the college. During high school, Kasey participated in concurrent enrollment at a community college. She received a scholarship to attend a state university but during her senior year, her father died. She said, "I knew I couldn't leave my mom – I'm an only child - so I enrolled at a closer university and lived at home." Kasey commuted about 30 minutes each way to attend college.

Kasey's college major was psychology and her career goal was to become a counselor. She said, "growing up, my parents expected that I be involved in the community and with

volunteering. I really enjoy being involved and helping others." After high school and throughout college, she worked in a mental health facility, a decision she made as a way to gain experience for her college major and career goals.

She completed her bachelor's degree and began a graduate program in counseling. During her counseling practicum, Kasey experienced a difficult situation which caused her to reevaluate her career goals. She said, "I went home every day crying….I realized that I am way too emotional to do this kind of work." With the realization that she "wasn't the right person for the mental health field", she went to her advisor and had the "tough conversation" about changing her major. She switched to a general psychology program, where she had the "really cool opportunity to teach as a graduate assistant." Through this experience, she realized that she enjoyed teaching and "really wanted to work on a college campus." However, she believed that many positions at a university required a doctorate and was not interested in going further than a masters degree. She said, "I knew I was not going to leave this area – my family is here, my husband's family is here." So, she began looking locally for jobs in education. She was familiar with the community college because both her mother and uncle graduated from the institution. She said, "I hadn't finished my master's yet, but I knew I needed to get my foot in the door somehow." With a colleague's help, her mother helped Kasey arrange a lunch meeting with a college vice president to discuss her career opportunities after completing her graduate degree.

Kasey finished her master's degree, but the community college did not have any full-time positions available, so she took a job as a substitute teacher at a local school district. A few months later she reached out to the community college vice president, who invited Kasey to campus to meet with the director of academic advising. Kasey said she and the director "hit it off, but there were no job openings". The director told Kasey about an opportunity to volunteer

with a particular campus project to "gain some experience and exposure on campus." Kasey

agreed and by the end of her first day, the director offered her a temporary, part-time position to

help with a grant application. Kasey "leapt at the opportunity" and spent the next few months

working on the grant project. Kasey was hired to be a student advisor for the grant program when

the college received the grant. After two years in this role, she had the opportunity to transition

into her current position as a full-time academic advisor funded by the college, not the grant.

Kasey's educational background in psychology and counseling influence her approach to

academic advising. She said "being an advisor lets me blend the academic side with the support

side, and they need mental health support. It is my goal to break down the stigma around mental

health." She loves working with students and enjoys her work environment because she can be

involved with several different activities. Kasey's husband also works at the community college

and they share the goal of "becoming full-time faculty someday." While she acknowledges that

she could gain more teaching experience (and money) by being an adjunct at other institutions,

she says, "I'd rather pour everything I have into this institution because we aren't going to leave.

Even if I don't get a faculty position, I'm still going to be here. This institution has been good to

my family. I wouldn't want to work anywhere else. We are both here for the long haul."

Kimberly

At the time of the interview, Kimberly had been an academic advisor at a distant/rural

community college for almost three years but she had worked at the institution for 19 years.

Kimberly grew up in a town near the community college and left after high school to attend a

state university. From a young age, she knew she wanted to be in education and recalled "playing

school" with her friends. She said, "for a lot of us that go into education, we spend eight hours a

day, five days a week at school, watching the teachers act out that role as their career. So many

other professions and jobs are just so vague as far as what they do at work, so I think that's why I

chose education, because it was familiar to me." Her first and only major was early childhood

education; she said "I never changed my major, which is probably pretty unusual."

She described her college experience as "pretty boring" saying that she was not involved

in clubs or college activities. She lived off-campus, had a job, and was focused on completing

her degree. She met her husband while in college and after finishing her bachelor's degree they

got married and moved to another state for his job. There, she worked in an early childhood

education program for a few years, but she wanted to move back to Oklahoma to be closer to

"home" after starting their family. Her mother mailed her a newspaper clipping of a job posting

at the local community college. Kimberly applied, flew down for an interview and was later

offered the position. She accepted the position and she and her family moved back to Oklahoma.

In her position, Kimberly facilitated a grant program. When funding for the program was

discontinued after 16 years, Kimberly found herself needing to "figure out what was next. I was

thinking about my next job but I didn't consider moving. This is home, this is where our family

is, where my husband's job is." The community college is the only higher education institution

in the rural area so she knew that finding another job could be challenging; she said "I knew I

might have to take a job in another town and would have a long commute."

She was "unemployed for a whole week" before receiving a call from a friend at the

college who told her about an upcoming job opening. Even though it was in a department that

she did not feel was a "good fit" for her personality, she applied and accepted the position when

it was offered to her just to be back into a full-time position. She spent three "very long" months

in the position and then an opening for an academic advising role became available. Through her

work with the grant, one of her responsibilities was academic advising for a specific degree

program; however, the thought of being an academic advisor for all of the institution's programs was "a little out of my comfort zone…. but I was forced out of my comfort zone when the grant ended, so I just had to do it [apply]". She was hired as an academic advisor and "while it was overwhelming at first, I was happy to be working with students again."

Kimberly's path to becoming an employee at an Oklahoma community college was born out of a desire to live near her hometown and extended family. Her journey to academic advising was set into motion by the unexpected circumstance of the discontinuation of the grant program, but she said the "stars aligned" due to the availability of an advisor position when she was looking for a job. Despite her initial trepidation, she believes academic advising is a good fit for her personality and gains satisfaction from helping students define and explore their educational and career pursuits. She recently began a training program to further develop her skills and expertise as an academic coach.

When asked about future career goals or plans, she said, " I love my job and feel like this is what I was born to do; it just feels right and comes naturally to me. I am really happy where I am and would be totally content retiring from this job."

Michelle

Michelle has worked at the distant/rural community college for 23 years. Michelle's parents have college degrees; her mother was a teacher, and her father was involved with politics. She said, "Education is very important to me and my family," and grew up with the belief that "going to college is just what people do." Michelle is from a suburban area in Oklahoma. After she graduated from high school, she left home to attend a private university in Oklahoma.

While in college, she worked in the admissions office making phone calls to prospective students and really enjoyed her job. She relished her time as a college student, saying, "I never wanted to leave college." She completed a bachelor's degree in English communications and a master's degree in human relations. After college, she spent a short time working in fundraising but said, "it was not my calling – I was not invested, so I got out." She recalled how much she enjoyed working in the admissions office as a student, so she spent the next nine months looking for a job in a similar setting. She saw a newspaper advertisement for an advising position at a community college located in a rural community about an hour and a half from where she lived so she applied for the job. When she was offered the position, she "nearly fell off my couch because the pay was much higher than what was being offered where I was living."

Michelle was single with no significant obstacles that prevented her from accepting the job and relocating to the rural community. However, she said, "I didn't intend to stay this long, I didn't think I'd still be here 23 years later, still at the same place. But now, I can't see myself being anywhere else." Since moving to the rural community 23 years ago, Michelle has gotten married, raised a child, and built her life as a member of the community.

Michelle said academic advising is an excellent job for her that aligns with her personality because "I just like people - I like helping them and being social." She compared being an advisor to being an ambassador or tour guide; she said, "my job is to help students learn how to navigate college and to teach them to advocate for themselves." She recognizes the student as a "whole person" whose academic and personal lives overlap. She has an open-door policy to "lend a listening ear to students…and a lot of times, that's what they need – someone to listen to them, even if I can't solve their problem."

Michelle feels that the institution "sees the relevance of my work and the contribution advisors make to the overall goals of the institution." However, she discussed challenges related to working in a rural college, such as ongoing budget cuts, uncertainty about funding for programs, increased responsibilities, and much-needed updates to campus technology and infrastructure. She said, "the budget for higher education in Oklahoma is terrible…people wear many hats and are stretched thin, which makes it difficult for us to be able to help the students as quickly or as efficiently as I'd like because we are all doing all kinds of things on top of our primary responsibilities."

Michelle plans to continue academic advising until she is eligible to retire in eight years. After retiring, she plans to move away from the rural community to "someplace that is more culturally and politically diverse."

Rebecca

Rebecca has been an academic advisor at a distant/rural community college for two and a half years. Rebecca is from a small town in Texas but moved to the community when her husband became a full-time faculty member at the community college. After taking a few years' leave of absence from work to raise their child, she was ready to return to the workforce, and in what she described as a "serendipitous turn of events", the college happened to have an opening for an academic advisor position, so she and her husband both began working at the college around the same time.

Rebecca holds a bachelor's degree in English from a liberal arts college in Texas. She was a concurrent student while in high school at a local community college and then left home to attend a residential university. She described herself as a "traditional college student, I went to college right out of high school and my primary job was to be a student." She worked part-time

in the campus mailroom/print shop and "loved my job and enjoyed getting to know the campus and the people who worked there."

After completing her degree, she got married and moved out of state for her husband's graduate education. There, she worked as an insurance analyst for about five years, which did not provide her with professional nor personal satisfaction. When their first child was born, she decided to take a leave of absence from the workforce and raise their child. Her husband completed his graduate degree and became a university professor. After several years, they decided they wanted to make a change. Her husband desired a faculty position at a smaller institution where he could focus on teaching, and they wanted to be closer to extended family. Her husband began his job search for a faculty position at several different colleges, including this distant/rural community college. They knew of the community college because it was located less than two hours from where they each grew up. The town "seemed like a nice small town and a nice small college. We weren't interested in a large urban area – we'd already done that." When her husband was hired as a full-time faculty member, the family relocated to the area.

While she was not intentionally seeking academic advising as a career, it aligns with her personality. She gains satisfaction by helping students explore academic and career possibilities. Rebecca noted that "even though I have a non-traditional background for an advisor because I only have a bachelor's degree in English, I am still able to pull from previous experiences to see how they can be applied to advising and connecting with students." Additionally, she finds the work very gratifying because "I get to work with students who want to be here and who are excited about being here; it's a very positive environment." Many of her advisees are adult learners, attending part-time, or balancing multiple life priorities and being students. She noted

the difference between her own college experience how her students experience and approach

college, saying, "I realize now that I was very privileged to focus on being a student and was

able to finish my degree in three years."

As for her future, Rebecca plans to pursue a graduate degree at some point and has

contemplated the possibility of teaching as an adjunct; however, she is adamant that she does not

want to teach full time. She described her path to becoming an academic advisor as

"serendipitous," however, she considers academic advising to be "more than just a job" and

intends to continue working in higher education for the foreseeable future. According to

Rebecca, "I think people become academic advisors because they have life experience or

perspective that they want to share - at least that's the case for me."

Sandra

Sandra has been an advisor at a distant/rural community college for five years, but her

career in higher education spans over 15 years. Before academic advising at the community

college, she worked at a university in financial aid. Sandra grew up in a town not far from the

community college in a "loving and supportive family." She went to college right after high

school because "going to college was always an expectation. Our family vacations often

involved touring different college campuses. The conversation with my parents was never IF I

was going to college; it was WHERE I was going to go to college."

As a child and teen, Sandra observed her parents take a very active role in the community

through volunteering. She gained exposure to helping others by "tagging along" with her mother,

who was involved with a summer camp for individuals with special needs. Sandra recalled

observing how people treated those with special needs differently, "I was young, but I still

noticed how people kinda avoided interacting with people who looked different…and I didn't

like that." These experiences shaped her desire to help people with special needs, so when she

left home to attend a state university, she pursued a degree in human services and counseling.

After completing her first year of college, she returned home for the summer and decided

to take a sign language class at a local regional university. Sandra became familiar with the

university's program, faculty, and students and at the end of the summer, "felt really compelled

to stay, so I transferred." Her instructor encouraged her to become a peer interpreter and tutor, a

position that she loved because "the students trusted me. I lived on campus on the floor with the

deaf students and totally immersed myself in that environment. It was rewarding to be a part of

that - I really enjoyed it." While in this role, Sandra "really connected with my supervisor; I

admired her leadership and wanted to be just like her when I became a professional."

After completing her bachelor's degree, Sandra began a full-time job at the regional

university as an educational opportunities counselor. In that role, she developed strong

relationships with students and colleagues. She later moved into the role of associate director of

the financial aid department. During this time, she also completed a master's degree in

educational leadership and administration.

After getting married, Sandra relocated to a different part of the state and began working

at a regional university in the area. While it was a change from what she was accustomed to, she

grew to love the community and the institution, but when her marriage dissolved, she returned

home. The divorce was a difficult time for Sandra, who said, "I didn't know who I was anymore,

I fell into a funk. I knew I had to snap out of it so I had to do a lot of self-evaluation." Upon

returning to the area, she began searching for a job and learned about an academic advising

position at the community college. She was unsure about applying because "I didn't think I could

do it, I only knew financial aid." She sought advice from a trusted colleague, who "reminded me

of all the ways my financial aid background overlapped with advising." She applied, and was offered the position.

Looking back, she is happy that she pursued this career, saying, "this has been my favorite position so far!" She views advising as an "opportunity to get to know the whole student, to show them that someone cares about them, and open their eyes to different possibilities." She said, "students face so many barriers, so advisors need be positive, supportive, and caring role models for them." For Sandra, the level of trust that her advisees have in her is the most rewarding and special part of her job. Moreover, she feels "honored and humbled that [the institution] trusts me with the students and doesn't worry – they know my students are being taken care of."

She considers the community college "home" and plans to continue as an academic advisor indefinitely, saying, "I need to be with the students. They are the ones I care about." Her personal and professional goal is to become more involved in the community again and "get back to who I was before the divorce."

Tammy

Tammy has been an advisor at a rural/remote community college for 20 years. In fact, this community college has been her only place of employment since she graduated from college. The eldest of five children, Tammy was raised in the area and was the first in her family to attend college. She completed an associate degree at the community college after graduating from high school, then went on to complete her bachelor's and master's degrees in business administration at a nearby regional university.

After finishing her bachelor's degree, Tammy began working at the community college as an administrative assistant in the academic advisement office. There, she learned about

academic advising and often helped the advisors during busy times. She "really enjoyed working with the advisors and learned a lot from observing them and listening to them help students." Due to this experience, Tammy developed a career goal to become an academic advisor. She shared this wither her supervisor, who encouraged her to go to graduate school to better position herself for an academic advising career in the future. She followed her supervisor's advice and completed a master's degree in human resources administration while working as an administrative assistant. She continued working in this role until an academic advising position became available.

Tammy enjoys her job as an academic advisor, gets along well with her colleagues, and gains satisfaction from helping students develop academic and career plans. After 20 years in the role, she is particularly proud that she has helped multiple generations of families within the community throughout her. She also mentioned her satisfaction with the benefits and time off that the institution provides to employees. For Tammy, "this is my home. I am happy here. I enjoy my work. I'll be here until they tell me to leave."

Appendix E. Arriving at the Topic: My Autobiography

My scholarly interest in exploring this topic was developed during an elective course entitled "*Autobiography in Adult Education,*" taught by Dr. Irene Karpiak. As I engaged in reflective and creative autobiography writing throughout the course, I considered how my career trajectory as an academic advisor was influenced and underscored by various social and environmental factors. These writing exercises sparked my curiosity - I contemplated whether my experiences were unique or if others shared similar experiences? I wondered if my career path could be analyzed and explained with a theoretical framework? I offer an expanded excerpt from my autobiography below to contextualize my interest and approach to this topic.

Going to School

My first experience with school began with half-day kindergarten. If this had been my only experience with school, I certainly would not be here today, telling you this story as part of my autobiography. I wouldn't say I liked school. I was afraid of my teacher and cried every day when my Mom dropped me off. She was a stay-at-home mom, and this was the first time I had ever been away from her, so the few hours I was at school felt like an eternity.

Doctors discovered that my Mom had advanced-stage cancer when I was in first grade. Her battle lasted only five months, and she passed away on February 23, 1989, just a couple of months after I turned seven years old. Memories of profound sadness and loneliness characterize the months following her death. My father's attempt to avoid the pain began with him putting away all of her pictures, clothing, and artifacts - it was like she never existed. My grief was amplified when he disappeared, numbing his pain and escaping our bleak situation through the use of various substances. And leaving me behind to look after myself in our desolate world. During this time, school became very important to me because it was my place to escape the

sadness of home, and my teachers encouraged me to talk about my feelings and share memories

of my Mom. I associated school with being seen, heard, valued, and welcome from that point

forward.

As I grew up, my feelings of sadness and abandonment evolved into resentment and

anger toward my father, which led to my decision to sever my relationship with him when I was

a young adult. I was surprised at how my animosity toward him resurfaced and intensified when

I became a parent. I ruminated on his role in my negative childhood experiences. I wondered

how a parent could treat their children how he treated my sister and me? Becoming a mother also

stirred up renewed feelings of grief about my Mom not being here to guide me through the new

world of motherhood. These feelings were magnified when my son was seven years old, the age

I was when my Mom died, and I realized I had *been* a mother longer than I *had* a mother. I

struggled alone for a long time, trying to reconcile and compartmentalize my feelings. This

strategy eventually created an unmanageable burden that leaked a steady stream of negativity

into my life. Finally, I realized I needed help from others. Through this healing process, I am

doing the (long overdue) work of constructively acknowledging my childhood trauma and

learning how to embrace and lean into my feelings.

One outcome of this work has involved finding closure toward my father. His life ended

in March 2015; however, my grief for him can be traced to February 23, 1989 - the day his wife,

my Mom, died. A large part of his emotional life died that day as well. I grieved for the person

and father he could and should have been and for the relationship that never was. If I consider his

perspective, as a 32-year-old man who lost his wife, my feelings of contempt are overshadowed

and replaced by sympathy and, maybe, compassion. I cannot imagine how difficult it is to lose a

spouse, especially at such a young age, and then try to figure out how to raise two little girls. As

an adult, my decision to extend him grace, empathy, and gratitude has freed me from the grip of resentment and enabled me to find closure. The process of letting go has been cathartic. I conclude this personal narrative with lyrics from a song released in 1971 by the Bee Gees titled "*How Can You Mend a Broken Heart*?"

I can think of younger days when living for my life
Was everything a man could want to do
I could never see tomorrow, but I was never told about the sorrow

And how can you mend a broken heart?
How can you stop the rain from falling down?
How can you stop the sun from shining?
What makes the world go round?
How can you mend this broken man?
How can a loser ever win?
Please help me mend my broken heart and let me live again

I can still feel the breeze that rustles through the trees
And misty memories of days gone by
We could never see tomorrow; no one said a word about the sorrow

And how can you mend a broken heart?
How can you stop the rain from falling down?
How can you stop the sun from shining?
What makes the world go round?
How can you mend this broken man?
How can a loser ever win?
Please help me mend my broken heart and let me live again

Jesse, I hope your broken heart has mended, and you've finally found a way to "live again."

Going to College

My identity in higher education can grouped into six categories, all of which involve community college: 1) community college student, 2) community college dropout, 3) community college employee, 4) community college graduate, and 5) community college professional, and 6) community college researcher.

Community College Student

I am from a small rural community in southeastern Oklahoma. The loss of my mother as a child, followed by the neglectful behavior of my father due to his parental shortcomings and addictions, led to my experiences of a childhood characterized by poverty and dysfunction. These factors underscored how I experienced attending a small rural public school and how I organized my thoughts and ideas about what obtaining a college degree could mean for my life trajectory. For me, the rural town I grew up in was a place to escape, and a college degree was my ticket out. I had no intentions of returning to the area after graduating from college. In my view, rural towns do not symbolize a "home" to return to but a place to flee.

Due to unhealthy and dysfunctional family circumstances, I moved out of my father's home during my senior year of high school and lived on my own when I graduated from a small, rural high school. The graduating class was less than 40 students. Academically, I was among the top of the class. I was unsure about my specific educational or career goals, but I was convinced that a college degree was essential for creating a vastly different life from the broken home in which I was raised.

I did not believe that I could afford to go to a university, so I applied for a scholarship at a local community college that was a 45-minute commute from where I lived. I was thrilled when I received an academic scholarship. This is not unusual; according to McDonough (1997), high school students often perceive their opportunities for higher education based on "academic achievement, class background, and high school's perspective on desirable college destinations" (p. 2). Unbeknownst to me, my decision to attend the community college is considered an undermatch because I chose to enroll at a community college even though I met the academic criteria for a higher tiered institution (Bowen et al., 2009; McCullar, 2021).

Community College Dropout

Approximately one-third of the college-going population is comprised of first-generation students, i.e., a student from a family where neither parent has more than a high-school education (Pascarella et al., 2004). According to Choy (2001), first-generation students are at a disadvantage with respect to persisting and degree attainment. Although I did not have the language for it at the time, I was a first-generation college student and experienced many challenges typically associated with this classification. My experience as a first-generation student is best described by McCullar (2021), who posits:

the bureaucracy and systems in place can be confusing to a first-generation student, compounded when students are not accustomed to the lingo and have limited parental guidance. The deficit can be overwhelming to a new student, and, at times, crippling. The skillset needed to navigate college is not intrinsic (p. 41).

I attended a one-day orientation, where I met with an academic advisor who helped me select and enroll in my classes: accounting, English Composition 1, college algebra, and humanities. Then, I participated in some ice-breaker activities with other students, toured the campus, obtained my student ID card, and picked up my textbooks – I was ready to start college. After the first few weeks, I became discouraged because my college experience was starkly different than I envisioned. Even though I had excelled in high school, the classes were challenging, and my grades were not what I was accustomed to. I felt overwhelmed about my decision to attend college and doubtful about my ability to succeed. After a difficult first semester, I decided that college was not for me. My decision to drop out was made quietly and shamefully, yet not met with family backlash nor encouragement to reconsider the impact of my decision. I was living on my own, and this decision meant that I had more time for work and to earn money to support myself.

I now recognize that I lacked essential skills critical to college success, time management, study skills, and, most importantly, asking for help. I stumbled through my first semester alone, unwilling (i.e., embarrassed) to seek help from the resources that I now know were available at the community college.

Community College Employee

Five years, six jobs, and a few half-hearted attempts at college later, I was 23 years old and looking for a job. After dropping out of college, I left the rural town. I lived in a few different places but ended up in the Oklahoma City area, where I got a job as an administrative assistant at Rose State College. While I did not have a particular job in mind, I knew that I needed a full-time position with benefits and a set schedule. I applied for dozens of jobs, one of which happened to be at a local community college. A few weeks later, the community college contacted me to set up an interview for a position as an administrative assistant. I interviewed and accepted the job when it was offered a few days later.

Community College Graduate

My job at the community college exposed me to a work environment unlike any I had experienced before. I was surrounded by educated and supportive faculty and staff who seemed interested in my educational goals and my plans for the future. I felt connected to the campus community. I felt like I belonged. I was encouraged to finish my degree. Soon, I enrolled in classes, and while I was still undecided about my academic major or career path, I was committed to completing my associate degree. Eighteen months after starting my job at the community college, I graduated with my associate degree.

Helping others has always been a fundamental element of my personality. As part of my administrative assistant role, I often helped the academic advisor run reports and process student

enrollments. This experience allowed me to obtain a "behind the scenes" glimpse into the work

of an academic advisor. As I became more familiar with this career, I developed the career goal

of becoming an academic advisor. I knew I needed additional education, so I started my

bachelor's degree and continued with a master's degree.

Community College Professional

As my education progressed, so did my career. In what I can only describe as serendipity,

an academic advisor position became available halfway through my graduate program. The job

description required a bachelor's degree, so I applied, interviewed, and was thrilled to be offered

the position. I was working on my MBA when I started the position. My sense of what an

academic advisor did was limited to my own experience as a student. I became an academic

advisor to help students develop educational and career goals and believed that my experiences

as a first-generation community college student, dropout, and graduate would inform my

approach to working with students. It was not until I began my graduate program in education

that I became familiar with student affairs as an examined activity and acquainted with seminal

theories of the field. I believe my desire to help students made up for my lack of theoretical

foundation, and I think I was a "successful" advisor. However, my experience was also marked

by a heavy student advisement load, a lack of resources and support, and my perceived lack of

agency. After five years in the position, I was burned out and ready for a change.

It was during this time that I began my doctoral program in education. During this time,

the college advertised a full-time faculty position to redesign and launch an educational

strategies course for students on academic probation and/or taking developmental coursework.

Along with numerous other candidates, I went through a rigorous formal interview process, and I

was thrilled when offered the position. I was in this role for about four years when the college

president asked me to lead a new project under the workforce development and external affairs division. A few years later, I moved into a new position in the academic affairs division that involved academic outreach and coordination. I realize that my experiences may not be common, and my experiences have shaped my perceptions about being a community college student, employee, and researcher.

The different contextual forces have influenced the various positions and job roles I have held. For example, in my perception, my role as an academic advisor and faculty member had a much different purpose than my role in workforce development and external affairs, and I have had to decide how to reconcile my beliefs and values within the roles I have held. Admittedly, some of my experiences have created conflicting feelings and disenchantment as I became exposed to the "behind the curtain" workings of the college and have experienced institutional external pressures and motives that contradict my altruistic reasons for working at a community college. Community college changed my life. It enabled me to create the life I wanted. What started as "just a job" at a community college evolved into a career that spans over 15 years, and for that, I am thankful.

Community College Researcher

Qualitative researchers are considered an instrument of analysis and are advised to consider their own personal and professional experiences to situate a study within a compelling interest related to their life experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Jones et al., 2014). My previous experiences and identities informed my entire approach to this study from the purpose and research questions, theoretical framework, interview questions, interview technique, what I found, and how I interpreted those findings.